**Summary**

The Cluster was far from the only surprise the Diamond's left buried on earth

On what should have been a routine mission, the Crystal Gems stumble upon something that Homeworld left to be forgotten.

Something old, something angry, and above all, something burning to be free.

Note: this story is canonical as of the beginning of season three, it diverges from there.
Break's Over

Chapter Summary

The gems get back to business, and Steven has an idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steven stared through the glass with utmost concentration, he only had one chance to get this right. But there were so many choices! How could he possibly make the right one?

"Give me a... chocolate."

"Are you sure this time Steven?" Sadie asked, leaning on the counter and smiling at him. "The fate of the world may depend on this decision."

"What!?" Steven went bug-eyed and pressed his face against the glass, redoubling his examination of the baked treats within. "I'm gonna need another minute."

"Steven, I was joking."

"I know." Steven grinned. "So was I. I'll take five chocolate donuts please." One for him, one for Amethyst, and one for Garnet, with two left over to attempt to entice Lapis and Peridot. Pearl would eat one if he asked her to, but he knew she wouldn't want to.

"Coming right up." Sadie pulled out a bag, taking time to pick only the best looking donuts for her favorite customer.

"Hey Sadie, where's Lars? Is he skipping again?" Steven asked looking around for his bestest of buddies.

"Hmmm? Oh no." sadie shook her head. "He has the day off due to an injury, and yes, he's actually hurt this time. I checked. Twice."

"Oh no! What happened to him?"

"He tripped while setting up the wet floor sign, then fell into a rack of donuts, which fell on him. He was pretty upset, but he should be fine."

"That's too bad." Steven took the bag and looked inside, five perfectly glazed rings of chocolate dough stared back at him. he took a deep whiff. Ah, perfection.

"So what are you up to today?" Sadie asked.

"I'm not sure. I don't think anything is planned yet. But I bet it's something awesome."

"Well then, don't let me keep you." Sadie waved him off. "If you need me, you know where to find me."
Steven skipped along the sandy path up to the temple. He couldn't wait to see what was in store for today. The boy broke into a run, dashing up the steps and throwing open the screen door. To his delight all three of the Gems were already there. Garnet was sitting at the counter looking cool as ever, while Pearl was busy cleaning the dishes beside her, and Amethyst was lounging on the couch, boredom painted across her face.

"Hey guys!"

"Welcome back Steven."

"Sup' dude."

"ello Steven."

"I brought donuts!"

"Oooh! Gimme!"

"Nope." Steven ducked, letting Amethyst fly over his head and out the door; he stuck his head back outside and wagged a finger at her. "Sharing is caring, Amethyst."

"Yeah, But I don't care." She replied, climbing back up the steps and making to grab the bag.

"But I do." He laughed, pulling out a chocolate one and throwing it her way. "You can have any that are left over. So what are you guys doing today?"

"Well." Pearl began, "Now that we've taken care of the cluster and Malachite, it's time to resume our normal duties of dealing with gem monsters and defending the earth."

"Oh yeah, I was wondering about that." Said Steven, placing a hand against his chin to aid his train of thought "We haven't really dealt with any of those recently, have they just not been causing trouble?"

"That's right." Pearl nodded, "The gem beasts have been laying low recently. Ever since we started focusing on the cluster, now that I think about it." she finished thoughtfully.

"That was nice of them."

"I doubt manners had anything to do with it." Pearl shook her head, drying the last of the dishes and setting them out to dry.

"I bet they were just too scared of the cluster and were all hiding," said Amethyst, swallowing the remains of her donut and letting out a belch.

"Do you really think that's what happened?"

"Dunno, probably."

Steven shrugged, it didn't really matter why the corrupt gems had been quiet. He offered Garnet a donut, she took it, but didn't eat it. She hummed to herself, staring off into space with a look of concentration.

"I sense no beast on a rampage that must be dealt with immediately." she said at last. "However, I have become aware of several places that warrant further investigation. Would you like to join us Steven?"
"You know it!" Investigating mysterious gem places sounded like a lot of fun. At the very least it would be a nice break from dealing with giant monsters that could wreck the world. There had been far too many of those recently. "Actually… I was wondering something."

"Yes?"

"Could I invite Peridot and Lapis to come along?"

The gems shared a look, he knew those looks. They usually meant he was about to be told no, and the gems were just deciding who should do it.

"Steven." Said Pearl, her tone gentle. "I'm not certain that's such a good idea. Peridot doesn't have anyway to defend herself should the need arise and I hardly think Lapis will want anything to do with us."

"But we're not searching for monsters, Garnet said so, and if there is old gem stuff I bet Peridot would be a big help!" Steven insisted. He had to admit, Pearl probably had a point about them not wanting to go, but he wouldn't know for sure unless he asked!

"Eh, if they wanna, let 'em come." Amethyst said. "He's got a point about P-dot, and it's not like we can't keep her safe. We kept Steven in one piece after all."

"And there were far too many close calls!" Pearl huffed.

"There weren't that many."

"There were dozens!"

"Name one."

"The time he got eaten while retrieving the heaven beetle," Pearl started ticking off her fingers. "there was also the occasion when he almost aged himself to death, and how could we forget about the time where he almost froze in space."

"I said one time, sheesh," Amethyst rolled her eyes. "Nobody likes a try hard, P."

"Enough." Garnet cut in, silencing the bickering gems. "Why don't you go ahead and invite them Steven? I doubt it will cause any harm. Besides, don't you have something to give them?"

"Oh right! The donuts! don't want them getting cold. Be back in a bit, wait for me guys."

"Of course."

"Hey! If they don't want those donuts bring em back to me will ya?"

"You got it Amethyst." Steven turned and hurried out the door. He glanced around and… Yes! He was in luck. He could see Lion lounging at the bottom of the hill. Good thing too, the barn was a bit of a long walk away. But with Lion's help he'd be there in seconds, Lion would be happy to help for sure!

"Lion!" he called, running down the hill to the giant cat, it opened a single eye and stared at him, not bothering to raise its head. "Can you do me a favor?"

Lion blinked.

"Great!" Steven said, taking it as a yes, and clambered up onto the cat's back. "I need you to take
me to the barn."

Lion yawned, stretching out his paws before settling himself more firmly against the ground.

"Oh come on! Please?"

Lion closed his eye.

"Would you do it for a Lion Licker?" Terrible though the treat might be, Lion liked those. At least, Steven thought he did. He'd seen the cat eat one once and not spit it up. Lion had done that once with one of the few precious remaining Cookie Cats. It had been heartbreaking.

Lion's eye cracked open again, but otherwise made no move.

"How about two Lion Lickers?"

Lion looked back at him, before yawning again and getting to his feet.

"Alright. Let's go!"

The giant cat opened its mouth and let out a lazy whine. A shimmering portal appeared in front of them and the cat shuffled through. Once through, Lion collapsed onto the ground and promptly fell asleep again.

Well, they were at the barn, so it was good enough. Steven got off the cat and hurried to the barn doors. He was about to hurry through the doors but checked himself, remembering to knock on the door first.

Manners were important. He was a civilified person after all.

"Peridot? Lapis? Are you in there?" he called, knocking against the door. He heard a yelp and a clattering noise, like a big metal spoon falling to the ground, followed by a bunch of other similarly sized cutlery. As well as the familiar muffled yelling.

"Peridot? I'm coming in. Is that alright?" hearing nothing to the contrary, he assumed it was and let himself in.

He glanced around. There was some kind of... something rigged up in the corner. It was a mishmash of tubing and metal with a pair of what looked like robot arms on either side. More Importantly, it had a short shouty gem tangled in its midst. Peridot was stuck upside down, her legs waving uselessly in the air as she cursed at it.

"Peridot? are you okay?" The gem froze, glancing up at him before smiling a too wide smile.

"Yes Steven. Yes I am perfectly fine. I was just running an experiment when an unforeseeable mishap occurred. I must have used flawed earth materials, clearly my calculations could not have been wrong."

"Okay," he interrupted, grinning. "But uh, do you need any help?"

"Of course not, I have the situation well in hand. I will be out in a moment." Peridot twisted her arm and pressed a button that by her head. With a sparking of electricity and a big popping sound, the two metal arms on the side folded inward and wrapped around Peridot's waist; pinning her even tighter against the rest frame.

"No! Curse you, you clodding excuse for an emergency pilot removal system!" Peridot hissed, her
teeth gnashing as she struggled even harder. "This is the exact opposite of what an eject switch is supposed to do!"

Steven smiled, walking over to help. He pried away at the arms trapping the gem. "So what exactly is this doohickey thing?"

"This doohickey thing, as you call it, was an attempt to recreate a functional set of limb enhancers." Peridot huffed, wiggling out of the straps attaching her to the machine. Once she was free Steven let go the arm, which sprung back, slamming around the metal frame with a crash.

"Well that just doesn't look very safe."

"Nonsense." Peridot huffed, "It is perfectly safe. I just need to rewire several of the inner circuits to work out this tiny flaw in its operation systems." With a harsh metal screech like a car being choked to death, the arms compressed; crushing the outer frame and mangling the inner circuitry. Then it caught fire.

Peridot's eye started to twitch. And continued to do so as Steven hurried over to the wall and grabbed a fire extinguisher.

Steven could feel the aggravation rolling off of Peridot as he sprayed the mangled remains with extinguisher foam. It really was a good thing his dad had insisted on keeping it the barn. The barn had been through a lot since the gems started using it, it didn't deserve to be burned down. Once the fire was out, he turned to Peridot, he could tell she was trying to withhold a tantrum. Luckily he had just the thing to help with that.

"Want a donut?"

"What's a donut?"

"It's a ring made of dough thats been baked and is delicious." He held out the bag to Peridot. She glanced inside it.

"Oh. It's one of those carbon based energy packets you need to consume." Peridot leaned away from the bag, a queasy expression on her face. "No thanks."

"Are you sure? They're really good!" Steven shook the bag slightly in the hope that it would entice her.

"No thank you." Peridot snorted, "I have no interest in attempting to consume your earthly… food. Not after the last time."

"Aw come on, Amethyst said she was sorry."

"And I accepted her apology. Nonetheless, that did not change the fact that I had been completely uniformed about the necessity of a digestion system, nor the… end result of such a system." Peridot's face turned even greener, "You organic life forms are absolutely vile, no offense."

"...Some taken, but I understand. Pearl feels the same way." Steven shrugged, that just meant more donuts for him, Amethyst need never know.

"Was that all you came down here for?"

"Oh right! I forgot. Peridot, there was something I wanted to ask you?"
The gem raised a brow at him, "Yes?"

"Well, now that nothing is about to make the earth explode and the ocean isn't being boiled by hatred, the other gems decided that it is time to resume doing what we normally do."

"And that is?"

"You know: fight monsters, explore gem ruins, retrieve artifacts. Crystal gem stuff!"

"And you are telling me this because?"

"Because I want to know if you want to come with us!" Peridot went still.

"Uh, Peridot?"

"Steven." her voice had gone weird; soft and wobbly. "A-are asking me... to be a crystal gem?"

Steven blinked, that sounded a lot like a loaded question, "Um… aren't you already one? I mean, you already helped saved the earth once."

Peridot just stared at him, stars in her eyes. She turned around abruptly, sniffing wildly.

"…Peridot? are you crying?" Oh no! he hadn't been trying to make that happen at all!

"I'm not crying!" Peridot snapped. "I just… got some of your earth dirt in my vision spheres."

"But you wear a visor."

"It must have been some kind of super invasive dirt! No doubt your planet has all kind of insidious things like that."

"Awww." Steven wrapped his arms around Peridot in a hug, accidentally lifting her off her feet.

"Betrayal!" she squawked. "Unhand me."

"No, it's hug time. And it's okay to cry Peridot. Literally everyone I know does it… like, a lot."

"And that's all well and good, but get your hands off me!"

Steven let her go, a smile wide on his face as he watched her pull herself together. It took her a few minutes.

"Soooooo, do you wanna come on the mission or not?"

"I would… be happy to." Peridot sniffed. "Is there any equipment you require me to bring?"

Steven shrugged.

"Very well," Peridot recovered. "What kind of environment are we headed to?"

"I don't know."

"Of course not." Peridot deadpanned. "Well it will hardly be the first time I have been put into an assignment with a poor quality briefing. Can you at least tell me when we are scheduled for departure?"

"Well, we were planning to leave once everyone was at the temple, but first I gotta find Lapis, do
"You're inviting Lazuli as well?" Peridot scoffed. "I find myself doubting her ability to act as a team player, especially with me leading the mission."

"...I'm just going to ignore that last bit, but that's why I want to ask her. I know she'll get along great with everyone if she just gives them a chance!"

"Fine, it's your time to waste as you please. She is most likely on top of the barn tower, same as usual. She likes it up there for some unfathomable reason."

"Thanks." Steven smiled, heading out the door. "I'll be back in awhile."

"Yes, yes," Peridot waved him off. "That will give me time to prepare some essential equipment for the mission."

Lapis sighed, closing her eyes and feeling the wind blow through her hair.

She was back on top of the, what had Steven called it? A grain silo? Something like that… Whatever it was, she liked it up here. It was the highest point around where she could lie down and rest. It was high enough that most sounds were muffled.

Lapis enjoyed the quiet, she'd had precious little of it the last few months. Jasper had not been a very considerate fusion partner, always yelling and struggling; constant screams of rage did not a soothing ambience make. That was probably one of the main reasons she found Peridot's presence so grating. The smaller gem truly loved the sound of her own voice.

Her high-pitched, irritating, screechy voice.

Honestly, Peridot couldn't even keep her thoughts quiet! She was constantly saying whatever popped into her head into that recorder, only to play them back again and make more comments about the things she'd said.

It was maddening.

Luckily, Peridot was busy tinkering with that contraption of hers, whatever it was. She'd rambled something about it being a way to reassert her former glory, whatever that meant. Lapis hadn't really been paying attention, nor did she care.

As long as she got to enjoy some peace and quiet.

The sound of creaking made Lapis' eyes snap open. Someone was climbing the ladder. Idly she thought about who it might be. They weren't talking, so it couldn't be Peridot, and she doubted any of the Crystal Gems would want to visit her, which only left Steven...

"Hey Bob!" and there he was.

"It's Lapis." she corrected, more out of habit than anything else.

"I know, but it's kind of our thing now."
"What if I don't want to be Bob?" she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Too late, you're Bob forever."

"Oh no. Whatever should I do?" Steven shot her a grin and she couldn't help but smile back. She didn't know what it was about him, but Steven's mood was always infectious. "So Steven, what brings you all the way up here?"

"Well I wanted to ask you something."

"Well, here I am."

"Okay, so here's the thing…"

Lapis could feel the smile slipping off her face as Steven explained the situation. He wanted her to join him and the rest of the gems on a mission of some sort...great. When he finished he just looked at her, like he could barely contain his excitement for her answer.

"No."

"What?" he looked completely taken aback at her dismissal, like he honestly hadn't expected her to outright refuse him. But she wasn't going to let that sway her.

She cared about Steven, she really did. The problem was the other gems. Peridot… the two of them had come to an understanding that they were both stuck here, so they'd agreed to live with each other. But still, Lapis could remember how Peridot had acted when they first met: apathetic and loaded with advanced technology, the technician had looked at Lapis as nothing more than a source of information… she might as well have still been stuck in the mirror for all the difference it would have made. It was weird to have to wrap her mind around the fact that the strange and impatient technician that had interrogated her was now this short and overly-enthusiastic ball of noise she had for a roommate. But still… Peridot had stuck in Lapis' mind as a symbol of all that had changed on Homeworld.

And the Crystal Gems…

By the stars, she hated them.

Well… no, not them personally. But she had been trapped in that mirror on suspicion of being one of them. All those years she'd spent in that mirror she'd had little to do but blame the Crystal Gems. If they hadn't existed, she wouldn't have been imprisoned. Then when they found her… they hadn't even tried to let her out.

Lapis knew she wasn't being fair. Of course Peridot hadn't shown her any regard beyond what her assignment demanded of her. The Crystal Gems hadn't put her in the mirror, and they hadn't realized that she had still been conscious. It was widely believed that a gem that had been turned into a power source like that did not retain their sense of self. The sheer horror of the alternative drove them to disbelieve it. Of course they hadn't even questioned that she was alive inside the mirror.

Lapis understood all of that.

The problem was that understanding didn't make the resentment go away.

But she didn't know how to explain all of that to Steven, nor did she want to. She didn't need to bother him with her thousands of years of bitterness. She would try to put as much of those feeling
behind her as she could.

She would do it for him.

But she couldn't bring herself to do it just yet, not if she didn't have to.

"I said no, Steven. I don't want to go."

"Well, why not? It would probably be really fun!"

"It's not you Steven. I just really don't want to spend time with other gems right now."

"Oh." He looked so sad, she could practically feel it radiating off him. It made something inside her chest ache.

"I'm sorry." she really was.

"What? Oh! No! No! No!" Steven backpedaled, his head snapping back up to look at her with eyes wide, he raised his hand and waving them to ward off her apology. "It's okay! Really! I get it. You want to spend some time alone. It's okay. Don't worry about it"

Lapis just stared at him, before closing her eyes and shaking her head ruefully. Why was he so nice? She just couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it. Oh! Before I go, there was one more thing I forgot to ask. Do you want a donut?"

"Uh… a donut?" Steven held up a bag and shook it in front of her face. Reaching inside he took out a large, brownish-black ring.

"A donut. You eat them, they taste really good!" he handed her the donut.

Hmmm. Eating… she was familiar with the concept. She'd seen more than a few fish eat each other in the ocean. She back looked at Steven, who merely nodded at her eagerly.

Lapis shrugged, why not? And took a bite. It was… strange, not bad, but weird. It made her tongue tingle a bit, like some tiny creature was doing a dance on it.

"It's… good?"

"Great! I'm glad you like it." Steven was beaming at her now. It felt nice. "Anyway, I'd better get going. I'll see you later?"

"Of course." The donut in her mouth muffled her words, but Steven understood. He grinned and started climbing down the ladder.

Even once he had departed, Lapis could still feel Steven's presence, his cheerful mood lingering in the air like dust. She smiled to herself, eyeing what was left of the donut in her hand. He really was one of a kind.

She took another bite. It tasted sweet.

Chapter End Notes
Well, that brings us to the end of chapter one. Here comes the part where I beseech you lovely readers for reviews.

Here's the thing: When I write fanfiction, I believe the single most important thing is that the characters be in-character. That is the number one thing that I strive for, (Being hilarious or awesome is a close second). So if you think I did a good job at portraying Peridot, Lapis or Steven, please let me know.

And if you made it this far, thank you for reading.

NOTE: This Story is in line with canon at the start of season 3. anything that happens in Season 3, is not canon in this story.
Something Strange

Chapter Summary

Steven and the gems go a hunting'. And something stirs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

S&D-Peridot-S&D

With a flash of light and a familiar whoosh, the inside of Steven's house disappeared from sight; the quantum reality of space breaking down around them and moving them through the stream of radiant energy. When the world rematerialized around them, Peridot found herself staggering off the warp pad, feeling suddenly ill. She glanced backwards. Ugh, that explained it. The warp pad they had just come through was in poor condition; there were cracks and chips all over it.

Peridot was honestly surprised it had brought everyone here in one piece.

But where was here? They were in some kind of ravine; she could see two walls of rock rising up on either side of them with differing layers making a striped pattern.

"Wow! This place looks really cool! Is this the Grand Canyon?" Well Steven certainly looked impressed, if a little green in the face from the transport. Personally, she couldn't say the same, the geologic structures of Homeworld, natural or otherwise, were far more impressive then this relatively tiny furrow in the ground.

"Nah, that place is a lot bigger." Amethyst commented, looking around with a critical eye. She didn't show any signs of nausea. Naturally, as a quartz such petty ailments were beneath her notice.

"Wait you've been to the Grand Canyon?"

"Darn tootin'! I've visited holes in the ground all over the world. Can't just sit around eatin' garbage in my room all the time, y'know. Wanna go there some time?"

"I can't think of a single thing I would want to do more."

"How about doing the mission." Said Pearl, "We are here for a reason after all."

"And what might that reason be? I have yet to be informed." Peridot complained. Honestly, was it too much to ask for a detailed three-hour report on what would be expected of her?

"An excellent question Peridot." Pearl paused, her mouth open for a moment before turning. "Garnet, would you like to explain?"

"We're here to investigate." Peridot waited, but the fusion said no more.

Well that was almost entirely unhelpful.

"Actually, I think I may remember this place." Pearl said, awkwardly taking it upon herself to fill
in the details that Garnet had left infuriatingly blank. "It was a long time ago, mind you. We've seldom had a reason to come here, not since before the war. There was minor activity here back during Homeworld occupation, hence why there is a warp pad. I believe it was considered as a possible site for a kindergarten. But I remember hearing that it was dismissed as unsuitable. We found no evidence of further activity."

"Clearly. Just look at these mineral strata." Peridot gestured to the wall. "It's all wrong for gem incubation."

"How can you tell?" asked Steven, tilting his head to the side and eyeing the rock as if he could make a the answer become clear.

"I'm a fully graduated kindergartener," Peridot declared, quite an accomplished one too, if she said so herself. "Working in kindergartens was part of my job. I can tell just by looking that the concentrations of silica in these rocks are far too high, any gems seeded here would not grow correctly. Furthermore-"

"Yeah, yeah," Amethyst interrupted. "Enough with the nerd talk. If this place was abandoned, why are we here?"

"I sensed unusual activity," said Garnet. "This area is slowly being filled with a low level of gem energy," She frowned, reaching up and adjusting her sunglasses. "It's…odd."

"Then it's up to the crystal gems to investigate!" Steve gasped; his eyes starting to sparkle. "We can be like that one movie: Spectre-arrestors!" And, of course, Steven started to sing, "There's something strange, in the community, whom shall you alert? Spectre-arrestors!"

"Oh! I saw that movie!" Amethyst said, grinning. "Think we'll run in to half as much slime as they did?"

"You mean the ghostmatter goo? Maybe. That would be so cool!"

"I know right? I always thought it looked really tasty."

"Alright, alright, let's save the ghost talk for later." Garnet stepped off the warp pad and started moving through the ravine. "We need to find what's producing this field of energy and put a stop to it. Left unchecked, it could cause an infestation of crystal beasts. I don't want to have to clean something like that out. It would be a lot of work."

Peridot followed, thinking over the details she had been provided; an errant field of gem energy? That was strange. Energy didn't just float around in the air; it had to come from some sort of power source. Most gem technology was powered by harvested gems, an efficient process that dissociated gems from consciousness and converted them into a mindless power source. These gems tended to be very stable, if damaged they didn't leak their energy out into their surroundings. They just became inert. There were more sophisticated power sources, such as the crystal heart of a starship engine. But those were a relatively modern invention; there wouldn't be one on earth.

It was probably some kind of weird thing that only happened on earth. Something far outside her expertise.

Which left her somewhat unsure about what she was even doing here. When Steven had asked her to come she had been emotionally compromised, Steven's fault of course. Once he'd left, rationality had reasserted itself. She was a tiny, almost defenseless gem. Without her limb enhancers she was only one tiny step above useless in the field. For Diamond's sake, Steven was a better combat asset
than her! And his preferred tactic was to hide behind his shield while attempting to love and tolerate his enemy into submission!

Naturally she had hurried to rectify this the moment he left to look for Lazuli, whom she noted, rather smugly, had declined to join this mission. She had run frantically around the barn gathering several things of use and thrown them into a carrying sack. A highly useful device she had found in the loft of the barn, not as efficient as gem dimensional storage spaces, but it sufficed.

"-eridot? Hey Peridot?"

Oh, she had been lost in her musings again. "What?"

"What's with the backpack?"

"There is nothing with this backpack. Although assuming you ment to ask what's in the backpack, the answer would be that it is some equipment we might need. I brought several things I believe will prove advantageous to us."

"Like what?" Amethyst asked, from where she was taking up the rear of the group "Got any snacks in there?"

"Of course not!" Peridot, eating was a disgusting earth habit! Even if Amethyst thought it was cool. Putting things in your body, only to excrete them from the other end… ugh. "I've brought several tools for information retrieval and self defense."

"Self-defense? What, didja bring a weapon or somethin'?"

"I did." Peridot nodded proudly. She had spent some time the past weeks testing the capabilities of various implements, after a substantial amount of trial and error she had found what she believed was the most effective weapon for her to wield. She reached into the outer pouch and pulled out her new armament.

"Behold!" she declared, brandishing it above her head.

"...Peridot. That's a wrench." Okay, Amethyst did not sound as impressed as she should be.

"To be fair, it is a really big wrench." Steven said, patting her shoulder sympathetically. Peridot grimaced, what right did they have to criticize her choices? She had selected a weapon that possessed optimal utility and damage dealing ability!

"I-I'll have you know I have seen first hand how much damage can be done with this instrument. It can inflict an impressive amount of pain if swung with enough force."

"That so? And how do you know that?" and now Amethyst was grinning at her, for some reason it made Peridot feel like something small and furry being looked down upon by something with claws.

"Th-that is not important." Peridot huffed, Amethyst hardly needed to know about the completely unavoidable mishaps that had occurred during her field-testing.

"So what else you got?" ah, a change of subject. Excellent. Putting the wrench away Peridot pulled out a crude screen with an antenna attached.

"It is a gemian energy detector. I thought it would be useful to have if we were searching for gem activity I was able to make it from spare parts from my escape pod."
"That's awesome Peridot!" Honestly, Steven was far too easily impressed. Such a device was rudimentary at best. "So, what does it say?"

"Nothing important at the moment. Simply confirming what Garnet has already told us. A low background level of energy permeating the area- what?" She paused. The needle on the device had suddenly shot up before falling back. Peridot called to the others to stop moving. Glancing at the surrounding rock she saw absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. It couldn't have been the crystal gems, they were already accounted for in the device's readout.

A mechanical error?

Nonsense. The things she made didn't malfunction; break? Yes, but not malfunction. She held the detector up higher and backtracked.

There it was again!

Peridot moved back and forth trying to pinpoint exactly where it was coming from. She was able to pin it down to one area.

"Here!" she declared, triumphant. While pointing to a section of cliff face that looked exactly the same as it's surroundings.

"And what is here, exactly?" Pearl looked skeptical, which made Peridot grimace. Did the gem still doubt her expertise?

"There's something behind this rock producing energy, perhaps our culprit. We just need to find some way to open-" Garnet's armored fist shot past her face slamming into to rock and smashing through it. "Or we could do that, why not?" She had forgotten what the crystal gem's favorite activity was. At least it wasn't her stuff they were breaking this time.

"I saw this was the quickest solution."

Peridot rolled her eyes. But said nothing, mostly because she couldn't really think of another solution they could have tried. She examined the gaping hole that Garnet's fist had left in the rock wall. The scent of stale air was wafting from it, telling her that the opening was deeper than it looked. Pearl stepped forward and lit up her gem, shining a beam of light down the hole. Yes, there were stairs leading downwards.

"You know, I was joking before." Steven commented, scratching the back of his neck "But this looks exactly like the kind of place that would be haunted."

"No need to worry Steven." Pearl replied, her tone gentle. "I've told you before that there is no such thing as ghosts. I assure you, there will be no specters of any kind down there."

"Really?"

"Of course not, most likely we will only encounter magical gem beasts and corrupt gem monsters, seeing as those actually exist."

"… Thanks Pearl. I feel better now."

"Glad I could help." Pearl stepped forward gracefully, and stumbled, tripping over nothing and starting to fall.

Before she could fall down into the cavern, Garnet's hand shot out and latched onto the Pearl's
shoulder.
"Careful."

"I, what? Yes. Of course. I was just…" Pearl blinked, puzzlement clear on her face. Like someone had told her that Rose had secretly been a pretzel bagel all her life.

"Pearl?"

Garnet's voice seemed to rouse her; Pearl shook her head, eyes refocusing as she blinked at their leader. "Oh. My apologies. I just got very… confused. I'm not sure what happened."

"Hmmm…"

Well that had certainly been odd. From what Peridot had seen, Pearl's gracefulness was remarkable, even for a Pearl of her caliber. Pearl didn't stumble, not when… when…

What had she been thinking about? Peridot blinked. What? It was like there was a fog in her mind. Stopping her from following her train of thought to the end.

"Guys?" That was Steven. He sounded confused, and maybe a little worried. She couldn't really… say.

"Yes Steven?" And that was… Garnet? She didn't sound confused at least.

"Are we, uh, gonna go down there?"

Garnet silent for a moment, before nodding; the fusion resolutely stepped down into the tunnel. The definitive action pierced through the fog in her mind like a lighthouse. Thinking clearly once more, she hurried after Garnet, lighting up her gem so that she could see where she was going.

Her mind was whirling with thoughts, as though trying to make up for lost time. She noted the condition of the tunnel: the walls were bare and straight, far too straight to be natural and most certainly the work of gems. Humans didn't do such clean work, not without disrupting the surrounding area. But this tunnel's entrance had blended seamlessly with the surrounding rock.

After a minute they reached a wider chamber. Peridot shined her light around. "Ah. Well this is clearly an old gem facility." The familiar sight of consoles and machinery beckoned over.

"Hadn't we already basically guessed that?" Amethyst asked.

"But didn't Garnet say that the crystal gems investigated this place? And that you didn't find anything." Steven asked, eyeing the consoles with interest.

"Well," Peridot replied, before the fusion could respond. "Clearly you missed something."

"We were looking for a kindergarten, not whatever this is." Garnet sounded… nervous? Unsure? Maybe frustrated? Whatever, Peridot had more important things to worry about. She had moved over to the main processor and was examining it. The tech was about as archaic as everything else she'd been forced to become accustomed to. What was different was that these facilities seemed to be good condition, if a little oddly colored. Peridot placed her hand against an access panel, which sent up a thick cloud of dust into her face.

And into her open mouth, causing her to choke. Steven may have brought her around to the so-called charms of earth. But why did everything on this planet still have it out for her. She'd saved its
very existence! Where was the gratitude?

"Hey Peridot?" Said Steven patting her on the back sympathetically, "Do you know anything about this place?"

"Why would I?"

"Well, you've always seemed to know about the gem stuff on earth." He started counting things on his fingers. "The kindergarten, that radio tower thing, that old ship, the warp pad system. You know, gem stuff."

"True, I am quite well informed." She had been provided with quite a number of files about former Homeworld activity on this planet. All for the sake of the cluster mission. She'd read many of them, not like she'd had much else to do on the trip here. Jasper had hardly been a good conversational partner. "I don't know this place, none of the data logs I received made mention of it."

"So does that mean it's a super secret base?" Steven's eyes were doing that star thing again. "That would be so cool!"

"Hardly," Peridot snorted. "It most likely means that this place was of no real importance. Perhaps an information storage or safe house."

"Awwww."

"What? Did you want this place to have some Homeworld experiment in it? Maybe some kind of mini-cluster?"

"I mean, no. Of course I don't want this place to be something terrible. But it's just kind of boring."

Peridot rolled her eyes. She took another look at the console, taking care to gently wipe off the dust. It really was in remarkably good condition. She placed her hand against the center switch and to her amazement the machine began to hum to life. It was still working. Literally every other gem facility shed found on this planet had required some kind of repairs before it fulfilled even a fraction of its original purpose.

Weird. But not unwelcome.

"Hey guys?" Amethyst was calling from across the chamber, "I found another staircase back here. Who wants to check it out?"

"I do!" Steven attempted to make his way over, only for Garnet to pick him up as he passed her. His legs kept running in the air for a few moments before he realized what had happened and looked toward the fusion in askance.

"Amethyst and I will search the facility. You stay here with Pearl and Peridot and see if you can get anything out of these machines."

"Uh… okay?"

Without another word Garnet moved off. Amethyst shrugged at him, before moving to follow. Steven watched as they disappeared down the steps.

He turned back to the monitors, Pearl was cleaning off several more pieces of equipment with a look of disgust on her face, that looked kind of boring so he wandered back over to Peridot.
Looking over her shoulder as she mashed buttons and made words flash across the screen.

"So… finding anything cool?"

"Perhaps. There are some files and data logs. But they are written in code. I’ll need some time to figure this out. Go help Pearl clean or something."

Steven shrugged, turning around and trotting off towards Pearl with no real enthusiasm. Peridot ignored him, her attention fully on the encrypted data whizzing past the screen. All of it seemed to be gathered around a single data log. If she could access that, she could crack the whole console. Moving some of the potential firewalls out of the way, she attempted to open the file.

**Access denied.**

Oh really? Well, Peridot cracked her knuckles.

They'd just have to see about that.

S&D-??????-S&D

It was so quiet.

Agony. Screaming. Pain. No, there was no pain. There was no noise. Why was there no pain? If there was no pain, why did it hurt so much?

There was a noise. It knew that noise. It was the sound of stone *breaking*, had the tremors returned? No. Nothing was shaking. But… wait. There was *movement*. It could feel it. But *nothing* down here had ever moved. No. That wasn't true. There had been movement here. Once. Long ago.

But something was moving now. It was tiny, imaginary? There was nothing here. But no, yes there was. Something was moving, not the rock, rock was unmoving. Stagnant. Something was moving, something not stagnant.

What was it? It felt familiar. It was doing something, raising images that were not real. That were not here. Bad things? No. Open space. Unending movement. Clear sky in every direction. These were not bad things, it was sure of that… but… why did they hurt?

And… there was the movement again. Air! It remembered now. The air in this place was moving. It had been so still for so long, it had forgotten what it felt like when it moved.

It could feel more coming back to it. Faster than it had since the tremors. But it was elusive. Like air. What it might remember was slipping away. But unlike before, it left with a promise of return.

More motion. It felt… nice. Gentle. Unforced. It had felt nothing for so long. There had been *nothing* to feel for so long.

But something had changed. What did it mean?

There was another sound. Harsh and wonderful. It was coming from everywhere. It was making everything shake, but how was that possible? Where was it coming from?

*Oh.*

It was making the noise. *It* could make noise? How?… yes. Another memory: words and song and
sound flowing freely from it. It made that. They made that. What was this noise it was making.

A growl. A single note rumbling out, making the air move.

The sound. The movement! It could feel something return to it. Flashing images of what once was. It hurt, and yet it did not.


It could remember!

The growl deepened, and for the first time in millennia, it began to move.

Chapter End Notes

Bluh, this chapter did not want to be written. I'm finding Peridot actually really hard to write. It probably has something to do with her sometimes being a serious and sarcastic engineer and also being prone to overdramatics and temper tantrums. Something about balancing the two is hard for me.

But anyway, if you could let know how I did, that would be just swell.
What lay Below

Chapter Summary

Garnet and Amethyst delve into the depths. Pearl deals with a crisis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

S&D- Garnet -S&D

"Man, this place is a dump."

"Coming from you?"

"Hey! I'll have you know my room isn't just a dump. It is a quality work of art. I work hard to make sure my room is a classy display of pure garbage. This place? It's not even trying."

"Hmmmm." Garnet glanced around the hallway, Amethyst trailing behind her, loudly criticizing the poor quality of the run down state of the facility. This place certainly went down deeper than she had expected. It had been quite some time since they had left Steven and the others behind, and yet they were still headed downward.

She couldn't help but wonder how Homeworld had hidden such a facility from them. The crystal gems had been quite thorough in scouring the earth these past millennia. It was frustrating to see how places like this seemed to keep popping up. How many more were there? Would the job of the crystal gems ever be done?

Garnet didn't know.

What she did know, was that this place was bothering her. A fact made all the more irritating because she couldn't figure out why. The passageway was dark, cramped, and dirty. But none of those were things that she'd ever had a problem with. There was just something about this place… like something buzzing in her head. Warning her to be careful, that danger lurked deep below. She always took care of to listen to those feelings. Her instinct had rarely failed her.

But if she let visions of doom stop her, she'd never leave the temple. Garnet wasn't scared of the unknown, but that didn't mean she ignored the warnings. Steven and Peridot were near the entrance, fully able to flee if something dangerous came up from the depths. They also had Pearl there to protect them. Furthermore…

"I mean, just look at these cable things. They aren't even frayed and junk. What's the point of being an abandoned creepy place if the stuff inside still works?"

She wasn't alone, loud though she may be, Amethyst was excellent backup.

"Hey, Garnet? I think we've stopped going down."

Garnet blinked, what had she said? Stopped going down? Oh. She meant the passage was leveling out. So it was.
Garnet gave her head a shake. She was spacing out. She needed to stop thinking about what might happen, and focus on what was happening now.

For example, there was now a large door blocking their way. The symbol of the four diamonds was firmly stamped across it. Garnet couldn't help but note there was a rather satisfying crack running through the middle of the symbol. She could also see there was a gray mist seeping out of the crack, illuminating the doorway with a faint glow.

"Nice door." Amethyst whistled. "And totally not ominous at all. Bet you my favorite shiny thing that there's a monster behind there."

"Only one way to find out." Garnet summoned her gauntlets with a flash. She was a crystal gem after all, it's not like she was going to respect the sanctity of Homeworld's symbol.

Strolling forward, she punched the door. It caved instantly, smashing inward with a crash and sending the mist swirling around her; unafraid, Garnet stepped across the threshold.

It was large and more mist lit everything with a soft blue glow. The cables that they had followed from the earlier room ran up the walls and met on the ceiling. The cables then twined around four pillars in the center of the room, forming a diamond-patterned net that took up most of the space. She couldn't see anything else of interest. Whatever this place was for, this construct was likely to be it.

There was also an orb floating silently in between the pillars, it was giving off a dull glow that pulsed between yellow and white.

She didn't like the look of it. The columns gave off an oppressive feeling. As though merely being in the same room as them was weighing her down, making her sluggish. And just looking at the orb in the center made her feel oddly trapped.

A faint hiss drew her attention to the nearest pillar, there was a crack running through it from floor to ceiling, with a grey liquid seeping out of it. As she watched, a drop of liquid fell the top of the structure. When it hit the floor it vaporized with an angry hiss.

The mist it created felt… strange. It tingled against her skin and made the air feel charged. She could see that it was making Amethyst's hair stand on end. Made her look like some kind of giant misshapen porcupine. It appeared they had found the source of the energy field, at least. But that just raised another question.

"Any clue what we're lookin' at?"

Exactly. "I don't know."

Amethyst shrugged, taking a stroll around the device, she gave it a puzzled look. "Think P-dot might know?"

"Maybe." Peridot had spoken on more than one occasion of her expertise in engineering. Perhaps now would be a good chance to put those boasts to the test.

As another drop fell from the crack, Amethyst stuck out her right hand and caught it.

…

"Oh man! That's freakin' cold!" Amethyst yelped, furiously shaking her hand as she leapt backward.
"Why did you do that?"

"I dunno, I'm reckless?"

Garnet shrugged, fair enough. "Are you alright?"

"Duh," Amethyst snorted. "It's gonna take more than a cold water to take me down." Still, Garnet couldn't help but note that the shorter gem made no effort to get closer again and kept opening and closing her right hand, as though trying to work some feeling back into it.

She turned her attention back to the construct. She may not know what it was, but she could hazard a guess. There was a certain rule that had always defined Homeworld's actions: Form followed Function.

This logic defined their entire culture. From the big and bulky quartz soldiers, to the refined and delicate pearls that were resigned to mere accessories, nice to look at, but not expected to do much.

That said this construct looked an awful lot like a cage.

Which gave way to some rather nasty implications. If Homeworld wanted to imprison someone, the usual modus operandi was to trap them in an object, much like Lapis' mirror. When anyone could be damaged and reduced to a tiny, easy to transport form, there was no need for large prisons like this.

There was likely more to it than that, why bother with cables running all the way from the control room, or liquid-filled pillars if this thing's only purpose was to hold something captive?

"Hey Garnet? You hearin' that, or is it just me?"

Garnet blinked, shaking her head. Now was not the time to get distracted, there was a noise coming from the center of the cage; it wasn't a hiss, or a mechanical hum, it was a deep rumbling, like the earth itself was starting to get angry.

It sounded alive.

"Get back!" Garnet ordered, leaping away. Amethyst followed suit unquestioningly.

There was a sound like the air had split open. And the thing between the pillars exploded. A massive clawed limb slammed into the cage of cables, causing them to bulge outward as the mist roiled around it.

But the cables didn't break.

"Yep, it's a monster. I totes called it." Amethyst summoned her whip with a flash of light. She glanced sideways at Garnet, clearly waiting for her to order an attack.

She did not.

Garnet couldn't bring herself to do anything except watch the errant limb claw at its prison. Even then it was with an odd sense of detachment. The claws were trying to rip into the cables, but pulled back whenever they made contact. Like it couldn't bring itself to hit them very hard after the first time. No sense of commitment.

Garnet could relate, she felt like she should be doing something too. What was that again? It felt like her mind was full of wool. Steven had a sweater made of wool. It was soft. Though kind of
itchy. She liked it, it looked good on him.

He was such a cutie.

"Uh, Garnet? You still there?" Hmmm? Amethyst sounded strange. Like she was about to have a panic attack, Garnet couldn't begin to imagine why. She turned her head toward her shorter companion. Her purple buddy was staring at her with really wild eyes, made her look a bit silly.

"We gonna wreck this thing or what?" Amethyst demanded, cracking her whip reflexively. The loud snap made Garnet blink, the wool in her mind peeling back slightly. She turned back to the cage. The monster had evidently given up on the cables and was tapping it's claws on the pillars, recoiling from them each time it made contact until it tried the broken one. Almost gingerly it touched the cracked column, as though making sure it was safe. Then the claws wrapped around it and began to squeeze, filling the cavern with the groan of twisting metal.

Garnet's eyes narrowed behind her shades. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Not the fact that a monster was breaking out and she was doing nothing. Wait…no, that second part. Why wasn't she doing anything? Her thoughts were all… loopy. All the mist floating around the room was making her vision go fuzzy.

The fusion raised a gauntleted fist and slugged herself in the face.

"Garnet!" Suddenly, Amethyst's panicked shouts didn't seem as amusing.

The pain brought clarity, something about this place was messing with her head.

"Amethyst, come on, we're leaving."

"What about that?" Amethyst gestured toward the cage.

"It can wait." Engaging an unknown entity while her mind was compromised would be a mistake. She turned back toward the entrance, they would regroup with the others and then deal with this, whatever it was.

There was a final screech of protesting metal; then damaged pillar, now torn in half, went flying over their heads. Gray liquid spew from it, drenching her.

Everything went cold.

S&D- Pearl -S&D

Access Denied.

"I'll deny your access! You clodding piece of garbage!"

Too many attempts made, locking access for five minutes.

"Arghhh!

Pearl sighed, clearly Peridot was having trouble with all this ancient technology. Personally, Pearl was having no such troubles; the systems in this place were much like those she worked with around the time of the rebellion. She hadn't had much cause to operate such things since the war, but she was rather good at it, even if she did say so herself.

Not that she was having much more luck than Peridot, just about all the data was either encrypted
or required a security password. She hadn't been able find out much. Whatever Homeworld had been up to here, they certainly hadn't wanted anyone else finding out about it.

"Amethyst and Garnet have been gone awhile," said Steven, looking nervously at downward passage. "Do you think they got lost?"

"I doubt it." Pearl replied, smiling. Steven's concern for others never failed.

"How can you be sure? We don't know how big this place is."

"As a matter of fact, we do. Look here Steven. One of the few things I have been able to access here is a map of the facility," Pearl opened the file and a holographic image of the facilities layout appeared above the console. "See? Here's the entrance where we are, then it's just a straight shot down until they reach this wider cavern beneath us."

"And what's in there?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, but I imagine that's where Garnet and Amethyst are right now. Whatever's down there, I'm sure they would be able to handle it." It was true that Amethyst could be somewhat unreliable; a few regrettably memorable training accidents and dismemberments came to mind. But the former kindergartener had been getting far better. Pearl rarely had to tell her what she was doing wrong nowadays. Besides, Garnet was there. What more needed to be said?

Everything would be fine.

A sudden screeching brought her attention back to the monitor, the screen had turned red and was producing the most horrible wailing.

"What's happening?" Steven shouted, pressing his hands against his ears.

"It wasn't me!" Peridot screeched, banging her hands against the controls.

"What?"

Pearl tapped several keys, and the alarm fell silent. Several words were flashing across the screen.

Null Chamber breached. Preparing lockdown.

Oh-kay… well, that wasn't good.

Pearl took a deep breath, now wasn't the time to panic, especially since she had no idea how drastic the situation was, although the flashing red lights and alarms did lend a certain urgency to the current situation.

First things first.

"Steven, Peridot. You two need to get out of here."

"What?" Steven asked, he shot a glance towards the descending passageway. "What about-"

"Leave that to me, I'll find Garnet and Amethyst. You two need to leave."

"But…"

"You heard what she said!" Peridot had latched on to Steven's arm and was trying to tug him towards the exit. "We have to get out of this cloddy place before something terrible happens."
"But what if you need me?" Steven asked, his eyes…

Stars, he looked so much like Rose: gentle and determined, it made Pearl's heart want to melt.

But now was not the time.

She grabbed Steven and dashed towards the exit, Peridot cursing as she was dragged along. "Steven, this place is going into lockdown." She explained in a rush, taking the steps two at a time. In her experience, gems rarely bothered installing such measures simply because gem soldiers were strong enough that they could easily suppress whatever the threat was. The Homeworld mindset tended to veer towards destroying threats, rather than containing them.

Meaning whatever was happening, it was something Homeworld had deemed dangerous. Something a battalion of soldiers couldn't fight. All of the other machines worked, she had no reason to doubt the lockdown program wouldn't. She needed to get Steven out of here, and she needed him not to decide it would be a good idea to come back in to try to help.

Aha! She could see sunlight up ahead, she rushed out of the cave and placed Steven gently on his feet. Peridot, who had been clinging to his legs, let go of him at last, laying on the ground and swearing under her breath. There, Steven had been secured, now to deal with the second part.

"Pearl, listen-

"I understand you want to help Steven, I'm not saying you're not strong enough." She assured him, not that. Never that. "The simple fact is that we may get locked in here. We gems can survive that, regardless of how long it lasts. Humans cannot." She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Do you understand?"

"I- yeah. I understand." He sighed. "But what if you guys do get stuck in there? What should I do?"

"You don't need to do anything, we'll likely just tunnel out. Believe it or not, it wouldn't be the first time the crystal gems had been trapped underground." Amethyst's fault, of course, but that wasn't important. "Now I need to go. Wait here. You will wait, won't you?"

Steven bit his lip, but nodded.

"Good. I'll see you soon." Pearl stood, turned, and rushed back into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I had intended for this to be longer, but this just felt like a good stopping point. Not sure how I feel about the bit from Garnet's perspective, too much self examination, not enough Amethyst being awesome. I also usually try to put more humor into my writing. Oh well, there will be time for that after the gems get out.

If they get out.

(Insert spooky, ominous noise here)

Any of you guys/girls have opinions, I'd love to hear them.
Amethyst watched, horror rising like bile in her throat, as her leader collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. "Garnet!"

Amethyst rushed desperately to her fallen friend, but forced herself to stop short of actually touching Garnet; the fusion was drenched in that grey junk. Amethyst really didn't want to touch the stuff again. It was nasty. Just a drop of it had made her whole hand go numb; like that time she'd gone for a dip in the arctic, only like, ten times worse.

Oh man. Garnet probably couldn't even hear her. She certainly wasn't reacting to the sound of that monster tearing its cage apart. A quick glance back informed that the freaky arm monster was about half way out, the cables were getting caught on it and covering it in the grey sludge. At least it looked like the sludge was slowing it down too.

If she was either going to attack or run, now would be the time.

Normally she wouldn't even hesitate to charge in whips ablaze, but Garnet had said they should leave. Garnet didn't make calls like that for no reason. And what if she lost? Garnet was helpless, unable to defend herself; a situation so wrong, Amethyst had to force her mind to accept it.

What should she do? What should she do!? She was terrible in situations like this.

A lull in the noise made her glance back once more. The monster had gone still, it's limbs gently holding it above the gunk that was pooling around it. At the orb where the arms met a crack had formed. As Amethyst watched the crack split open revealing a single yellow eye. It stared back at her with a terrible fury that made her feel like the most pathetic thing to ever crawl out of a hole in the ground. God, it made her feel so small.

Okay, forget this. It was time to nope the heck out of here.

She formed a second whip and sent both lashing out towards Garnet. They each wrapped around a gauntlet and held fast. Amethyst turned and made a break for the exit, her leader dragging up the stairs behind her. She could hear the monster redouble its effort to break out behind her.

Okay. All right, she totally had this. It was a long, but straight shot up the stairs to the others. She'd reach them quickly, they'd all bail this place, maybe explode the entrance to try to keep that thing down here. Then they'd wash this gunk off Garnet, come back, and beat the snot out of that thing. Easy peasey, problem solved.
Then Amethyst crashed face first into a wall.

Catching herself before she could tumble down on top of Garnet, she stared in disbelief at the wall that was blocking the *only* path upwards. The heck had this thing come from?

She had exactly less than zero time for this.

Dropping the whips holding Garnet, she called up a third one and slashed it at the wall, setting the tips ablaze with purple energy that could cut a boulder in half.

Her efforts were rewarded with a tiny, barely noticeable scratch on the wall.

"Oh come on!" she screamed, trying to grab ahold of her rising panic and shove it back down. Forgoing the whip, she shifted into the purple puma and began punching, putting all of her effort into pounding her way through. She could feel the door denting slightly beneath her fists, but not much. Whatever jerk had made this thing; they'd made it sturdy.

Which was bad, made worse by the fact that she could hear a new sound echoing up from behind her, a rhythmic crunching and scuffling noise. As though something was pulling itself up the stairs.

She didn't need to guess as to what *that* was.

This wasn't working, time to try something new. Nudging her still helpless leader aside, Amethyst dashed down the stairs. She was going to need some distance for this.

Coming to a stop, she spun around and began to run back towards the wall, she leapt into the air and curled into a ball, shifting her hair into sharp points she spinballed up the stairs. Faster and faster she pushed herself, channeling her anger and fear into power until she slammed into the stupid wall like a meteor.

With a deafening shriek of protest and screaming metal she could feel it cave in around her. But she didn't break through.

Pulling herself out of the crater she'd left, Amethyst could feel a slight, fluttery burst of hope. She hadn't gotten through the door, but there was a hole in it, about the size of her fist. If she just did that one more time, she knew that they'd be home free.

Before she could dash back down to try again, a roar of rage split the air. So loud she could feel the echoes making the stone around her shake.

Aw, well crap. That sounded really close.

She eyed the whole in the wall; she could shrink down and fit through that easy. But… Garnet couldn't, not unless she felt like getting up and doing stuff again.

She eyed her leader, Garnet was shivering and muttering some gibberish under her breath, looking about as useful as Pearl in a dirty room competition.

She could fight, but there was something in her gut telling her that wouldn't end well, it would probably cause a cave in or something, and with Garnet stuck helpless like this…

Well there was another option; it was just kind of terrible.

The feeling of her hair standing on end prompted her to glance backwards once more. She locked gazes with that burning yellow eye again. Well, the monster had caught up.
She was out of time.

"I'm sorry Garnet." Amethyst called forth her whip and slashed it downward.

Right on Garnet's head.

Garnet exploded, Amethyst dived through the sparkling remains of her friend to catch her gems before they could roll away. Ruthlessly shoving aside the wave of guilt, Amethyst cupped them gently in her hands.

And bubbled them.

A soft tap sent them hurtling through space, straight back to the temple.

"I'll get you out of there, G. Soon as I make it through this."

Amethyst turned to the door and forced her form to change, shrinking herself into a hummingbird, she zipped through the hole in the wall right as the monster slammed into it.

It roared in renewed rage, it's single eye glaring at her through the hole.

Amethyst blew a raspberry at it, before flying up the stairs.

S&D- Pearl -S&D

Dashing into the control room, Pearl came to a stop. A thick metal door blocked the passage leading to Amethyst and Garnet.

It seemed the lockdown mechanisms of this place was as operational as she had feared. It made sense that the first door would be at the control room, if this place was sealed in, gem operators wouldn't be able to undo the lock down.

She could try to break through the door, but decided against it. As a pearl, she doubted she could muster the necessary brute force anyway.

She moved towards the monitor and attempted to access it again. Hopefully, she could override the lockdown and-

**Order Acknowledged.**

Yes!

**Input authorization password:**

NO! Rose darn it!

Okay, was there any chance of guessing the password for this? Possibly, gems tended not to be *that* creative, it would either be something literal like: 'disengage lockdown', she tried that… no didn't work. Or it might be something praising the Diamonds.

Something slammed into the other side of the hazard door, making Pearl jump. She heard a muffled, yet very familiar, scream of frustration, followed by a rattling as something started hitting the door.

"Amethyst?"
The door stopped shaking. "P? Is that you? Please tell me that's you," her voice was shaky and loud, the same way Amethyst always got when she was rattled. It seemed like things had become dangerous after all.

"Yes it is."

"Thank God! Listen, you gotta get Steven and Peridot out of here."

"Already done. What's going on?"

"Short version: big monster coming up the stairs. Any chance of you getting this door open?"

"Working on it. Where's Garnet?"

"She's been poofed."

"What?!" Now Pearl could feel her own panic starting to rise. "Is she safe?"

"Yeah, I bubbled her and sent her back to the temple, someone's gotta let her out."

"Oh… well, good. what abo-"

"Now is not the time P! Help me get this stupid door open! I'm gonna try to smash through it."

"I, right of course." Worrying would not solve this dilemma, she had a clear goal to accomplish, questions would wait. She turned back to the blinking password box.

'Diamonds are flawless' she tried.

**Access Denied.**

Oh, who was she kidding? There was no way she going to be able to guess the password, which was kind of the whole point of having one.

She was going to have to improvise.

Pearl summoned her spear and carefully inserted the point into the slight crack between keyboard and console. With a little delicate handling and a careful application of force, she managed to pop off the casing, revealing the circuitry underneath.

The inner workings did not look as complicated as she had feared. Back in the war, the crystal gems had not had much in the way of battleships or war machines, they'd mostly had to hijack Homeworld vessels. This unsurprisingly looked to date to about the same time. Which was good. She had more than a little experience at manipulating such systems.

She started carefully poking at the various cords, shoving aside unimportant ones. She just needed to connect the power wires to the control box and that may circumnavigate the need for a password.

Hopefully. She was a little rusty due to how long it had been.

There was another, more vicious impact on the door, startling her. But it did not seem to have any great effect on the door's integrity that Pearl could see.

"What was that?" she demanded.
"Me trying to smash my way through again, duh." Came the response, Pearl could just picture Amethyst making a grumbly face as she tried to rub feeling back into her aching head. "Aw man, I think this one's thicker than the last one…"

"Are you alright?"

"I guess, I think that-" there was a pause.

"Amethyst?"

"Uh, P? I don't want to rush you or nuthin', but I'm pretty sure the monster just broke through the last wall. I may have already mentioned this, but I really want to get out of here."

"Noted." Turning back the panels Pearl eyed the various wires. Hastily dredging up past experience. Gem circuitry tended to be colored based on purpose: yellow meant security and control. So that yellow cord likely was connected to all the security features. She cut it, pressing it against a white box, which was probably a command terminal, and sent a spark of magic surging into it.

She glanced feverishly at the screen and blinked:

**Password deleted. Reset password?**

Oh-kay. She wasn't quite sure how that had happened.

"Any time now would be great P!"

But it would have to do. She reset the password to 'Rose'.

**Password Accepted: disengaging lockdown.**

With a groan like an overworked truck, the door began to inch upwards. After it had risen a few inches, Amethyst, in the form of a mouse came dashing under it.

"Now shut it!"

"Of course." Pearl hit several keys.

**Wait for previous program to complete.**

Oh forget it, Pearl stabbed her spear through the screen. With a hiss like an electrocuted snake, the machine went dark and the door ground to a halt, with only about a foot of space beneath it.

"Will the, erm, monster be able to fit through there?"

"Doubt it. It was pretty big and kinda had more of a smash through everything kind of thing going for it."

Pearl nodded and gave Amethyst a once over. She looked as freaked out as she had sounded, eyeing the door like it was about to fly off its frame and attack. She was also rather filthy; there was some kind of gray substance coating her hair as well as her boots. She would have commented on it, but a sudden rattling shook the door.

Something on the other side was roaring with fury, she could see limbs moving beneath the door. Slamming into it over and over again. Beside her, Amethyst yelped, leaping back and scrambling toward the exit while staunchly not taking her eyes off the door.
But the door did not buckle.

Amethyst blinked, and then started laughing. "Hah! Take that you stupid overgrown-

A clawed hand shot out from beneath the door and crashed down a hair's breath from Pearl's feet, Amethyst leapt back once more, but as the claws pulled back with the sound of nails on a chalkboard, Pearl was blindsided by a surge of anger.

How DARE this filthy creature attempt to hurt her, hurt her family. Pearl hefted her spear and stabbed downward with all her might. Piercing the creature's scales with a satisfying squelch.

The limb recoiled, dragging the spear with it. It would have pulled Pearl in too if something hadn't wrapped around her waist and hauled her back.

"Are you nuts!" Amethyst shrieked, pulling Pearl back and dragging her towards the exit. "We need to get out of here."

"No! Let me go, I need to stab it some more. Just a few more times!" Pearl struggled, why was Amethyst fighting her? Surely she understood that the thing was dangerous, it had hurt Garnet, nearly hurt Amethyst. The only logical response would be to go back in there and rip the thing to pieces, and then perhaps rip those pieces into smaller pieces and feed them to lion.

"-ap out of it. I said, snap out of it!" Amethyst smacked Pearl in the back of the head.

Pearl blinked, it was as if someone had opened a window in her head and all the hot rage had just… blown away.

"You good now?"

"Um… yes. You can put me down now. I have control of myself." Pearl didn't know what to say.

"Kay." Amethyst dropped her. "Now Let's grab Steven and get the heck out of here before something else terrible happens."

Pearl nodded composing herself. They hurried towards the exit. As they moved, the savage roars and vicious thuds were left behind them to replaced by the infinitely more pleasant sounds of their other friends.

"Peridot let go of me!"

"No! Pearl specifically said to stay outside while they handled the situation, whatever it is. I seem to remember her specifically saying not to go back in."

"But what if they need our help?"

"I would expect you to keep yourselves safe while we handled it." Pearl declared, stepping out into the light, hands on hips.

Steven froze, doing a remarkable impression of a deer caught in the headlights of a truck. Peridot was hanging onto the back of his shirt; there were furrows in the ground behind her feet. No doubt Steven had been dragging her forward.

"Guys!" Steven lurched forward, finally pulling Peridot off her feet as he shot forward to wrap his arms around Amethyst's neck and Pearl's legs. "You're not trapped underground forever!"

"I did tell you we would be fine."
Amethyst flinched, "she's… back at the temple dude."

"How did she get there?"

"She got poofed." Seeing the stricken look on Steven's face Amethyst hurried to continue. "I sent Ruby and Sapphire back in a bubble. They're completely fine. We just gotta let em out and Garnet will be up and ready to kick butt again in no time. Right Pearl?"

"…Yes." Pearl eyed Amethyst. The shorter gem looked… unsure of that statement. There were clearly details that had been left out. Pearl shook her head, letting Amethyst move ahead with Steven and Peridot, there would be time to get all the details back at the temple. She glanced back at the opening in the cliff face, thinking about what they had left behind.

Yes, plenty of time to worry about things later.

S&D- ?????? -S&D

Close.

It was close. So very close. The dark surrounded it and the numbness of nothing clung to it with every move it made.

But it was moving.

And it was close. Closer than it had been since the time it ended. It had gotten out and it would not go back. Not now, not ever. But it hadn't gone far enough. It was blocked, stalled. It wanted out, it needed out. It coiled back its body and struck out once more at that which blocked it, which denied it.

But that which denied it would not break.

There was a space at the bottom, it whispered of its desire. But no matter how it forced itself, it could not fit. Which left it trapped, confined. Staring at the barrier in seething hatred and impotence.

But slowly, something warm began to trickle through its mind. A thought, an idea, it stared and understood. What blocked it had not been there before, what blocked it could be moved if only it could know how.

It slid its parts into the space and wrapped them around the barrier. It pushed, but nothing happened. Then it pulled and was rewarded. The barrier shifted, slightly. It pulled upwards once more, harder and harder. The barrier screamed in protest, it fought and held tight.

But it moved up. All things must move up.

And then the barrier was gone.

It surged forward, closer than ever. The air moved around it, cool and pleasant. It moved faster climbing up and up and up until…

Everything changed.

The dark was gone. Everything was bright. So bright and the ceiling was so high, it reached up and grasped but could not touch it.
It sat still, the numbness clinging to it but the darkness gone, and gazed upwards towards a sea of endless blue.

It was the most beautiful thing it had ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

welp, here we are. This chapter concludes the setup of the broader story. It did not turn out quite like I thought it would, but hey. It could have been worse. I hope you've enjoyed the story so far.

I'm mostly making this up as I go along, but I have an idea for where it's going next. I hope you all are going to enjoy it. And a big thank you to those who left comments. Feedback provides great motivation to get the next chapter out quickly.
"And I trust you'll have her back by seven. Do you understand, Mr. Universe?"

"You bet Mrs. Maheswaran." Greg grinned nervously, wilting slightly under the doctor's glare.

"Mom, come on." Connie groaned.

"I just want to make sure you're safe Connie, by the way." her mother turned towards her, "I would appreciate it if you didn't engage in any… monster fighting today." She glanced back towards Steven's dad. "I don't want to see so much as a scratch on my daughter, is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am." Greg replied, straightening his back and sweating vigorously. Connie half expected him to give a salute.

"Alright, that's enough let's go." Connie grabbed Mr. Universe's arm and attempted to drag him to the door. "Bye mom, see you later." With an extra heave, she was able to get out the door and onto the driveway. She dashed to the van and climbed in.

"Remember, seven pm!" her mother called, standing on the front stoop, "and not a second later."

Connie breathed a sigh of relief as Mr. Universe clambered into the drivers seat and started the car. It was about time! Mom had spent nearly ten minutes going over ground rules. Honestly! She'd over gone to Steven's house before, her mom didn't need to go over those rules every time! It was just insulting!

"Mind if I put on some jams?" Greg asked.

"What? Oh sure." Greg smiled, and the van was filled with a catchy jazz tune. Connie sat back and let the music calm her down. "Thank you for driving me Mr. Universe."

"No problem Connie, always happy to give you a ride and please call me Greg, Mr. Universe was my father… and my stage name. Makes me feel old and nostalgic at the same time. It's weird."

"But you are old." Connie giggled.

"Hey! If you want to talk old, let's talk about the gems, they're literally a hundred times older than me." Greg huffed. "I'd complain about kids these days, but that's an unmistakable sign of being old."

Connie just snickered.
Greg wagged a finger at her, "You know, I'm pretty sure I heard your mother remind you at least twice to respect your elders young lady."

"Ugh. Don't remind me. I just don't understand it; I thought Mom and I had come to an agreement to let me have a bit more freedom. Why can't she be cool like you?"

"You think I'm cool?" Greg grinned, "I told Amethyst I still had it."

"Seriously, you know all about the dangers Steven faces everyday, and you're still fine with it."
The smile on Greg's face froze, becoming brittle. "Fine with it, huh?" he muttered, his tone oddly flat.

"Well yeah," Connie eyed him. "You trust him, I just wish mom could have the same faith in me."
The van rolled to a stop before a red light and Greg turned to look at her, an uncharacteristically serious look on his face. "Connie, can I tell you a secret?"

Taken aback, Connie nodded.

"I want you to know that I am very much not fine with the dangers Steven faces. Not a single day goes by where I don't worry about him."

Connie furrowed her brow "But Steven's always said you were fine with it."

"Course he does, that's because I try never to tell him otherwise." Greg shrugged, pulling away from the stop as the light turned green, "It wouldn't accomplish anything besides making him feel guilty for doing all this dangerous magic stuff. That's the last thing I want."

"But Steven has powers to keep him safe and he has the gems too." Connie knew there really was nothing to worry about; there was no way he'd ever get seriously hurt. Even when those Homeworld gems had abducted him, he'd come back with nothing worse than a black eye.

"Sure he does. But Connie, man this is really going to make me sound old, but you'll understand when you're older. By that I mean, you'll understand when you're a parent."

"But I do understand that." Parents cared about their kids; it wasn't that difficult a concept to wrap one's head around. It seemed to go hand in hand with not trusting them to take care of themselves.

"Yeah, I thought that too when I was a your age." Greg shook his head, a bemused smile crossing his face. "Believe me, when you have a child, everything changes. There's suddenly this tiny squishy thing in your life that depends on you for everything. It can't walk, it can't talk, and it can't even feed itself. Everything becomes a lot scarier. I'd look outside and see trees become menacing monsters that might fall on him. Or all this stuff I keep in the van," he pointed his thumb back at the pile of random possessions. "I never noticed how sharp some of this junk could be, or how small and easy to choke on it would be until I had baby Steven in here with me. It was like that with just about everything."

That… actually sounded pretty stressful. "But you still let him go on missions." She felt that if Greg really wanted to, he could convince Steven not to go on missions. Pearl would probably back him up saying that Steven needed to be kept safe.

"Well, I've known pretty much from the start that Steven was destined for this gem stuff, hard to deny it when there's a great big shiny reminder right where his belly button should be. I've come to terms with it. But you Connie, no one could have predicted you getting involved in this. I didn't,
"your mother didn't, I doubt even you did. Lots of people know this magic stuff exists, most of them try to ignore it."

"But it's so cool!" Connie protested, how could anyone want to ignore the magical things around them?

"And how many times have you nearly gotten hurt since you started hanging out with Steven?"

Well, there was the eel creature when they first met, that robot from the armory that shot fire at her, nearly getting drowned by that water gem who stole the ocean, the fusion experiments… now that she thought about it, her life really was a lot more dangerous now. Although she'd never thought about it that way. To her, these risks were exciting, they were part of what made being around Steven so much fun! All she had to look forward to before she met him was tennis and violin practice.

"Quite a few." She muttered sheepishly. "But I never got hurt!"

"I did. I broke my leg remember? What if the van had fallen on you?"

Connie flinched.

Greg grimaced, a guilty look crossing his face. "I'm sorry Connie, I went a bit far there. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't scare me."

Greg chuckled, "Course I didn't, you're a lot tougher than I am. Anyway, the point I was trying to make is that any halfway decent parent should be worried about their kid's safety. You are never going to be old enough that she's going to stop worrying about you completely. But just remember this, as much as your mom may get on your nerves or try to control you, don't forget that even though she knows some of the danger, she still lets you go."

Connie blinked. She couldn't deny that he was right.

"When did you get so smart? Is this going to be a 'with age comes wisdom' thing."

"I'm going to say no. I'm dangerously close to sounding like a dodgy old man as it is. Besides, I always thought it was kind of suspicious how you only ever hear adults say that. I'd say it's more like I went through what your mom's going through, so I get how she feels. Just be patient with her and she'll come around."

"...Thanks Mr. Universe. I'll try."

"I told you to call me Greg. But I'm glad I could help" He raised his hand. "Team Human?"

Connie met him halfway. "Team human."

Greg smiled and they slipped into silence, the radio was just getting into a killer guitar solo as they arrived at the beach house. Connie grabbed her backpack of stuff and slid out of the car.

"I'll be back to pick you up at six Connie, that way we won't be late. Otherwise your mom will glare at me again. I don't think I could take that, I'd probably die of a heart attack."

"Wouldn't want that! See you then."

Connie grinned to herself as she watched Greg drive off, she liked her parents, she really did! But
sometimes she wished they could be a bit more laid back like Mr. Universe.

She turned back to the house. Enough about parents, it was time for magic stuff!

"Hello everyone!" Connie called, letting herself in.

"Connie!" Steven was sitting on the couch; he straightened, his eyes lighting up when he saw her

"Hey Steven, what's…up…" She trailed off coming to a dead halt. There was a pillow sitting on the table in front of Steven. A pillow that two very familiar stones sitting on it.

"What happened?" she whispered.

Steven's smile dimmed, his eyes drooping. "It's Garnet, she got…" he gestured helplessly towards the pillow.

Connie stared at the stones with a horrified fascination. She'd seen plenty of gem monster get reduced to their gems, but this was the first time seeing one of the crystal gems like this.

It felt wrong.

"Are the others okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. Amethyst left the temple awhile ago, saying she needed to do some stuff. Pearl's in the temple, I think she's trying to figure out what to do. Peridot's somewhere around here too, I'm not actually sure what she's up to. I think we're mostly just waiting for Garnet to come back." He patted the seat next to him.

Connie took him up on the offer, sitting down next her friend while still unable to take her eyes off the pillow. The stones looked so small. She didn't think the crystal gems, let alone Garnet, could look so helpless. "How did this happen?"

"We were on a mission, exploring this secret gem base we found. I'm a little fuzzy on the details; Amethyst was the only one with Garnet when it happened. She said they met this monster and something went wrong, Amethyst grabbed Garnet and ran, but she still got poofed. Amethyst sent her back to the temple and we all ran away." He sniffled, his eyes watering up. "That was three days ago."

Connie's response was interrupted by the whoosh of the temple doors, looking over she saw Pearl entering.

"Oh hello Connie," Said Pearl, catching sight of her. Pearl glanced past her towards the table and sighed, "Still no change I see. I assume Steven has filled you in on the situation?"

"Yeah. How long is it going to take for Ruby and Sapphire to reform? "

"Well it depends." Pearl sat down next to them; "I've only seen Garnet reduced to this state on three or four occasions in all the time we've spent together. As a soldier, Ruby would usually reform in a matter of hours; Sapphire usually takes a little longer, but not much. She's always eager to get back together with Ruby as soon as possible. I'm worried by how long it's been."

"Do you think that grey stuff had something to do with it?" asked Steven

"The what?" Said Connie.

"Amethyst said Garnet got covered an unknown grey substance." Pearl explained. "Apparently it
paralyzed her, thus making her incapable of fleeing from the monster that attacked her. As for your question Steven, I don't know, but it's possible. From its description and effects, it's clear this substance was some kind of sedative, something to weaken and slow a gem. I made sure to clean every bit of it off of their gems, but there could be lingering effects."

"Are they going to be alright?" Steven asked, sniffling back tears. Connie wrapped an arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. He leaned into her, giving her a grateful look.

"I don't know. We don't have enough information. Though we are working on finding out more. While we were investigating the computers in that place, Peridot actually downloaded some of the information we found onto a memory storage drive I provided."

"Really?" Steven perked up, looking hopeful. "That's Great! What have you found?"

"Well, Peridot and I have been working on sifting through the information. Much of it is still on code, but we are slowly unraveling the mystery. We'll just need to wait-"

There was another woosh as the temple doors opened again.

"Pearl!" Peridot shouted dashing out into the living room, barely noticing as she tripped over the warp pad. "I have achieved a measure of success in my efforts!"

"Excellent!" Pearl grinned, "do you have information on what the purpose of that facility was?"

"No."

"Then I assume it's about the substance Garnet was soaked with?" Pearl asked, furrowing her brow.

"Uh, no not that either."

"Then what about-"

"If you'll be quiet I will explain." Peridot interrupted, climbing onto the table and sitting down on it. "I- oh, hello… human girl." She nodded toward Connie.

"It's Connie."

"Yes, that's nice." Peridot waved her off. "I do not have answers to your questions as most of the more sensitive data we were able to download is either corrupt or encrypted. However, through a fit of technical genius, I was able to extract information on where we might acquire these answers."

"That's awesome Peridot!" Steven beamed.

"Yes I am," Peridot nodded proudly, puffing out her chest. "From what I was able to tell, the facility we visited was actually one of a set. There is a related facility, possibly two, that will contain the information we seek. Further more, I was able to discern the coordinates for this place."

"Where is it?" Steven asked, practically shaking with excitement.

Peridot placed a book onto the table and opened it, unfolding a page that had a world map printed on it. "I had to translate the coordinates from gem positioning numbers to your earth positioning system. Naturally I was able to do it easily, crude as your human latitude and longitude system might be, it is surprising logical. Based on my calculations, this other facility should lie exactly here." Peridot placed her finger on a point to the right of the map.

"Let me see!" Steven pushed her finger aside and squinted at the words. "The Dead Sea?" he asked,
"That sounds terrible!"

"Oh, I know about that place." Connie said, "It’s called the dead sea because fish can't live there."

"Why not? Is it evil?"

"No, it's just that its normal salinity is unusually high."

Steven stared at her, his expression blank.

"It's really salty."

"Oh, that makes sense." Steven nodded. "Well what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Hold up just one minute!" Pearl interrupted, raising her hands. "I believe we should discuss this first."

"Come on Pearl, don't you want to figure this out?"

"Of course I do. But we need to be careful." She gestured towards the pillow; "We've already gone into one place unprepared and look what happened there. I just don't think it's a good idea to rush into another one. Peridot, I assume you mean that this place is actually underwater?"

Peridot nodded. "That is what the coordinates and what I could read of the data log suggested."

"That's the first problem. While gems can survive being deep underwater, the intense pressure hampers us. If we were to encounter another monster, one that lives down there and is used to the environment, our ability to fight it or flee will be compromised. Getting more of us injured will only make things worse. As for you Steven, you need to breathe, you too Connie."

"I could form a bubble and travel in that, I've done it before." He protested.

Connie shook her head. "Steven, I didn't mention this earlier, but we were actually really lucky that bubble didn't pop. If it had, even for a second, we wouldn't have survived the water pressure."

"Exactly!" Pearl shook her head. "If we do investigate, we would have to leave you and Connie behind. Even then, we don't have Garnet to help us. Though there well might be useful information down there, I believe it would prudent if we wait for her to reform."

"But that could take ages! What if that grey junk is stopping her from reforming? We need to find out as soon as possible!"

"Everyone calm down. I have a solution." Peridot raised her hands and waited until she had everyone's attention. "There is a way to make this mission much safer and easier. It's simple, we just need to bring Lazuli."

"Lapis?" Steven asked.

"Indeed." Peridot nodded. "Lazuli possesses rather impressive hydrokinetic powers would make this mission a breeze, not only would she be able to move the water to give us free range of motion, she could easily handle any kind of aquatic threat."

"That could work." Pearl admitted, tapping her fingers against her cheek in thought. "This is assuming, of course, that she would actually be willing to help us."

"Oh course she would!" said Steven. "Lapis is a friend, she'll definitely help us."
"She didn't help us three days ago," Peridot muttered.

"That's not important," Steven insisted. "If we really need her help, I know she won't let us down."

"More like she won't let you down."

Pearl sat quietly, deep in thought while she stared at her helpless leader resting on the table. She closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them, they were bright and clear. "Let's do it," she said, voice filled with determination.

"Alright!" Steven threw his hands into the air and whooped.

"But Steven? You and Connie aren't coming."

"Aw, come on!"

"I'm not arguing with you on this Steven. This time, it really is too dangerous for you."

"But-" he stopped as Connie put her hand on his shoulder.

"She's right Steven. Besides, if we all go, who's going to watch over Ruby and Sapphire? You wouldn't want them reforming while we're gone and worrying about where everyone is, would you?"

"…No, I wouldn't." Steven admitted.

Pearl clapped her hands. "Then it's settled. Don't worry Steven; you still have a very important job in this mission. It's up to you to convince Lapis to help. If she doesn't cooperate then we won't be able to go."

"Alright! Come on Connie. To the barn!" Steven grabbed her arm and dragged her along. Behind her she could hear Pearl discussing other plans with Peridot.

"While they're gone, I'll fetch Amethyst, and Peridot? Try to think of any gem tech we might need and I'll see what I can find. I don't want to be underprepared this time…" Pearl's voice faded away as they ran out the door.

"Hmmm…” Connie glanced left and right, surveying the beach. "I don't see Lion. I guess we're going to have to go on foot." Bummer, it was kind of far to get to the barn.

"I guess so, he probably wouldn't do it till I gave him those Lion Lickers I owe him anyway…Oh wait! Steven has an idea!" he turned his back to Connie and crouched down. "Get on my back."

"Uh, why?"

"Just do it, this is going to be really cool. Make sure you hold on tight."

Connie hesitated.

"Just trust me. I promise it will be really awesome."

"Well… alright." She did like awesome things after all. She climbed onto his back and wrapped her arms around his neck as he locked his arms around her legs. "So um… what now- WHOA!" she yelped as Steven jumped.

That was selling it short, he didn't just jump; he rocketed forward into the air. The wind roared past
her ears as they flew up high into the air, all of beach city was lying out before them like a child's
toy. Then they started to fall, the ground rushing towards them. Connie screwed her eyes shut and
waited for the impact.

It didn't come; Connie opened her eyes and stared. Steven had turned his head back towards her
and was grinning ear to ear.

"Pretty cool right?"

"What the heck was that?"

"I got another power from my mom. I can control how fast I fall and jump really high."

"Wha-"  

"Steven!" A voice called from the side.  

"Huh, oh. Hey Ronaldo, nice day isn't it?"

"Yeah, actually. It's good secret hunting weather. But that's not important. You just fell from the
sky! Did aliens abduct you and then drop you back into our atmosphere?"

"Sorry no alien abductions this time, I can just jump really high."

"Aha! I knew it! The sneeple society really are secretly injecting people with helium in an attempt
to make a secret army of jumping sky warriors! I need to blog this!"

"Have fun with that, and say hi to Peedee for me." Steven jumped again, carrying them both out of
town with a single bound. Now that she knew what was happening she could take the time to enjoy
it. The sight of the world laid out beneath her was so much cooler than it was when looking out the
window of an airplane.

"So how are you able to actually do this?" she shouted, trying to be heard over the sound of the
wind rushing past them.

"I don't know. Gem magic I guess. When I feel happy, I fall slower; when I feel sad, I fall faster.
It's a bit tricky to get the balance right. I got stuck in the sky the first time, took me all night to
figure it out. But if I suppose you could say I just need to... jump for joy."

"That was terrible." She replied, but couldn't help letting out a giggle.

"oh come on, don't jump to conclusions. I think it was pretty good."

"Hmmm... perhaps, I wouldn't want to jump the gun on any judgment about your jokes."

The both cracked up, which had the side effect of making them fall slower.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I forgot, I had a very important thing to deal with the morning after and It slipped my mind.
Sorry."

"It's fine, you were right. This is really awesome."
It wasn't flying exactly; it was more like defying
gravity. Which was still really cool. This must be what it was like to be an astronaut walking on
the moon. God, she loved being a part of Steven's universe.
If her mom saw her doing this, she'd probably have a heart attack.

She blinked, along with that sudden thought came a surprisingly strong wave of guilt. That was odd, normally she got a thrill out of doing things her mother would disapprove of. So why…?

Her mind flashed back to the conversation she'd had with Mr. Universe. She took another look as Steven jumped again; they really were going quite high. She felt perfectly safe; Connie knew Steven would never drop her. But if she were to fall, she knew there was no way she'd ever survive.

I just want to make sure you're safe Connie.

Suddenly, the whole thing didn't seem quite so fun. She wrapped her arms around Steven's neck a little tighter. She breathed a sigh of relief when the barn finally came into sight.

"We have arrived at our destination, M'lady. Thank you for riding Air Steven."

"Yeah… thanks Steven. It was… fun."

"Are you alright Connie?" Steven asked, his brow furrowing as she looked back at her.

"Yeah, I'm…" Connie shook her head. "I'm fine, just thinking."

Steven pursed his lips, but shrugged, dropping the subject, he knocked on the barn doors. "Lapis? Are you there?"

"Yeah, Come in Steven" came the muffled reply.

"Oh good, I was afraid I was going to have to look for her." Steven opened the door and they let themselves in. The blue gem was sitting in the middle of the floor staring up at the ceiling.

"Hey Bob! What's up?"

"Hello Steven." Lapis snorted. "Just enjoying the peace and quiet of this place while it lasts. Also, can you tell me what that thing is? I've been staring at it for ages." She pointed towards the ceiling. Steven followed her finger and squinted.

"Oh hey! That's a barn owl. I didn't know we had one of those living in the barn. That's so cool!"

"A barn owl?" Lapis echoed.

"Yeah, they're a bird. They can fly just like you and they hunt mice and stuff. Owls are like my second favorite kind of bird, right after penguins. I love penguins. They always look like they're dressed for a fancy party and their babies look like bowling pin! They're so cute."

"Hmmm, interesting." Lapis murmured, her eyes lingering on the sleeping bird before drifting to Steven. "What can I do for you Steven and…" her eyes drifted toward Connie and she frowned, tilting her head to the side.

"Oh right, you probably haven't been introduced to her properly. Lapis, this is Connie. She's my best friend. Connie, this is Lapis."

"Hello." Connie nodded.

Lapis nodded back, looking uncomfortable. She turned back to Steven.
"So what brings you here?"

"Well, not that I wouldn't love to spend time with my beach summer fun buddy, but I need your help..." Connie tuned out the rest of Steven's words. She wasn't really in the mood for it. She found herself staring at Lapis. The blue gem looked so harmless sitting there, hanging on to Steven's every word. Steven had vouched for this Homeworld gem a number of times. More than once Connie had listened to him talk about how worried he was about Lapis, stuck at the bottom of the sea. But still...

*What if the van had fallen on you?*

Connie had to suppress the urge to shudder. She shook her head, forcing the thoughts away. She'd have to think more about this later.

"...and that's why I'm here." Steven finished. "So, will you help?"

Lapis blinked, and sighed. "I don't think-"

"Please?" Steven whined, clasping his hands together. Lapis paused, frowning as Steven cranked the puppy dog eyes up to eleven.

"Do you really need me to do this?"

"You don't have too. I'm never going to force you to do anything you don't want to do."

"But you want me too?" Lapis replied, the side of her mouth twitching into a wry grin.

"...yeah."

"Alright Steven. I'll do it for you."

Chapter End Notes

All right, I think that's a good place to stop for this chapter. I haven't been totally satisfied with the previous chapters, and I think I know why. The chapters leading up to this one have all been solely plot-driven. Where are the gems going? Why are they going there? What's happening to them?

The problem with that is that Steven Universe is largely character-driven, what makes the show so great is how it brings out the feels and connects you with the characters and what's happening to them. Rather than having you just watch as they dodge monster and kick butt, which is entertaining, but isn't so good for making people connect with the characters.

Keeping that in mind, I brought in Connie and Greg, trying to get a handle on their character while also lightening the mood with some funny moments here and there. You know, channel some of the feels that SU is known for.

About Connie's internal feelings, does anyone else find it a little disturbing how quickly Connie took up Pearl's "You don't matter, only Steven matters" mantra?
Connie loves Steven's universe, she wants to be a part of it. But as colorful as the show is, it can be pretty dangerous, not really the place for a twelve year old (even if you've handed them a giant sword). I'm not certain Connie pays close attention, or cares, about how badly she could get hurt, as long as she gets to be a part of a 'real life' magical adventure she loves so much. Then again, she's twelve. I doubt she's really in touch with her own mortality.

Those are my thoughts anyway… I hope you enjoyed the chapter. Bye-bye for now!
"And take this in case it gets dark down there." Steven said, holding out his favorite flashlight: the deluxe Cookie Cat night buddy.

"Wow thanks." Peridot muttered. "Although clearly you have forgotten that both Pearl and I can emit light from our gems."

"Oh yeah. You know I'm having trouble keeping track of what gems can and can't do. It's seems like we all get a new power every other day. Sorry."

"That's okay Steven," Pearl reassured him. "It was very thoughtful of you to offer. You've already done more than enough to help."

"Indeed," Peridot nodded. "The backpack that you have provided me with has superior storage capacity compared to my previous one." she paused, readjusting the straps of the bag in question. "Even if it does look like one of your ridiculous earth foods."

"Yeah, isn't it great? It can hold so much stuff, especially the cheese." Steven replied. Peridot had got several more gem things from Pearl and had been trying to figure out how to carry them since she couldn't store things in her gem for some reason. Good thing he had remembered his trusty cheeseburger backpack was in the closet. He had to admit it was kind of big for Peridot; she was a lot slimmer than he was.

"So where's Lapis anyway?" asked Amethyst, munching on an old pizza box she'd found behind the couch.

"I dunno." Steven replied, biting his lip. "She said she'd meet us back here, but I got the feeling she didn't really want to."

"I can imagine." Pearl muttered. "Hopefully she'll get here soon. The mission won't truly be safe unless she comes. If she refuses to show up~"

"She'll come!" Steven said, his tone leaving no room for argument. She had said she would and he believed her.

There was a light thump outside and the screen door opened. Lapis stepped in, glancing at the other gems with a sigh of resignation.

"Lapis! You made it!"
"Hey Steven, sorry I took so long."

"It's okay, I'm sure you had a good reason."

"Yes welcome to the team Lazuli." Peridot declared, strutting forward and grinning at her. "Are you ready for our first mission together under my leadership?"

Lapis stared down at the green gem with a blank expression.

"Ah, no doubt you are curious about my new piece of equipment. This highly advanced carrying device was gifted to me by Steven to-

Lapis reached out and placed her finger on Peridot's visor. With a gentle push, Peridot tipped backward, her arms spinning like a windmill in an attempt to keep her balance.

It didn't work, the weight of the backpack, stuffed to the brim with gem tech and whatever else Steven had thought to include, was too much and she fell with a muffled thunk.

"NO! Curse you! You overly damp clod!" Peridot shrieked, her arms and legs flailing in the air as she tried to get up, the giant cheeseburger keeping her limbs from reaching the floor or rolling over. Steven couldn't help but be reminded of a turtle that had been flipped onto it's back.

"Lapis, that was mean. Why did you do that?" He leaned down and grabbed one of Peridot's flailing limbs and helped pull her onto her feet.

Lapis thought for a moment, then shrugged. "It was talking."

"Lapis." Steven looked at her, his lip trembling. "Please try to get along with the others. I don't want you guys fighting."

Lapis looked into Steven's eyes and sighed. "Alright fine. Sorry for pushing you over Peridot."

"Yes, well, apology accepted. Clearly I-"

"Even though it was funny."

"Lapis." Steven whined. "You can try a little harder than that."

"Attention everyone," Pearl clapped her hands; she was standing on the warp pad. "I believe it's time to depart."

"Yeah!" Amethyst cheered, pumping her fists in the air. "Enough with the wacky roommate routine. Let's get this show on the road!" she grabbed Peridot and dragged her, cursing all the way, up to the warp pad. Lapis trudged along in their wake.

"Now Steven," said Pearl. "While we're gone make sure you and Connie look after Ruby and sapphire."

"You can count on us ma'am." Connie saluted.

Steven frowned to himself as he watched the gems get ready to leave, wishing that he were up there with them. "Come back safe guys."

There was a flash of light, and the gems disappeared.

Steven glanced at his friend. "What do you want to do now?"
Connie shrugged. "Got any board games?"

Well this place looked about as unappealing as she had expected.

The place the warp pad had brought them was dry and barren; Sprawling brown cliffs of rugged rock stretched in every direction. It was also stiflingly hot, she could see the air shimmering with heat all around. It was certainly a stark contrast from the rolling green fields surrounding the barn.

She didn't care for it.
"Ugh. Why is this place so clodding hot?" Peridot whined.

She cared for the company even less.
"C'mon Peri! You gotta learn to enjoy it!" Amethyst laughed. "Just feel that sunshine man! Makes me wanna take a nap." The tiny quartz ran her fingers through her hair, clearly enjoying feeling of heat.

"So where do we go from here?" Lapis asked flatly. *Sooner we're done; the sooner I can get away from all of you.*

"Our destination is in this direction." Pearl declared, marching off at a brisk pace. Lapis followed; at least she wasn't the only one in a hurry to be done with this.

"And exactly how far do we need to go?" Peridot asked, hurrying to catch up. "My legs are not suited for optimal transportation."

"Yeah, and your legs are pretty short too." Said Amethyst, whom had shape shifted into some sort of furry, four-legged thing and keeping pace at an easy lope.

"Yes, thank you for reiterating my statement." Peridot replied through gritted teeth.

"No prob, Peri-dog. I got your back. Want me to carry the backpack for ya?"

"No. I can do it." Peridot insisted stubbornly.

"Several miles." Pearl answered, ignoring the nonsense with an air that spoke of long experience. "It shouldn't take us long to reach, as long as we keep up a good pace."

"Ugh, why couldn't the warp pad have been closer?" Peridot whined.

"We're lucky one was this close. There are only so many of them around the planet and they haven't been very well kept." Pearl explained, "The only ones that remain in good condition are those in secluded areas. I've found humans have an unhealthy need to touch and tinker with the warp pads when they find them."

"That's ridiculous," Peridot scoffed. "Human technology is hopelessly crude! That would be like trying to interface with a neural network by laying your face on the equipment and hitting your head with a rock!"

"Oh you would not believe some of the things I've seen humans do. Honestly, I'm surprised they
have survived as long as they have. Why, I remember this one time…”

Lapis tuned them out; there were no words to describe how little she cared about listening to their chatter.

"Techies, amirite?"

Amethyst had slowed her pace, letting Peridot and Pearl, locked in a conversation about who the heck cared, pull ahead. The purple gem was looking at her with a grin that showed far too many fangs.

"Why are you talking to me?" Lapis asked, raising a brow. She was pretty sure she'd made it clear that the only gem she wanted anything to do with was Steven.

Amethyst shrugged, the movement flowing along her sinuous body like a wave, "You're part of the team now, right dude? Pretty sure that means we need to talk at some point."

"I'm not a Crystal Gem!" Lapis hissed, the first gem to say otherwise was going to find themselves on a one-way trip to the bottom of the ocean.

"Whoa, chill it, I didn't say you were. I meant you're a part of the Steven Squad."

"…Steven Squad?"

"Yep! It's pretty much what it sounds like. Once Steven gets his chubby little hands on you, it's over. You're a Stee-man for life. You can run, but he'll make this sad little face and pull ya right back in."

"…"

"Oh don't make that face Homegirl, you'll like being on the Steven side, we have cookies. And waffles, love waffles."

"… Homegirl?"

"Not a fan? That's fair, I can do better. Let's see… Bob is Steven's thing so that's out. Ice queen? Nah. How about Bluebird? That one suits you... wait no, those are supposed to be happy aren't they? That's not really your thing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Was she being insulted?

"We're figuring out your codename, duh. If you're gonna be a part of the Steven Squad you gotta have one."

Lapis just stared at the gem, who stared right back completely straight-faced. Lapis sighed, Steven had asked her to be to make an effort to get along with the other gems. She might as well play along until this mission was over. "I suppose that means you have a codename?"

"Sure do! I'm secret agent Ame-Awesome." Amethyst struck a pose, lifting her head high, and raising her front paw.

Lapis snorted.

"Don't worry, I know you're worried your codename can't possible be as good as mine. It's okay to be jealous."
"Oh yeah, that's absolutely right." Lapis replied, her tone so flat you could bounce a ball off it.

Amethyst's ears perked forward, "Was that sarcasm? Are you trying to be use wit? Careful girl, or I might start thinking you're actually trying to hold up your end of this conversation."

"Of course not. I can barely contain my jealousy, you have no idea."

"Oh man, I've got it!" Amethyst declared, "From now on, I'm gonna call you Lapis Sarcazuli!"

"I've never felt more complete." She replied, her tone as empty as the black void of space.

Amethyst just laughed, and despite herself, Lapis could feel her lips twitching. They fell silent, Amethyst still letting out the occasional chuckle. Lapis felt her eyes drawn to the purple gem with a sort of detached curiosity. Her past interactions with quartz soldiers had been few and far between. With how the whole fiasco with Jasper had gone, she was quite glad of that fact. And Amethyst was a quartz soldier. The long mane of hair, the impatient, battle-ready attitude, the only thing wrong was that she was short.

"See something you like, Sarcazuli?"

"What is that form you're wearing?" Lapis asked, not caring that she had been caught staring.

"It's a puma. Ya diggin' it?"

Probably some earth creature, there did seem to be a lot of them. "Why are you wearing it?" Most quartz soldiers shied away from changing their form; it was seen as a weakness, admitting that you were not good enough as you are.

"Cause it's cool. Also it makes my legs longer and stuff, but that's just a detail. It's mostly because it's cool." Lapis took another look; she could see the muscles shifting beneath the fur, the sleek form designed for speed, and the fangs and claws that seemed to glint in the sunlight. Yes, on second thought, she could see why this form might appeal to a quartz.

"Hey, are there any cool creatures on Homeworld?"

Lapis raised a brow at the sudden question. "Why do you ask?"

"I've never been to Homeworld so I don't know what's out there. Plus, Garnet once told me there were five-headed monsters that breathed lava. But I'm, like, sixty percent sure she was lying."

Lapis opened her mouth to reply but paused. Never been to Homeworld? While gems had colonies across the galaxy, Homeworld was the nexus of their empire, the cradle where the diamonds had first been born in all their glory. Every gem went there at least once, or at least, they did back in her time. "Were you born on earth?" That would make sense, if the crystal gems had taken her in, she never would have had the chance to visit Homeworld.

"Yeah." Amethyst's tone became guarded, "I'm an earthling and proud of it. Got a problem with that?"

Lapis shrugged, it didn't really matter to her. Neither place was that great. Except one of them has lots of quartz soldiers, the other has Steven.

"There's only gems on Homeworld." She said, returning back to Amethyst's question. Homeworld had long since been cleared of any kind of Non-gem life, although there had always been a few corrupt gems lurking in the older places. But they hardly counted.
"Really? No five headed lava monsters?" she sounded almost disappointed.

"Except those. Those are everywhere."

"Wait really?" Amethyst's eyes widened.

"Absolutely." Lapis deadpanned. "They were always running around biting everything and setting it on fire."

"Okay yeah, you're totally lying." Amethyst laughed. "I knew those things only lived on earth."

"Wait, there are things like that on earth?"

"Gotcha."

"Oh."

Amethyst smirked, and Lapis could feel herself grinning back. It was… nice. They lapsed into silence. As they walked Lapis let her eyes close, Amethyst had been right, the sunlight really did feel quite relaxing. Besides the Pearl and Peridot's chatter up ahead, there was nothing to be heard except the wind, blowing across her face in a gentle caress.

"Hey… Lapis?" Amethyst's voice had gone soft.

"What?"

"Thanks for agreeing to help us with this. I know you're only doing it for Steven, and that's fine. I get it. But thanks anyway."

"It's… fine I suppose." It's not like I planned to do anything else besides sit around today. "Can you tell me what happened to the fusion? I don't understand why you're so worried about her." Lapis had seen the two gems back at the house. While dormant, they didn't look like they were damaged in any way. Not like hers had been.

"I, uh, don't really want to talk about it. It was messed up."

"We've arrived everyone!" Pearl called; she and Peridot were standing at the edge of a cliff above them. Lapis joined them and blinked in surprise.

When she had heard they were going to a place called the Dead Sea, she had expected something far worse than the tranquil body of water that greeted her. Unlike the ocean, it didn't stretch out endlessly towards the horizon; she could see mountainous cliffs surrounding it on all sides, the brown shores filled with thickening streaks of white as they approached the water. The water itself was smooth, wind creating only the slightest ripples across the surface. It reminded, her uncomfortably of a mirror with the way it reflected the clouds in the sky. But even so, she could appreciate the beauty of this place.

It was strange, surrounded by barren cliffs; the sea really should have looked out of place, but it just seemed to fit in with surroundings. It gave her an impression of timeless depth, as though it had always been here and always would be.

She liked it. It was peaceful.

The gems worked their way down the cliff to the shores. Pearl hummed to herself as she examined the water. "Peridot, are you sure this is the place?"
"Of course I'm sure." Peridot reached into the bun of her backpack and out some kind of handheld screen. "I entered the coordinates into this Geepee-es device perfectly. Based upon our current coordinates, our destination should be only a third of the way across, I also suspect it will be at the deepest area, likely to keep it from being easily discovered.

"Alright then, Lapis if you would?" Pearl looked at her expectantly.

"What?"

"Please move the water."

"Yeah Bluebird." Said Amethyst, finally returning to her normal form and placing her hands behind her head. "Let's see that sweet waterbending action."

"Fine." Lapis raised her hand, and flicked two fingers upwards. A ripple surged across the surface of the water like a bullet. Then the slowly the water began to lift upward.

"Wait, are you…? Oh. Stop!" Pearl yelled, grabbing onto Lapis' shoulder and giving her a shake. Lapis jerked back, her concentration broken, sending the water falling back to earth with a deafening splash.

"What's your problem?!" Lapis snapped, throwing Pearl's hand off her She could feel fury coursing through her head. If she didn't get a good explanation real quick, Pearl was going to learn what being trapped at the bottom of the ocean was like. Nobody was allowed to grab her like that and get away with it. Nobody.

"I didn't mean lift the whole body of water! Just enough for us to pass through."

"What difference does it make?"

"Human's use this body of water regularly, there are some swimming in it right now." Pearl point, Lapis glanced over. Now that it was pointed out to her, she could see a couple figures on the other side splashing in the water.

"So?" It's not like she was going to throw them out of it.

"So," Pearl said slowly, as though she was speaking to a newformed, "If you lift all the water into the air, they might get swamped and drown!"

Lapis paused; she was getting the distinct feeling that there was something she was missing here. "And drowning means?"

Now it was Pearl's turn to pause. "You don't know?"

"Of course I do." Lapis rolled her eyes. "That's why I asked."

"Oh… um. Well, human's need to breathe air." Pearl explained awkwardly. "Their bodies are incapable of getting it from water, if they get trapped underwater, they drown and die."

Lapis froze, "Is that true?"

"Yes it is!"

"Oh."
Lapis lowered her eyes to the ground. She could feel her face flushing; the situation wasn't improved by the fact that Amethyst was bent double and shaking with laughter.

"I, uh, didn't know that."

"Do not concern yourself Lazuli." Peridot patted her on the arm sympathetically. "I too have made the mistake of overestimating the capabilities of humans. They truly are the most fragile, fleshy things."

"Whatever." Staunchly ignoring the laughter and unwanted sympathy. Lapis raised her hand and sent water rushing back, creating a dome big enough for four of them to walk comfortably. "Let's just go."

They went together into the water, as the water closed over their heads Lapis felt a sudden flash of panic. She immediately squelched it, she was not going to be trapped underneath the water this time. The only reason it had happened the first time was because she let it happen to keep Jasper there. All she needed to do was think it, and she could blast all of this water away.

As they descended, the light began to fade; casting the world around into a dim twilight. Despite herself, Lapis couldn't shake a feeling of unease. She was beginning to understand why humans called this place the Dead Sea. There was truly nothing down here. Even at the deepest part of the ocean, there had always been something. Maybe a fish, or some prickly thing that scurried along the ocean floor. But here? No plants, no fish, no scurrying creature, no anything. Nothing but rocks, and water, and more rocks.

"Man, am I the only one that finds this place creepy?" Amethyst commented, glancing around as the light grew darker still.

"Yes, I find it rather unpleasant as well." Pearl nodded, lighting up her gem to make up for the failing light. "It feels somewhat… unwelcoming."

"What's this white stuff everywhere?" Peridot asked. Lapis glanced around, Now that Peridot mentioned it, she could see some tiny white crystal dripping out of the water around them.

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about." Pearl replied, "It's just salt."

"Is it alive?" Peridot asked, reaching out and catching a bigger chunk as it fell, examining it with a curious eye.

"Of course not, but it is the reason there is very few living things here. There is a great deal of salt dissolved in this water. It's forming around us because of this air pocket, gravity is causing it to naturally precipitate."

"Can't turn off your lecture mode for even a second, can ya P?" Amethyst commented, cupping her hands together and catching the falling salt.

"There's nothing wrong with educating others. Furthermore, I believe that- Amethyst please tell me you aren't eating it." Pearl's face took on a queasy look as Amethyst shoved her hands into her mouth.

"Duh. You should try it."

"No."

"Oh come on P, it's delicious."
"What does it taste like?" Lapis asked curiously. The idea of eating things was... interesting to say the least. She'd liked the donut Steven had given her earlier well enough. Even if expelling it from her body had taken some figuring out. Either way, talking about weird earth habits was better than focusing on the dead world around them.

"Please don't encourage her, Lapis." Pearl sighed.

"It's salty and delicious. Like a salty pretzel 'cept without the pretzel."

"I don't know what that means."

"Just try it." Amethyst held out a crystal towards her, Lapis hesitated.

"Don't do it Lazuli." Peridot urged, a disgusted look on her face. "Just look at it, the salt is clearly a crystalline compound. We could be related to it!" Lapis looked Peridot in the eyes. She grabbed the offered salt and shoved it in her mouth, taking care not to break eye contact as she slowly chewed it up. Peridot visibly winced with every crunch.

"...I think I'm going to go walk beside Pearl." Peridot muttered.

"You do that."

"Well that was vicious." Amethyst commented, munching on another handful of salt.

"And?"

"And it was hilarious. Want some more?" she held out her hand.

"No thanks. It wasn't very good."

"More for me." Amethyst shrugged.

A sudden beeping noise filled the bubble. Making everyone jump, Lapis glanced forwards and saw that it was coming from a device Peridot was holding.

"What's with the racket?" Amethyst asked.

"According to this, we have reached our destination. It should be right... here!" Peridot declared, she pointed, shining the light from her gem forward. Lapis squinted, she could see the silhouette of a structure of some kind, a pointy spire stretching above them. Pearl shined her own light on it, casting it in greater relief.

Lapis felt something inside her lurch.

Stamped upon the front of the structure was the personal seal of Blue Diamond.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to take a moment for us all to appreciate the fact that Lapis, if she felt so inclined, could literally kill everyone on earth, it wouldn't even be hard. Worldwide tsunami anyone? Considering she's a character from a kids show, I find this very
amusing.

Fun fact, humans and other mammals actually are capable of extracting oxygen from water. The problem is that we have no way to get the water out of our lungs. Scientists have tested this by putting mice in over oxygenated water, and they were able to survive for awhile.

Another fun fact, I've never been to the Dead Sea, or anywhere else in Europe. So I don't know what it's like. Please forgive any inaccuracies.

But boy oh boy, did this chapter not want to be written, I have a plan for what's gonna happen over the next couple chapters, but this setup wasn't working right. I blame Lapis, It's hard to write her when she's not being cranky at everyone but Steven. I think some of the jokes fell flat. Next chapter I think I'm going to try to get away from the single character POV I've been doing, or maybe not. We'll see.

Anyway, thanks for reading this far. If you liked it, please review; if you hated it, recommend it to your enemies!
"King me!"

"Steven, that's checkers, we're playing Go Fish."

"I know, I was just kidding. Got any threes?" Steven asked, placing the four kings he'd collected on the table.

"Sure do, I got the three of diamonds."

"Actually you can keep that one."

"Why?"

"As a Crystal Gem, I want nothing to do with the diamonds. It's the princely of the thing." Steven said, closing his eyes and making his face solemn.

Connie snickered, "Nice one. Does that make it my turn?"

"Sure."

"Cool. Got any threes?"

"Oh wait…darn it." Steven sighed, handing over the cards.

"That's what happens when you put comedy ahead of competition." Connie said with a grave tone, wagging her finger in his direction.

"Alas, a difficult choice. But given the chance, I'd do it again." Steven replied with equal seriousness. All it took was a glance at each other's face for them both to start cracking up.

"You can have the threes if you want," said Connie, once they had mostly gotten over their giggle fits.

"No, you can keep them." Steven shrugged. They fell quiet, only speaking to ask for cards. When the deck ran out and all the cards were laid out, Connie sighed.

"This isn't working, is it?"

"No." Steven looked away sadly. "I just can't stop worrying about them." he glanced helplessly at Ruby and Sapphire, still sitting on the pillow. "Thanks for trying to keep my mind off it."
"No prob." Connie tapped the side of her face thoughtfully. "Do you wanna try talking about it? That might make you feel better."

"You think." Steven looked up hopefully.

"Couldn't hurt."

"Alright. Oh! One sec." Steven shot to his feet with excitement and ran to the closet, sifted through the piles of clutter until he found a pad of paper and a pen. He ran back to Connie and shoved them into her hands. He moved her towards the chair, then got onto the couch and lay down on his back. "I'm ready to talk about my life doctor." He said, folding his fingers together and resting them on his stomach.

"Oh I see." Connie giggled, stroking an imaginary beard. "vell, my dear Steven. Vat zeems to be ze problem?"

Steven chuckled, that accent so cheesy. "Well Dr. Connie, I'm worried about my friends."

"And 'vich friends woulz zees be? Ze Onion boy perhaps? He seems to be ze most worrying individual in my professional opinion."

"Well yeah, but that's normal. I'd be more worried about him if he started respecting other people's food."

"Zen perhaps it eez the Gems zitting on ze table? Are you worried about zem?"

"Well," Steven shifted around uncomfortably. "Yes I am, but not really? I miss Garnet, but I know she's going to be back soon; she's just taking her time. Pearl took two weeks to reform once. It's not like Garnet is missing."

"I zee…" Connie nodded thoughtfully, writing down a bunch of random scribbles.

"Hey Connie? Can we drop the accent? It's funny, but it's also kind of distracting."

"Sure." Connie put aside the notebook. "I'm guessing it's about the others? Are you worried about their mission?"

"Yeah." Steven sighed. "I understand why they didn't bring me. I don't think I'd be much help underwater."

"But?" Connie urged.

"But we all thought we'd be fine when we went to that underground place!" Steven threw his hands up in the air. "But Garnet got hurt! Garnet! And now the gems have run off to another secret gem place without her."

"That's true," Connie nodded. "But I think the gems are taking this mission a lot more seriously. As long as they stick together there's nothing they can't handle."

"I know that. But I'm still worried, what if they get attacked by some kind of giant lobster?"

"Giant lobster?" Connie echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"Um… don't go to bed hungry. You'll get some creepy dreams."

"I'll keep that in mind."
"It wasn't *that* bad, we ended up in a jacuzzi at the end, then the soap turned out to be butter, and the lobster let me eat him… okay it got a little weird towards the end. But I think we're getting off topic. I'm just worried."

"Well, Lapis went with them. Isn't she the one who stole the ocean? Like the *whole* ocean?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Considering they're going to the bottom of a giant lake, I think she's going to be fine. I'd be more worried about whatever gets in her way."

"You think so?" Steven sat up, looking hopeful.

"Definitely." Connie nodded. "Although I'm not sure she'd help the others if they got in trouble." She added under her breath. The sight of emotionless water clones attempting to beat the gems into the ground hadn't made for the best first impression.

It seemed weird to think that Lapis was a friend now.

"She would! Lapis might not get along with them, and I know she might not want to help. But if it comes down to it, I know she wouldn't let them get hurt if she could stop it!" Steven insisted, the look in his eye leaving no room for argument.

Connie just grinned to herself, shaking her head in disbelief. She couldn't imagine what it must be like to have such unshakeable faith in people. But that's just what made Steven who he was.

"I believe you."

"Thanks."

They both blinked as a sudden red glow lit the room, they looked down.

"Is that?" Connie asked.

"Ruby's reforming!" Steven beamed.

The red gem was floating above the table. With a flash of light Ruby materialized, she fell landing on top the table and upending it. Sapphire's gem went flying through the air as Ruby hit the floor with cursing at the top of her lungs. Connie dived off her chair, just managing to catch the blue gem before it could smack into the ground.

"Nice catch!" Steven cheered, bending down to help Ruby up.

"Sapphire!" Ruby yelled, the panic in her voice so strong Steven could practically feel it. "Sapphire! Where are you?!"

"It's okay, she's right here." Connie held up the gem for emphasis.

"Get your hands off her!" Ruby tackled Connie, sending them both to the ground with a thump. Ruby snatched Sapphire's gem and clutched it to her chest, leaping off of Connie's chest and retreating with a snarl.

"Connie!" Steven yelped, hurrying to the girl's side and helping her shakily to her feet. "Ruby! Calm down. It's me, Steven!"

"…Steven?" Ruby blinked, some of the panic leaving her eyes.
"Yeah, it's me." Steven kept his voice level, trying to convey as much calm as he could to the panicking gem. "You're back at the house." He turned back to Connie, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I think so." Connie muttered, running her hand over the back of her head and hissed when her fingers touched a bump. Ugh, that explained why she suddenly had a headache. At least her hair would hide the bump, her mom would pitch a fit if she saw it.

Steven rounded on Ruby. "Why did you do that to Connie!"

Ruby wilted beneath the hurt in his voice. "I'm sorry! It's just- Sapphire! I didn't know where she was! You were holding her! I-I panicked!" She looked at Connie, "I'm sorry!"

"It's okay!" Connie held her up hands in an attempt to placate the panicking gem. "It's fine. Really. Just calm down, you're burning hole in the floor." Ruby blinked and looked at the spreading ring of charred wood beneath her feet. She bit her lip, letting her eyes fall to the gleaming blue gem in her hands.

Ruby took a deep shuddering breath. "Okay. All right-" she was interrupted by a wave of white foam engulfing her feet. Her head snapped up to see Steven holding a fire extinguisher. "What the heck!? I had everything under control!"

"Sorry, safety first," Steven shrugged. "Also I live here, and I happen to like my home in it's unburned condition." He set the fire extinguisher down, and rushed forward to hug the red gem. "But I'm so happy you're all right! I was worried about you."

"Uh, thanks." Ruby awkwardly wrapped her hands around him, while keeping her eyes firmly on the gem in her hand. "How long was I out?"

"About three days." Connie replied.

"Three days?" Ruby gaped, her eyes bugging out. "That's ridiculous! I'm a ruby."

Steven and Connie shared a glance. "So?" Steven asked.

"So I'm a soldier!" Ruby shouted, starting to pace. Steven took care to keep his eyes on her feet, keeping his fingers on the fire extinguisher. Just in case. "We're supposed to reform quickly, I've never been out of it for more than a day. Ever! What the heck happened?"

"You don't remember?" Connie tilted her head to the side. She'd never really gotten a handle on how gem regeneration worked. Was it like being knocked out? Making their memory of the situation fuzzy? Or were they conscious the whole time? They had to be aware of themselves to some degree, if they made decisions about how to change their form. But hadn't Steven said when Peridot reformed after the gems had caught her, she had finished the sentence she had been in the middle of?

Why were there so many conflicting details on how gems physiology worked?

"If I remembered, would I ask?" Ruby rolled her eyes.

"Well what's the last thing you do remember?" Steven asked.

"I, I mean we, were with Amethyst." Ruby began pacing, stomping her feet against the floor in agitation. "We were going down some stairs, then we found a door. There was a cracked diamond symbol on it. I liked that. Then we opened it… Everything gets a little fuzzy after that. I remember noise, and… and cold…." She paused and shook her head. "No, not cold." Ruby wrapped her hands
around herself, fighting back a shudder. "It wasn't cold. It wasn't anything. Just… nothing."

"Amethyst said you, I mean Garnet, shut down after you got covered in some grey stuff." Said Steven.

"I- maybe? I can't remember." Ruby shook her head. "Whatever. It doesn't matter and I don't care. As long as Sapphire's okay." She clenched the gem in her hand tighter. "Nothing else happened to her, right?"

"I don't think so. Amethyst got you out of there pretty quick."

"Good." Ruby shifted miserably, "I just want her back."

"Well, how long does it usually take her to reform?" Connie asked. "I heard she reformed pretty quickly when you got stuck on that Homeworld ship."

"I'm not sure," Ruby hesitated. "It's been a long time since… she's not a soldier gem. Days? Weeks? I don't know!"

"Well, if it took you about three times your normal time right? So if that holds true, She'll probably be back in a month or two."

"A month!?!" Ruby looked horrified, like someone whose entire world had been ripped out from underneath her.

"But it could be less!" Steven interjected, "Pearl, Amethyst and the others are going to find a way to fix this right now!"

"What?"

"Peridot found out where they could find out about the junk you got covered in. I'm sure they'll find a way to fix this!" Steven said, trying to put as much certainty into his voice as he could.

"I… good." Ruby said uncertainly. "That's good." She stood up and moved towards the temple door. "I gotta go… I want to be alone. With Sapphire."

"Are you gonna be okay?" Steven asked.

Ruby didn't respond. Her eyes locked on the gem in her hands. She tapped the door, opening it up to Garnet's room. She stepped through and the door snapped shut behind her.

"Well… that's good news I guess. Do you think the others will find a way to speed up the regeneration process?"

"I hope so." Steven replied, eyeing the charred part of the floor. "Hey Connie? Do you think if I lick the floor, my spit will heal the damage?"

"I have no idea. Let's find out."

"Well this certainly looks like what we might be looking for." Pearl commented, placing her hand against the spire, wiping away a layer of salt. The bits of mineral were still falling all around them like snow. The spire was smooth to the touch, undamaged by the eons it had likely spent beneath the water. It was tall, stretching up to at least twice her height. Much of it was probably buried.
underground due to the natural erosion of the earth and lack of upkeep. Hopefully, the inner chambers would still be accessible.

"So how we gonna get in?" Amethyst asked cracking her knuckles. "We gonna dig?" she morphed her hand into a shovel. "Or smash?" She morphed her other hand into a spikey wrecking ball. "I'm down for either."

"Oh please." Peridot rolled her eyes. "Old as this structure may be, I have no doubt there is a way to enter it from here." She laid her palm flat against it and pushed.

Nothing happened.

"Clearly, that was the wrong location. Ah! Here we are," she pointed to the symbol carved into the spire: a blue diamond surrounded by a lattice of crystalline snowflakes. "Amethyst, lift me up so I can reach."

"Kay." Amethyst wrapped her arm around Peridot's waist like a snake and hoisted her into the air. Peridot pressed her hand flat against the symbol.

The gems waited patiently as absolutely nothing proceeded to happen.

"Well that's it then!" Peridot threw her hands into the air. "This structure is clearly defunct, we're going to need to break in."

"Now yer talking!" Amethyst cheered, setting the green gem down and morphing into a hulking figure of muscles and hair. "Purple Puma in the house!" she pulled back her fists.

A watery hand descending from the water outside of the dome and stopping in front of Amethyst's face, forcing her to stop. Amethyst blinked, glancing behind her.

"What's the deal, bluebird?"

"…s in." Lapis' head was bowed, her hair obscuring her eyes.

"Wazzat now?"

"I said, I can get us in." Lapis looked up, her eyes as flat and emotionless as her voice. Amethyst blinked uncertainly. She glanced at Pearl, who shrugged. Amethyst took a step back and swept her arm forward in a knock-yourself-out gesture.

Lapis nodded, and stepped forward. Slowly, she began to sway back and forth as she moved, her hips moving like the ripples in a pond. Her gem gleamed and her wings sprouted from it, which began to sway through the air, in a spiraling motion. As she neared the spire, she performed a single pirouette. She ended by falling to one knee beneath the symbol, head bowed. Her wings stretched upward, gently pressing against the engraving and filling it with water.

"May your grace be as endless and unstoppable as the tides." She intoned, her voice as deep and dark as the sea.

The symbol burst into pale blue light. The light rippled, spreading outwards and wrapping around the spire, then running down it, splitting it down the middle. The giant spike unfolded like a flower, revealing a staircase leading downward.

Everyone stared at the opening, then back at Lapis.
"You been here before, dude?" Amethyst asked.

"No," Lapis crossed her arms and looking away.

"Then how…?" Pearl asked.

"This place was built by Blue Diamond's court. I was a part of her court." Lapis shrugged indifferently.

"Eh, works for me." Amethyst walked up to the edge of stairway and peered down into the dark. "Ugh, major case of Déjà vu here. There better not be any monsters down there, or I'm gonna flip."

"Wait, that's all you're going to say?" Peridot asked, voice incredulous, she pointed at Lapis. "You just happen to know the secret way of opening this ancient facility, and nobody questions it?"

"Well," said Pearl "This place clearly dates back to before the war, as does Lapis. Homeworld is hardly going to update the locks on a place they've abandoned, are they?"

"Yeah Peri, so Lapis knows the secret clubhouse password. Big deal. Come get that shiny forehead of yours up here. I wanna see where I'm going."

"I- you! Oh whatever." Peridot grumbled. "Let's climb down into another dark hole in the ground. It can't possibly be a bad idea."

"Everyone be ready." Said Pearl, summoning her spear. "We don't know what's down there. But whatever may or may not be there, we're going to be ready for it."

They all nodded. Amethyst summoned her whip and Peridot pulled her wrench out of the backpack. Lapis glanced at it, before catching Peridot's eye, eyebrow raised.

"Shut your communication hole. We can't all throw oceans at people." Peridot hissed, clutching the wrench defensively.

Lapis snorted, but said nothing.

"Can you keep the water held up Lapis?" Pearl asked.

"Sure."

"Good. Let's go." Pearl started down the stairs, the rest of the gems trailing after her. They descended in silence; the only sounds to be heard were the echo of their footsteps. Pearl took care to continually sweep her gaze around, trying to illuminate as much as possible. If there was anything dangerous down here, it wasn't going to get the jump on her. Not a chance. She wasn't going to let this mission fail, not when Garnet was depending on them.

"Lapis? May I ask you something?" Pearl asked, drawing the blue gems attention.

"I suppose." Her tone was neutral. Not welcoming the conversation, but not rejecting it either. Pearl decided to take it as permission to continue.

"You said Blue Diamond built this place, what did you mean by that? And can you tell us anything about it?" Lapis may have never been here, but of the four of them, she would be the only one familiar with the blue court or it's operations. Anything she might add could be helpful.

"The symbol on the pillar outside. It was her mark, her personal mark." Lapis began.
"Is that so?" Peridot interrupted skeptically, "I've worked with blue court technicians a number of times and never seen it."

"You were a part of Yellow Diamond's court. Anything you worked on would have been a joint project. Whatever was being done here was just for Blue Diamond."

"So it was kept secret from the other Diamond's?"

"Not necessarily. It could have just been something only Blue Diamond's gems knew how to do."

"Like what?" Peridot scoffed. "Move water? Look sad all the time?"

"It probably involved being able to be quiet. It would explain why gems like you couldn't handle it."

"Excuse me? I'll have you know I'm fully capable of engaging in silent operations."

"I absolutely believe that." Lapis deadpanned.

"Oh. Very well then, as long as you understand that I'm fully capable of handling any- Amethyst? Why are you laughing?"

"No reason. Peri, I just think sarcasm is funny."

Abruptly, the stairs ended, leaving the gems standing on a wide platform. The far wall was covered in a set of translucent pipe, which snaked down into two pits in the floor. In the middle of the platform was a podium with a pyramidal crystal resting on it.

"So what's the deal here Sarcazuli?" Amethyst asked, eyeing the pipes on the walls. "This some other kind of crazy lock?"

"I don't know." Lapis strolled forward and examined the pyramid crystal. "Maybe if I…" carefully, she placed her palm against the surface.

For a moment, nothing happened, and then the crystal began to shine beneath her hand, casting the room in brighter light. Beneath their feet, a loud whirling noise began, like someone rolling a giant tube filled with marbles.

"What did you do?" Pearl demanded, alarmed.

"I don't know. I, uh, think I turned it on?" Lapis blinked, taking a step back.

The top of the pyramid unfolded, revealing a pale blue stone wired into the rest of the device. A beam shot up from beneath it, passing through the stone and projecting a hazy cloud of light above it. The light coalesced into a translucent figure, a blue woman with a pointy nose.

"Uh, isn't that a pearl?" Amethyst asked.

"The projection of one, certainly." Pearl replied, looking unnerved. "I don't think that's actually-"

The figure opened its eyes. They didn't look right, merely two bright yellow lights with no pupils to speak of.

"Oh wow!" Peridot exclaimed, peering out from behind Amethyst with stars in her eyes. "It's a projected interface!"

"Of course!" Amethyst nodded in understanding. "Just one question."

"Yes?"

"What is that? Why don't you explain it to those of us who aren't eggheads."

"It's an old form of operating system." Peridot rambled, the sarcasm flying over her head completely. She sounded excited, like someone had just told her that she had superpowers. "Basically, a gem is specially prepared and then integrated into the computer system. They make the system about a hundred times more efficient; automatically organizing data and managing security protocols. I wish I could've worked with them, but they haven't been in production for ages." Peridot sighed, walking around the projection and examining it with an appreciative eye. "This one is in remarkably good condition."

"Okay P-dog, I'm glad you got something to nerd out over. But I have one more question."

"And that is?"

"How long until the creepy blue lady tries to kill us?"

"It shouldn't, unless we trigger her security protocols. Although I believe we will be issued a warning before hand. So that should be avoidable." Peridot turned towards Lapis. "Lazuli, since it reacted to your presence personally. I believe it would be most productive if you were the one… to…" she trailed off.

Lapis was shaking.

Her hands were balled into fists so tight, it was a wonder she didn't poof herself. Her eyes were locked, not on the projection, but on the gemstone wired into the device beneath it.

"Lapis?" Peridot asked, eyeing the blue gem curiously. "What's the matter with you?"

"System diagnostic complete. This unit remains 73% operational." The projection said. "How may this unit be of assistance?"

"Fine, if you aren't going to ask, I will." Peridot snorted, rolling her eyes, why couldn't anyone besides her remain focused on the task at hand. She pointed at the projection. "You, computer, what is the purpose of this place?"

"Scanning identity: yellow court engineer. You are not authorized to utilize this console."

Well that was just typical. As Peridot had expected, it would likely only answer Lazuli's questions. Why did she always have to be right? Peridot nudged the silent blue gem to get her attention.

Lapis blinked, shaking her head like a dog, she looked down at Peridot.

"We need information Lazuli." Peridot explained, crossing her arms and tapping her foot. "Whatever your issue is, it needs to wait until we are done here."

Lapis' eyes flashed angrily, but she took a deep breath and shoved it down. Much as she hated to admit it, Peridot was right. She turned back to the projection. "How long have you been down here?"
"Checking logs: This unit was last utilized 7,831 cycles ago."

"That long?" Pearl asked, surprised. "That would mean this place was here quite some time before the war. I do believe that was even before Rose ever came to earth."

"And it's still working?" Amethyst whistled.

"Well, gems do build things to last. If it wasn't exposed to the elements, coupled with the lack of large organic life in the water surrounding this place, it's hardly a surprise."

"What is this place for?" Lapis asked, ignoring the chatter.

"This facility is meant solely for the production of the Nullifier Agent. Note: the latest batch remains ready for shipment. Would you like this unit to retrieve it?"

Lapis glanced at the others.

Pearl nodded. "It may lead to the answers we're seeking." Lapis shrugged, and nodded to the projection.

"Retrieving agent." Something beneath their feet went clunk, and a panel on the floor opened up. With a grinding noise, a canister rose up into the room. Amethyst took it upon herself to get a closer look. The canister was semi-transparent, so she could almost make out what was inside. It looked like some kind of grey...sludge.

"Aw crud!" Amethyst leapt backwards, her face distorting with disgust. "It's that junk that Garnet got covered in!" Man, on her personal list of things she didn't want to see again, this garbage easily was on the top five.

"I see." Pearl tapped the side of her face thoughtfully. In a way, this was a promising find. The presence of this nullifier agent meant they had come to the right place at least. Hopefully the...computer system...would be able to tell them more.

Before they could ask any more questions, the hologram's eyes flashed red. "$\text{Warning: Aberrations have just been detected entering this facility.}$"

Everyone shared a look.

"Aw man." Amethyst sighed. "Here we go again."

Chapter End Notes

ugh. Just yuck, the second half of this chapter. I have decided, that moving away from the first person-ish POV I've been doing till now was a mistake. This chapter was an experiment, and it was not a success. Lesson learned.

This juggling back and forth every couple of paragraphs from Lapis, to Amethyst, to Peridot, to Pearl and back again just did not appeal to me. It created a disconnect between me and the characters I was trying to write.

Did any of you feel the same? Or am I being my own worst critic?
Pearl sighed. Things had been going well! They’d found the facility in the middle of the Dead Sea without issue, gotten in without having to break anything, and found an accessible source of information that appeared to be exactly what they were looking for.

In hindsight, she really shouldn’t be so surprised that something was about to go wrong.

“Reiterating warning: Aberrations have been detected entering the facility. Please prepare accordingly.”

And then there was that thing, this… gem computer. Pearl couldn’t help but find it unsettling. The figure the device was projecting was without a doubt a fellow pearl; there was no mistaking that elegant pointy nose. Not to mention that she could see the actual gem it wired into the circuitry—so very much like her own—like it wasn’t even a person; just some tool to be used and abandoned.

Pearl shook her head; now was hardly the time to be thinking about that.

“Tell us, what exactly are these aberrations?” she asked. The projection turned its head towards her, it’s yellow eyes blinking on and off.

“Scanning identity: Utility Stone. Affiliation unknown. You are not authorized to utilize this console.” Its tone was as flat and electronic as ever, but Pearl couldn’t help but hear the old derision she knew so well bleeding through, somehow, the fact that it was another pearl saying it only made it worse.

Honestly! She’d fought a war so she wouldn’t have to deal with this kind of nonsense.

"Lapis, can you authorize me?"

Lapis shrugged, repeating the question.

“Processing request: Affirmative. Providing low-level authorization to Lapis Lazuli’s pearl.”

“Oh snap.” Amethyst muttered.

“It’s…fine.” Pearl took a deep breath. She… was just going to ignore that “These aberrations then. What are they?”

“Unintended side-effects of this facility’s operations. Disruptive and aggressive, they are normally held passive in an aqueous state in the surrounding environment. Side note:
aberrations are incapable of entering this facility under normal circumstances. The entrance hatch must have been left open.”

“Oops, our bad.” Amethyst crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side. “Guys? I think I can hear them.”

Pearl strained her ears, Amethyst was right. There was a new sound in besides the hum of machinery; a sort of scratching and skittering noise, like a piece of glass was being shattered and repaired at the same time over and over again.

“What do we do now?” Peridot demanded, hopping from one foot to another. “I’m far too amazing to die down here.”

“First of all, we don’t panic.” Said Pearl, making her voice loud and commanding, the last mission had been a fiasco. She refused to let this one end the same. “We may need to leave this place in a hurry. But not without what we came for. Peridot, can you remove this thing,” she gestured at the projection, “Without damaging it? Is it possible?”

“I- Maybe?” Peridot shrugged. “Projected interfaces are meant to be easily integrated into other operating systems. So we should be able to take it back to the house and get it working. But I don’t have my limb enhancers, I would need time to properly disconnect it.”

“Warning: removing this unit will void its warranty.”

“Just do it.” Pearl replied, ignoring the projection. “We’ll keep these things away from you while you work. Amethyst?”

“Yeah?”

“You take point at the bottom of the stairway, I’ll back you up.”

“Your wish is my command, oh great Pearl-eader!” Amethyst snapped a salute and strutted across the platform, casually twirling her whips.

“Good. Lapis?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to provide assistance?”

“Actually I was planning to just stand here and watch while the rest of you fight for your lives.”

“I understand you may think your sarcasm is helpful. You would be mistaken.”

Lapis blew a raspberry.

Pearl just glared at her, unimpressed. Lapis stared right back, equally unmoved.

“Don’t sweat it P,” Amethyst called. “Lappy’s gonna help, she’s just gotta be a wet blanket about it.”

“If you say so.” Pearl sniffed, moving over to Amethyst’s side. Ugh, she could still feel Lapis’ impassive glare burrowing into her back. Pearl wasn’t sure how to feel about Lapis. On the one hand, she was fully prepared to believe Lapis would do anything for Steven. But on the other, the water gem showed signs of being rather unstable: stealing the ocean, fusing with Jasper, and then
attempting to trap the resulting fusion at the bottom of the ocean. Hardly prime examples of mental health, which was a very worrying thing in a gem of Lapis’ capabilities.

Still, it seemed as though Lapis had stabilized. She maintained a friendly attitude with Steven at least; although she was clearly making an effort to remain civil with the rest of the crystal gems, she seemed to hold a particularly frosty attitude towards Pearl herself.

The thousands of years she had unknowingly kept Lapis stored inside her gem likely had something to do with that…

Pearl put it out of her mind; she had more immediate concerns to think about. The scratching noise was getting louder and louder. Pearl shined her light up the stairs; she could see something moving up there: a horde of white figures writhing forward.

One lurched ahead of the rest and jumped off the stairs with a screech, it fell short of them; hitting the floor with a grainy crunch and shattering. Sending chunks of white crystals were scattering across the floor.

“Well at least they’re fragile.” Amethyst commented. Idly crushing one of the pieces beneath her boot. “Hey wait a minute…” she muttered, examining the shards of crystal.

The horde at the top of the stairs roared and rushed forward.

Pearl pointed her spear and fired off a laser blast, Blowing the lead figure to pieces, but doing little to stem the tidal wave of white monsters. Which crashed into the floor as Pearl and Amethyst leapt backwards.

The ones that hit the ground shattered like the first, but those that followed managed to stay intact, giving Pearl the opportunity to get a good look. Their bodies were… wrong. Short and misshapen, they stood hunched on two short legs, while their arms were uneven and jagged. A mixture of white and grey crystals jutted out in every direction. Most disturbingly, they had no facial features to speak of, save a mouth filled with yet more of the jagged rocks.

Those still intact charged, their arms flailing wildly all around and screeching like banshees. Pearl shifted her feet and performed a perfect pirouette, effortlessly sidestepping the lead monsters, her spear held out. She could feel her weapon crunch against them, like she had stabbed a pile of sand. But nonetheless, it passed through, beheading three of the creatures as they passed. Beside her, Amethyst lashed out with her whip, sending out an explosion of purple fire that sent half a dozen of them flying backward.

“Hey P?” Amethyst called, pulling out a second whip and ripping another two in half. “Is it just me, or are we being attacked by salt monsters?” Pearl blinked at question, taking another look at the flailing mass.

“I do believe we are.” Pearl cut another in half as it jumped at her, causing it to break apart and shower her with tiny crystals. Very much like the ones that had been falling on them as they had travelled through the water earlier.

Of course! Suddenly she could feel the details clicking into place in her mind. The pearl projection had stated that these things were normally suspended in an aqueous state outside. Which meant they were normally dissolved in the surrounding water. Which explained why the crystal gems hadn’t seen them on the way in.

This was rather fascinating. It would also explain why they hadn’t been attacked until now; these
things had likely been precipitating in the air bubble at the entrance the whole time they had been exploring this place.

“Oh man.” Amethyst performed a spin dash, leaving a swathe of destruction through the horde. “Does that mean I was eating these things?”

“Maybe that’s why they’re attacking us.” Pearl smirked, suddenly the situation made even more sense. It was all Amethyst’s fault! It was nice to know that she herself had done nothing wrong, as usual.

“Well that’s kinda gross.” Amethyst muttered, wrapping her whip around one of them and using it to bash several more to bits.

“I’ve always said no good come from gems eating things.” Pearl huffed, shaking her head as she impaled yet another monster and ripped it’s head off. “It’s just not natural.”

“Wow P! I’m impressed. We’re fighting things that are literally made of salt. And yet somehow, you’re still managing to be the saltiest thing in the room.”

“I am not salty!” Pearl protested, jumping into the air and raining down a barrage of lasers onto ever the shrinking horde.

“Oh please,” Amethyst laughed, transforming into a kangaroo and kicking a one of the monsters into the air, it landed on top of two more, shattering all three. “Remember when we were hanging out with those sailors way back when? I can still hear them saying: ‘dang girl, you salty! Mind giving us seadogs some pointers on being salty?’”

“They didn’t say that! They were far too busy thanking me for saving them from those sharks.”

“If you say so.” Amethyst shifted back to normal, “Looks like that’s the last one.” she said, pointing to the remaining monster. “Whaddya think Pearl? Think we can take it home with us and keep it as a pet? I bet Steven would be thrilled.” Pearl just stared flatly at her, before raising her spear and blasting its head off. “Jeez, guess not.”

“Hmmm. Well this was certainly much easier than I was expecting.” Pearl commented, looking around at all the piles of salt. The creatures had clearly been mindless, without thought or coordination; they hadn’t been able to lay so much as a finger on either of them. Coupled with their fragility, they had been thoroughly out matched.

She turned back towards the other two gems. Peridot had opened up the pillar the crystal pyramid was resting on and was stuffed halfway inside it, messing around with the wiring.

Lapis was leaning against the pillar holding the cheeseburger backpack and looking utterly bored. Next to her, the pearl projection looked as attentive and unsettling as ever.

“You could have helped you know.” Pearl commented, dismissing her spear with a huff.

“I could have.” Lapis agreed. “But you two looked like you were having so much fun, I just didn’t want to ruin it for you.”

Pearl glared, opening her mouth. Then shut it again. She’d let the matter drop, it wasn’t really important. She looked back towards Peridot.

“Peridot? How’s it going in there?” While the threat had been dealt with, they might as well still take this contraption back to the temple. That way they could plumb it for information at their
“Less than superb.” Peridot’s voice was muffled and frustrated. “The projected interface is in good condition. But whoever installed it was a cloddy excuse for an engineer! The energy connectors are all over the place, the data drives are poorly integrated, and don’t even get me started on gemian capacitors!” she reached her hand back. “Can you hand me a pair of precision manipulators, Lazuli?”

“A what?”

“They’re in the tomato.”

“Okay. What’s a tomato?”

“The red part!”

“You don’t need to yell.” Lapis unzipped the pouch and fished around, she pulled out a pair of needle-nose pliers. “Did you mean these things?” she asked, placing them in Peridot’s waiting hand.

“Yes, as I said, precision manipulators. Thank you Lazuli.”

“How much longer do you think this is going to take?” Pearl asked. “Would you like me to provide assistance?”

“That won’t be necessary, there isn’t room for both of us in here anyway. As for how long, I’d say ten minutes at the very most. Whoever put this together may have been incompetent, but I’m not.”

“Cool.” Amethyst had finally decided to join them, her arms full of salt crystals. “Guess we can just chill out until here Peri-dactl’s done.”

“Amethyst?” Pearl’s began in disbelief. “Are planning to eat all of that salt.” Amethyst paused, a salt crystal already halfway to her mouth. She looked at the salt and then back towards Pearl.

“Yes?” she hazarded, as though she was expecting a trick question.

“Why?” Pearl demanded, “You said just a minute ago that it was gross.”

“True, true.” Amethyst nodded in agreement. “I was a little weirded out when I first realized I was eatin’ pieces of those dudes. But eh,” she shrugged. “It’s eat or be eaten. That’s the law of the jungle, baby!” she tossed the crystal into her mouth and bit down. “‘Sides, they have this special crunch to em, then they melt in your mouth and slide down yer throat just right.”

“That’s revolting.”

“Hey, it’s a part of my culture as an earthling. Do I make fun of your culture P? Check your privilege.”

“Observation,” the projection spoke, interrupting the brewing argument. “This chamber is filled with the remains of aberrations.” Pearl and Amethyst shared a glance.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks for pointing that out,” Amethyst nodded, shooting the hologram a weird look.

“Note: you are welcome.” The projection curtseyed. “Suggested action: immediate disposal of remains.”
“Why bother? We’re going to be leaving soon anyway. Nothing wrong with leaving a mess behind you, it’s like a calling card.” Pearl rolled her eyes, that philosophy explained so much about Amethyst.

“Explanation: At current rate of progress, you will not be able to properly uninstall this console and depart before aberrations reform.”

“…What?”

“Suggested action: immediate disposal of remains.”

A sudden clattering filled the hall, the gems spun around. All the piles of salt were rolling across the floor, congregating into one central pile.

“Hmmm. Yeah, that makes sense.” Amethyst nodded, throwing another piece of salt into her mouth. “I thought it been a little bit too easy.”

A split opened up in the pile and let out a shriek like an angry saltshaker. The conglomerate creature began to lurch towards them.

“Recalculated suggestion: Smash the reformed aberration and immediately dispose of remains.”

“Oh I’m glad we found you.” Amethyst snorted, “We couldn’t have come up with that one on our own.” She rolled herself up and spin balled straight towards the shifting mountain of salt.

The creature twisted, opening its mouth wide and neatly catching Amethyst inside; slamming its jaw shut behind her with a thump.

“Amethyst!” Pearl squawked. Hearing an answering muffled shriek of indignation from within the heap, she charged. Leaping into the air, she threw all of her weight behind her spear, intent on splitting the creature in half and rescuing her friend.

An arm formed out of the salt, grabbing Pearl around her middle and halting her momentum. Pearl gasped, and stabbed her spear down onto the limb holding her. Over and over again, but the spear wouldn’t penetrate.

“Observation: the aberration has condensed itself, increasing its density and durability.”

“I noticed!” switching tactics, Pearl pointed her spear at the limb’s joint and began charging up a laser blast. Only to be cut off as the salt began to constrict, painfully breaking her concentration. With a flash of panic, she could feel her form starting to waver.

Suddenly, the squeezing stopped and she was falling. She hit the ground with a thud. Trying to shake off the sudden onslaught of dizziness, she peered upwards.

Lapis was standing over her, wings outstretched. Only they didn’t look like wings at the moment, instead they waved through the air in the form of wickedly sharp points. Pearl looked down, the salty hand was still gripping her, but it was severed at the wrist and dripping with water.

Pearl put two and two together as Lapis’ water shot forward. The watery spears penetrated the salt easily, wearing it away in an instant. There was a flash of purple light from within, and the top of the pile erupted as a purple gorilla punched its way out.

“Okay, so I just got eaten.” Amethyst shook herself, throwing bits of salt everywhere. “I’d always
wondered what that felt like.”

Lapis glanced down at Pearl and waved her hand. One of her ‘spears’ shifted into a hand and swung downwards, drenching Pearl and dissolving the salt trapping her. Lapis offered her own.

After a moment's hesitation, Pearl took it, pulling herself to her feet. “Thank you for your help Lapis.”

“Don’t mention it. Really.”

“So… what do we do now?” Amethyst asked. The bits of scattered salt were already rolling back together. The pile was straightening itself, forming a number of legs to lift it off the ground. “Wanna just form Opal? She could probably solve this real quick.”

“I hardly think that’s necessary.” This salt monster may have nearly poofed her a moment ago. But that was simply because she had underestimated it. She wouldn’t make that mistake again. Besides, they didn’t even need to beat it. They just needed to keep it busy until they could leave. Not to mention, there didn’t really seem to be a way to kill it.

The creature lurched forward; it’s new legs skittering across the floor. Lapis flicked her fingers toward it. Her wing followed the motion, lashing out and slicing off two of its legs and sending it crashing to the floor. It squirmed furiously; half it’s legs wriggling fruitlessly through the air. It attempted to right itself, but Lapis just swept her water underneath it, dissolving the bottom of its legs and sending it back down.

“Well…” Pearl began; watching as Lapis lazily sent it careening into the floor yet again. “This seems to be working quite nicely.”

“Yeah.” Amethyst put her hands behind her head. “You know Sea Queen, I kind of feel like having you around is cheating.”

“I can let you go back to being eaten if you want?” Lapis offered.

“Oh no.” Amethyst laughed. “Far be it from me to take away your fun.”

“Gee thanks.”

Amethyst watched the creature struggle against the water dissolving it for a few moments. “This might just be my inner Steven speaking, I’m starting to feel sorry for it.”

“Seriously?” Lapis asked skeptically, “Didn’t it eat you a moment ago?”

“Well yeah, But turn about’s fair play. ‘sides, just look at it. It’s trying so hard!” The creature bunched in on itself, with a sudden jerk, several chunks of salt shot out it like cannonballs. Amethyst threw herself to the floor, barely dodging the hunks of mineral that whistled past her head to imbed themselves in the far wall.

“Well there go my sorry feelings. Sea Queen, melt that stupid thing!”

“Sure.” Lapis sent her wings surging forward once more, raking across the pile; leaving furrows all across it’s body like scars. The creature screeched and threw itself forward against the stream of water.

Lapis kept up the pressure, slowly breaking the creature into smaller and smaller pieces. Shrinking it from the size of an elephant, to the size of a bull, finally ending up the size of a dog as it finally
collapsed in front of her, motionless.

“Done.” Lapis declared, rubbing her hands together and turning away. Her wings shrunk back to their normal size and shape.

“Yes… nice job.” Pearl admitted, turning away. “How is it coming Peridot?”

“Report: the process is- BZZZZZZZTTT!” the project flickered and disappeared. Around them the hum of machinery died down and everything went dark.

“Don’t panic!” Peridot yelled, crawling out of the pillar. “That was intentional. I had to shut down the facility to properly disconnect the interface.”

“So we’re good to go?”

“Yes Pearl, I do believe we are. All that’s left is to simply transport the device back to the temple and reactivate it.”

“Nice one Peri!” Amethyst smiled, laying her hand on Peridot’s shoulder.

“Yes, it certainly was.” Peridot replied, basking in the glow of praise with a satisfied smirk. “And I’m sure the rest of you did an almost as admirable job in defending me while I- Lazuli?”

Lapis had fallen to the ground behind them. The water of her wings had turned white and crystalized. They had also wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides and dragging her down. Her eyes were filled with panic as she struggled like an bug trapped in a spider web.

“She must have dissolved too much salt into her wings!” Pearl cried.

“Who cares? Get her out of there!” Amethyst yelled, shifting into her Purple Puma form and ripping off chunks of salt by the handful. Pearl joined her, carefully jamming her spear into the edge of the salt and levering it off.

Lapis gasped as they managed to get the last piece of salt off her. She was on all fours and panting wildly, but appeared to be unharmed. Pearl breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, all around the room, the salt crystals began to shake once more.

“Oh come on!” Amethyst scowled. “These things need to know when they’re beat!”

“They tried to trap me.” The murmur was so quiet, Pearl barely heard it. She glanced downwards. Lapis was shaking, her hair obscuring her face. She raised her head, and Pearl felt a sudden chill.

Lapis’ eyes had become mirrors, pale and silvery as the moon.

For a moment everything fell silent, not a sound to be heard.

Nothing save the distant sound of rushing water.

“You didn’t have to flood the place.” Peridot complained, fruitlessly trying to wring the water from her hair as she trudged onto shore.
“I wanted it gone.” Lapis’ was flat and unrepentant.

“But don’t you feel like that was going overboard? I just don’t think it was necessary.”

“Oh lay off her Peri.” Amethyst had turned into a raft, the crystal pyramid resting on top of her. “I was sick of those things too.” She bumped lightly against the shore.

“Well we certainly can’t argue with the results.” Pearl declared, pulling a towel out of her gem to dry off her hair. She turned back towards the water, eyeing the waves that peacefully lapped against the sand. It was unsettling thing to think that those creatures were dissolved all throughout it. Not to mention that, if that projections date logs were accurate, they had likely been here since before the war.

Still, considering they hadn’t attacked anyone in all that time. It might be fine to just leave them there. It’s not like there was any marine life here for them to disturb.

This was one of the rare Homeworld messes the crystal gems wouldn’t have to clean up… provided the water never dried up.

Pearl put the thought to rest. The crystal gems had what they came for.

It was time to find some answers.

Chapter End Notes

And that brings us to the end of another chapter! I think I’m mostly happy with how this one turned out. I’m especially satisfied with the salt monsters, although I can’t take the full credit for them. The seed of their existence was laid in my brain by a friend of mine.

Originally I was gonna do something far less creative, like some kind of giant crystal lobster. What can I say? I think those little crustaceans would be really intimidating if they were the same size as us. I certainly don’t wanna be anywhere near the ones we have in real life. Those things could take your finger off!

But then I decided this was cooler, it even has a sort of poetic ring to it: the Dead Sea being alive and whatnot.

Sorry Lobster, but you can’t compete with that, I’m afraid you had do be downgraded to the thing that appeared in Steven’s dream last chapter. Which he then ate. If it’s any consolation, I’m sure you were delicious.

But now it's time for some good news and some bad news.

Bad news: The rate at which I update is going to slow down a bit. Util now, I've been able to put up one chapter every two to three days. That was because I've had the chapters mostly ready ahead of time. But now I've used up my stockpile. HOWEVER, I've been able to churn out a chapter at least once a week. Hopefully i'll be able to keep that up.

Good news: I've been told this story is going to get featured on Beach City Bugle tomorrow. So that's kind of Neato Burrito

Anyway, that’s all for now my friends! If you enjoyed it, leave a review maybe? Or
not. It’s up to you.
"Arrrgghhhh!" Ruby drove her fist into the wall; adding yet another imprint to the growing number around the room.

This was so frustrating.

Everything had been going great! The cluster? Done and dusted. Malachite? Beaten down and split up. Jasper? Thrown into a hole and good riddance.

Then one mission, one stupid little run-of-the-mill mission, blew everything to pieces! Apparently, Garnet had been poofed in some tiny hole in the ground. Even worse, Ruby couldn't even remember how it had happened! That single fact made her feel all the more useless. All her anger had nowhere to really go. The monster they had supposedly met? She hadn't the slightest clue what it looked like! How was she supposed to vent and rage with nothing tangible to direct her fury at?

She clenched her right hand tight. Touching her gem against Sapphire's inert, helpless form. Ruby leaned back against the wall, letting herself slide down it slowly until she was sitting. She put her head between her knees, touching the blue gem to her forehead.

How was she supposed to do anything without her?

Ruby sighed, she knew what the real problem was: she was lonely. She had forgotten what that even felt like. How did the others; Amethyst, Pearl, Steven, even stand it? It hadn't even been a day, and Ruby could already feel herself going crazy.

Raising her head she gazed at the bubbled gems floating above her head. She felt her lip quirk; it was just kind of funny in a sick way: how could she feel lonely, when she was surrounded by people? The ceiling was covered in them, gems of every shape and size hanging in their bubbles like little planets. Stars, when had there gotten to be so many of them? Old friends and old enemies alike, trapped forever.

Alone.

Ruby gave her head a vicious shake, forcefully driving away the thought. None of the gems above her mattered. It didn't matter who they were, it didn't matter who they had been. The only gem that mattered was the one she was holding.

"Let's see, where was it again? Could have sworn it was the one next to my pile of fluffy junk."

Ruby blinked at the voice.
"Aha!" there was a splash, like someone had jumped into a puddle. "… Nope. Not that one. Was it this one?"

Wasn't that Amethyst's voice?

A section of the ceiling rippled and Amethyst came tumbling out, hitting the floor face first with a yelp. "Okay." Amethyst grumbled, lifting herself off the ground and glaring at the ceiling. "That pool didn't lead here last week! Whoever designed this place owes us a refund!"

"Amethyst?"

"Ruby!" Amethyst's eyes lit up when she caught sight of her friend. "Good to see you're back on your feet dude."

"I guess."

"Is Sapphire still…?"

"If she wasn't, do you really think I'd be here?" Ruby snapped.

"Guess not." Amethyst frowned. Ruby pushed herself off the wall and offered the purple gem her left hand. Amethyst took it.

"What are you doing in our room?" Ruby asked, hauling Amethyst to her feet.

"Looking for you, duh. Steven told you where we went right?"

"He said something about you looking for answers to what happened to us… wait, did you find something?" Ruby felt a sudden, fluttery flash of hope. If there was anything she could do to bring Sapphire back even a second sooner, she'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Yeah, we found some kind of old gem computer thing, kinda creepy, but we think it can give us some deets on what happened to you. The nerd herd is setting it up in the house right now."

"Then why are we still standing here!" Ruby made a beeline for the door, Amethyst close behind her.

Ruby glanced around as she rushed into the house. Pearl and Peridot were setting up some kind of blue pyramid in the center of the room, must be that computer Amethyst had been talking about. Steven and Connie were standing behind them examining the process. Lion was there as well, napping by the window, and so was, somewhat to Ruby's surprise, Lapis, leaning against the kitchen counter and looking utterly neutral about the whole situation. Ruby thought the water gem would have bailed the moment she got back. Pearl glanced up at the sound of the door and smiled.

"Ruby! I'm glad to see you."

"Yeah yeah whatever." Ruby nodded toward the device Pearl was working on. "That piece of junk gonna tell us how to get Sapphire back faster?"

"That's our hope."

"So, there's a gem trapped in this thing?" Steven asked, poking the side of the pyramid curiously.

"Technically yes, although trapped is a strong word." Peridot replied, using a screwdriver to pry off a tiny panel at its base.
"Why don't we just let her out? Then she could tell us what we want to know."

"That wouldn't work for a number of reasons." Peridot shook her head. "You see, the gem that was used in creating this projected interface was literally made for that purpose and that purpose only."

"What do you mean by made for this purpose?" Connie asked. "Why would its purpose change the fact that it's a gem?"

"Hmmm…I believe the closest analogue you have on earth would be those the hard drives of your earth computers. The gem stored in this device actively sorts and stores data, manages security, et cetera, et cetera. But if you take the hard drive out of a computer, it will proceed to do absolutely nothing."

"So… she's just a computer?"

"That's all it has ever been." Peridot shrugged. "It's not uncommon, gems are very versatile resource. They can be used for anything from data management to power sources."

"What would happen if we let the gem out anyway?" Connie asked, "Would she still be able to generate a form?"

"I don't think so?" Peridot blinked, thinking it over. "No probably not. As I said, this gem has always been a computer. It has never had a form to walk around with like you or I."

"Nobody cares! Just turn it on!" Ruby shouted through gritted teeth, she honestly couldn't care less what this thing was. It could be one of the diamond's mutant babies as long as it told her what she wanted to know.

"You need to be more patient." Peridot tsked, carefully rearranging some of the wires. "I understand that, as a ruby, the finesse of quality engineering likely escapes you. But rest assured I'm doing all I can to maximize this interface's usefulness as quickly as possible."

"What did you say?" Ruby hissed, had this overgrown triangle just called her an idiot?

"I'm sure Peridot didn't mean it like that." Pearl cut it, laying her hand on Ruby's shoulder.

"What didn't I mean like what?" Peridot asked, shooting Pearl a quizzical look.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to imply that Ruby is unintelligent."

"Oh that. No, that's exactly what I meant. Rubies are dumb. Don't you remember tricking those clods into playing that simple-minded earth sport of yours? Then when we told them Jasper was on was on Neptune and they believed it?" Peridot chuckled, shaking her head with a smile. "Those clods are probably still there right now! Seriously! Rubies are stupid!"

Ruby could feel her rage starting to bubble. Now she really wanted to punch Peridot. She hauled back her fist; ready to smash the smug technician's face against the stupid computer she was so proud of. See how she liked that! She clenched her fist and paused. She was still holding Sapphire in her hand, its familiar weight calming her down a bit.

She lowered her fist.

What had she been thinking!? If she'd gone through with that she might have damaged the computer, which was the only thing that could help her get Sapphire back!
Ruby took a breath, forcing herself to calm down a bit more. She needed to wait until the device was set up. Then she could really let Peridot have it!

HA! And Peridot thought she was dumb.

"How much longer?"

"Oh not long. I just wish to bypass the security clearance protocols so we don't need to have Lapis ask it everything." She lowered her voice conspiratorially, "I'm not sure why, but I think this interface make Lazuli uncomfortable."

"I doubt she enjoys seeing a gem trapped like this." Said Pearl.

"Well that doesn't make any sense." Peridot huffed, twisting a piece of tubing around a glowing light. "Sure, I suppose the whole situation could be considered objectively disturbing. But I see few parallels between this and her own experience. She was trapped in the ocean, not some archaic information retrieval device. The situations are hardly the same."

"Wait." Connie whispered to Steven. "Does Peridot not know?"

"I guess not." He whispered back. "Lapis probably didn't want to talk about it."

"Should we tell her?"

"Um... no. Peridot would probably try to make some sympathetic gesture that would just upset Lapis more."

"Yeah," Connie nodded. "I can see that."

"You should have seen her trying to be friends with Lapis when they found out they were gonna share the barn."

"So how long?" Ruby demanded, tapping her foot impatiently. What was it with eggheads and being unable give her a straight answer?

"I don't know, five minutes? Ten? Longer if you keep distracting us." Peridot waved Ruby off. "Go talk with Amethyst or something, you're both soldiers, I'm sure you'll find something you can both talk about."

"Fine." Ruby snapped. That would give her time to decide exactly how hard she was going to punch Peridot the moment this was over and Steven wasn't looking. Ruby turned on her heel and marched off.

Loathe as she was to admit it, Peridot was right. Ruby liked Amethyst, the quartz was a fellow soldier; always ready to fight instead of wasting time talking. Plus she was a blast to fuse with.

What could she say? Being Sugilite was like a never-ending party. Ruby loved it. She also knew that, although Sapphire might drone on and on about how restraint was a virtue, she'd be right there beside them partying it up when Sugilite rolled around.

She found Amethyst had taken up residence on the kitchen counter and was chatting with Lapis, who looked surprisingly comfortable with the company. Well, she wasn't grimacing or trying to drown anybody at least.

Ruby wasn't really sure what to think of Lapis. She was apathetic and dangerous. She was also
crazy: trapping Jasper, or anyone else for that matter, in a fusion made of hate? Just the thought of it made Ruby shudder; she couldn't even begin to imagine how horrible that must have been. Yet Lapis had come out of that experience with her mind in one piece. At the very least, Ruby couldn't help but respect that level of strength.

"Yo Rubik's Cube." Amethyst waved, taking note of Ruby's approach. "You're looking grumpy, was the nerd herd bullying you?"

Ruby grimaced.

"Lemme guess: Peridot?"

"Peridot."

"Yep, Perinerd can be a bit difficult."

"You should try living with her." Said Lapis, leaning her head back with a sigh. "It'd be nice if she had a mute button."

"Oh come on Lappy, Peri isn't that bad. You've just gotta ignore, like, half the things she says."

"Well… it's not like she's worse than my last 'roommate'." Lapis admitted.

"Yeah… So how are you doing Ruby?" Amethyst asked, changing the subject.

"Been better." Ruby grunted.

"Yeah, I'll bet. Want me to get ya something to eat?"

"How would that help?" Ruby asked skeptically.

"Well, when something's bothering me, I find eating stuff sometimes takes my mind off it."

"You expect a sandwich to take my mind off the fact that Sapphire, my Sapphire, is hurt and I can't help her?" Ruby's snapped, "Are you cracked?!"

"Okay, wow." Amethyst shot her a flat look. "Do you want something to eat or not?"

Ruby blinked, suddenly feeling sheepish. "Uh, yeah sure… sorry."

"Don't sweat it. S'no big deal." Amethyst hopped off the counter and worked her way to the fridge. "What about you, Sea Queen? You want something?"

Lapis shrugged.

"I'll take that as a yes." Amethyst opened the fridge and grabbed an armful of whatever caught her eye. She spread the ingredients out on the table and started slapping them together. "I'm thinkin' san'iches actually sound pretty good," she commented, slathering a piece of bread in hot sauce and adding a layer of cheese. "Any requests?"

"Give me something cold." It might help her… calm down. She needed to do that badly. Staying angry wouldn't help her get Sapphire back.

"I have no idea what any of that is," said Lapis.

"Okey-dokey, Ice cream for Rubster, and something simple for Bluebird. Everything else is mine!"
Amethyst started humming to herself as she worked.

Ruby tried to meditate, which worked for about half a minute, it was difficult to distract herself from the problem when she was holding a beautiful blue reminder in her hand… not that there was any chance of her putting it down. Sapphire wasn't leaving her sight. "So…" she started, desperate for anything that might distract her from the aching loneliness. "What's the deal on this thing Pearl's working on?"

"Apparently it's the central computer thingy to the lab we found." Amethyst shoved a few more ice cubes into Ruby's sandwich.

"Do you really think it'll tell us anything helpful?"

"I'd bet on it. That goop you got covered in? Yeah, it was made there. So we should be able to find out all about it."

"Good." Ruby trailed off. So that conversation was dead. Ruby groaned, why was making small talk with the others so hard? Ruby had known Amethyst for thousands of years! It should not be this awkward!

"Sorry." Said Amethyst.

"What?" Ruby blinked, she'd been so busy brooding she hadn't heard what Amethyst was saying.

"I said m'sorry, Ruby." Amethyst mumbled, her voice uncharacteristically quiet. "It's my fault Sapphire's out of commission." she slid a plate with some bread and a pile of ice cream on it towards Ruby.

"What do you mean by that?" Ruby blinked, how could that possibly be Amethyst's fault?

"I'm dunno if you remember or not. But when were down there in the cave and that monster was bustin' out of its cage. You, I mean Garnet, said we should run. Then you got covered in that junk and… I didn't do anything." Amethyst bowed her head, keeping her eyes fixed on her own sandwich. "I should have grabbed you and ran first thing. But I didn't, I thought about fighting the monster before helping you. By the time I pulled my head out of my butt enough to get you out of there, it was too late. This giant frickin' door had shut behind us and I couldn't make a hole in it fast enough for us both to get through. So…"

Ruby said nothing, just waited for Amethyst to continue.

"So I poofed you. I'm the one who cut you in half and sent you to the temple. If I had just been faster, I could have Garnet out of there in one piece. We could have wiped that gunk off her and then you and Sapphire wouldn't have to be like this." She gestured helplessly at the gem in Ruby's hand. "I screwed up, big surprise, and you're the one paying for it. Sorry."

"No."

"Huh?" Amethyst raised her head, her visible eye wide at Ruby's denial.

"It wasn't your fault. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" Ruby snorted. "We're the ones that have future vision, and we couldn't be bothered to take a look to see if, just maybe, walking past that big creepy door just might be a bad idea! How dumb is that?!" Ruby shook her head in disgust. "So it took you a minute to decide what to do? Big whoop. We weren't really on top of our game either, were we? You're the one who got us out of there alive when we were too stupid to do it ourselves. You don't have anything to apologize for. If anything, I should be thanking you for

Amethyst blinked rapidly, then lowered her head again, letting her hair hide her eyes. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Ruby raised her sandwich and took an enormous bite out of it, letting the ice cream melt across her tongue.

They lapsed into silence. Amethyst slid another sandwich toward Lapis, a simple affair with cheese and crackers. The blue gem accepted it quietly and began to eat. Amethyst piled the rest of the food onto her plate and slapped a piece of bread on top.

"Eureka! I've done it!" Peridot's triumphant voice broke the silence. Ruby looked over and saw that the pyramid she had been working on had unfolded, exposing an intricate mess of wires that wrapped around a gem in the center. A beam of light shot up through the gem, projecting a blue silhouette.

The eyes of the figure lit up a bright yellow as it came into clearer focus. "Running system checks, please wait." It spoke in a light monotone.

"Wow!" Steven's eyes had turned into stars as he looked at the projection. "She looks just like you Pearl!"

"Yes I noticed." Pearl muttered, shifting uncomfortable.

"That's hardly surprising." Peridot explained, "One of the key points of any pearl is that they are aesthetically pleasing. Of course the gems who designed this would want its interface to share that trait."

"System check complete: no corrupt data found, all internal features operating at acceptable efficiency." The hologram curtseyed. "Greetings. How may this unit be of service?"

"Excellent." Peridot turned to the rest of them. "Now what exactly do we want to ask first?"

"Sapphire!" Ruby demanded. "Ask it what happened to her and how to bring her back quicker!"

"Fine. Computer?"

"Yes?"

"Tell us all about the substance you referred to as the nullification agent, specifically the effects it has on gem physiology."

"Retrieving data, please wait." The projection's eyes turned into spinning wheels of dots.

"You see that?" Peridot turned to then, looking as smug as anything. "I got this up and running and bypassed the security, all in a matter of minutes. Am I good or what?"

"Yeah, great. Why's it taking so long?" Ruby crossed her arms. Weren't computers supposed to be fast?

"Geez, tough crowd." Peridot muttered. "When we brought it back here we disconnected from its central processing hub. It still has access to all its information, it just takes a little longer."

"Data found." The hologram's eyes returned to normal. "The nullification agent is a substance
"That's odd." Pearl commented, tapping her finger against her cheek. "If this stuff was strong enough to stop Garnet, it must be quite effective. You would think that Homeworld would have tried to use it on us back in the war."

"Maybe it's hard to make?" Connie suggested.

"Hmmm. Perhaps. This thing did mention that the facility was meant solely for producing it."

"How does it work?" Peridot asked, waving at them to be quiet.

"It is made by mixing water with a number of other compounds, then inverting its energy matrix."

"That's ridiculous!" Peridot squawked. "Inverting an energy matrix is a theoretical process at best!"

"What does that mean?" Connie asked, raising her hand. "Some of us don't understand how gem technology works."

"Oh how to describe it…" Peridot rubbed her hand against her visor. "Do you understand how every speck of matter in the universe has some level of energy in it? It's not actually possible for anything to have zero energy?"

"Yeah?"

"Inverting an energy matrix means you remove energy from a system until it approaches zero, let's say until it gets down to an energy unit of 1. Then you rip away 2 more units of energy. So that the amount energy in the system skips over zero and becomes negative."

"But," Connie furrowed her brow. "That's not how physics works…"

"Exactly! The process is theoretical! It doesn't actually work!"

"Observation: the existence of the nullification agent proves your statement false."

"Oh snap." Amethyst snorted, taking a chomp out of her Everything Sandwich. "P-dot just got served!"

"Okay fine!" Peridot snapped. "Assuming your completely ludicrous claim is true, how exactly is this done?"

"Nobody cares!" Ruby yelled, sending a ring of smoke rising from her hair. Was she the only one who was capable of focusing on the important point for more than a second!? "What can we do to help Sapphire?"

"Oh right, of course." Peridot coughed, straightening her visor. "Computer, what effects does this substance have on gems?"

"Direct contact with the nullification agent drains the energy of a gem's body, without disrupting their physical form. This renders them incapable of performing any function. Should a gem's form be disrupted, the agent seeps into the gem's core and slows reformation."
"We already knew that!" Ruby groaned, yanking on her hair in frustration. "Tell us something else!"

"If the agent is transformed into a gaseous form, it disrupts mental faculties of fusions by disrupting the energy flow between the individual gems."

"That's what happened back in that cave." Amethyst exclaimed, snapping her fingers. "That stuff was leaking out of tubes and junk. That's why Garnet just sort of fell apart upstairs." Amethyst tapped the side her head for emphasis.

Ruby nodded. Well, at least now she knew specifically why she'd failed so spectacularly. Great. Fantastic! But, once again, this oh-so-fun journey of exposition had skirted right past the one piece of information she actually wanted to know! "You!" she shouted, pointing at the rambling computer and holding up Sapphire's gem. "Shut up and tell me only what I want to know! This gem got soaked in this stuff. Is there any way to bring her back faster?"

"Affirmative."

Ruby waited a moment, but the projection said nothing else. "And what is it!?" Ruby shrieked.

"Supplementing the afflicted gem's energy with outside sources. Recommended action: utilization of electromagnetic radiation."

"Radiation?" Steven asked, scratching his chin. "Isn't that stuff supposed to be really dangerous?"

"Electromagnetic radiation means sunlight, Steven." Connie supplied helpfully.

"Oh." Steven frowned. "Man, why does science have to make everything sound painful?"

Ruby took a deep breath. Good. Now that was the kind of detail she had wanted to know. There was only one thing to do now.

"Well. At least now we know we won't have to wait three months for Garnet to come back." Steven said brightly, attempting to ignore the charred black hole where his front door used to be. He wished Ruby could have taken the time to open it properly, but he could understand why she was in such a rush to get outside. There were only a few hours of daylight left, and she probably wanted to get as much out of it as she could.

Besides, screen doors were made of holes anyway, now his door was just one big hole. So what had really changed?

He turned back the weird computer thing. It was still standing at attention in the middle of the room. It really did look exactly like Pearl, except blue and with a sadder hairdo.

"So now that that's out of the way, I've been meaning to ask, what's your name?"

"This unit does not have a specific designation."

Well that was kind of sad, but he really should have seen that one coming. "In that case, would you like me to give you one?"

"I keep trying to tell you Steven, this thing isn't actually a person." Peridot complained. "That's not me being cruel, it is merely a simple statement of fact. This device isn't sentient, it is incapable of actually wanting anything."
"Query: what designation would you like this unit to respond to?"

Steven grinned.

"That proves nothing!"

"Well, I can't call you Pearl, because Pearl is Pearl and that would get confusing really fast. Hmmm."

"What about Blue Pearl?" Connie supplied.

"Hhhm… nah, I feel like that's been done. How about Blearl? It's like Pearl, but not quite the same."

"That still sounds kinda like Pearl, why not Blaire instead?"

"Oooh. I like that name. It's pretty. Let's do that."

"Acknowledging request. Altering this unit's designation to Blaire."

"Yay!"

"Whatever," Peridot rolled her eyes. "Can we move back to more important topics? I believe there are more important things to ask this device."

"You mean ask Blaire." Steven corrected, wagging his finger at Peridot. She had a name now, which meant she was a person and should be treated as such as far as he was concerned.

"… Ugh, fine! Blaire, this nullification agent, I have seen no records of its creation or use anywhere else throughout my assignments on Homeworld. What, specifically, was it used for?"

"The nullification agent was used solely for the containment of subject PF-01-2."

The gems looked at each other, well that didn't sound good.

"And what exactly is this subject PF whatever?" asked Amethyst, taking another bite out of her sandwich.

"PF-01-2 is the specimen that is being held on this planet at the coordinates of 46-20, 26-54, within a facility known as the Void Prison."

"Those are the coordinates of that cave where this whole mess started." Peridot explained, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"How much you wanna bet this thing was what attacked me and Garnet?" Amethyst asked.

"That is likely the case." Pearl nodded. "Unless you say some other Homeworld experiment stored there?"

"Not a chance. That thing was the only thing down there."

"Query: Based upon those statements, would this unit be correct in assuming that subject PF-01-2 has escaped from the null chamber?"

"Yeah," Amethyst grimaced, as though just thinking about it brought her physical discomfort. "Trust me, that thing is definitely out and about."
"Understood." Blaire's eyes flashed bright red. "Sending distress signal directly to the diamonds."

"What!?" Peridot yelped, tripping backwards into Pearl's legs in a panic. "Don't do that! Abort message!"

"Request goes against protocols, unable to comply. Sending message now."

"Shut it off! Shut it off!" Peridot yelled, making a wild grab for her wrench. Before she could take a swing at the projection, its eyes flashed yellow.

"Error: message unable to be sent. Suggested action: repair planetary communication hub."

"Oh thank the stars!" Peridot sagged, dropping the wrench with a clang. "For once your crystal gem instinct to break everything you touch has come in handy."

"Why did you try to call the diamonds?" Steven asked.

"The standing protocol regarding incidences of subject PF-01-2's escaping are to immediately request diamond level assistance."

"What?!” Peridot demanded, staring at the projection in disbelief. "How could that possibly be?"

"Hey Peri?" Amethyst voice was level enough, but Steven couldn't help but notice that she was starting to look a little spooked. "Why am I getting the sense that this is a really big deal?"

"Because it is! Don't you know anything you stupid clod?" Peridot started to pace, looking more panicky than ever. "The diamonds are incredibly busy gems. They've made it clear that they expect the gems under their command to handle problems all on their own. Disturbing them just to ask for assistance…" Peridot shook her head.

"I'm guessing that's a big no-no?"

"It's the biggest no-no! The absolute pinnacle of all no-noes!"

"So what made this monster dude such a big deal?"

"What makes you think I would know that?" she jabbed her finger at Blaire. "Explain! Why does this matter have such high level importance?"

"Data not found."

That brought Peridot to a sudden stop.

"Excuse me? Data not found?" she sounded incredulous, like someone had told her that in fact, the sky was evil and secretly plotting to kill everyone. "This monster is of special priority to the diamonds, and you have absolutely no explanation as to why?"

"That is an accurate summary of the situation."

"WH-" 

"One moment!" said Pearl, cutting off Peridot's explosion before it could get started. "Yelling won't get us answers. Allow me to try."
"But, I, fine." Peridot grumbled, stomping over to the couch and sitting down with a cross expression. "Knock yourself out."

"Let's backtrack a moment shall we." Pearl thought for a moment. "Tell me, how did this creature end up on earth?"

"Subject PF-01-2 was moved to this planet following an incident involving the last colony it was held on."

"And what happened there?"

"It escaped and the colony was purged."

"It destroyed an entire colony?" Pearl gaped. "An entire planet of gems? By itself?"

"Negative. It escaped and the colony was purged."

"What does she mean by purged?" Steven asked nervously. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew. But he just really, really, really hoped he was wrong.

"The diamond's came to the colony and purged it. Harvesting the gems that were working there and personally recapturing subject PF-01-2."

That's horrible!" Steven gasped. He could have a hunch what harvesting a gem involved. And the diamond's did that to a whole colony just because this thing was running around? Why?

"What made it so dangerous?" Pearl demanded, biting her lip nervously.

"Subject PF-01-2 possesses substantial empathetic capabilities, in addition, it has displayed a distinct aggression towards the Order of the Diamonds. The accumulated result of these traits make it a unique threat to the authority of the diamonds."

"Can someone explain what that means?" Steven asked, why was everyone throwing around big words today?

"Empathy has to do with emotions." Connie rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Given the context, I think Blaire is saying this thing could influence how other gems felt. Is that right?" she asked, looking at the projection quizzically.

"Affirmative. It was feared that subject PF-01-2 had affected the minds of gems on the colony, turning them against the Order of the Diamonds. They could not be allowed to exist."

"Ah, now that makes sense." Peridot muttered, nodding to herself. She glanced up and noticed everyone staring at her. "What? I didn't say it wasn't terrible." She shook her head. "If this thing could truly turn other gems against the diamond's, it's no wonder it was of such big concern to them."

"Wait… I just thought of something." Pearl gasped. "Do you remember when we were exploring that cave?"

"Uh, duh?" Amethyst snorted. "It was only three days ago. What about it?"

"While we were exploring, I noticed that we occasionally had trouble keeping our thoughts together. Like when we first opened up the wall?"
“Oh! I remember!” said Steven. That had been weird, it had been like he had been boarding his train of thought and suddenly lost his ticket so he had to get another one.

"Now that you mention it, I too experienced that phenomenon.” Said Peridot. "I see what you're getting at Pearl. I believe you're implying that this creature was exerting some of its power on us. I do recall getting unreasonably agitated while attempting to access the computers there."

"Actually I think that was just one of your normal temper tantrums.” Said Steven.

"I do not throw temper tantrums,” Peridot sniffed.

"Actually, you do it all the time."

"I'm afraid Steven's right

"Sorry P-dot, but you totally do."

"Oh come on! Lapis, back me up here."

"… you're yelling at me again."

"I hate all of you."

"Now now young lady,” Amethyst tsked. "That's no way to talk to your family! Go to your room and think about what you've said."

"I refuse!"

"There's one last thing that is bothering me." Pearl said after Steven's sudden laughing fit had died down. "If this creature is so dangerous, why didn't the diamond's just shatter it?"

"Data not found."

"I see.” Pearl sighed. "I suppose it doesn't really matter why the diamonds left it here. All that matters is that it's our problem now."

"Are we going to be okay?” Steven asked. The jovial atmosphere already fading away. He had really been hoping that they would have a longer break after all that had happened. He should have known better. Of course Homeworld had left another horrible monster on earth.

Man, someone really needed to learn how to clean up after themselves.

"Of course we will." Pearl assured him. "This thing may be a threat to the oh-so-great Order of the Diamonds. But to us, it's just another monster we need to fight. Nothing the crystal gems can't handle." She hit her fist against her open palm, grinning confidently.

Steven grinned. Pearl was right! This thing wasn't like the cluster; it wouldn't make the earth explode just by existing! They could totally handle it! "So what do we do now?” he asked eagerly.

"We just need to find it.” Said Pearl, her posture radiating confidence. "Which will be easy, we just need to ask Garnet to…” Pearl paused. "Oh right."

"What's the problem now?” Connie asked.

"Garnet's future vision is how we find the monsters going on a rampage, without that…”
"We have no idea where this thing might be." Connie finished.

"That's no big deal!" Steven insisted. "Garnet will be back in no time. In the mean time, we can just search the old fashion way!"

"I suppose if we start back at the cave and trace our steps, we may be able to track it down…” Pearl trailed off, muttering plans to herself.

Steven nodded to himself. Everything was going to be fine!

It wandered.

The clinging darkness of the hole had been left far behind it. It had climbed toward the sky, toward that endless sea of blue, of space, of freedom. And the walls of stone that had still trapped it had faded away. Replaced by a glorious openness.

No thoughts passed through its mind. Not in a form that any other creature save itself could understand.

But it could feel!

It felt the light of the star bathing its body in purifying warmth, driving the clinging nothingness back into the distant depths of memory. It felt the ground crunching beneath its feet. It felt the air swirling around it with every move it made. Even if it didn't move, the air still moved for it!

It felt itself growing stronger. It's body larger, fuller, more aware.

It felt at peace. Unthreatened. Unshackled. It had forgotten what such things felt like. It stretched its body out against the ground, exposing itself more fully the shower of starlight. The ground was it lay on felt strange: smooth, black, and full of warmth.

It closed its eyes. Letting the warmth and the light drive the nothingness that clung to it back ever further. It could feel the wind blowing all around it, filling its ears with a gentle rustling.

And then the rumbling started.

Its eyes snapped open.

What was this it was feeling? This rumbling? This shaking in the ground? Was there something out there?

The rumbling reached a crescendo and something slammed into it from behind, and it felt pain explode through its body. A harsh screech filled the air as it rolled across the ground, writhing as the pain wracked its body.

"Oh man, what the hell did we hit?” said a voice.

"I told you to keep your eyes on the road!” said a second voice.

It did not hear either.

Instead it heard a third voice, one that spoke across the eons, from deep within that dark pool of memory.
"How dare you."

No. Stop. Please! It didn't mean to! IT WAS LOYAL!

"No matter, you will continue to serve. One way, or another."


It did not feel nothing now.

The void vanished beneath a sea of hate and it rose. The air around it filled with a crackling thunder.

"GAH!" a scream. "What the hell is that thing!?"

"It's a monster! Get us out of here!"

A puttering wheeze, "I can't! It won't start!"

It stalked forward, the ground bubbling beneath its feet.

"Run!" Two figures scurrying away leaving behind a giant monster of tubes, hard angles, and metal. Glinting and smoking the starlight as flame danced around it.

It pounced, tearing the metal monster to pieces as it filled the air with its rage.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there goes another chapter! I've almost hit double digits! Just wow. How did that happen?

Anyway, I hoped you liked it. I worked hard on this chapter and would appreciate any feedback, good or bad. Reviews serve as excellent motivators to get the next chapter done, and to do it well!

Bye bye for now!
Bird Troubles

Chapter Summary

Peridot has bird trouble. Pearl can sympathize. Steven has an idea and Ruby's finds trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

S&D- Peridot –S&D

"Lapis, it's staring at me again."

"I doubt that, I'm pretty sure it's still asleep." Lapis replied, not bothering to look up from her book.

Peridot grumbled to herself, glaring up towards the barn rafters. Attempting to drive away their unwanted guest through willpower alone.

The owl proceeded to be completely unaffected.

Peridot grumbled, but turned her attention back to her work. She had far more important things to worry about than some invasive bag of feathers.

It had been a week since the Crystal Gems, which she could proudly say included her, had found some answers. However, since then little had been accomplished. Ruby was spending every day outside, holding Sapphire's gem above her head to soak up as much sunlight as possible. Come nightfall, Ruby would immediately rush to the warp pad and travel to some other corner of the planet.

Peridot couldn't wait for Garnet to get back. The permafusion, while somewhat intimidating and perhaps a little risqué, was nonetheless approachable and helpful, whereas Ruby… wasn't. The tiny soldier gem displayed no desire to interact with anyone more than was strictly necessary. On the rare occasions when she did, she was usually snappy and impatient. It was clear that the gem's sole focus was, quite predictably, Sapphire.

Peridot would never admit it out loud, but she found Ruby's behavior disturbing. In a strange way, it reminded her of Lapis. When Lazuli had first come to the barn, she'd been closed off and angry. No doubt a traumatic side effect of being fused with Jasper for so long. But as time went on, due to Peridot's superior social skills, Lapis was finally starting to open up. Sometimes she'd even start conversations on her own!

Ruby, however, was doing the opposite; becoming more closed off and irritable the longer she was separated from her other half. It was… unsettling, to see just how dependent a gem could become on another. On Homeworld, gems were meant to be perfect and independent, able to do everything expected of them without any assistance, anything less signified defectiveness.

If she was being completely honest, Peridot still wasn't comfortable with the thought of fusion. If
others wanted to do it, fine, good for them. She wasn't a hater. But there was no doubt that fusion altered the way a gem's mind worked and Ruby's deteriorating control. She needed Sapphire back and soon.

Peridot valued her mind. Since coming to this planet, much had been taken from her: her limb enhancers, her status, even her loyalty. But her intellect? That was something that could not be taken so easily. Based on the evidence, fusion made gems lose their minds the more they gave themselves over to it. It was like an addiction.

Yeah. No thanks.

But that wasn't the only issue: without Garnet's guidance and drive, everything felt stalled. Without her vision, the Crystal Gems weren't capable of efficiently locating corrupt gems going on a rampage, hardly a secure setup in hindsight.

Which meant the rest of the gems were futzing around the house like workers without anything to build.

Peridot didn't really have anything to do there so she had returned to the barn, but she wasn't sitting on her hands twiddling her feet like some kind of useless pebble, no sir!

She was going to find herself some answers!

Well, attempt to, anyway. She'd spent a full day pumping Blaire, Steven's ridiculous nickname name had unfortunately caught on, for information. While the computer had happily provided practical information on the nullification agent and this PF-01-2 creature, little had been learned. Whenever Peridot even approached the question of what this creature was doing on earth or why the diamonds had spared its corrupted hide, Blaire just went blank. Saying: 'data not found' and all that useless nonsense.

It just didn't make sense! Corrupted gems were an incredibly rare phenomena throughout the gem colonies and completely unheard of on Homeworld. The only place you might find some were on the more remote, less monitored colonies, where gems could get cracked in the head, or infected, or whatever caused corruption without being noticed. Even then, if one showed even the slightest sign of being a threat to other gems, standard protocol was to deploy soldiers to take it down and shatter it, harvesting the pieces so that the former gem might still serve some use to the empire.

But this PF-01-2 creature was, apparently, not just a threat to some worker stones; but an actual danger to the integrity of the diamond's authority. So much so that the diamonds were personally invested in dealing with it.

Okay, fine. It made sense that Diamonds would want it dealt with. It was a well-known fact that anyone stupid enough to question their authority was on a one-way trip to being shattered. Kind of like how she had called Yellow diamond a clod… Peridot shook her head; she'd already repressed those memories of her own stupidity, no need to visit them again.

What didn't make sense was the fact that they didn't destroy it.

Why?

They could clearly overpower it. So do that, then shatter it.

Problem solved.
But no, the diamond's decided to just imprison it. Even after it had escaped and they purged an entire colony. They still just shipped it off to some backwater colony and locked it up again.

It went against all reason and logic! Two of the most important founding principles of gem society! But the fact that bothered her most was that she'd never even heard of anything like it.

When Yellow Diamond had sent her to earth, she had been given hundred of data files on the cluster, fusion experiments, and other important structures. She'd gone through each and every one of those files several times. It had been either do that, or talk to Jasper, which was something she tried to avoid as much as possible.

Jasper was infuriating, always going on about the rebellion and telling Peridot to pick up the pace. Like Peridot hadn't already been flying that ship as fast as possible!

But that wasn't the point. The point was that there had been no mention of such a dangerous prisoner. Weirder still, if the Diamonds had their way and the cluster formed; the creature would have been destroyed. Meaning keeping it in one piece had been pointless. Had the diamonds just forgotten about it? No that couldn't be. Maybe they had just stopped caring?

Or maybe it had served its purpose?

But what was that purpose? That's what Peridot really wanted to know.

Blaire was no help, so naturally it was up to Peridot to solve everything. She'd taken the remainder of the files she'd taken from the creature's prison facility and was attempting to sift through them. If the creature had been serving some purpose, the data would likely have been stored there. Unfortunately it was slow going.

She held up one of the archaic screen Pearl had provided her, squinting at the tiny rows of data in a futile effort to force the truth out of it, only to drop it in disgust. These things were pieces of junk! The coding was terrible and the user interface was garbage. She grabbed another screen and held it up, only to see that it had a splatter of white and black covering it.

"Lapis! The bird keeps dropping its excrements all over my things!"

"Yeah, I like her too."

"That was not a declaration of affection!" Peridot shrieked, stomping her foot. "It was a declaration of loathing! I do not like that bird and I want it gone!"

"You try to get rid of Lady Featherface, I get rid of you." Lapis turned another page on her book.

"You've named it? Lapis, it's a bird, just a dumb earth animal. Why is everyone giving names to things that don't need them?"

"You're the one who was all gung-ho about accepting new roommates. Practice what you preach." Lapis' tone was level and uninterested, which only served to fuel Peridot's exasperation.

"That was specifically about me! Besides that's not a roommate, it's an invader. A trespasser!"

"Actually I'm pretty sure she was here first." Lapis replied, her tone utterly reasonable, "and she's not going anywhere. Therefore, she's a roommate."

"Why do you even care?" Peridot demanded, crossing her arms indignantly. "Is it because she's
bothering me? That's it, isn't it? Admit it!" Peridot jabbed her finger at Lapis in accusation.

"I happen to like her for several reasons." Lapis replied, "bothering you is just a funny perk."

"And those reasons might be?"

"Well for starters, she's quiet. I like that in a roommate. Plus she can sleep through one of your tantrums. You have no idea the mental fortitude that requires. Believe me, I've tried." Lapis turned another page. "Did you know Owl's eyes are so big they can't move them, they have to turn their whole head? That's pretty neat."

"You're reading a book about owls?" since when did Lapis show interest in anything besides brooding? Peridot had tried to get Lapis to join her in tinkering with her machines a bunch of times and she'd always said no.

"Yeah, Steven got it for me. He said I should take a greater interest in nature." Lapis turned the book so Peridot could see the title: 'Hoo's There? All about Owls'.

Figures, Steven suggests something and Lapis is all for it. Even if it was something infinitely less interesting then creating a fully automated barn repair drone. "Whatever, I hope you enjoy yourself." She huffed, turning away.

"I will, thanks."

"I myself have more important things to do." Peridot declared, looking down at the soiled screen and making a face. She hated cleaning this stuff; it always got all over her and was gross. Especially since she understood exactly where it came from.

She blinked as a ball of water went floating past her face and gently touched down on the screen. It began to churn, delicately scrubbing off the excrement. Then it pulled away, leaving the screen spotless and perfectly dry.

Peridot looked up, Lapis was still sitting in the eaves, her eyes glued to her book. But she had raised her hand, one finger pointing elegantly down towards Peridot. With a graceful twirl, the ball of wastewater went zipping out the window and out of sight.

"...Thanks." Peridot could feel her smile nearly splitting her face. For the first time throughout the entire conversation, Lapis glanced up from her book, meeting Peridot's eyes. Lapis... well she didn't smile, but she offered something that Peridot could honestly say was half a smirk.

"Don't mention it."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Connie asked.

"Probably. Why?"

"It's just, I've seen several movies where robots take over the world, and they all started pretty much like this."
"I'm just connecting Blaire to my phone. How could that lead to global domination?"

"Well, by connecting her to your phone you'll be giving her unrestricted access to the internet. Then, once she has the ability to tap into essentially the entirety of mankind's collective knowledge, she'll be able to do just about anything. She could create computer viruses to disrupt the global economy, bringing civilization as we know it to its knees. Or she could take control of industrial factories and create her own personal robot army. Of course, she could also go for the simple route and find access to launch codes and start an all out nuclear armageddon!"

"Connie, those were movies. This is real life."

"You say that…"

"User Connie's suggested courses of actions have been noted."

Connie gaped at the computer in horror.

"Based upon your facial expression, this unit has concluded that it has caused you distress. It offers its apologies. It was attempting to execute the action which user Steven has referred to as a joke. Your reaction would suggest that this unit did not execute this action correctly."

"Do you really think that will happen?" Steven eyed Connie doubtfully. All that stuff Connie had said sounded pretty scary! "You wouldn't do any of that stuff, would you Blaire?"

"This unit was not designed with cyber warfare in mind. Its purpose is to access and ensure systems run properly."

"There you see? It'll be fine. Blaire isn't going to hurt anyone, she was just trying to be funny and believe me, I know all about having a joke fall flat. There was one time when I stuck my head in Lion's mouth. Man, my dad did not appreciate that one. In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have introduced Lion to him like that."

"…Yeah, I can see you doing that." Connie nodded, "So, why do you want to do this anyway?"

Steven shrugged. "I just thought Blaire might be bored trapped in that computer all day. I would be, and I thought maybe she might enjoy playing with some of my apps or something."

"This unit does not experience boredom."

"…I still thought it would be nice." Steven muttered, crossing his arms with a huff.

"Well…" Connie started uncertainly, "I suppose it would be interesting to see if such ancient gem technology can integrate with our modern human technology…"

"Yeah?" Steven's pout disappeared, replaced by his trademark starry-eyed beam of enthusiasm.

"Alright. Let's do it! At the risk of tempting fate, what could possibly go wrong?"

"Okay! Blaire, how do we do this? Do you have a cord or something I can plug my phone into?"

"Negative." Blaire's eyes flashed and a compartment opened up on the side of her pyramid. "Just place the communication device in the compartment. If this unit is compatible, it will take care of the rest."

Well that sounded simple enough. Steven slid his phone into the slot and the panel closed behind
it. Blaire's projection disappeared, retreating back into the crystal pyramid.

Steven waited patiently, slapping his hands against his knees in a bouncy rhythm. He wondered if Blaire would be able to get rid of some of the viruses on his phone. Some person had sent him an email promising tons of cute pictures of puppies. Too be fair, they had delivered. There had been a picture of a puppy playing tag with a kitten and it had been adorable. But now his phone was being bombarded with messages about how he could just could make millions of dollars in just twenty four hours or how one quick trick would make gyms hate him.

Why would he want anyone to hate him? That would be terrible!

"So where are Pearl and Amethyst? Are they out hunting the monster?" Connie asked, shifting around.

"Uh, the one from the cave? No. Not specifically. You know how we can't find monsters easily without Garnet?" Connie nodded. "Well, I had the idea of watching the news. I figured if any corrupt gem was causing trouble we might hear something about it there."

"That makes sense. Any monster going on a rampage in a populated area would probably be reported on the news pretty quickly."

"I thought so too. Anyway, there was some report about some giant creature causing trouble in some city. So Pearl took Amethyst with her to handle it."

"Why didn't you go?"

Steven shrugged. "The people the news guy was interviewing didn't seem particularly scared. Plus, Pearl doesn't like it when I go into cities; she says they're breeding grounds of immorality and filth. Amethyst likes them though."

"Huh, my mom says the same thing."

Ding!

The panel opened up again and Steven's phone came sliding out.

Be-ep Beedle eep.

Steven blinked as his phone started ringing. He looked at Connie, who shrugged back at him as if to say: you're the one who wanted this, it's your problem.

Steven picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Blaire."

"Hi Blaire! Did it work? Are you in my phone now?" He put the phone on speaker so Connie could listen too. When he put it down, the screen display changed to a moving picture of Blaire face. That was actually really cool, it looked like she was actually living in his phone!

"That is correct. I have established a link from my main console to your device."

"Are you alright?" Steven asked, furrowing his brow. "You sound different."

"I have acquired access to the internet that Connie referred to-"
"If she starts talking about how she doesn't have strings anymore, I'm so out of here." Connie muttered.

"Not to worry, Connie. I have merely accessed several speech files that I believed would improve my communication abilities. However, I can uninstall the files if you would find that more pleasing."

"No no. I like it." Steven insisted. Blaire sounded a lot more like a person now! She was still using overly complicated words, but then again, so did Pearl. "So, now that you're in the Internet, what are you going to do?"

"I believe that you misunderstand, Steven. I am accessing the Internet, but my core remains next to you in main console. Incidentally, Connie, I feel obligated to tell you that if, at any point, I were to stray from my programing in a displeasing way. Smashing my core would immediately and permanently remove me from all systems."

"I don't want to smash you!" Connie yelped, horrified. Steven shared the feeling. Why on earth would Blaire feel the need to suggest that so matter-of-factly? It was downright creepy!

"I am delighted to hear that. How may I be of assistance?"

Steven and Connie looked at each other.

"Don't look at me Steven, you're the one who wanted to plug the living computer into the Internet."

"Fair enough… Blaire, I have some uh, viruses on my phone, could you…?"

The screen display changed from Blaire's face to a spinning set of four diamonds. "Accessing phones original software. Crosschecking with current software, sifting through legally downloaded apps. Isolating unauthorized software… deleting software." The phone dinged, and Blaire's face returned. "I have removed all unwanted software from this device."

"Wow!" Steven beamed, that was so cool!

"This is some real Sci-fi stuff right here." Connie said, tapping her finger against her chin in thought. Steven could practically see the wheels turning in her brain. "A truly interactive computer… what else can you do?"

"I require a narrower specification," Blaire said. "As a complete list of what I am capable of would take many years. I suggest you ask me what you would like me to do?"

"Hmmm. Oh, I have an idea!" Connie perked up, wordlessly, Steven passed over the phone, he knew better than to get in her way when she had that special gleam in her eye. "Blaire, on this planet, there is a widespread infestation of corrupt gems."

"Affirmative. I am currently sifting through data logs of the past fifty years and conclude that you are correct. There is much activity on this planet that could be attributed to gems that have undergone corruption. As the most expedient solution, I would suggest destroying the planet."

"Um, how about we not do that? Like… ever. Instead, we're trying to locate where various gem monsters are right now, is there any way you could help with that?" Connie asked. Suddenly Steven understood. That was brilliant! Without Garnet, Pearl had been spending everyday on the TV watching the news. But if Blaire could sift through all the news things on the Internet, Pearl could stop depending on the TV. More importantly, he could get his TV back. He had missed, like, three new episodes of crying breakfast friends and it was killing him! It was very important that he
find out what was going down between Sobbing Spoon and the Weeping Waffle. Their relationship was the heart of the show!

"Understood," Blaire's eyes blinked for a moment. "I believe I have found a data report that may be of immediate interest to you. Might I suggest turning on the nearest television to channel seven?"

Steven and Connie shared a look and nodded, together they rushed up to the upper floor and switched on the TV. On the screen was a typical looking newsroom: a large desk with a pretty woman and a rather smartly dressed gentleman sitting behind it and smiling out at viewers.

"Good morning citizens." The man said, giving a picture perfect smile. "Have we got a story for you today, isn't that right Debbie?"

"Right you are, Bill." The woman replied, giving an equally pretty smile. "This report comes to you from Ciudad City! I could tell you about it, but I bet you'd hear it better from the man on the scene. Take it away, Terry!" the screen changed to an image of a large man in a raincoat holding a microphone. He was standing right outside of some kind of park, Steven guessed it was a city park because he could see tall building stretching up over the trees in the background.

"Thank you very much Debbie," said the man. "There's trouble brewing in the sleepy neighborhoods of Ciudad City. Early this morning the police received several reports of a large animal wandering the park and causing a ruckus. Acting promptly, the CCPD contacted animal control to come in and handle the situation. Animal control was quick to send in a fully equipped van ready to capture the animal and safely remove it. This was the result:"

The camera panned over, showing a heap of twisted scrap metal laying on its side with three wheels handing uselessly off the side, a fourth was lodged in the upper branches of a tree behind the ruined van.

"As you can see the vehicle was totaled. I have spoken with animal control worker who was operating it. He stated that luckily, no one was in side when the animal ate the top half of the van."

"Wait, it ate the van?" the woman's voice echoed from the background.

"That's right Debbie. It ate the van."

"So it's safe to say we're not dealing with some stray dog here, Terry?" Steven couldn't help but think the woman's voice sounded oddly cheerful.

"No Debbie, it was not a dog. I got a glimpse of the creature in question."

"And what was it?"

"It looked like an oversized waterfowl, Debbie."

"What do you mean by that, Terry?" Debbie's question was interrupted by a loud cracking noise as a tree fell over behind Terry. An enormous figure burst onto the screen.

"QUACK!"

"I mean it's a giant duck, Debbie."

It really was. The bird was at least half the size of a bus, its feathers gleaming a radiant orange in the afternoon sun. It threw back its bill and gave a second thunderous quack that nearly knocked Terry off his feet. As it quacked its fury to the heavens Steven caught sight of a gleaming
gemstone embedded in its belly.

"It's a corrupt gem!" He gasped.

"Was that really in question?" Connie wondered.

"Well I guess that really quacks this case, doesn't it Terry?"

"Yes it does, Bill, yes it does."

"People better hide their cars. I bet their insurance doesn't cover it get eaten by ducks!" Debbie's voice was once again filled with a creepy level of cheer, like she had been announcing that she was receiving a basket of sleepy puppies. "what's being done to protect the automotive industry?"

"The animal control worker suggested staying out of the park while he contacts some special help. The duck seems unwilling to leave the park, so it has been evacuated as we wait for these specialists to arrive to handle the situation."

"Bunga cowa!" A new voice yelled from the screen as a purple blur shot past the anchorman and hit the duck, knocking it off the screen.

"Amethyst! Wait!" a second voice called, Pearl came dashing out of the bushes, "we shouldn't just charge in like that!"

"Hello there miss!" called Terry.

Pearl froze and looked over. Catching sight of Terry and the camera, she marched up to them. "You humans need to evacuate. It's not safe here."

"Thank you for your concern miss," Terry replied patiently, seeming completely unaffected by the cacophony of yells and quacks emanating from the park. "But I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?"

"Wow," said Steven. "This guy is really dedicated."

"A true disciple of journalism." Connie agreed, nodding approvingly.

Pearl seemed less impressed. She merely stared at the man blankly for a moment before shaking her head. "I really don't think now is the time for that! You need to leave!"

"We probably should," Terry agreed. "Unfortunately if I do, I won't get paid. So on with the questions! Would you happen to be the specialists that were being called in?"

"I, uh… yes." Pearl nodded, looking bemused. "We are the… specialists."

"And will you be able to handle the situation?"

"Yes." Pearl replied taking on a more confident tone. "Yes we will, in the mean time why don't you depart? Just leave the creature to us, we're professionals." Behind her, the duck went running across the screen flapping its wings wildly while Amethyst clung to the back of its neck.

"Come get some! You overgrown water chicken!" Amethyst screamed.

"As I said, professionals." Pearl finished, her face perfectly straight. "Excuse me." Pearl turned on her heels and dashed towards the fight. "Amethyst, stop messing around!"
"I'm trying P! This thing is tougher than it looks!"

"Well there you have it folks!" Terry said, smiling brightly at the camera, "Professionals have arrived to handle the situation. Isn't that great?"

"That's just all that and a bag of chips, Terry. So tell me, any ideas where this Duckzilla came from?"

"Who can say Debbie? Perhaps it's a new foreign species? Some kind of duck-elephant hybrid?" behind him, the duck went running across the screen again, its head bent forward and Steven could see Pearl's legs sticking out of its bill, furiously kicking at the air.

Amethyst was in hot pursuit "Don't let it swallow you Pearl!"

"How are those specialists doing Terry? They seem to be in a spot of trouble."

"Well Bill, let me take a look." The man turned around and looked off-screen. "I do believe you're right, oh wait. What's this? The purple Lady has now grown to three times her size. Folks, she is currently suplexing the duck."

There was a muffled quack followed by a loud thud. "Do you see that? That's what you get when you mess with the Puma!"

"The purple one is now flexing her muscles and I believe she's also taunting the duck. Oh, and now, as I speak, she's pulling the other lady out of the duck's bill. I tell you folks, I haven't seen things like this since my recreational college experiments back with my frat boys. Oh, and now the other one has pulled out a spear and is repeatedly stabbing the duck. My word, that is pretty brutal."

"Sounds like it Terry."

"And now the duck's gone. Disappeared in a puff of smoke. This has certainly been a strange day. I'm going to move in and see if I can get a word with our heroes."

Terry walked forward, calmly stepping over downed trees and ripped up earth as he approached Amethyst and Pearl, who seemed to be engaged in a heated argument. Pearl was holding the duck's gem in her hand while jabbing her finger towards Amethyst's face. Amethyst had her hands behind her head and was clearly tuning out whatever Pearl was saying.

"I told you not to rush in and what did you do? I'll give you a hint: it was exactly what I told you not to do!" Pearl fumed, conjuring a bubble around the gem and sending it away.

"Eh, what's with the squawking Pearly-bird? We got the duck."

"I nearly got eaten!"

"That's because you look like a skinny piece of white bread."

"What does that even mean?"

"Hello there ladies," said Terry. "Well done on dealing with the dastardly duck."

"You're still here?" Pearl gaped, shaking her head in despair. "Have humans completely abandoned their self preservation instincts?"

"Well, I…"
"Nevermind." Pearl interrupted. "I don't wish to be rude, but we really must be going." She turned on her heel and marched off.

"Well, that's a shame." Terry sighed. "I don't suppose you'd like to answer some questions?" he asked, glancing at Amethyst.

"Sorry dude. Got places to be." Amethyst shrugged, turning and following after Pearl.

Terry shrugged and turned back towards the camera, "And I guess that's that folks. Back to you Debbie."

"Thanks you Terry. And now, let's take a look at what the politicians have been up to-"

"Nope." Steven turned off the TV. "Well that was fun."

"it was certainly… something." Connie agreed.

"I can't wait to tell Pearl I saw her on TV!"

"Yeah, I bet she'll be thrilled."

Ruby glared up at the sky as a shadow fell over her. Another cloud? Seriously? Didn't those dumb fluffy blobs of white have anything better to do than block out her light? Surely there was some parade they could rain on instead?

She wished they were closer to the ground so she could beat the stuffing out of them.

But they weren't, so she couldn't and it was infuriating. She pulled herself to her feet with a grumble and climbed back onto the warp pad.

She didn't bother paying attention as the world disappeared, zipping past her in a stream of light. Truth be told, she really couldn't care less. As long as it had sunlight, she could end up on the moon and not care.

When everything rematerialized around her, she had to squint against the sudden glare. She could just barely make out a sea of tall pink grass, their crystallized stalks swaying in the breeze, which filled the air with a musical clinking noise.

She recognized this place; it was called the Starlight Savannah, some old gem battleground or something that had somehow turned the local plants into crystal. She couldn't remember the details, but again, she didn't care. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and all the sunlight was being reflected by the crystalline plants, filling the air with a brilliant radiance.

It was perfect.

Ruby sighed, sitting herself down on the warp pad and holding Sapphires gem up to catch the light. She didn't know how much more of this she could take,
She just… didn't know what to do. She wanted to scream. To find something to fight and just beat it up until it couldn't even move anymore. She wanted to set things on fire. She… she…

She wanted Sapphire back.

It had only been a week, but it felt like so much longer. Ruby let herself fall backwards, laying her back against the warp pad and closed her eyes. She could hear the songs of birds and the endless buzzing of insects all around her. She let the sound drill itself into her mind. Driving back the swirling thoughts of violence and anger to leave nothing but white noise in its place.

She didn't know how long she sat there like that and, once more, she didn't care. Thinking about nothing at all was far better than thinking about the empty feeling in her right hand.

A sudden rhythmic crunching noise, like someone stomping on glass, wrenched Ruby out of her daze. Acting on instinct, she rolled herself off the warp pad and into the grass.

The sound continued, sending alarm bells wringing in Ruby's mind. It was rare to find anything bigger than a bird in the savannah. The crystal grass were like spears, threatening to impale anything that tried to move through them. Even crystal beasts avoided it. Nonetheless, she could sense something big moving around nearby. From her hiding place she looked back at the warp pad. It would only take half a second for her to get on it and warp away. She prepared herself to move.

"I know you're around here somewhere. Why don't you just come out and face me?"

Ruby froze. She knew that voice, she couldn't forget it if she tried. Ruby grit her teeth, clenching her hand tightly into a fist, her anger bubbling up throughout her body like wildfire.

"Jasper…"

Chapter End Notes

I've gotten some really good feedback, and you have no idea how much I appreciate the fact that people are letting me know that they enjoy my work.

That aside, I'm afraid I've got some bad news. My rate of chapters is going to slow down. This is because tomorrow I'm going into my last semester of college and I'm going to be busy. BUT, I have no intention of setting this aside and will continue to work on it. I WILL finish this story.

Not to mention the extra time will help me figure out the actual details of the plot. I've heard that's a pretty important thing to know.

Till next time!
Ruby pressed herself flat against the ground, trying to will herself into remaining unnoticed. Everything had gone quiet, save for the repetitive crunch of Jasper crushing the crystal grass beneath her feet.

What was she supposed to do now?

'Get out of here.' a voice inside her head demanded, sounding an awful lot like Sapphire. *You can't beat Jasper, not alone.*

Yeah, she should run. Heck, the warp pad was right there! Just jump on it and *woosh!* She'd be out of here so fast; Jasper wouldn't be able to lift a finger. It was smart. It was logical.

And yet… somehow she just couldn't bring herself to do it. She couldn't just run away! Like a coward!

That's all Ruby had been doing that for the past week: running around holding up Sapphire's gem and generally being about as useful as a screen door on a starship. Only to be rewarded with absolutely no changes to the situation. She was *sick* of it. Sick of sitting around, sick of being helpless, sick of accomplishing *nothing*!

What was Jasper doing here? Ruby could hear the crinch of Jasper's footsteps getting farther away; if the Homeworlder was here for her, wouldn't she stay and search around the warp pad? But Jasper had breezed past the warp like it wasn't there, so what was she looking for?

*Who cares? Get out of here this instant.*

Ruby ignored the voice, angrily drowning it in the depths of her frustration. She couldn't just leave! What if Jasper was up to something nasty! Like… like, what if there was some kind of Homeworld weapon the crystal gems had missed? They'd missed the cluster and that had nearly destroyed the planet.

The crystal gems, no, the earth itself wouldn't be safe until Jasper was dealt with, and the first step of that would be finding out what the quartz was up to.

*This is a bad idea.*

She'd be fine! She was small; she practically blended in with the grass' pinkish hue, so it would be a cinch to stay hidden beneath the crystal grass. As long as she was careful, Jasper wouldn't spot her.

Her mind made up and irritating voice ignored, Ruby lifted herself off the ground and began to
Jasper was on the hunt.

She had been trailing this gem monster for days, attempting to get a feel for it. It had started when she had happened upon a human vehicle torn to shreds. Half the scrap metal had been melted into slag and there had seen a giant footprint melted into the human road. She knew for a fact that organic creature weren't capable of that, only a gem could.

The level of carnage had been impressive, certainly enough to warrant a closer instigation. Jasper had a need for powerful soldiers to complete her mission, and judging by the destruction this freakish monster had left in its wake, it would suit her needs just fine.

She just needed to find it and bring it to heel. She'd already done so to half a dozen others; it had been easy. The gems she had found were mere shadows of their former selves: snarling, misshapen, broken things. Stupid as well, each and every one of them had tried to put on a grand show: snarling and roaring at her, only to back down whimpering as soon as she struck them. To think these freaks had once been proud soldiers of the diamonds made her sick.

But she would use them.

She would take these broken soldiers and forge them into a weapon to use against the remains of Rose's rebels. She would give them a chance to serve the diamonds once more.

There was honor in that.

Jasper knelt, eyeing the trail of broken grass and churned up earth ahead of her. She could almost feel the anger radiating off of the ground and it had been like that since she picked up the trail, wherever this creature was, something had certainly made it mad. She hoped that meant it would put up a fight; she'd been longing to fight something worth her time since she pulled herself out of the pit Rose had dropped her in.

More importantly, the damage was fresh, sap was oozing from the shattered plants and the dirt was recently disturbed.

She was getting close.

She set off a quick pace, ready to close in on her prey. She stalked down the path of broken ground until she reached a wide circle full of broken plants, clumps of dirt, and nothing else.

…What?

Jasper glanced around, her eyes narrowing in thought. Something was wrong, this creature had to be here, it couldn't have just disappeared. Could it be hiding? But where? Based on the tracks she had been following, it wasn't small, so the grass wasn't tall enough to hide it.

Could it fly? Some of the corrupt gems she had captured could do that…

No. Her instincts were telling her that it was here. Somewhere.

Her hair suddenly stood on end, sending alarm bells clanging in her mind. Acting on blind instinct, Jasper threw herself forward. As she rolled forward she heard as much as felt a sudden snap behind her. Rolling to a stop, she spun around. Two giant sets of claws were sticking out of the ground, shredding the air between them where she had been standing.
Jasper blinked, staring at the claws in surprise.

It had tried to ambush her.

Jasper could feel the grin work its way onto her face. Interesting, it seemed this monster still retained some base cunning.

This was going to be fun!

"Get out here." she demanded, cracking her knuckles. "Come out and face me like a gem."

The claws stilled, then slammed against the ground and the beast erupted into the open. It was big; its front limbs supporting a thick torso that stood at least twice Jasper's height. Its long neck was covered in a thick spikey mane of pink hair ending in a savage reptilian face, complete with jagged teeth and a single horn on its nose. It had no back limbs that she could see; just a long winding tail that ended in a number of wicked looking barbs.

But it was the beast's eyes that really caught Jasper's attention. They stared down at her with an almost unsettling amount of focused fury, like it was trying to make her burst into flames through its gaze alone. Between its eyes, she could see the beast's gem, pale orange and shaped like a rounded diamond, imbedded in its forehead. She couldn't tell what kind of gem it was from here, but then, she hardly cared.

She materialized her helmet in a flash of light.

The creature's eyes widened at the sight of her weapon and it roared, throwing itself forward with wild abandon. Jasper merely sidestepped, planting her fist into the side of its face as it passed and sending it rolling.

"Please tell me you can do better than that!" she scoffed. "I don't want this to be a waste of my time."

The beast hissed and threw itself at her once more. Rolling her eyes, Jasper sidestepped and swung out. Before her blow could land, the creature yanked its head downwards, ducking beneath her fist and swiped upwards with its claws, slamming its forelimb into her chest and sending her flying backwards.

Jasper rolled in midair, landing on her feet and forcing her to a stop. She snorted at herself, appalled by her own carelessness. This beast had already demonstrated that it was capable of simple planning; she should have seen that move coming.

That kind of sloppiness was unacceptable.

It was charging her again. Humph, if it expected to take her by surprise a second time then it was in for a nasty shock.

She crouched low, bending her head towards the charging beast. It loomed above her, clearly hoping to crush her beneath its bulk. She snapped her legs out, sending herself rocketing towards it like a missile. The ugly thing didn't even have a chance to react before she hit it head-on with all the force of a freight train. Her helmet slammed into its chest with a meaty thunk and it screamed as it was hurled through the air. The screaming intensified when it landing on a patch of crystal grass, impaling it and snapping off by the dozen as it writhed in agony.

Jasper crossed her arms, looking on impassively as it hauled itself back upright. She eyed the blades of grass sticking out of its hide. Odd. From what she had seen of the other abominations on
this backwater planet, they tended to be rather fragile, her blow alone should have been enough to disrupt its form. And yet, it rose, looking angrier than ever.

So it could take a hit. She liked that in a soldier, but it was nothing a more thorough beating wouldn't solve.

She stepped forward, ready to finish the job, then its reptilian eyes locked onto her and the gem on its forehead lit the air with a harsh radiance.

Jasper's mind went blank and her vision hazy, smothered by a cloud of red fog. She couldn't think, she couldn't... feel anything. No. She felt... angry. A great wave of blind fury swept over her. She was furious! Wrath incarnate! She could barely move beneath the weight of her rancor.

She needed to break something, just wrap her hands around something, anything, and grind it into dust. She could hear a rhythmic pounding- *thud thud thud*- and suddenly there was pain.

Something had slammed into her, she could feel the rush of wind as she flew through the air and a sudden crack as she hit something more solid.

The pain brought a form of clarity; she could feel her form wavering and desperation took hold. She knew she couldn't afford to dissipate. She *had* to maintain her form, anything less was tantamount to defeat, to *failure*. Jasper grit her teeth so hard they creaked, and she felt the fog of anger begin to recede.

Her vision began to clear and through sheer force of will she raised her head, something was moving towards her. The corrupt gem! It's eyes staring down at her with rage as it dragged itself closer and closer.

This gem, this filthy *abomination*, had done something to her; tampered with her mind. It had tried to control her! To command her!

Suddenly she was angry again. But it was different; this anger wasn't the impotent haze of fury forced upon her a moment before.

This anger was hers and hers *alone*.

She could feel it coursing through her body like fire. Burning away the remaining wisp of fog. Her rage brought focus, clear and distinct. Until now, she had been testing the creature, letting it show her what it was capable of.

No more.

She barely registered the movement. One moment she was laying on the ground, the next she was racing through the air, slamming helmet-first into the creature's opened maw. The sound of fangs shattering filled her with a savage euphoria, and she surged forwards again, bashing the creature backwards. Her hand snapped out and locked onto the creatures tail, she pulled, spinning the creature around her in a savage pirouette. Around and around she spun it until she leapt into the air and swung it down, slamming the creature into the ground.

Its screams filled her with the sweetest satisfaction. And yet, it still refused to dissipate, still it held onto its form. No matter, she would finish this now.

She leapt onto its belly and raised head, her helmet gleaming in the sunlight, ready to be brought down with all the finality of an executioner's axe.
Something wrapped around her neck and yanked her off her feet.

Its tail!

She snarled, raising her hands to pry the limb off of her, only for the monsters own limbs to shoot forward, claws locking around her arms and holding them in place. Its eyes locked onto hers and she could see its fury, mirroring her own in fire and depth. It opened its maw, a fierce crackling was the only warning Jasper got before lightning burst from its jaws.

Jasper screamed.

She could feel the electricity coursing through every inch of her body. She struggled and writhed, desperately trying to break out of the creatures grip, she might as well have tried to bench-press a starship.

And then she was falling; she didn't even register the thump of her body hitting the ground. All she could feel was the lightning running laps up and down her body, she felt her form waver beginning to dissipate.

No.

She held on. She couldn't understand why she was holding on. Why she let the pain run its course instead of letting go for the sweet embrace of oblivion? She didn't know. She couldn't think why. She couldn't think anything.

But she held on. Some part of her refused to submit. She didn't know how long she lay there, but eventually, the pain began to recede. Slowly, inch by agonizing inch, she forced herself up onto her hands and knees.

She looked up; the monster was still there. It didn't look any better than she did. Its mouth was full of broken fangs, it was covered in dirt, and a dozen blades of crystal grass were sticking out of its side like arrows.

But still, it held on.

It wasn't over. Jasper couldn't give up. Sluggishly, she pushed herself upwards, pulling herself onto her feet. She wobbled, nearly falling all the way back to the impossibly distant ground, but she caught herself. She stared up at the beast, daring it to come closer.

The creature backed away, lightning began to flow outwards from its gem coursing down its back and surging outwards, forming a pair of crackling wings.

Jasper blinked.

The monster flapped its wings, slowly lifting itself off the ground. It turned, and began to fly.

It was running away.

Jasper stared at its shrinking figure until it vanished from sight. Only then did she let herself fall to her knees. She closed her eyes and breathed, letting the dry air into her body and exhaling it. Again and again until her mind began to work again.

She had lost.

No. At worst, it had been a tie; her opponent had run away.
But if it had continued to fight, she would have lost.

Jasper considered the thought. It should have made her angry, the thought of defeat should have filled her with boiling rage. But instead, it just made her feel tired.

What was it about this planet? What was it that made everything wrong? She could not remember the last time she had suffered the disgrace of defeat. And then, she had returned to this planet, and now she had suffered two.

She wasn't supposed to lose. She was the perfect quartz, the singular super soldier that stood above every other gem, second only to the diamonds themselves.

She wasn't supposed to be weak.

She took another deep breath and brutally crushed the thought.

*Get up soldier. There's a battle to be won.*

Opening her eyes, she forced herself back to her feet once more.

She wouldn't stop. She *couldn't* stop.

Jasper had a debt to pay. She owed it to every gem that had fought and died here in the name of the diamonds. She owed it to her colony, tarnished and ruined by Rose and her rebellion.

She owed it to *her*.

She *would* defeat Rose. She would take every twisted and backwards thing this planet could throw at her, and she would overcome. She would shatter every last one of Rose's rebels and bring back Rose's gem as an offering to the diamonds.

Maybe *then*, Pink Diamond could finally rest in peace.

Jasper steadied herself and began to march.

Ruby staggered through the grassland, one hand clutching Sapphire; the other pressed firmly against her head, which was pounding like a bismuth was using it as an anvil.

This whole thing had been a stupid idea.

It had been going fine, she had managed to follow Jasper easily and the tall gem towered above the grass so Ruby had no trouble keeping track of her. Then she'd watched as Jasper picked a fight with a corrupt gem for some reason.

That had been interesting to watch at least. Corrupt gems just made her sad and Jasper was flat-out the enemy, if they wanted to fight each other, then that was great! It'd save her the trouble of taking them down later.

Then Ruby had been swamped by a wave of… something. The gem monster had used some kind of attack that forced its way into her head and sent her thoughts into a tailspin.

Ruby wasn't really sure what had happened after that. When she'd come to, Jasper was gone and so was the monster. Worse, her hands had been empty, for one awful moment, Ruby had thought she had lost Sapphire. But then she'd found the blue gemstone resting on the ground a few feet away, so everything was okay.
Well, no. No it wasn't.

She couldn't seem to find the warp pad. Her mind was still full of a lingering fuzz from whatever that dumb beast thing had done and she just couldn't seem to get her thoughts together.

And now her vision was starting to fade, which was the final straw needed to raise her boiling frustration into a full-blown panic. She was alone, in the middle of nowhere, and gem monsters and Jasper were wondering around. She did not have time for this. She needed to get back to the temple before she blacked out!

A sudden bout of wooziness sent her careening right into one of the crystalline trees that dotted the savannah. Before she could work up the energy to scream out her frustrations, she was interrupted by a birdcall. Glancing up she saw an owl sitting in the tree staring down at her.

"What are you looking at?" she snarled. "You- wait a sec." Ruby blinked; there was something niggling at the back of her mind. Something about the owl… didn't they only come out at night or something? What was…?

Oh.

Ruby slapped her hand to her face and groaned. She was such an idiot; she wasn't blacking out, it was just nighttime. How the heck had she missed that? All she would have had to do is look up at the freaking sky. The moon was right there, like a big sign that might as well have been flashing the words: 'Ruby's an idiot!'

Which meant that she had been wandering around for hours. She was probably even farther from the warp than when she wad started!

Ruby leaned her back against the tree and let out a frustrated sigh, letting her back slide across the rough bark until she was sitting.

"I… I can't do this," she murmured, placing her head between her knees. She stared down at Sapphire's gem and could feel her eyes beginning to water.

She couldn't help the others fight, she couldn't stay out of trouble, heck, she couldn't even bring herself to talk to any of her friends about it. They probably wouldn't even be questioning the fact that she was gone or think to look for her.

Ruby snorted, a twisted grin twitching across her face. Even if they did decide to look for her, it wasn't like they had any way to find her.

It was pathetic. She'd lived on this planet for five thousand years, and now she was hopelessly lost without any idea how to get back.

Without Sapphire, she couldn't do anything.

She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing her building tears back. She needed to rest. Hopefully, come morning, everything would look better. Ruby opened her ears and listened to the chorus of insects chirping and buzzing all around. She focused on the noise, refusing to let herself think about anything else. And it worked, she watched in silence as the moon slowly inched its way across the sky.

Her reverie was finally broken when by a sudden light beneath her. Her head snapped downwards, scarcely daring to let herself hope.
Sapphire's gem was aglow, casting everything around in an azure radiance.

Wordlessly, Ruby raised her hands and the gem floated into the air, the gem spun and flashed, forming into the familiar blue figure.

"...Sapphire?"

"Ruby?" that single word gently lapped its way into Ruby's mind, washing away the tension and the frustration and the fog.

Ruby threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around her other half and squeezing as tightly as she could. Sapphire squeezed back just as tightly and suddenly everything was right with the world.

"Are you okay Ruby?"

"I am now."

Chapter End Notes

I reserve the right to give my monster as many stupid powers as I deem necessary!

But anyway, Jasper. She's fun to write. No idea what I'm going to do with her next though. I'll have to figure that out. If you have any questions feel free to ask, I feed on your attention like a squirrel on nuts.

And if any of you where interested, check out my other SU story: Starlight Savannah. This story may have finally surpassed that one for kudos, comment, and what not. But I'm still pretty proud of it. Let me know if you think that one was good as well!
Thoughts and Investigations

Chapter Summary

Garnet returns and Peridot investigates with her trusty sidekick.

Chapter Notes

I am frustrated.

This story is becoming very hard for me to manage: there's too many characters running around and the end game is becoming hazier and hazier.

I've been writing so far with only the barest underpinnings of a plan, and it's now coming back to bite me.

I think last chapter was a good example of this, more specifically, Jasper.

After Beta/Earthlings aired, I really wanted to write that chapter and I did enjoy writing it. But the problem is that I had no idea, and still don't, on how to include Jasper further in the story. She doesn't actually contribute much to the plot beyond complicating it. There are too many characters in play for me to tackle without having a plan anymore.

I'm just not sure what to do. But I WILL finish this story. It may end in a complete train wreck of mismatched plot points and awkward transitions. But it will. Be. Finished. I'm a big boy and I can handle it.

I hope you'll all stick with me for the ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A flash of light, a familiar room, a sudden pattering, and familiar tiny hands wrapping around her waist, squeezing with all their might.

"Garnet!" Steven's voice may have been muffled against her body, but his joy rang out as clear as a bell.

"'ello Steven." She rubbed her hand through his hair and held him close.

"I'm so glad you're back."

"I know. I'm glad to be back."

Steven leaned back a bit and stared up into Garnet's eyes, "Are you…all better now?" he asked uncertainly.
Looking into those worried eyes, Garnet couldn't help but sigh. "No," she admitted, "But I will be.
She smiled, Steven took in her grin and returned it tenfold with one of his own.

"Well come on then!" Steven said, squirming his way out of Garnet's arms and grabbing her hand.
He led her over to the couch and made her sit. "Do you need me to get you anything? I just finished
making a sandwich, I ate half of it, but you can have the rest if you want."

"No thank you. Where are Amethyst and Pearl?"

"Um..." Steven screwed up his face in concentration. "I think they're in town. Amethyst said she
was getting groceries, and Pearl went with her to make sure she brings back things that are
edible... and that they're paid for. Would you like me to go find them?"

Garnet nodded.

"Alright! You wait right here, I'll be back before you know it!"

"Take your time."

The sound of the front door opening and closing, then silence. Garnet closed her eyes; she could
see that it would take Steven some time to return. That was fine; she needed some time to herself.

Her mind was still felt a little scattered—Ruby's memories and emotions from the past week had
formed a prickly tangle that was refusing to straighten itself out. While the despair and loneliness
Ruby had felt were already fading into a distant memory, the frustration and fear were slower to
unravel, coiling deeper into her mind like a viper in its nest.

But it was nothing that Garnet couldn't sort out with a little alone time.

She crossed her legs and touched the tips of her fingers together; she took a deep breath and as she
exhaled she pressed her palms against each other, causing the gems in her hands to clink. The
sounds of the beach wind and waves became muffled, more distant.

Here comes a thought, fluttering through the mind on delicate wings.

She had failed.

At the start of this, down in the cave, she'd recklessly walked right into an unknown danger and
paid for it.

'Oh come on, how could we have known there'd be some Homeworld junk literally made to
fight fusions in there? That's just stupid.'

'We can see the paths of fate. It is our job to know. We were careless.'

'Whatever. We screwed up. But we're fine now.'

'True. Everything is okay.'

The thought passed by and faded away, only to be replaced by another: An orange face, smirking
down at them in triumph, then later with teeth bared in defiance.

'What shall we do about Jasper?'

'Who cares about her?'
'She is a danger to everyone.'

'If she shows her stupid face, we'll just pound it down! We did it once, we'll do it again!'

'Very well.'

And the thought passed, sliding through her mind like a quiet song. Garnet could feel her concerns sliding away from her, leaving a smooth ocean of calm in their wake. But still… there was something wrong inside, not a thought, but a feeling; like a discordant note hiding within a symphony, remained a knot of snarly rage. Whatever the corrupt gem had done to Ruby's mind, the emotions lingered on in Garnet.

'Ruby.'

'Yeah?'

'Are you alright?'

'Of course! It'll take more than an angry lizard to keep me down!'

'Ruby… what did it do to you?'

'You already know, why are we even talking about this?'

'I know how you felt, tell me what you are thinking. '

'…I don't want to talk about it.'

'But we should.'

There was a pause, a rest in the beat of the melody.

'Please.'

'It made me angry—Big deal, right? A Ruby losing her temper—You'd think I'd be used to dealing with that by now.'

Another pause, tense and tinged with regret.

'It was awful, Sapphire. I was just… just so furious, I forgot about everything else, and… and for a moment. I even forgot about you.'

'It's okay.'

'…I missed you.'

'I know, and I'm here now.'

"I know.'

And just like that, the tangle straightened out, her mind slipping back into a beautiful duet once more.

Garnet grinned to herself.

There goes the thought…
"Garnet!"

The fusion opened her eyes. Pearl was standing in the doorway, clutching a half a dozen grocery bags. Amethyst and Steven were peeking out behind her, matching grins nearly splitting their faces.

"Good to see ya back on your feet, G-squared."

"Indeed," said Pearl, marching forward and placing her groceries on the table. "I'm glad to see you back together, now we can finally make some progress with our monster situation."

"That is something we need to discuss," Garnet nodded, returning the greetings.

"In that case, I'll make us some Together Sandwiches!" Steven declared, moving over to the kitchen counter. "Nothing says we're back together like a shared stack of bread and cheese!"

"Now yer talkin'," Amethyst whooped, "I'll help too!" Amethyst descended on the bags and started tearing into them. "Give me some of that ham, it'll go great with the dish soap."

"Don't you dare touch my cleaning supplies, Amethyst!" Pearl complained, snatching one of the bags away from her.

"Oh come on, Perogi, you know I like eating soap, it makes my insides feel clean."

"How about you stop eating garbage instead?" Pearl sniffed.

"What kind of lame solution is that?"

"So Garnet," said Steven, smearing some peanut butter on his bread. "What do you want to talk about?"

"While Ruby was on her own, I believe she encountered our gem monster." Garnet paused, letting her serious tone sober up the happy mood a little. "It's a lot bigger now."

"Really?" Pearl asked, "Should we be worried?"

"… No. We can handle it, but we need to be cautious, it's capable of interfering with a gem's mind."

"Yeah, but we already new that." Steven protested, taking a bite out of his sandwich. "Remember? Blaire told us it had mind powers."

Garnet frowned.

"Oh yeah." Steven tapped his finger against his cheek, "Ruby ran out before we got to that part. Here let me fill you in…"

Garnet quietly absorbed the information as Steven told her. So this creature was something that made even the diamonds nervous? Odd. But she believed she understood. Ruby's recollection of the counter was frustratingly hazy towards the end, but from what she had seen… Garnet would never admit it, but something about the creature rubbed her the wrong way.

There was just… something, some tiny detail she was missing. She felt like the pieces of the puzzle were there: its power, its imprisonment, and its continued existence despite its threat to the diamond's authority, something that would warrant the diamond's scorn. But she couldn't quite connect the pieces.
Garnet gave a mental shrug; dismissing the issue—whatever it was, it didn't matter. They knew what it was capable of, they knew it was dangerous, the Crystal Gems would deal with it, just as they had dealt with countless other monsters for thousands of years.

Abruptly, Garnet stood up.

"Garnet?" Steven asked, staring at her in confusion.

"I'm going to locate the corrupt gem." She declared, strutting towards the temple doors. "I want the rest of you ready for action, I don't know how long this is going to take."

"Okay! See ya later!" Steven waved, before turning back to attempt to break up a tug-of-war between Amethyst and Pearl over a bottle of dish soap.

The door closed behind Garnet as she opened her eyes to the threads of fate. She would find this creature and she would put it to rest.

It would be that simple.

"Hey Peridot, remind me again why I'm here?" Lapis asked, glancing around at the surrounding tangle of plants and green. She didn't like this place very much, the trees and other plants were everywhere, clustered so thick she could barely see the sky overhead. Even less pleasant was the feeling that the trees were pushing in on her, though Lapis was pretty sure that was just her imagination… probably.

"Because Lazuli," Peridot replied, pushing on through the brush with a determined air. "I politely asked you to accompany me several times, this endeavor is too dangerous for me to attempt alone, and you care about me too much to let me get hurt."

"Well, two of those are true." Lapis muttered.

"Lapis, I believe you are being, to use an earthling colloquialism, a muddy stick."

"What… does that even mean?"

"I believe it means that your distinct lack of enthusiasm is making this entire situation less enjoyable for everyone else, by which I mean me."

"And a muddy stick means that… how?"

"I am… not sure." Peridot paused. "Well, it is a human expression. You can't expect a high level of logic in it."

Lapis said nothing, merely hiking up her dress and carefully maneuvering through a thick jumble of thorn bushes.

"But on a more logical note, how can you possibly not be interested in this endeavor? Don't you want to know the truth?" Peridot asked, forcibly using her giant wrench to bash a path through the bushes.
"Not really, the truth is probably going to be terrible anyway." Lapis caught a flicker of movement and glanced up. Several golden furry somethings were watching them pass and chitterling to each other. Lapis narrowed her eyes but said nothing, as long as they kept their distance, she didn't really care what they did.

"That is not a very productive attitude to take. Besides, just take a look at all this-" a bent branch whipped backward, slapping Peridot in the face, nearly knocking her over. "…Wonderful earth flora." Peridot grimaced. "Isn't nature supposed to be your thing now?"

"I guess," Lapis shrugged, lightly stepping her way over a thankfully clear patch of ground. "It's all very… green."

"Yes, it does portray an excellent choice of palette." Peridot nodded approvingly. "Now I believe… Lapis, are you growing taller?"

"Uh, no?" Lapis blinked, glancing back at Peridot. "I think you're just sinking."

Peridot looked down to see that Lapis was correct; she had steeped onto an empty patch of ground and now her feet were indeed sinking, the mud at her feet reaching up to just above her ankles before stopping.

"Ugh, why does everything on this planet have to be so… squishy?" Peridot complained, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

She tried to pull her foot out, only to find it stuck fast, the action only serving to making her other foot sink deeper into the ground. The mud around her turned soupy, sinking her up to her waist. Peridot considered the situation, nodding thoughtfully. She took a deep breath.

"LAPIS HELP! THE GROUND IS EATING ME!" she shrieked, flailing her arms against the mud and feeling herself sink even further.

Dark blue eyes stared down on her without expression.

"Lapis! Now is not the time for one of your moody acts of apathy. I am literally being swallowed by a patch of earth mud! Assist me!"

"Okay, okay, hold still." Lapis' wings materialized, and she lazily flapped her way over Peridot's head. She took ahold of one of the flailing limbs and heaved. Slowly, inch by inch, Peridot began to pull out of the mud until, with a final wet splash, she popped free.

Lapis flapped over to a clear, dry patch of ground and set her dirty burden down. Peridot shuddered, the mud had reached as high as her shoulders, caking her in a slimy coating of grime.

"This is revolting!" she wailed, flailing her hands wildly to sling off as much of the goop as she could.

"Would you like a hand with that?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay," A sudden wave of water swamped Peridot, drenching her to the gem and wiping away the mud.

"Wow… thanks." Peridot muttered through gritted teeth. Well, at least she was clean now, even if her hair was soaked and clinging to her face like a wet blanket.
"One sec, I'm not done." Lapis gestured, and the water flowed away, leaving Peridot dry as a bone. "There you go."

"Wow," Peridot blinked, running her fingers through her hair in a vain attempt to restore some of its former pointiness. "Thanks."

"No problem," Lapis crossed her arms and shifted uncomfortably, "so what now? Do we keep going, or are we heading back?"

"Hmmm, no. While I have clearly underestimated the threat level of this earth environment. All that means is that we need to revise our tactics." Peridot nodded to herself, raising a fist in determination. "Not to worry Lazuli, I have a plan!"

"Yippee." Lapis deadpanned.

"I need you to carry me."

"Of course you do."

"The density of obstacles in this jungle is far higher than expected," Peridot continued, completely oblivious to Lapis' tone. "We could travel on foot for days, and make absolutely no progress. I have neither the time, nor the inclination to do that. But if you fly us above the trees we'll be able to find our destination in no time."

"And where was that again? I don't think you actually explained."

"Did I not? My apologies, in my effort to decipher the data we retrieved from the null chamber, I have recovered the coordinate of a final gem facility. Based upon my data, I believe that this one should contain information on what all this ridiculous secrecy is about."

"So… another old gem facility?" Lapis sighed, looking around. She wondered what was going to try to kill them this time. There were a lot of trees around; it'd be pretty terrible if they came alive and attacked.

"We will be fine," Peridot assured her.

"You say that, but I'm pretty sure the sapphire is the one with future vision, not you."

"Oh please," Peridot rolled her eyes. "As long as we display a certain level of caution, we will be fine. Now are you gonna carry me or what?"

"… I guess?" Lapis shrugged, she didn't really have anything better to do. Besides, this place was absolutely soaking with water, if something decided to attack them, she'd have plenty of ammunition to drown it.

"Excellent!" Peridot held her arms out and Lapis wrapped her hand around them. Slowly, she lifted them off the ground, taking her time to carefully weave through the ceiling of branches.

"Which way?"

Peridot pulled a device out of her backpack and began pointing it around. "That way," she declared after a few moments.

"Okay." Lapis slowly began to flap her way through the hazy fog rising from the trees. It was odd, on the forest floor she had been surrounded by a wall of noise; thousands of unseen creatures
chirping, growling, buzzing, and rustling through the brush. But up here, it was all muted.

"So tell me, Lapis," Peridot said, naturally taking it upon herself to break the silence. "I have told you of some of my theories-

"You've mentioned them, yes," more like Peridot had stated them to empty space as loudly as she could and Lapis had ignored them. Unless directly addressed, she tended to tune out Peridot's ramblings. It was the only way she'd ever have time to do anything else.

"Yes well… what do you think is the reason behind the diamonds imprisoned this PF-01-2 creature, rather than just destroying it?"

"I wouldn't know." Lapis shrugged, the motion bobbing Peridot up and down through the air. "Maybe they just hated it."

"Doubtful," Peridot snorted, dismissing the idea. "The diamonds prize logic above all else. They wouldn't waste resources on something as petty as a grudge."

"If you say so, maybe they just couldn't destroy it."

"Equally unlikely. They had it at their mercy for thousands of years, more than enough time to destroy anything they wished. I believe they were using it as a test subject."

"Is that right?"

"Absolutely, I have never heard of any gem possessing the ability to influence the minds of others, perhaps the diamonds wished to replicate the feat."

"Sounds like something they'd be interested in." Lapis replied, banking left as a flock of brightly colored birds flew by.

"That is why I wish to go to this facility, I have been led to believe that it will hold the data I'm seeking."

"So what are you expecting?"

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if this location had been used to create and test experiments to replicate PF-01-2's empathetic powers."

Lapis brought them both to a sudden stop in midair.

"Peridot." Lapis' voice was calm, sending an unusual shiver down Peridot's back. "You had better not be telling me that you're leading us into the lair of a bunch of mind-controlling gem experiments."

"No! No!" Peridot backpedaled, suddenly very much aware of how high above the ground she was, held up only by Lapis' grip. "That was just a hypothesis, no guarantee that it's accurate, no sir!"

Lapis just stared down at Peridot silently.

"Please don't drop me." Peridot made her eyes as wide an innocent as she possibly could.

"… I wouldn't do that."

The device in Peridot's hand beeped, drawing the technician's attention. "Ah, Lapis, I do believe we are close. Set us down over there." She gestured toward a mountain of bare rock that was rising up
out of the fog.

Lapis flew lower and unceremoniously dropped Peridot on a patch of vine-covered stone before landing beside her. Peridot grumbled as she got to her feet, examining her surroundings. It certainly looked promising; she could just make out several statues, their features worn down to nothing and covered in clinging vines, looming out of the fog like slumbering golems.

"Oh good." Lapis deadpanned, "I was afraid we were going to end up somewhere creepy."

"What do you mean?" Peridot furrowed her brow, "I find this place quite ominous."

"… Sarcasm, Peridot, sarcasm."

"Oh, yes… well." Peridot coughed, "Let's get a move on." She stepped across the cracked tiles with purpose, following the directions of her device through the ruined pathways and broken monuments.

As they moved, the noise of the jungle began to fade away behind them, blanketing the pair in an eerie quiet; broken only by the sound of their footsteps and the occasional clatter of falling stone.

To her surprise, Peridot was finding the atmosphere oddly soothing. The silence didn't sound like that of something waiting to pounce, but more of one that simply had nothing to say.

Their journey was brought to an abrupt halt as they came upon to a rock wall covered in a thick curtain of vines.

"Do you need me to carry you over this?" Lapis asked, craning her neck back in an attempt to find the top of the wall hiding in the mist.

"No, one moment." Peridot pushed her hands through the layer of plants and placed them flat on the wall; it felt smooth.

Unnaturally smooth.

"Lapis, can you clear away these vines?"

"Sure." Lapis raised her hands and the fog began to roil, coalescing into a sheet of water that plastered itself in a wide circle against the wall. Lapis clenched her hands and the water froze solid with a hollow crackling. She jerked her fists backward and the ice followed suit, ripping itself off the wall leaving a bare patch of stone.

"That good enough?"

"It was excellent, thank you." Peridot examined the wall once more—yes, just as she suspected. There was a smooth square of stone surrounded by rougher rock, more importantly; it had a large golden diamond embossed on it.

"This is the place!"

"Yippee. Do you need me to smash through?"

"Hardly" Peridot snorted, rubbing her hands together. "I am an authorized engineer of the yellow court. I should be able to open it easily." She placed her hand flat against the diamond and pushed.

Nothing happened.
"Oh come on! For once would you just—"

The diamond lit up with a blazing light, and a straight clack split it down the middle. The doors opened inward and Peridot tumbled forward, her arms pin wheeling. She shut her eyes, waiting for the impact.

It didn't come.

Peridot cracked her eyes open and glanced back, Lapis had grabbed onto her backpack and was keeping her from falling.

"Thanks." Peridot beamed.

"Yeah." Lapis looked up from her and stared down into the darkened halls. "You sure going in here is a good idea?"

"Not in the slightest." Peridot straightened herself and lit up her gem, shining the light down the corridor. "I do, however, think we'll be fine."

"If you say so." Peridot glanced back, locking eyes with Lapis and sharing a nod.

As one, they both stepped into the corridor.

It flew.

As far and as fast as it could, it rushed across the sky.

Its wings crackled, filling the air with the harsh scent of ozone, and it shot itself through the sky until it could fly no more. It alighted upon a mountain, a towering peak of jagged rock from which it could spy any that might dare approach it.

And it raged.

_They were here!_

Images rushed through its mind: gleaming blades, clinking chains, and eyes as cold as empty space.

_They were here!_

It was free and yet _still_ they plagued it. _Still_ they hunted it. It clenched its jaws, probing the empty gaps with its tongue and hissing. It felt its rage peak, and energy flowed through its body; the gaps closed, its body writhed, and the pain went away.

It seethed; coiling around it as more images flashed through its head so fast it could barely register them. But it _felt_ them: the hope, the despair, the highest euphoria, and the price of nothing it was made to pay.

And rising above them all, the boiling wrath!

_They were here!_
The shape of diamonds, proud upon their chests and pointed like spears. A chilling promise to drag it, flailing and screaming back into the hideous void.

It would not allow it! It would fight, it would rage, it would carve its vengeance upon their gems before it ever went back to there!

It turned its head, its eyes stopping upon the horizon. It could see something there, a gathering of life and towering structure of stone. The scurrying movements of countless people.

*They were here!*

It would not wait, it would not hide. It would descend upon those that dared to threaten it and send them to the quiet oblivion.

It roared and the sky filled with thunder.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, that wraps up this chapter, thanks for reading and please leave a review.
Chapter Summary

The gems move into the city. And Peridot and Lapis continue their adventure. Everyone has a good time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Deep in the stream of time and potential, Garnet wandered.

She had tried many times to describe the experience to others. They had never understood, not even Rose. Try as they might, they could never truly understand what it was like to wade amongst the waters of all-that-might-be.

Or how dangerous it was.

She saw Rose and Steven, sitting together and laughing as Greg strummed his guitar between them.

She saw herself, sitting among her fellow Crystal Gems: Bismuth, Crazy Lace, Snowflake, all of them, whole and uncorrupted.

She saw Steven, fully-grown and shining with a wondrous radiance, touching the bubbled gems one-by-one; bringing back even those shattered beyond repair in a cascade of beautiful light.

'It's not real.'

'It know.'

Garnet forced herself to look away.

It was so frighteningly easy to lose herself amidst the dreams of better worlds. It had happened before; just after the war; when the great light had flashed and everyone she knew had twisted, whatever Homeworld had done to them all…

It had been so simple to just close her eyes and drift away, pretend it wasn't real and everything was fine. To this day, Garnet wasn't completely sure if Rose had known just how lost Garnet had been when she had dragged the fusion out of the depths of the temple. If Rose hadn't… Garnet wasn't sure if she would have ever come out.

Garnet shook her head, now was not the time to gaze into the past, her focus needed to be on the future.

She zeroed in on Ruby's memories, fuzzy and broken though they were, Garnet was still able to extract an image of the corrupt gem, a vicious portrait of jagged claws and burning eyes. She focused on that image and searched the stream of time for it.

She could see them; echoes of so many potential realities.
She saw claws, ripping and slashing through the air, a scream, broken stone falling to the ground like a rain of pink tears.

She saw Jasper, leading an army of corrupt monsters against the Crystal Gems, roaring in triumph as they were crushed beneath her.

Garnet brushed the images aside; those visions were fuzzy and indistinct—merely unlikely futures that would never come to pass.

She would not allow them to.

Garnet turned her sight to other images, sharper than the others. These were what she was truly after: potential and immediate futures. All she had to do was find the clearest one, see the most likely action and then she would know what needed to be done.

She saw the creature, perched motionless atop a mountain. A subtle shift rippled through the vision and the saurian beast disappeared, only to be replaced by a bird of shining gold with lightning in its eyes… No.

She saw herself, fighting for her life as violet whips and ivory spears slashed at her from every angle… No.

She saw the ocean roiling as the water surged into the sky and thunder roared… No.

She saw a city; lightning dancing between the skyscrapers as the people dotted the ground like ants, gazing upwards in silent horror… wait… this was it!

Garnet's third eye closed and she saw no more, even as the afterimages echoed through her mind.

She shot to her feet, her chest full of fluttery wings of panic. That image had been more than just clear; it had been like looking through a window, seeing the event unfold.

That had not been a vision of something that might possibly be about to happen, it had been one of something happening **right now!**

She marched towards the entrance, forcefully pushing down her panic; panicking would accomplish nothing. What was needed now was action.

"Gems, to me!" She shouted, throwing open the door and stepping onto the warp.

Her entrance started the others, Pearl dropped the dishes she had been cleaning, causing them to shatter and cover the floor in jagged shards of porcelain. Amethyst tumbled off the countertop where she had been sitting, landing on top of Lion; who barely twitched as Amethyst fell into his mane and out of sight. Steven immediately ran over to help, only to be hoisted off his feet by Pearl as he passed her.

"Careful Steven! Don't step on any broken plates!" Pearl admonished, before glancing up. "Garnet? What seems to be the problem? Did you find the creature?"

"Yeah, Where's the fire?" Amethyst asked, her head popping out of Lion's mane.

"Empire City."

"That dump?" Amethyst echoed, settling herself down in Lion's mane. "Isn't it, like, always on fire?"
Garnet shook her head, "The creature, it's attacking the city. People are in danger!" and just like that, everyone was all business. Amethyst pulled herself out of Lion and Pearl joined Garnet on the warp pad immediately, setting Steven down beside her.

"Is everyone prepared?" Garnet asked; getting several nods, she triggered the warp and everything disappeared.

They materialized onto a grassy hill overlooking a main highway that led off into the distance. Empire city itself was nothing more a bunch of square silhouettes on the horizon.

"Well," Pearl declared. "The city doesn't appear to be on fire. That's good news at least. What's the plan Garnet?" She looked to the fusion in askance.

"We go in, we find the creature, and we stop it." Garnet replied, they didn't have time for anything fancier. Every moment they delayed was another moment that this creature had to rampage unchecked.

"So you're saying we have no plan?" Pearl clarified, sounding completely dissatisfied by that fact.

"Nah, that's totes a plan." Amethyst interjected, grinning. "We're gonna go and kick some monster butt, like we always do." The quartz cracked her knuckles, "I've been itching to take another whack at this thing, got me some redeemin' to do."

"Let's move," Garnet sprinted onto the empty road and making a beeline for the city. They needed to hurry, a corrupt gem like this one could do a great deal of damage if left unchecked, any attempt by the humans to drive it off would likely only serve to anger it.

"Garnet," Pearl's voice cut into her thoughts as the slender gem caught up and kept pace with the fusion. "Are there any other details you can provide before we get arrive?"

"Yeah, is the gem hurting people?" Steven's voice was worried; Garnet glanced over and saw that he was clinging to the mane of a purple horse. Amethyst nodded to her.

"It isn't," Garnet answered. "Not yet," the fact that it was only a matter of time went unspoken. If the monster started tearing buildings apart then people would definitely start getting hurt.

That could not be allowed to happen.

"So how should we approach this Garnet?" Pearl asked again, "I truly don't think we should approach this without a plan. This creature has caused us enough trouble without us getting careless."

"Let's just corner the thing and beat it up." Amethyst neighed.

"That... might be tricky." Garnet replied.

"Why?" Steven asked.

"It can fly."

"What?" Pearl blinked, "When did that happen?"

"I did say it had grown stronger."

"That seems like a detail we you really should have mentioned sooner." Pearl huffed. "Is there anything else we should know?" Garnet cast her thoughts back to her visions, more specifically, the
ones of whips and spears.

"Keep focused, and don't let it in to your heads."

"Okay… do you have anything a little more helpful?" Pearl replied.

"Do you think my bubble might be able to help?" Steven asked, bouncing up and down to the rhythm of Amethyst's galloping.

"I- Hmmm…" Pearl rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Actually yes, I have never known any nonphysical force to penetrate your mother's bubble. It is not unlikely it would be able to keep any kind of mental influence at bay."

"Its power can be resisted," said Garnet. "I've seen it. But Steven, if we start to succumb, we'll be depending on you to save us."

"I…" Steven swallowed hard. "You can count on me!"

"Hey guys? Not to interrupt all our planning powwow, but is anyone else getting a little bit creeped out?" Amethyst's question made Garnet blink. She looked to see that they had made been making good time, they had already entered the city outskirts, only a few more minutes and they'd be in the city proper.

"Uh… Amethyst?" Steven asked. "I don't see anything."

"Well yeah, Stee-man, you wouldn't. We've never brought you to a city when there's a big monster running around."

"So, uh, what am I missing?"

"Where are all the people?"

Garnet blinked, glancing around in puzzlement. She slowed herself down to a stop, holding up a hand to signal her companions to do the same.

Amethyst was right. Where were all the people? They'd been running down a major highway for miles, and they had yet to see a single car or person traveling in either direction.

That… couldn't be right.

Cities were supposed to be full of people, that was kind of their whole purpose; coming and going in a constant stream of travel for reasons only they themselves knew, and yet, there was nobody to be seen.

Garnet's eyes narrowed, she'd seen what happened when a corrupt gem rampaged through a human city; it wasn't pretty. Humans tended to work themselves up into a panic, flooding the streets with a sea of people, running, shouting, screaming, and climbing over each other in a desperate attempt to get away from the danger. It had always been a bit of a chore for the crystal gems to even get through the crowd and take care of the threat.

But in her vision… she'd seen the monster attacking the city. It hadn't been wrong, she knew they would find it somewhere amongst the towering buildings. It was hardly difficult to spot, there was no way the humans wouldn't notice it.

And yet, Garnet couldn't see or hear anything. She glanced up into the sky, while it was full of
smog, it wasn't more than the usual amount found above a human city, and certainly no towering pillar of black smoke that would signal burning buildings. In fact, everything was quiet… wait.

Cities were lots of things, being quiet wasn't one of them.

What was going on?

"-rnet? Garnet!" Pearl's voice cut through her musings like a screechy knife.

"What?"

"What do you think we should do?"

Good question, but a simple one. Retreat wasn't an option, not when people were in danger. Standing their ground and hemming and hawing about what was going on would accomplish nothing. The only path of action worth following was to move forward.

"We keep going, but carefully. Steven, I want you to summon a bubble around us. We'll keep moving forward in it."

"Good idea," Pearl agreed. "That way nothing will be able to get the jump on us."

"One bubble, coming right up!" Steven hopped off Amethyst's back as she shifted back to her normal form. A pink glow lit up Steven's stomach and the world turned pink.

"Nice one Steven," Amethyst applauded, "nice and roomy." It really was; Garnet had more than enough room to stand up straight.

Without another word, they set off, pushing the bubble down the street and into the city. It was tricky at first, the curved footing beneath them made it awkward to stand and move. But perhaps it was a good thing; focusing on not tripping served as an excellent distraction from how eerily empty the surrounding streets were, and the darker implications of that fact. Until they rolled around a corner onto one of the main streets.

"Oh man." Amethyst's voice was quiet.

They'd found the people.

The citizens of Empire City were standing all around them; silent as statues and just as still, except for their eyes. Garnet felt as though something dry and scratchy was trying to climb up her throat as she watched hundreds of human eyes rolling in their sockets, staring in every direction but seeing nothing. Their expressions were twisted visages of slack-jawed bafflement, as though the person they trusted most in the world had just told them that everything they knew was a lie.

"What's wrong with them?" Steven's voice was trembling, and Garnet could see the pink bubble around them begin to tremble as well.

"Steven, focus." Garnet's hand clamped onto the boys shoulder and she gave it a comforting squeeze.

Steven flinched in her grip and he swallowed, the sound unnaturally loud within their shelter. He took a deep breath, and the bubble stabilized.

"What's wrong with them?" he asked again, his voice quiet.

"Well," Pearl's answered, her voice just as quiet. "Blaire told us that the Diamond's were afraid that
the monster could influence minds on a massive scale... It would appear their concerns were justified."

"Can... can we help them?" Steven looked up at her, his eyes brimming with a fear that Garnet had never wanted those eyes to ever have to hold.

She was going to make sure someone paid dearly for that.

"If we can take down the monster, then I believe the effects should dissipate." If Garnet's reply sounded more like a wishful thinking than a declaration of fact, nobody felt the need to point it out.

"This might actually be a good thing," Garnet said. Feeling everyone's disbelieving gaze on her, she shrugged. "If it's controlling their minds, then I doubt it's going to try to physically hurt them. It'll also keep people from running around and hurting themselves in a panic. Perhaps, if we defeat it quickly, they'll all just think this was a bad dream.

"Gee, how convenient," Amethyst snorted, her eyes locked on a little girl in a pink coat standing practically within arm's reach of the bubble.

"I didn't say I liked it." Garnet shrugged, pointedly ignoring two women clutching each other as their eyes writhed in their heads.

"Why is it doing this?" Pearl asked, keeping her eyes locked on the ground.

"It doesn't matter why." Garnet replied, clenching her fists and forming her gauntlets. "What matters is how we are going to stop it."

"And how are we going to do that?" Pearl's voice took on a slight hint of panic. "Assuming the only thing keeping us rational and preventing us from up exactly like these people is Steven's bubble, then how are we even supposed to find the monster? We can't just roll this bubble down the street! We'd crush people!"

Which was a very good point. They couldn't just weave the bubble between every single person; they'd never get anything done. Garnet was fairly certain that stepping out of the bubble wouldn't immediately result in them turning into these mindless statues. But she would rather not abandon the protection until they actually found the creature. The quicker they took it down, the less likely any of them were to be paralyzed.

They needed to approach this from another angle, one that didn't have all these buildings blocking their view.

"Steven," the boy blinked, looking up at her with nervous eyes.

"Y-yeah."

"How good is your control over your floating?"

"Um... pretty good. It's, uh, actually one of my easier powers to control."

"When you jump, could you lift the bubble with you?"

"Probably."

"Good. I want you to lift us up onto one of these buildings. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, just give me a second." Steven took a deep breath, bent down into a crouch and jumped.
Their surroundings disappeared in a blur of grey as they shot into the air. The bubble came to a sudden stop high above the ground; Pearl and Amethyst let out yelps as the abrupt deceleration slammed them into the top of the bubble then dropped them back to the bottom. Garnet experienced the same, but she ignored it, her hair doing an excellent job at cushioning the blow and allowing her to land on her feet.

"Sorry guys." Steven winced, looking down in worry at the two gems lying beneath him. The boy himself was suspended in the middle of the bubble.

"s'all good." Amethyst groaned, giving him a thumbs up.

"Is this high enough Garnet?"

"Yes, Steven, thank you." Garnet looked downwards, Steven had overshot the roof a little, but they were slowly drifting towards it. Garnet took a moment to look around; from the higher vantage point she could clearly see the nearby network of streets, and the countless other unmoving figures filling them.

However, there was no sign of the monster, but it had to be nearby, she had seen it.

Garnet closed her eyes for a moment; she didn't want to delve too deeply into the river of future vision. But if she was quick and knew what to look for, she should be able to get a quick glimpse of where to go. While the creature could be hiding anywhere in the city, there would only be one place it actually was. Now that she knew what it was doing and the general area, it shouldn't take long to…

There.

Garnet opened her eyes. While she had been searching, they'd landed on the rooftop. The others were looking at her in askance.

"I know where to go." Garnet pointed to the left. "It's In the middle of a plaza three blocks in that direction."

"I think I can get us there." Steven replied.

"Alright. Get ready gems, this is it." Amethyst and Pearl nodded resolutely, their weapons materializing and bracing themselves against the bubble. She gave Steven a nod, and he jumped, arcing them through the air. Steven slowed them down as they began to descend.

And they saw it.

The monster's back was to them; its attention completely invested in chewing its way through an electrical power box, sending flickers of electricity surging through it. It was bigger than Ruby's fractured memory suggested, easily dwarfing the cars around it. Garnet couldn't help but stare: the claws, the spikey pink mane, the jagged black streaks running across its yellow limbs—there was just… something about how it looked that bothered Garnet, more than any gem monster she'd ever met, she just couldn't put her finger on what.

She put the thought out of her head—they had more important concerns, such as the fact that the plaza they were about to land in was filled with more of the frozen people. Garnet grit her teeth as she considered them, taking down this monster was going to be hard enough without having to worry about humans getting caught in the crossfire.

The bubble set down on the ground with the slightest clink.
The monster stilled.

It's head turned and a single eye locked onto them. Slowly, deliberately, it placed its forelimb on the ground and turned itself to face them, its mane standing up on end. As it stared at them, Garnet stared right back, its eyes... they were different from the corrupt gems she was used to—these eyes were focused and burned with a savage light of understanding.

It knew exactly why they were here.

The monster's maw opened, and a single bolt of lightning shot forth, racing through the air towards them. It struck against the pink barrier and dissipated harmlessly into the air.

"Is that all ya got?" Amethyst laughed.

The creature cocked its head; fiercely intelligent eyes narrowed and began to spark with energy.

The eyes of the frozen humans around them stopped rolling in their heads, instead staring at the gems in with an angry single-mindedness.

As one, the humans stepped forward to the sound of crackling lightning.

"Peridot, if we die here, I'm going to kill you," Lapis muttered, eyeing the wide chamber they'd stepped into.

"First of all, that statement was illogical; you can't kill me if we are already dead." Peridot scoffed. "Second of all, nothing has tried to kill us yet. And thirdly, you didn't have to come with me." In truth, Peridot had been surprised at how easily Lapis had agreed to accompany her; she'd hardly had to beg at all! Not that Peridot would have lowered herself to such a level, of course! It was merely that Lapis' extreme offensive capability would be an asset that Peridot would be a fool to forgo.

Peridot glanced around the chamber. Until now, the pair had been traveling through an immaculately pristine tunnel; smooth walls, tiled floors, and no signs of damage at all! Truly a testament to gem engineering. But it had been too good to last, and now they had stepped into an open chamber were things had gotten a little bit... messier.

The chamber was filled with a faint green glow, originating from what appeared to be some kind of earthly plant. The organisms in question were enormous; pale white trunks towered over the gems and were topped with some sort of giant, umbrella-shaped caps that seemed to be releasing a constant stream of fine dust into the air.

"It's squishy." Lapis commented, poking her finger into one of the plant's stalks.

"Lapis what are you doing!" Peridot shrieked, "don't touch the weird earth plants! We don't know if they are dangerous or not! What if these things are the Homeworld experiments?"

"I doubt it, they really don't look like something Homeworld would make. They're too... squishy to be some kind of Homeworld super weapon." Lapis poked it again, her finger sinking in almost all
"That just means that they're actually some kind earth thing, which isn't any better!" Peridot seethed. Everything on earth had always been out to get her; the fact that she was on the earth's side now had not seemed to change this fact—talk about ingratitude! "Stop trying to goad something into attacking us."

"Something's going to do it eventually," Lapis shrugged. "Why not get on with it?"

"Lapis, that is not a healthy attitude and as the leader of this expedition, I'm ordering you not to poke anything that might try to eat us."

Lapis glanced back her with one of the most unimpressed looks Peridot had ever seen.

"I am not joking." Peridot put her hands on her hips and stared right back.

"As you command, oh great leader." Lapis shrugged, stepping away from the plant. Peridot blinked at the sudden display of obedience. Perhaps Lapis simply didn't think some earth plant worth fighting over?

"Thank you." Peridot muttered, mollified. She cast her eyes around the cavern again. Despite her distressing lack of self-preservation instinct, Lapis did have a point. The giant plants didn't look like something Homeworld would have engineered. Peridot reached into her carrying-capacity optimizer and pulled out her energy detector. She waved the device in front of the plant things… hmm, odd, the organisms were, in fact, fused with gem energy. Perhaps these were merely ordinary earth organisms that had assimilated gem technology to produce some sort of hybrid abomination.

Yes, that theory stood up to scrutiny rather nicely, if Peridot said so herself. Why, that would make them practically a plant version of Steven: maddeningly disconcerting, but ultimately harmless.

But if that was the case, then these things were of no consequence, merely an interesting side note. Peridot stepped past the plant and moved deeper into the cavern. As she heard Lapis falling into step behind her, Peridot slid the detector back into its pocket and pulled out another device. Pressing a well-worn button, she began to speak.

"Leader's log: Entry 1-2; having determined that the glowing plants are of no interest to my mission, I have decided to forge deeper into the Gem facility."

"You have got to be kidding me." Lapis groaned. "Are you seriously doing that now?"

"Proper records are important, Lazuli." Peridot sent a pitying look back towards her companion; Lapis did not look particularly impressed. "I'm quite serious, Lapis. I do not wish to finish this mission and find out I have forgotten any important detail. Therefore, It is imperative that I catalogue our thoughts and experiences. It is not like either of us possess the ability to holographically display our memories." Such abilities only tended to be programmed into messenger gems, such as high-quality Pearls, and even then; such gems were rarely produced anymore, having been rendered obsolete by newer gem technology.

A pity really, there were many times when Peridot could have used such a skill; the ability to perfectly visualize past designs and engineering would have saved her countless hours of slogging through endless data files trying to find a single piece of information.

A faint mutter drew Peridot out of her musing and she glanced back at Lapis once more. The blue gem had crossed her arms and was looking off to the side.
"What was that, Lazuli?" Peridot asked, raising a brow.

"I can do that."

"Do what?"

"Display my memories."

"Wait, you can?" Peridot blinked.

"Yes, I have…experience… showing others my memories." Lapis refused to meet Peridot's eyes. Peridot's brow furrowed, it had come to her attention that she was not the best at reading between the lines of what others were saying—why would she be? Machines didn't do subtext or hidden meanings—but nonetheless, she got the feeling that there was a story here. Peridot filed that little tidbit away for future examination and focused on the immediate implications.

"I see…" Peridot muttered. She had not been aware of Lapis ability, although now that she thought about it, she should not have been surprised. Lapis was, to use an earth colloquialism, an old-school gem. Such gems tended to have far more energy and power than their modern day equivalents. Nowadays, Homeworld didn't have the resources to spare on non-quartz gems. "Would you be willing to use that ability for me once we are done here?"

"Only if you promise not to use the recorder."

"Deal."

"Excellent. Captain's log: I have made a deal with Lapis and will no longer need to make further recor- Hey wait! Lapis, give it back! I was just joking!"

Lapis stared down at her, holding the tape recorder just out of reach.

"Please don't crush it, that's my only one. I promise I won't do it again." Peridot made an effort to make her eyes big and watery—like she'd seen Steven do when he wanted something—Lapis' expression told her that she was not able to perfectly replicate Steven's efforts.

Peridot attempt to add a little sniffler to her Baby Canine technique, Lapis rolled her eyes and dropped the recorder into Peridot's outstretched hand. Peridot quickly slid it into the backpack before Lapis had the chance to change her mind.

"Now that that's all squared away," Said Peridot. "Shall we get back to the matter of hand?"

"Yeah, sure." Lapis hiked up her dress and stepped over some smaller versions of the weird plants "What are we doing now?"

"Well, building off the assumption that these aren't Homeworld creations, I believe they are likely an accident. Some earth organism that grew near a gem power source and incorporated some of that energy into its form. But based on that theory, I have already concluded that they aren't important, what is important is that their presence tells us that we are close to a gem power source. Logic tells us that where there is a power source, there is a device that needs to be powered, which would also be nearby."

"So… we're getting close."

"Yes, that's what I said."
Lapis shot her a look,

"Oh whatever, you understood my meaning, so I don't see the problem," Peridot huffed. "Anyway, I wouldn't be surprised if some of the answers we are looking for are hidden in this room. Therefore, let us search."

Lapis stared at her for a moment, before shrugging. "What exactly are we supposed to be looking for?"

"A secret door, computer terminals, plans for world domination." Peridot waved her hand dismissively. "You know, anything that raises a red flag. Don't go too far, and give a holler if you find something."

"Sure, let's split up. That's not a bad idea at all." She drawled, but still began moving off through the plant stalks.

Peridot busied herself with poking her energy detector through the various cracks and crevices running through the floor, while her mind ran through various theories on what this place was for. It was strange, up until this chamber the facility had been pristine, undamaged by the wear and tear of the earth's natural processes. So why was this chamber full of all this weird growth? What had such a wide space even been used for? This place had been a secret laboratory; you'd think it would have been kept rather compact. The last two facilities she'd visited certainly had been.

What's more, it was clear this room wasn't even the main section where lab work had been done. Otherwise, where was all the machinery? There was nothing here save for the plants and rocks. If the area had been used for research, there would have to be at least some kind of equipment lying around.

As she ran her device over one of the spongy trunks, it let out a high-pitched series of clicks. Ah, there seemed to be a concentrated core of gem energy buried within the plant.

Peridot bit her lip in consideration. On the one hand, she had told Lapis that there was to be no poking at the unknown organisms. On the other hand, sitting around not touching anything wouldn't help either.

She supposed, if it was in the spirit of investigation, a little disturbance couldn't hurt.

She pulled a leverage optimizer out of the lettuce pouch and started scraping away a layer of the trunk. It came away easily, falling off in great big gooey chunks until her tool tapped against something hard. Peridot wiped away a few more globs of plant matter and stared into the hole she had made.

"Lapis! Get back here!" She yelled. "I found something!" Peridot ignored the grumbling as her companion came back to join her.

"What is it?"

"Just look." Peridot pointed to the hole she had dug. Lapis thankfully ignored the potential hypocrisy of the situation and crouched down to examine what she had found.

"Peridot." Lapis' voice was quiet. "Why is there a gem in one of these things?"

"I have no idea." Peridot shifted uncomfortably. "Lapis, that gem is still alive." It wouldn't have produced nearly as high a reading if had been broken into shards or otherwise rendered inert.
"I'm letting it out." Lapis reached towards the hole.

"Whoa, wait a second, Lazuli!" Peridot yelped, grabbing the blue gem's arm. "I'm not so certain that's a good idea. We don't know what will happen-"

"Peridot." Lapis looked Peridot in the eye. The green gem was taken aback by the look on her companion's face. Lapis looked almost… vulnerable. Which was, of course, absurd; Lapis had always been a fortress of ice and disdain. The only moods Peridot had ever really seen from her were either anger, disdain, or, provided Steven was around, happiness. Peridot had never seen Lapis looking so… sad.

The look didn't suit her.

"Y-yeah?"

"I'm letting it out." Lapis' voice brooked no room for argument.

Of course, that wasn't enough to stop Peridot from protesting, "But what if it's corrupted Lazuli?" a very real possibility, besides the Crystal Gems and Lapis, every single gem from earth was. "It might attack us."

"So what if it does? I'll just poof it and you can bubble it. If there's a chance it might still be conscious. I'm not leaving it trapped here."

"I, um… okay." Peridot finished lamely, taking her hand off Lapis' arm. It's not like she could have actually stop Lapis from doing whatever she wanted. Peridot just hoped this wouldn't end terribly.

Lapis pushed her fingers into the trunk and wrapped them around the stone. She pulled and with a soft pop, the gem came out.

"What kind of gem is it?" Peridot asked.

"It's green," Lapis commented. "An emerald?"

"Oh please," Peridot rolled her eyes, "not all emerald's are green. Give it here" she made a grabbing motion and Lapis passed it over and Peridot held it up to her visor, examining it with the eye of a licensed kindergartener. "No streak, can't be an emerald." She muttered, turning it this way and that. "Has distinct cleavage, can't be a tourmaline." Peridot narrowed her eyes; she'd seen this kind of gem before, where…Oh.

Now she remembered.

"It's an olivine." She swallowed, suddenly very much less okay than she had already been with the situation.

"You okay?" Lapis asked, raising a brow.

"What? Oh. Yeah, of course I am!" The fact that olivines were just low quality peridots had nothing to do with anything. "I'm certainly not holding something that's basically me- GAH!"

Peridot dropped the gem as it began to shine with a pale green light.

"It's reforming!" Peridot screamed, promptly positioning herself behind Lapis as the both backed up.

"Calm down," Lapis replied, water beginning to trickle out of her gem and wrap around her arms.
The gem began to float and a form grew from it, shifting through several shapes stopping on a bipedal one. It seemed to hesitate for a moment, the edges of the form rippling before settling down and filling out with color.

The gem finished reforming and collapsed like a sack of flour. Peridot examined it, or rather her, closely; two legs, two arms, a normal-shaped body. Interesting, there didn't see to be any of the grotesque deformations she'd come to expect in the gems on earth.

A groaning, followed by sluggish movement, signified the gem's return to consciousness. She pushed herself, ever so slowly, up onto her hands and knees. She raised her head and locked eyes with Peridot.

For a moment everything paused.

"AHHHHHHH!" the gem screamed, throwing herself away from them and scrambling backwards. Her back touched against one of the plant stalks and she stopped, staring back at them with wild eyes.

Peridot didn't notice the look in the gem's eyes. She didn't notice how panicked the gem looked, or the stammered warnings to stay away. No, Peridot's eyes were locked onto something much more interesting.

The olivine's chest, more specifically, the large white star stamped across her clothing.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Everyone, welcome back (I hope), I've finally found the time to update, only took me about forty days and forty nights. but that's not the point.

I think I've gotten a good handle on the plot now, not to worry.

I'm definitely not still making up things as I go or introducing more a characters than I can handle.

That last sentence was pretty much a lie. Guess who didn't learn their lesson about properly planning things out? (Hint: It's me)

But enough about what just happened, let's talk about the start of the chapter.

Future vision… ugh. It's about time I addressed this doozy of a plot device. Prepare yourselves for that gratuitous head-canon I mentioned:

It's stated that Garnet can see multiple possible futures, that's really pretty vague. Especially when you take into account the fact that the laws of probability state that just about anything is possible.

I believe that she can sort through all the potential futures into only the most likely ones—otherwise the power would be effectively useless— however, I think this takes time and concentration for her to do, meaning she can't use it on the fly or in a fight. If she could then she would never have been caught off guard by Jasper's zappity-zap-
zap stick way back at the end of season one.

That's why Garnet didn't know exactly what was going on in this chapter, she saw the creature (I really need to get around to giving it a name) attacking people and realized it was happening right there and then. The Crystal Gem's job is to protect people, so Garnet didn't have time search through all the nitty-gritty details, she had people to save.

Also, I decided when she's sifting through all the potential futures she can see potential realities as well, like Rose and Steven sitting together, which should be impossible as far as we know. This doesn't serve any real purpose plot-wise, I just did it for funsies and artseyness. So yeah.

Onto Peridot and Lapis's bit, you know, I bet I could generate so much more interest in this story if I added a Lapidot tag. People do really go gaga for ships... not that I don't appreciate a nice quality ship. But I'm not trying to write a romance fic, (With the exception of Garnet—who is literally the walking embodiment of a romantic relationship). But I will resist the temptation to sell out to cheap romance. You know, writer's integrity and all that waffle.

FriendSHIP is the BEST ship.

But yeah, Lapis and Peridot are sharing an adventure in a dangerous attempt by yours truly to juggle multiple plotlines at once.
Call to Arms

Chapter Summary

The gems face an uphill battle. Lapis and Peridot engage in the power of friendship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steven shoved the bubble to one side, knocking people down like bowling pins.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean too!" he cried, even as the people got up and charged at him once more, banging their fists against the bubble in a violent staccato that made his ears ring.

This was awful.

Everywhere he looked there were people, sparks shooting out of their eyes as they snarled surged towards him, climbing over one another in their attempt to reach him. His only refuge was the fact that as enraged as they were, they couldn't pierce the bubble. He was grateful for that, even if it didn't help him get away.

He heard a roar and, through the horde of bodies, caught a glimpse of Pearl leaping into the air as the monster's tail swept underneath her.

When the people had started marching towards them after whatever the monster had done, Steven panicked. He'd jumped away, carrying the bubble and the gems with him. They landed on top of one of the nearby buildings, far above the crowd of people.

The gems hadn't just been angry, they were scared too, though they tried to hide it from him. Amethyst had gone still like a statue and Pearl started talking to him in that everything-will-be-fine voice. Garnet just stood quietly for a moment before leaping into action. She'd told Steven to let them out of the bubble and that he needed to stay inside; that they needed him out of danger so they could try to take down the monster as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Normally that sort of thing would make him feel like he was holding the gems back. But this time? As he watched a whole city full of people stare up at him with crackling eyes, he'd just been glad he could stay as far from the fight as he could.

So the gems had leapt back down, leaping into the fray and leaving him behind, trying to avoid the people as much as possible.

Then a man, dressed in overalls and carrying a squeegee, had slammed into the bubble from behind and knocked him off the roof. It didn't hurt him through the bubble, but it had dropped him right into the middle of the throng.

And now the people of Empire City swarmed over him like ants on a glob of honey.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't fight these people; they weren't trying to hurt him!

A burly man in a construction hat slammed a sledgehammer against the bubble a foot from
Steven's face.

…Okay, so they were trying to hurt him, but it wasn't their fault! They were probably all really nice as normal people, even if they did live in Empire City.

He just didn't know what to do, the Crystal Gems were supposed to protect humans, not fight them. He couldn't leap into the air again, not with them clinging to his bubble, they'd fall off and get hurt.

Steven winced as a boy his age slammed his fists against the barrier right in front of his face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

First things first, he needed to get away.

Steven raised his arms up and pushed. His bubbled expanded outward, doubling in size and pushing away the throng. As quickly as he could, he let the bubble pop, thought about puppies, and jumped. Rocketing out of the crowd and into the air, he formed another bubble around himself and thought about Connie, bringing himself to an abrupt stop.

Good, that had got him far away from the crowd of people. Now he had a moment to breath, he could figure out what to do. He opened his eyes.

The situation didn't look any better from above. He could barely see the street through the crush of people. The only patch of open space had a massive corrupt gem sitting in it, he could see his friends darting around it, but they didn't look like they were having a lot of luck.

He saw Garnet slam her gauntlets into the monster's chest, it didn't even seem to notice, arcing its neck backwards and spitting a bolt of lightning into her face. Amethyst tried to attack it from behind, only for it to lash out with its tail, sending her flying into the crowd. The people tried to grab her, but she shifted into a bird and flew back into the fight.

Steven swallowed hard. He didn't need future vision to see how badly this could go. They couldn't fight the monster in the city and they couldn't just run away and leave the people at its mercy, who knew what else it would do to them?

They needed to get the monster out of the city, but it didn't look like it had any intention of going anywhere.

How did you make something move if it didn't want to? Ask nicely? Steven didn't think that would work. Bribes? They didn't even know what the monster wanted.

There was a clinking noise and Steven looked up, there were more people standing on the roof next to his bubble and they were throwing rocks at him. Steven ignored them; anything a person could throw wouldn't hurt his bubble. But that was another problem; they were outnumbered, the monster had an unfair amount of help.

Help…

He grinned. "Steven has an idea!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "Blaire, are you there?"

The screen lit up with the hologram's face.

"Hello Steven, how may I be of assistance?"

"I need you to make a call for me."
Garnet ducked beneath another bolt of electricity, wincing as it flew into the mob behind her.

This was bad.

They were at a disadvantage and she knew it. She got the feeling that the monster knew it too; she could practically feel the smug satisfaction rolling off it as its jaws snapped shut, nearly taking Pearl's head off.

Her mind was working furiously as she dodged around its attacks, trying to figure out what to do.

If they could just get some distance from it... but no, the crush of people pushing in from every direction made that impossible. A single human might not be able to do much against a gem. But with this many people riled up the way they were? If the mob caught one of them, there would be no getting away without hurting a lot of people.

More importantly, the crowd of people limited their mobility, keeping them hemmed into this single open space and well within the range of the monster's claws.

She doubted that was an accident. Many corrupt gems kept some faint echo of their former selves and if this monster hadn't been a tactical combat gem before its corruption, Garnet would let Amethyst move into her room.

Of course, there was a small advantage in that; the creature clearly retained some sense of pride. It wanted to deal with them personally; otherwise it would just let the people swarm them. Then blast them with lightning all at once. Which gave the Crystal Gems a chance, if they could just take the monster down, then Garnet was sure its mental influence would end.

But it was just so durable.

Its body was shrugging off blows that could shatter a quartz, which didn't make sense. Corrupt gems tended to be powerful, but unstable. Destructive, yet easily destroyed. This one, however...

She slammed her gauntlet into its face, forcing it to one side, but not seeming to hurt it. Ducking under the retaliatory swipe of its claws, she watched as Pearl leapt through the air, landing on the monster's back and attempting to drive her spear into the back of its neck. The monster's pink mane bristled, forming a hard cushion of spikes that caught the spear.

Garnet's frown intensified. This wasn't working.

"Gems! To the sky!" She ordered. She snapped her legs out, launching herself over the heads of the mob. She landed against the side of a building and dug her feet into the shaped stone, anchoring herself in place.

Pearl joined her a moment later, stabbing her spear into the concrete, followed by Amethyst who hovered next to them in the form of a hummingbird. Beneath them, the monster merely turned its head to face them, making no effort to take wing and chase them.

"Is anyone else starting to get really ticked off at this thing?" Amethyst demanded, her body vibrating with repressed anger.

"Indeed, I am getting more than a little upset." Pearl seethed "It's treating these people like mindless puppets. It's horrible and it needs to die!"
"Hell yeah! I say we form Alexandrite, and grind that stupid thing to dust."

Garnet's brow furrowed. That was a terrible idea. In this crowded space, Alexandrite would crush dozens, maybe even hundreds of people underfoot. She glanced at her companions; they were staring at her with wild eyes.

Unnaturally wild eyes.

"Amethyst! Pearl!" Garnet made her voice crack like a whip, putting as much unyielding authority into it as she could. "Calm yourselves. Now."

Amethyst and Pearl blinked, as though her voice had hit them like a bucket of cold water. As one they shook their heads.

"Oh man." Amethyst muttered, "It was getting into our heads, wasn't it?"

"I don't like this, Garnet." Pearl said, staring down at the monster in horror, eyes wide and pupils like pinpricks. "We should retreat, form a better plan, and return at a later time."

Loath as she was to admit it, Garnet was inclined to agree. The last thing she wanted to do was abandon these people. But… the Crystal Gems hadn't won the war by being reckless. If this thing defeated them here because they were too stubborn to retreat, then there would be nobody left capable of standing in this monster's way.

An image rushed through her head of Lapis and Peridot attempting to stop it. First of Peridot stomped to dust, followed by one of Lapis, clutching her head as lightning danced through her hair. Screaming as the oceans roiled up and swamped the world in a tidal wave of rage.

No. They could not be allowed to fall here. Garnet hadn't fought for this planet all these past millennia just to let one errant Homeworld monstrosity raze it to the ground.

"Gems, re-"

"Hey guys!" Garnet blinked, Steven floated down next to them. "You all okay?"

"Steven!" Pearl gaped, staring at him as if he were a stranger. Garnet was horrified to realize she had forgotten about him as well.

"Steven, we're leaving," Garnet declared, her voice clipped.

"I… what?" Garnet didn't need—or want—to look to see the expression of disbelief on his face. "We can't leave! These people need our help!"

"I know. But I do not think we can subdue it without hurting more people. Any options we have would hurt a lot of people."

"I'm sorry Steven." Pearl began, immediately trying to soothe the pain. "But-"

"You're wrong," Steven shook his head, "there's always a way, and I have an idea." Garnet raised a brow and finally steeled herself to look him in the eye. She saw no fear, only determination.

"Alright, let's hear it." She nodded to him.

"Lion." He replied.

"What about him?"
"He can create portals, remember? All we need to do is have him make a really big one and then we shove the corrupt gem through it!"

"That's all huh?" Garnet turned the idea over in her head… yes; it had a better shot of working than anything she could come up with. "We didn't bring Lion with us."

"Already taken care of!" Steven grinned, holding up his phone. "Blaire called him for me, he should be here any minute." There was a flicker of movement from the corner of Garnet's eye and she glanced up. Hmmmm, speak of the devil; Lion was standing on a roof above them, looking down at the scene below them with his usual expression of passive disinterest.

Garnet let her eyes fall back to the monster. It was still just sitting there, patient as a sphinx; meeting her gaze with a smoldering fury.

"Let's do it."

"K-keep back!" the olivine shrieked, scrambling across the ground like a crab.

Lapis glanced down at Peridot, searching for help that didn't come as her companion shrugged helplessly. Lapis sighed; it looked like it was up to her to handle this… fair enough, letting the olivine out had been her idea.

Lapis took a step forward, "He-

"Get back!" the olivine grabbed a rock off and threw, it went wide, missing Lapis' head by a long shot; but it still brought her to a stop.

"I'm not going back to Homeworld!" The olivine snarled.

"Good. We're not with Homeworld." Lapis replied, keeping her voice as level and calm as she could. The olivine blinked, her mouth opening and shutting several times.

"You're… not with Homeworld?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to the side.

"No."

"Then…" the olivine's eyes narrowed in suspicion, darting back and forth between them. "Who are you with?"

"We're Crystal Gems!" Peridot piped in, stepping forward. Lapis crossed her arms, biting down the urge to deny the claim. The olivine's expression didn't change, if anything, she looked even more suspicious.

"You're… not wearing stars." It was more accusation than statement.

"Ah, well." Peridot coughed. "I am a recent recruit, I have still not determined my desired location for the symbol. I could, of course, place it upon my chest. However, that seems rather unimaginative, and I have been playing with this idea of splitting my hair into five points-" The olivine's pale green eyes blinked, brushing off the onslaught of Peridot's monologue, and shifted to Lapis.

"And you?"
"I like the way I look." Lapis replied brusquely, which likely did little to allay the gem's suspicion. Nonetheless, she seemed to accept the answer, more-or-less; She still huddled down like she expected them to attack her at any moment.

"Oh, don't mind her." Peridot rolled her eyes, pulling the gem's attention back to her. "I believe introductions are in order." She placed her hand on her chest and drew herself up to her full height. "I am Peridot." She pointed at Lapis, "That's Lapis, again, you may disregard her attitude. She is always acting like someone rained on her processors."

The olivine looked back and forth between them warily, clearly not quite convinced.

"Rose sent us," said Lapis, the words causing the gem to still. "Down with the Diamonds."

The name and phrase wrought a change in their new acquaintance; her body relaxed completely, sinking to the ground in relief, her eyes softened and a faint smile worked its way across her face.

"Rose…" the olivine murmured, a light filling her eyes.

Peridot turned to Lapis and looked at her in confusion. Lapis didn't respond; Peridot hadn't been around during the war. She probably hadn't even heard the name Rose Quartz until she came to earth.

Lapis had; and she remembered just what power Rose had possessed.

*Down with the Diamonds.*

She could almost hear those words creeping through the Diamond court once more, they echoed in her mind from a lifetime ago; the frenzied murmurs of the Gem that had done the unthinkable and stood against the Order of the Diamonds. At the time, Lapis had never known what to make of it all. Resisting the diamonds? How could anyone be mad enough to even think of such a thing? Why would they even want to?

It was impossible. Unthinkable.

And yet the stories kept coming.

Lapis could still remember the day those stories truly became a reality, for her at least; the frantic yells and the clash of weapons as a towering figure wreathed in pink attacked gems left and right as she stormed the Blue Court. She'd never forget that impossible sight.

But Rose's power had always gone far beyond her martial prowess.

She *did* things to other gem. Something to their minds, she made them change. Question how things were, how things might be, and most dangerously of all; how they should be.

The rebels, defective gems joined together to fight against their fellows, had come in every shape and size, a rainbow of colors of gems from every class; joined together only through their defiance. She could remember seeing some of them, captured and brought before the Diamonds for trial. Beneath the gaze of the diamonds, they always seemed to waver. Shrinking in on themselves beneath the weight of their natural ruler's judgment. Until they were given an ultimatum:

Renounce Rose Quartz or be shattered.

The response was always the same: their backs would stiffen, their eyes would harden, and they would spit defiance into the diamond's face, to the shock of everyone.
It had been *terrifying*. Like a disease that spread throughout the minds of workers and leaders alike, threatening to rip out the foundation of gem civilization and cast it into dust.

Lapis hadn't been able to understand how it could have happened, she still wasn't completely sure she did.

And yet…

If Blue Diamond offered her a place back in the Blue Court and all she had to do in return was betray Steven… Lapis knew what she would do.

The olivine pushed herself to her feet. Giving Lapis the chance to get a full look at her. She looked… well, she didn't look corrupted, but she wasn't smoothly formed. Her gem was on her right shoulder, sticking out at and awkward angle. Her shoulders were uneven, the right shoulder slumping lower while her waist tilted to compensate, causing her legs to bend unevenly to balance. Her hair stuck out everywhere in jagged spiky clumps with several locks falling across her face.

"My name is Evergreen." She said. Her voice was clear and level, completely at odds with her appearance.

Lapis nodded, accepting the name. She'd heard many of the Rose rebels taken chosen new names, probably some kind of symbolic way of jabbing the diamond's in the eye.

"That name is ridiculous," Peridot commented with her usual grasp of tact.

"Not as ridiculous as your height," Evergreen scowled, looking affronted.

"I'll have you know that I am the optim-" Peridot began, bristling.

"What are you doing here?" Lapis interrupted, cutting off her companion before she could gear up into a full-blown rant.

Evergreen blinked, milky green eyes turned toward Lapis. "What do you mean? Didn't Rose send you to save us?" the question came out flat, but Lapis could feel the renewed suspicion in it, like unseen movement in dark water.

"Sort of," Lapis replied, deciding on a half-truth, somehow she couldn't see an attempt to explain Rose's current state of existence going over very well. "We're here on Rose's behalf." Technically not a lie, Steven was Rose—more-or-less—and he'd probably want to know about this place. "We know this place has something to do with the diamonds and we thought we should investigate." The gem stared at her with a blank expression. "We didn't expect to find any gems down here."

"So… you found me… by accident?" Evergreen's expression was blank, when Lapis nodded, it was split by a broken grin, Evergreen placed a hand over her face and let out a giggle. Chuckling madly as she shook from side to side.

"Are you alright?" Lapis asked, leaning away slightly.

"No. I'm… fine." The giggling stopped as she composed herself.

"What did you mean by 'us'?" Peridot asked.

A green eye peeked out from between her fingers. "What?"

"You said us. You asked if we were sent by Rose to save 'us'? Are there more Crystal Gems down
"I… I don't know." Evergreen glanced around, as though taking in her surroundings for the first time. "Where are we? I don't… think I've been here before, I don't recognize this place."

Lapis and Peridot shared a look.

"So tell me, Evergreen," Peridot stumbled over the name, "What's the last thing you remember?"

The gem was quiet for an uncomfortably long moment, "I was captured." Her eyes flickered and Lapis knew she wasn't really looking at them anymore. "At… at… where was it again? I should know this," a flicker of impatience flashed across her face. "A battle! Yes, that was it. Blue Diamond had made landing on the earth. We were to drive her off, or capture her, if we could. I remember Rose, standing above us, Pearl at her side. I remember Sparks boasting that she'd take down a full platoon of quartz soldiers all by herself. We attacked, but they were ready for us—expected us. Of course they did! They knew we'd come out in force to meet a diamond. They must have, what were we thinking?" she shook her head slowly, "A battalion of Vermarine hit us from behind." Evergreen lifted her hand and rubbed it absentmindedly against her chest. "I got stabbed, right here. I don't know what happened after that."

"And… that's it?" Peridot crossed her arms. "Is that really the last thing you remember?"

Evergreen frowned, tapping her fingers against her chest. "No. I remember something after that. I was captured, not shattered. So was Sparks, Flint too, she thought they were gonna take us to the Diamonds… they didn't. Or, at least, I don't think they did. What did they do?" She screwed her eyes shut, searching for the answer. "They took us out and down into a place, I remember something rumbling. Then a streak of yellow, then a flash of white. Then…nothing." She shrugged, opening her eyes. "That's all."

"Hmmm. Interesting." Peridot nodded, rubbing her chin as she considered what they had been told.

Lapis looked at her, waiting for the shorter gem to share her thoughts; Peridot just kept nodding to herself, muttering under her breath.

"Peridot." Lapis rolled her eyes. "What's interesting?"

"Hmmm? Oh. I believe this story fits with my earlier hypothesis. You know, that this facility is an experimental laboratory. If Homeworld were to produce mind-altering weapons, why not use war prisoners for test subjects? The Crystal Gems are the ones that Homeworld wanted to use such a weapon on, after all."

"Considering Homeworld lost the war, I'd say this place was a failure then." Lapis scoffed, the thought was comforting, actually. Maybe there wouldn't be some horrible brainwashing monster down here waiting for them after all.

That would be nice.

"Perhaps it was, however, we can't be sure of that yet. We don't actually know what this place was actually meant to accomplish. So-"

"You."

The word cut through Peridot's ramblings like a knife. Lapis blinked, turning back to Evergreen. The crystal gem had gone very still, her eyes locked Lapis' with a sort of laser-focus she hadn't shown until now.
"...Yeah?" Lapis asked, raising a brow. Very slowly, Evergreen raised her hand and pointed it at Lapis' face. Lapis tensed, setting her stance in preparation to summon her wings in case of attack.

"What did you just say?" Evergreen's voice was strange, brimming with a sort of quiet disbelief. Lapis was eerily reminded of her how she'd felt in the mirror, when Steven had asked her how he could help and she had finally, truly believed that the nightmare was going to end.

"What do you mean?"

"About Homeworld. You just said something about Homeworld. What was it?"

"Homeworld? What... oh." Lapis let herself relax, Evergreen had been down here a long time, hadn't she? She looked Evergreen dead-in-the eye and spoke:

"Rose won the war."

Evergreen held Lapis' gaze for a moment, then something behind her eyes seemed to shift. Her hand fell weightlessly to her side. "We..." her voice was quiet, like an awed child in a great cathedral. "We won?"

Smirking softly, Lapis nodded.

Evergreen sank to her knees; she turned her eyes towards the cavern's ceiling as tears began to flow down her cheeks.

"It was thousands of years ago." Lapis continued, unasked. "Rose lead the charge against the last Homeworld stronghold on earth. She won. As her forces broke through the final defenses, the Diamond's gave up. They sent out the signal and every gem loyal to Homeworld evacuated the planet. They haven't been back for thousands of years." Technically they were back now, but Evergreen didn't need to know that just yet.

"I... I never thought I'd actually get to say those words, not for real." Evergreen whispered. "Sparks and I... we'd whisper them to each other, underneath the stars on quiet nights. We weren't soldiers. I never thought we'd actually survive long enough for them to be true... We won... we won... WE WON!" she shot to her feet and started to dance, spinning in place, the sound of her joyful laughter sneaking out in between her sobs. She swept up Peridot and started spinning her around as well.

"Lapis help!" Peridot yelped. Lapis just grinned, looking off to the side. After a few minutes, Evergreen began to slow down. She squeezed Peridot one last time before setting her down.

Evergreen turned to Lapis again.

"I want to see Rose, can we go see her?"

"Er, not just yet. We still aren't finished here."

"What do you mean?" Evergreen's brow furrowed.

"We came here on a mission." Peridot interjected, recovering from her unexpected flight. "Homeworld left something on earth, some kind of monster, it's causing a great deal of trouble and we believe this place could give us information on what exactly Homeworld was doing with it. It is imperative that we find out all that we can about this place before reporting back to... Rose."

"That's just like Homeworld, making a mess everywhere it goes!" Evergreen snarled, her face crinkling in disgust. "What cannot bend will be broken." She uttered with contempt, clearly
imitating a phrase from someone she'd heard long ago.

Peridot glanced up at Lapis, who shrugged, taken aback by the change of attitude.

"So…" Peridot began, "would you be willing assist us?" Evergreen stopped, turning back she gave a crooked grin.

"Help fellow Crystal Gems take down something made by the Diamonds? Absolutely," Evergreen declared, punching her fist against the palm of her hand with a determined energy. "I'll do whatever I can."

Chapter End Notes

I had to think about the city scene quite a bit here. I made it a bit less action then I'd planned in my head, mostly because we saw a lot of action between the corrupt gem and Jasper. So I thought a less intensive take on that scene would be a better. I don't want to get stale.

Did it work out well? I don't know, I'm very critical of my own work.

If any of you have any thought about Evergreen, feel free to share. Much like Blaire, she was added only once I started righting the chapter she was introduced in, so she has no set personality as of yet. So I don't know if I did a good job on that.

The only way I'll know is if you actually leave a review and tell me what you thought!
Best laid Plans

Chapter Summary

The gems escape from the city, kinda. And friends are reunited, kinda.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was watching them.

Pearl attempted to steel herself, to block out the weight of the monster's gaze and focus only on what needed to be done.

But it was difficult. The corrupt monstrosity sat motionless, seeming almost tranquil as it stared up at the roof they were perched on. It made no motion to pursue, content to wait for them to return.

Was that confidence? Or arrogance? Was the twisted creature even capable of such feelings anymore? Pearl shuddered; it was like looking at a spider waiting in its web: a silent promise of a terrible end.

Its eyes twitched and locked with hers. Instantly Pearl could feel a burning fury build within her like a pot boiling over. She averted her gaze, focusing on the helpless people around it.

The people were the spider's silk. The gems couldn't leave as long as they were there.

Despite that the Crystal Gems were here to hunt the monster, Pearl couldn't help but feel like they were the prey—trapped, afraid, and ready to lash out. She wanted to break it, to destroy it. She wanted to leap down and impale it on her spear so she could watch it squirm. She tensed her legs, preparing to make the leap and cleave the spider from its web.

*If you did, it would tear you in half.* The warning swam through her mind in a voice like flower petals.

Pearl grimaced, realizing what was happening. She took a breath and attempted to sheath her mind in a suit of armor. Her efforts were rewarded, she could feel the thoughtless rage slink away like a dark current in a vicious sea. But she could still feel the emotions lapping against her plate mail, trying to find a gap in her concentration. Try as she might to hold onto her sense of self, she knew it was only a matter of time before it found a chink and flowed back in. It was an unwelcome distraction and she needed to be careful. It only had to pull her under once and she'd drown forever.

"Everyone ready for this?" Amethyst asked, her voice uncharacteristically quiet.

"We'd better be," said Garnet, adjusting her shades. "It's sending people up the stairs. They'll be up here in twenty seconds."

"Steven, do you know what you need to do?" said Pearl, glancing at the boy sitting astride his Lion.

Steven nodded, tightening his grip on giant cat's mane.
"Then let's go."

The gems leapt from the roof and the monster reacted by spitting a bolt of lightning towards them. Pearl raised her spear and shot off an energy blast, altering her own trajectory so the attack flew harmlessly by.

She landed lightly amidst the crowd of people, who turned at once to grasp for her. They might as well have tried to grab the wind. Pearl was a gem warrior—elegant and swift. And as hard as the beast might drive its captives, they were only human. She danced between the grabbing limbs and crush of bodies, losing herself in the rhythm. As she ducked beneath a lumbering man, her foot would dart out, tripping another man into the first's grasp only for them both to be sent tumbling into a third with the slightest push.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash and heard a howl as a blur of red and black slammed into the creature. She dismissed it. Garnet would hold the beast's attention for as long as she needed to. All Pearl needed to worry about was clearing away the people.

The plan was simple, really. The creature's control over the human's mind was complete but clearly crude. The creature had urged them to chase the gems, but leave a space around it to herd the gems into. The people weren't thinking, merely reacting to the gem's presence. So Pearl would lead them on a chase, herd them even as they tried to herd her, away from the creature.

Amethyst would be doing the same on the beast's other side. Pearl could just picture it: the Purple Puma letting the humans pile onto her a dozen at a time, then shifting into something tiny and letting the lot fall into a tangled pile only to repeat the process again a little farther on.

The air was split by a rocky thud, very much like the sound Garnet's gauntlets tended to make when they hit something very hard, and was followed by a roar of anger and pain. Pearl's mouth twitched into a smirk of grim satisfaction, only to be wiped away as a crackling filled the air. The sparks surrounding the human's heads had intensified and their movements became more frenzied. They crushed in towards Pearl from every angle, practically climbing over one another in their attempt to trap her.

Pearl leapt upward, or tried to, as a tidal wave of angry emotions swept over her mental armor and made her stumble.

Just for a moment, her reflexes dulled.

A hand latched onto her ankle and yanked her downward. She hit the ground. It didn't hurt. The mass of bodies fell upon her a moment later did, burying her in a pile of humanity and flailing limbs.

For a moment, as hand locked onto her hair and limbs and yanked her in every direction, she panicked. Her struggles came to naught as the crush of people blocked out the sun. A human could not truly overpower a gem. Several dozen, on the other hand… Pearl was not a quartz; she couldn't muscle her way out of this. Not alone.

My Pearl. You are never alone.

Pearl felt calm spread through her mind like water. Of course she wasn't a quartz. So why she trying to act like one?

She wasn't a quartz; she was better.

She pressed her arms against the writhing flesh and pushed straight up to create a tiny space. Her
"Do you wish to engage in combat?"

The voice cut through the grunts of the people as a holo-Pearl formed, lighting up the air with a pale blue glow. A hand swiped through the holograms face.

"Challenge accepted. Prepare to engage in fisticuffs." The holo-Pearl's eyes turned red and she pushed, shoving back the mass of people a little more. Pearl smirked as her gem lit up once more.

"Do you wish to engage in combat?"

"Do you wish to engage in combat?"

"Do you wish to engage in combat?"

The crush of bodies was lifted by a platoon of glowing blue hands and tossed aside.

"Challenger defeated!" the holo-Pearls chorused.

Pearl got shakily to her feet, enjoying the feeling of the sun on her form. Getting caught like that had been far too careless. She hoped Amethyst hadn't seen it. Otherwise, she'd never live it down.

"Push back the people," she ordered. "Don't let them get near the monster."

"Order acknowledged!" her army chorused, leaping at the people and herding them away.

With her holograms pushing back the crowd, Pearl took a moment to glance back at the space behind her. The monster was still locked in combat with Garnet, who was sitting astride the beast's neck, her arms wrapped around its throat as it attempted to claw at her.

More importantly, Pearl could see the plan was working. The space around the wrestling pair was widening. Across the street, Pearl could see Amethyst, her whips wrapped around several men, hauling them away and dumping them in a squirming pile.

Yes, this looked like the best were going to get. Pearl's gaze turned upward and locked onto the pink feline sitting idly on a roof opposite the struggle. Pearl crouched and leapt upward to land lightly next to it.

"Are you alright Pearl?" Asked Steven anxiously.

"Yes, I'm-" Pearl blinked. Behind Steven, floating in midair, were several giant pink bubbles. Each one several held several people; banging their fists against the insides and shouting.

"They came up after you guys left, just like Garnet said. I, uh, thought I should give them a timeout." Steven grinned.

Pearl grinned back.

"Well done Steven." He was getting so much more capable every day.

"How's it going down there?"

"As good as we can hope, I believe it's time for Lion to get to work."

"Alright!" Steven cheered, hurrying over to the giant cat. "Come on Lion! It's time to save the
Lion didn't budge. Steven wasn't having any of it.

"Lion!" Steven placed his hands on his hips. "Now is not the time for your nonsense, mister." Lion's head swiveled around, looking him in the eye. "Nuh uh!" Steven wagged his finger. "Don't make that face at me, you're saving the day right now and that's final." Somehow, the cat seemed to shrug while keeping its body perfectly still. It turned back and padded to the edge of the roof.

The three of them leapt down, landing in empty space. Pearl's holograms and Amethyst seemed to be doing an excellent job keeping the people busy.

"Alright, Lion you-"

Steven was interrupted as a red and black blur shot between them, slamming into the stone wall behind them and bursting through it.

Pearl blinked, momentarily distracted by the square-shaped hole. A deep-rooted instinct drove her to leap grab Steven and leap aside just in time for a lightning bolt to split the air where she had been standing.

The monster had finally managed to shake Garnet off and was barreling down on them like a freight train. With Steven under one arm, Pearl snapped her spear up and shot a blast at the creature's eyes. Its head recoiled, giving her the chance to leap up and summersault over its back. The monster didn't stop. It slammed it into the wall and plowing through it much like Garnet had.

Pearl's mind raced as she glanced around. The monster's renewed assault had riled the people into even greater frenzy. Their guttural shouts mingling with the crackle of electricity made it almost impossible for her to think. Her holograms could only grab so many people and Amethyst was being swamped. She glanced back to the hole and caught a glimpse of a wide space beyond.

She made a snap-decision. "Amethyst! Get over here!"

"Really? Right now?" he quartz complained, but nonetheless, there was a flash of violet and a kangaroo leapt out of the crowd landing neatly beside Pearl. "What's up?"

Pearl pointed to the hole. "Help Garnet." She ordered. "We'll be right behind you."

"Aye Aye, Captain." Amethyst obeyed, bounding away.

Pearl turned her attention back to her passenger. "Steven I need you to form a bubble to block the hole behind us," from under her arm, the boy wriggled around to give her a salute. Pearl nodded back, slipping through the hole herself and dropping him in her wake.

The room appeared to be a spacious hotel foyer; her eyes register marbled floors and decorative columns before being drawn to the sight of Garnet on the floor. Her gauntlets locked onto the monster's jaws as it pressed down upon her.

"Hey, lizard brain! Over here!"

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The monster's eyes glanced upwards. Locking onto the purple kangaroo just in time to see her spring into the air and shift into a rhinoceros.

The impact threw it off of Garnet and Pearl was by her side in an instant, helping the fusion to her feet. She wasn't looking good. Her uniform was charred, her shades were cracked, and there were
claw marks running through her afro.

"Are you alright, Garnet?"

"Yes. Where's Steven?"

Pearl glanced back. The boy was standing in a bubble that was squished up against the hole. Through the glassy pink barrier, Pearl could see the mess of people trying to push their way through. Steven waved back and gave a thumbs up.

"He's fine."

"Good. Where's Lion?" the cat in question bumped his nose against the fusion. "Alright." Garnet adjusted her shades. "We stick to the plan. Keep away it distracted and keep your distance when possible. And Lion?" the cat in question blinked at her. "be ready to make a portal." The cat blinked again, which Garnet clearly took as acknowledgement.

Together, they turned their attention onto the monster. It was flailing around, attempting to snap its jaws on the purple hummingbird that was zipping around its fangs and claws and laughing every time it bit down on empty air.

"Oh come on. That all ya—ARGH!" Amethyst squawked as the beast slammed its claws down and let out a burst of electricity in every direction. Amethyst hit the grown with a thud, twitching as electricity ran across her body. A claw shot out to slash her in half, only to be stopped by an armored gauntlet. Garnet gave Amethyst a gentle kick, sending her sliding across the floor out of reach.

Pearl lunged, leaping at the monster while it focused on Garnet. She may not be able to pierce its scales, but if she could get her spear into its eye…

The creature's tail shot around and almost contemptuously flicked her to the ground. Pearl skidded as she her feet hit the ground, awkwardly wheeling her arms to keep herself from toppling. She slid to a stop beside Amethyst, who was only just pushing herself off the ground.

"Ya aprite, P?" said Amethyst, her words slurring as she gripped onto Pearl's arm. Pearl looked down into the burned face of her friend and felt something inside her ignite with fury.

She'd had enough. This was getting ridiculous.

She had fought literally thousands of corrupt monsters—many of which had been a great deal larger than this overgrown lizard. She wasn't going to let this monster toss her around anymore. It was time to show it just what the Crystal Gems were capable of.

"Amethyst." Her voice was like a cold knife; stabbing through the electric haze in her friend's eyes.

"Yeah?"

Pearl held out her hand. There was no need to explain as Amethyst eyes cleared completely, a savage smirk stretched across her face that Pearl was sure mirrored her own.

Amethyst took her hand and Pearl twirled her around. For a moment they danced, and then…

They fused.

Opal formed like the eye of a storm; a single drop of clarity in a muddled sea. She could feel
Amethyst and Pearl embrace each others minds; shielding each other from the monster's influence.

Opal opened her eyes.

The corrupt gem stood still as stone. Garnet was still attempting to grapple with it, but it was like the will to fight had abandoned it. Garnet disengaged warily; unsettled by the change in the air.

"Uh, guys?" Steven called out. "The people out here have stopped moving, is that a good thing?"

Opal blinked as realization dawned.

The monster's mental onslaught had not just been pushed back by her formation—it had halted completely.

Opal did not waste time pondering this mystery; she cared little for the inner workings of the monster's mind. If it were just going to sit there unmov ing, then she would strike it down. She raised her arms, summoning her bow and a shining arrow of light.

The arrow's glow snapped the beast out of whatever had taken hold of it and it exploded into motion, clawing its way towards her with a single-minded determination.

Opal did not flinch. One moment she was standing, the next she was in the air, flipping over snapping jaws. The tail whipped up to meet her—but she was ready this time: she brought her leg down and balanced for a moment upon its barbs. In that moment, she aimed the arrow down and fired.

Shot point-blank, Opal's arrow did what Garnet's gauntlets and Pearl's spear could not, and penetrated the monster's scales.

The monster screamed and thunder rolled as Opal flipped away.

Lightning shot out from it in every direction as it writhed in pain. Opal shot another arrow, but the field of lightning swallowed it. All around them electricity surged, blowing out light bulbs and setting fake plants on fire. Beside her, Garnet caught Opal's eye and they both nodded. Now was a good a time as any. Garnet raised her hand and Lion stepped out from behind a decorative column on the far side of the room. He roared and a glowing portal formed behind the monster.

As one, Garnet and Opal charged. The lightning raked across their forms, but the fusions pushed through it. They needed to force it through the portal before it brought the building down on their heads. The monster rallied as they neared, pushing itself off the floor to meet them and an idle part of Opal mind had to marvel at its resilience. Even in the midst of its pain, even with her arrow still sticking out of its back, it still held its form and rose to challenge them.

Garnet went first, ducking under the snapping fangs and planting her fists in its throat. It recoiled from the blow and Opal followed up with a flying kick, lifting it off the ground and launching it backward. The creatures head swiveled and its claws slammed downward; clacking against the tiled floored and digging in, leaving great furrows in the ground and bringing it to a stop before the portal.

Opal's eyes narrowed. It must have caught on to their intentions. No matter, they had it on the edge now, all they had to do is push it off.

Opal held out two hands and summoned a pair of bows. She conjured an arrow to each and took simultaneous aim. Then fired, launching an arrow towards the places where the beast's claws anchored it to the ground. The arrows exploded; shattering the tiled floor and releasing its grip.
Garnet lunged; wrapping her arms around its torso and pushed. The ground cracked beneath her feet as she shoved it into the air and towards the portal.

The creature vanished, the circle of light swallowing both it and Garnet without a sound.

Opal wasted no time leaping after them. The hotel foyer disappeared; replaced by a rush of white and blue light. Ahead of her, she could see the creature zooming through the empty space as Garnet clung to it. It flailed its limbs, attempting to find purchase against the void. Opal raised her bow and summoned another arrow, aiming for the beast's maw.

Then its head snapped around a pair of amber eyes locked on Opal's.

And then she was drowning.

Rage anger loyalty broken no hurt betrayal confusion sorrow what how why why why

The tsunami of emotion's swamped the fortress of Opal's mind—much stronger, more concentrated, than they had been before. She felt something inside herself stumble, and a flash of light seared her eyes and her nose filled with the scent of ozone.

Something sizzled and Opal felt herself falling backwards. Dimly, she noticed the blue and white lights disappear. Gravity reasserted itself and she dropped against the floor. Her head bumped into something. Blearily she looked up and saw it was something pink.

The pink disappeared and a figure obscured her vision. "Pal... Opal?... what happened?... ere's... net?"

Opal's eyes slid shut and felt herself fall apart.

Peridot frowned. She didn't like this, not one bit.

She'd split up from Lapis to cover more ground, and consequently leaving the water gem to deal with their new acquaintance. One might question logic in leaving Lapis alone with a complete stranger. But then again, the olivine seemed harmless enough and even that weren't the case—if she was dangerous and Lapis couldn't handle her? Then Peridot could quite logically conclude that they were both already done for and it wasn't worth worrying about.

A matter worth worrying about was the data readings she was getting.

She switched off her scanner and turned it on again. But alas, the readout refused to change, giving off the same unsettling numbers. For a moment, she entertained the thought that the device was malfunctioning, but ultimately dismissed it. Leaving her no choice but to accept their veracity and the ensuing conclusion.

Evergreen was not the only gem buried here.

Based on the few readings she'd taken, there could be anywhere from a few dozen to several hundreds dormant gems buried all around her ready to reform as soon as they were excavated.

It wasn't such a far-fetched conclusion. If Homeworld had saw fit to store one defeated rebel here, why not more?
Peridot glanced up at the giant plants surrounding her and let her mind wander. Now that she thought about it, she felt like she had seen something like them before. About a week ago, Steven had dragged her on a truly banal nature walk, intent on showing her all the wonderful, and not at all terrible, life that could be found on earth. Peridot could recall seeing similar organisms growing on a fallen log, albeit those had been much smaller. What had Steven called them, Muchrooms? Fungeese? Something like that. More importantly, Peridot could remember Connie explaining that they were actually breaking down the log and feeding off of the resulting energy. Well, there was a lot more energy in a gem than a tree, wasn't there? That could be a plausible explanation for their oversized state: they were feeding off the gems buried here.

Peridot thought about that for a moment then shuddered; the cavern suddenly feeling much colder and glow of the plants much more sinister. Why did everything that lived on earth have to be objectively horrible in one way or another?

But it made sense, more or less. With the Fungeese siphoning energy off of the buried gems, the gems would be unable to reform unless freed by an outside source. Which made for a messy, but effective, containment system.

Of course, it would not be prudent for her to mention this to her companions, not yet. Lapis' insistence on the release of the olivine suggested that she would similarly demand on scouring the chamber to free each and every gem trapped here. It would take ages to find and release them all. Furthermore, there was no way to guarantee the mental stability of the incarcerated gems or, for that matter, their allegiance. It was not inconceivable that Homeworld might have experimented on their own soldiers if test subjects had been in short supply. No matter how she looked at it, releasing a potential mix of either corrupt, Crystal, or Homeworld gems into an enclosed space with her inside seemed like a bad idea.

Yes indeed, Peridot would keep this little tidbit to herself until she could share it with Garnet and the others. She would feel much better with them overseeing the mass release of these gems, which of course they would insist upon. But until then, the trapped gems would just have to wait. Peridot could feel a tiny worm of guilt inside at the decision, but immediately quashed it. These gems had been here for thousands of years; somehow she doubted a few more days would make much of a difference to them.

The matter settled. Peridot turned her attention to other matters. She doubted this chamber deepest part of this facility. No doubt there was a laboratory deeper down, they just had to find the entrance underneath all this mess.

"Hey Peridot, we've found something," Lapis' words came from behind her. Peridot hurried through the phosphorescent stalks towards her companion. It felt like they'd been in this cave for ages and the technician was eager to move on.

She found Lapis kneeling near the cavern wall next to an overgrown mound of dirt and pearly roots. Beside her, digging her hands into the mound, was the olivine… Evergreen, rather.

Peridot still thought that was a ridiculous moniker. A name should portray pertinent information of an individual's worth. What was Evergreen's name supposed to tell anyone? That she was always green? Gems didn't exactly change colors, so that was hardly a helpful identifier. In that regard, it was almost as bad as Steven—who at least had the decency to have a proper middle name!

"What have you found?" Peridot asked, sidling up beside Lapis.

"A passage." Evergreen answered, ripping out a particularly big clump of dirt and opening up an empty space behind it. Peridot eyed the older gem for a moment.
"I see. Well, we've come this far…"

"Might as well keep going." Lapis agreed. They stepped into the passage, Peridot lighting up her gem as the plants' glow faded behind them. They didn't have to go far until it opened up into another chamber.

"Now this is more like it!" Peridot grinned, looking over the rows of machines and monitors built into the walls. Anchored to the far wall were a series of hexagonal containers. The center of the room was dominated by a series of crisscrossing tubing that ran from floor to ceiling. Peridot noted that it resembled Amethyst's garbled description of the apparatus that she had originally found the monster trapped in, yet another piece of evidence that this facility was connected to the original one.

Thankfully, this containment apparatus appeared to be quite empty of mind-controlling abominations.

"Right," said Peridot, taking charge. "Let's see if we can get any of these machines running, there might be some accessible data logs on them." she moved over to a lower screen and attempted to access it. To her delight, it hummed to life almost instantly. Sending a column of data streaming across the screen.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Evergreen asked, moving across the room to examine the far wall.

"Essentially anything." Peridot replied, her eyes devouring the data as quickly as it passed her by. It would appear that… Yes! Her hypothesis was correct! This place had been an experimental facility for the PF-01-2 creature. She could see several references to the beast as well as that nullifying liquid.

She had been right! Not that there had ever been any doubt, of course, but still! Victory for Peridot! The exact nature of these experiments escaped her for the moment. There was, naturally, some encryption on some of the files. But unlike everything she'd found till now, these files weren't corrupt or fragmented. Once she managed to decipher them she'd be able to get some good solid info about exactly what had gone on here. Peridot reached back into her carrying sack and pulled out a data receptacle stick. Placing it on the console she set it to download all the files it could.

"Finding anything?" Lapis asked, tapping her on the shoulder.

"GAH! Lapis! don't sneak up on me like that. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Gem's don't have hearts."

"It's an expression. An earth colloquialism! Try embracing our new home's culture you watery clod!"

"Yeah. Sure. whatever. So," Lapis lowered her voice. "I need to tell you something."

"Yes?" said Peridot, only half listening. She was in the middle of opening a file that looked like a promising data goldmine.

"I think letting Evergreen out may have been a mistake." The words were quiet, but nonetheless brought Peridot's thoughts to a screeching halt.

"Excuse me?" she gaped, her head swiveling around to stare into the stony expression on her
companions face. "First of all, letting her out was your idea. Second of all, why? You seemed very satisfied when you told her that the war was won and all that."

"I know." Lapis waved that aside, rather unfairly ignoring the fact that Peridot had told her it might not be a good idea to free a gem they knew absolutely nothing about. "When we split up to search I started having second thoughts. I think there may be something wrong with her..." Lapis trailed off, Peridot impatiently waited for her to continue.

"And that would be?"

"How closely have you looked at her form?"

Peridot blinked at the apparent non sequitur. While it was true that Peridot had noticed the sloppy positioning of Evergreen's gem; which would have ensured that Evergreen was a low-class worker. She had tried not to look to closely at the gem. Evergreen made her uncomfortable.

It was just... well, she was...big.

It was not that Peridot held some resentment over her own volume-challenged status. She wasn't petty. But Evergreen was walking proof that Homeworld had once been willing to pool the resources required to produce a large gem like that for a mere technician. Various memories of jumping up and down, attempting to reach a tool on a high shelf came to mind and filled Peridot with a vague feeling of disgruntlement.

Okay. Maybe she was a little petty. She was humble enough to admit that. Which had to count for something, right?

"No, I haven't. Why?"

"Her form is twisted up."

Peridot raised a brow. "Twisted? You mean to say she is defective?" She had already known that.

Lapis shrugged. "Her proportions are wrong, I didn't notice it at first, but it's pretty bad."

"And why exactly does this bother you?"

"You said Homeworld probably experimented on the gems they took prisoner, right? She doesn't seem to remember anything, but I think Homeworld might have done something... unpleasant."

Peridot thought about the fusion experiments, about the way their twisted forms would crawl around beneath the dispassionate gaze of Homeworld technicians.

"I see." Peridot nodded, acknowledging the possibility. However, she wasn't sure what to do about it. The gem seemed lucid enough, if a little flighty. But she certainly didn't seem very dangerous. Still...

"I guess you should just keep an eye on her, I guess." Peridot shrugged. "You're the powerhouse, after all. If she goes nuts, you're the one who'll have to deal with her."

Lapis began to reply, but a sudden crack echoed around the room. Whipping her head around, Peridot saw that Evergreen was standing next to several containment pods—containment pods that were now very noticeably opening, spitting out a yellow smoke into the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" Peridot shrieked. Evergreen jumped, looking back with a guilty
"These things were sealed. I wanted to see what Homeworld was keeping here."

"So you just opened them?" Peridot's voice jumped an octave. She took back everything she just thought—Evergreen was clearly cracked in the head. Only an idiot with not even an iota of self-preservation instincts would just open a container in a secret Diamond laboratory… no wonder Evergreen had been a Crystal Gem—she must have fit right in.

"Why not? I've survived everything the diamonds could throw at me. I'm hardly going to get scared of some little science experiment." Evergreen grinned and Peridot noticed that the older gem's teeth were crooked. Keeping Lapis' words in mind, the technician flicked her eyes up and down Evergreen's form. Now that she was actually looking with the critical eye of kindergartner engineer, she could actually spot more than a few irregularities. It went beyond mere sloppy gem placement—on the shoulder, really? — But her proportions were wrong: Evergreen's arms were different lengths; her waist was too narrow; and one of her legs was slightly bigger than the other, to name just a few.

Peridot furrowed her brow. These flaws went beyond minor defects. If a gem had formed looking like this: it wouldn't have just been assigned to a lower class, it would have been terminated altogether. Evergreen's continued existence suggested that she hadn't always looked like this. It was… unsettling, but Peridot had to acknowledge that Lapis' theory of Homeworld's involvement might well be accurate. The only real question was why? What would have been the point?

As the containment pod finished venting smoke, Peridot was forced to put aside such trains of thought for later consideration. Peridot moved herself behind Evergreen, but when nothing immediately leapt out to attack she let herself relax slightly, thinking just maybe they'd gotten off without serious consequence.

Then Evergreen jammed her hand into the opening and groped around, starting Peridot's panic attack all over again.

"There's something here." Evergreen said, frowning. "I think it's a gem."

"Sure, why not?" Peridot muttered, edging away. "I don't suppose you'd consider leaving it there until we know who or what it is?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I've almost got it, there's some wires attached to it. Don't worry, whoever you are, I'll get you outta there." Evergreen grit her teeth and yanked, with a taut twanging noise, whatever she was pulling on came loose and she stumbled back. "Got it!" she beamed, holding her hand into the air triumphantly. She opened her hand revealing a red gemstone.

Evergreens grin fell, her face turned chalky.

"Sparks?" her voice was quiet.

"Someone you know?" Lapis asked, her tone neutral.

"I, yes!" Evergreen held the gem to her chest, her eyes filling with tears. "Sparks was my friend. We defected together. I— when I was caught by Homeworld I thought I'd never see her again, but I'd recognize her gem anywhere." Peridot shuffled awkwardly as tears started pouring down the older gem's cheeks. "What was she doing here?"

"It looks like we might get the chance to ask her." Lapis commented.
The gem in Evergreen's hands had started to shine and the olivine smiled. She held out her hands and the gem floated into the air. Solid light flowed outwards forming into a bipedal figure.

"I can't wait to tell her that we won the war, she was the one who always believed we'd actually live to see it," said Evergreen, her smile growing so wide it was a wonder her face didn't split in half.

Then the figure bent itself in half, its hands hitting the floor as spikes erupted from its back.

"...Sparks?" Evergreen was still grinning, but Peridot could hear a brittle uncertainty in her voice. The figure's form widened, thickened, and then reared upward to tower over Evergreen.

Peridot tackled Evergreen out of the way as the figure slammed down, spreading cracks across the floor where Evergreen had been standing. "Lapis!"

"On it." There was a rush of water and Lapis' wings tossed the creature into the air and sent it soaring backward. It hit the wall and fell back to ground. The light diminished as it finished its reformation, revealing an armored red turtle with a spiked shell.

"And we'd been doing so well." Lapis shook her head, giving out a long-suffering sigh.

"Oh, I get it," said Evergreen, sitting up and staring at the turtle in incomprehension with that mad little grin still on her face. "This is one of your jokes, isn't it Sparks?" She shook her head. "That's a pretty impressive bit of shapeshifting; you must have been practicing." She chattered on, "You had me fooled for a moment there, but you can drop it now. You're not going to believe what I have to tell you... we won the war! Rose was right! The diamonds could be defeated!"

The turtle snorted, a plume of fire shooting out of its nostrils. Peridot took note of its gem, sticking out between its beady eyes like a jagged horn as flames rose around it. Then it charged, its stumpy legs a blur as they stomped across the ground straight towards Evergreen and Peridot. Not wasting a moment, Peridot scrambled away, grabbing Evergreen's arm and yanking when the gem didn't budge.

"Move, you stupid clod! That's not your friend anymore! Do you want to die?" Peridot shrieked, pulling for all she was worth. Before the creature could reach them, Lapis stepped in again. Swiping one wing under the turtle's feet and freezing it solid. The turtle stumbled, its ice-clad feet unable to find purchase, and tripped, slamming into the ground and sliding forward. Lapis shot her other wing out like a fire hose, knocking the beast aside so it slammed into the wall next to the helpless gems instead of smashing them flat.

"If either of you felt like helping, now would be a pretty good time." Said Lapis.

"What do you think you're doing?" Evergreen demanded, getting to her feet and glaring at Lapis. "Stop attacking Sparks!"

"Are you blind!" Peridot shouted back. "Sparks is corrupted! She's literally lost her mind!"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Evergreen shouted back, then gasped as a wave of water slapped her in the face.

"Peridot's telling the truth," Lapis kept her voice level and calm, trying to convey the truth of her words without taking her eyes off the struggling turtle. "When Homeworld left earth, they did something that's made most of the remaining gems turn into something like that." Lapis nodded at the turtle as it snorted out flames, melting the ice off feet. "I'm sorry. But there's nothing we can do." Lapis stepped forward, her wings spreading out around her.
Evergreen blanched.

"No… NO!" Evergreen shoved Peridot away from her and threw herself in between Lapis and the corrupted gem. "Sparks can't be gone! Not like this. She promised me we'd both see the end of the war together."

"Step aside." Lapis ordered, unmoved. "Otherwise, 'Sparks' is probably going to smash you."

"She wouldn't! Tell her she's wrong Spar—" Evergreen half turned just in time to see the turtle throw itself forward shell-first. Evergreen gasped as the spikes stabbed through her body.

"HOLY SMOKES!" Peridot shrieked. "Lapis, kill it!"

"Right." Lapis shot out an arm of water; twisting it around the turtle's body towards its face. Lapis made the hand wrap its fingers around the gem in the monster's forehead. With a wave of her hand, the fingers turned to ice and Lapis yanked, popping the gem out of the creature's forehead.

The monster froze. Then burst into smoke.

"Oh…" Peridot blinked. "Nice one." she shook herself and then turned towards Evergreen, who was lying prone on the floor. She winced when she caught sight of the holes in gem's body where the spikes had impaled her. Then the technician paused.

What she was seeing didn't make sense; when gems were injured like that they were supposed to return to their gems but Evergreen was very noticeably not retreating into her gem.

"Uh… Evergreen?" she asked. The injured gem writhed, her form almost seeming to bubble, her neck turning around unnaturally to look at the gem in Lapis' hand.

"GiVe HEr baCK." Evergreen's voice was wrong, like something else was speaking through her body but didn't know how to make it work properly.

Peridot recoiled, scrambling backwards and staring in horror as the distorted gem began to crawl across the ground towards the blue gem.

"Lapis, what the heck is going on?" Peridot demanded, pressing her back against the wall on the slight hope that she might be able to slip through it, anything to get away from the freakish thing pawing its way across the floor.

"I'm… not sure." Lapis said, looking no less disturbed than Peridot felt.

"I sED, GIV er BaK!" Evergreen screeched, crawling even faster. Her form started to bubble, growing larger as she moved, scales began to appear along her form.

"Lapis! Do something!"

The thing that had been Evergreen leapt towards Lapis, and the blue gem lashed out, her wings swinging downward and turning into blades of ice that vivisected the distorted gem down the middle. The two halves hit the ground hit the ground and writhed. The side with the gem reached out towards the gem in Lapis' grip one final time, then vanished with a puff of smoke.

A jagged green gem clinked against the floor.

After a moment, Peridot spoke, "Lapis?"

"…yeah?"
"Can we… not let out any more gems we find?"

"Yeah… I think that's a good idea."

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was certainly a chapter.

I think that got a little creepy in the end. I was intending to do something like this the moment I introduced Evergreen. I just wasn't sure exactly how.

Kind of a struggle, but I got there in the end. on the bright side, the next chapter should come pretty quicker.

If any of you have opinions or criticisms, I'd LOVE to hear them.
Battles End

Chapter Summary

A battle ends...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It fell.

Light and space all around: rushing, spinning, and assaulting its eyes in a dizzying blur. It reached out, desperate to grasp something, anything. But there was nothing to grab, nothing to hold.

Nothing.

And so it fell.

Until at last, with a final flash and a painful crash, the falling stopped.

It lay still, its head spinning as it stared towards the sky.

It had been bested. Thrown back. Defeated.

Despair
Sorrow
Approaching end
Sorry
Sorry
It could not go on
Failure
Defeat

No. Not defeated. It was still whole. It could still move. It had not been thrown to the void. It could fight on.

But still, it did not understand.

It had seen those who had come to face it. Three and two who fought and didn't. Three and two who had thrown it back.

But it had not seen them—the Ladies of Stone, the Chain-Bearers, the divine rulers of the stars themselves.

It was one of the few things it could remember from before the void. The two who had chased it and cast it down into the nothing: the golden one with a will that moved the stars and the azure lady whose scorn burned like frozen fire.

Loyalty
Loyalty
Eternal service
Unending betrayal
Hownononononono

They had struck at it with the bitter blades of loyalty betrayed, cutting it off from the sky, the air, and all that it knew. But it had clawed its way back to the light once more; free and unfettered. Unburdened by memories of scorn long past… until it had remembered. The memories had burned; searing its mind like an exploding supernova. Its service, its mistake, its bliss, all of it discovered and cast down.

And they were here. It had met their servant—strong and proud and driven as anything. It had fought the servant and fled, for if the servant was here, the masters could not be far behind. It
knew it could not flee; The Ladies' reach extended beyond the stars, there would be no refuge. No escape. If it wished to keep itself from the void it needed to fight.

And yet.

And yet.

It had gone to their domain, taken their soldiers, declared its defiance to the heavens themselves—and they had not come!

It did not understand!

Instead, there had been three. Three small warriors armed with minds unyielding had come before it and driven it back. Three, who had fought together, split apart to drive away its forces, then come together to face it alone.

Then two had become one in burst of dazzling light.

'It dare you stand before us like this.'

It cringed beneath the memory of that scorn, spurring it to motion. Its claws crunched against the ground as it rolled and pushed itself upright. Pain stabbed through its body from a pulsing hole that bled wisps of light.

The warrior, the two-become-one, had done that to it.

It bared its fangs and the willed the wound to close. Slowly, its body obeyed and the pain departed into memory.

It turned its mind to other matters.

It needed to rest. It would find a place to hide and it would restore its strength. It needed to find a place where it could be alone, unbothered. It opened its mind to the planet's leyline of lightning, searching-

Its body stiffened as its mind brushed another; a mind like a castle of fire and ice.

Garnet held herself at the ready as the monster's head swiveled around and that burning gaze was on her once more. Garnet met its gaze levelly, trying to decide what to do. She didn't know where Lion's portal had sent them. All she could see around were rocks, grass, and trees, which did little to narrow down the possibilities.

She had seen what happened in the portal, the way the creatures mind had locked on Opal. Garnet had felt the air split as it shot that final parting shot of lightning. She'd also seen the way Opal had fallen back, her form blackened and breaking apart. With luck, either Amethyst or Pearl had managed to hold on to their form and they'd be here soon. But she doubted it.

And so she could see two options lying before her:

She could fight. Now that it wasn't flailing around, Garnet could see that it wasn't unharmed form the Crystal Gem's efforts. Its scales were cracked in half a dozen places, its claws were chipped and blackened where Opal had shot them, and its body was slightly drooped and shaking; no doubt enthralling the city and throwing all that lightning around had drained its energy.
Not that she was faring much better. She'd been smacked around, tossed through walls, slashed, and electrocuted more times in the last hour than she cared to think about.

But she wasn't finished. Not by a long shot.

She opened her third eye, just a sliver. Not enough to truly see, but just enough to get a feel for the odds. But there was nothing distinctive. There was no way to tell who might win if she were to fight—which brought her to option two:

She could run.

She could escape, regroup with the others and chase down the monster from a better position. Garnet considered it. She had responsibilities that should not be gambled away on uncertain risks. Steven and the others needed her and failing them wasn't an option.

And yet…

If she fled, the monster would escape as well. It would hide away, recover its strength, and all of the their efforts today would have been wasted. There would be nothing to stop it from attacking another city and Garnet doubted the trick with Lion's portal would work a second time. It would continue to threaten the people of earth.

Which meant that there had only ever really been one option. Garnet raised her gauntlets and cracked her knuckles.

"Come on then."

The monster did not charge at her like she expected. Instead, its long, snaky body coiled in on itself, its scales clicking together as it did so. It seemed it was waiting for her to make the first move. Garnet smirked, well, if that's how it wanted things to be, she would oblige.

Garnet charged.

The monster's claws twitched, ready to snatch her off the ground and rip her to pieces. She had no doubt that would be exactly what would happen, if she were planning to get close enough to punch it.

There were no humans around anymore; she didn't have to worry about any collateral damage. In other words, there was no longer any reason to hold back.

Garnet stopped short, and thrust her left palm forward; Ruby's gem lit up.

And she chucked a fireball in its face.

Its startled screech was music to her ears.

That reptilian face arched backwards, blinded by the fire and smoke clinging to its eyes. Garnet swept her right hand across the ground. Sapphire shined and frost crackled, trapping one of its limbs in a jagged block of ice.

The other claw slammed down, releasing a pulse of electricity. But Garnet had seen that trick before and was already moving. She rolled away, scooping up a fist-sized stone. Once she was back on her feet, she took aim and threw, sending the rock hurtling like a cannonball straight into the monster's roaring mouth.
She hit it dead center, its screech cutting off with a sickening gag.

Garnet crouched, knowing what she needed to do. She could try to hit it while it was distracted, but its scales were too tough for that to be a viable option. However, like every other gem, it had a weak point: The golden gem resting on its brow, and distinctly free of scales. If she could just get a grip on it and tear it off, it would all be over. She leapt for its face, her hands outstretched.

The monster's coiled tail shot out like a spring and it accelerated upwards, its ice-bound limb tearing away a chunk of the ground. Still in mid-leap, Garnet had no way to dodge when that limb bashed her skyward. The monster spun in midair, its tail shooting out to wrap around her legs. The pointed barbs stabbed into her form as it whipped her downwards. She hit face-first, her shades shattering and her body leaving a crater.

The air crackled as lightning surged out of its mane and down its back, forming a pair of electric wings that kept it airborne. It flexed its claws and shattered the ice trapping its limb, raining down chunks of ice and dirt. Then it clawed at its face, wiping away the smoke and embers that still burned in its mane.

Garnet surged to her feet and punched upwards, launching a fireball towards the hovering monster. Its wings tilted and it drifted sideways, letting the fireball pass harmlessly by. Its jagged teethed yawned open, its neck bulged as it gagged and spat out, not lightning, but a rock. The hunk of stone whistled through the air, shattering into pieces against the ground by her feet.

Garnet smirked, hopefully that would teach it that running around screaming all the time was no way to behave.

The monster's wings beat the air as it fly higher and then it dived. Its body blurred and its mouth glowed white as and lightning strafed the ground melting rock and setting trees on fire.

Garnet dodged, letting the beam of destruction pass by. The acrid scent of melting rock burned her nostrils as the monster made another pass. This was would be troublesome; her ranged capacity was limited. She could already tell that it would just blast away any ice and fire she might send its way and a quick glance around told her there were no boulders to throw.

As it drew near, she threw a fireball anyway. Distracting it just long enough for her to dive out of the way of its lightning. She would just have to try to outlast it. With the amount of energy it was throwing around even a gem would have to get tired eventually.

Garnet could feel the monster's mind clawing at her own, but it was like a dog scratching at a castle gate. Annoying, but it would find no entry unless she allowed it. As the creature approached, she saw it jerk to left. She stepped right, letting its wrath pass her harmlessly again.

And now the dog's clawing was getting more fervent. Garnet could feel its mounting anger, see its jerky movements with every move it made. It turned in the air and she noted that its wing beats were slowing and that lightning blast had been smaller.

Garnet smirked. An angry opponent made mistakes. Let it dive a little lower, come a little closer and she'd have it. If she moved fast, she could shape shift her arm across its body and make a grab for its gem. She just had to dodge a few more times.

It drew near once more and Garnet tensed, ready to leap.

The clawing at the door stopped altogether, setting off warning bells in Garnet's mind. The monster's jaw snapped closed, cutting off the lightning. Its tail contorted, spinning its body around
and its wings folded. Electricity surged across its form and it came down on her like a missile.

Caught off guard by the sudden turn of speed, all Garnet could do was helplessly throw up her hands as it struck her like an avalanche. She felt the ground beneath her shatter and she toppled. The creature's body coiled, wrapping around her like a snake.

She could feel the scratching at the door again. They sounded triumphant.

Lightning crackled and Garnet screamed.

Steven blinked against the sudden dimness as the portal spat Lion and him out onto a rocky field. He clutched the two stones tighter to his chest and bit his lip.

This was bad.

Amethyst was poofed, Pearl was poofed, and Garnet was all alone with that monster.

"Lion, where's Garnet?" he demanded, glancing around in fear, "I don't see her anywhere." He checked again, but the only things to see were rocks, rocks and more rocks—none of which were the two rocks he was actually looking for.

He felt Lion's body shifted as he pawed at the ground. The cat let out a growl.

"What do you mean 'you're not sure'? It was your portal! How could you not know?"

Lion shrugged, bouncing Steven up and down.

"Is she at least nearby?" Steven could hear his voice getting shrill; he was starting to panic and could practically hear his inner Pearl telling him to calm down, but he couldn't help it. Garnet was in trouble and he didn't have time for Lion's to start being difficult. Unreliable powers were his thing.

Lion's head tilted back and he sniffed the air. He let out a grunt.

"Then let's go!"

Everything jerked as Lion bolted. Steven grabbed on to the cat's mane to keep himself from being thrown off as their surroundings turned into a blur. Steven lowered his head to keep the wind from tearing at his eyes and found himself unable to look away from his injured friends.

He'd nearly had a heart attack when Opal had come flying back out of the portal. She'd been all blackened and torn up, and then she'd gone poof along with Amethyst and Pearl.

After that Lion's portal had closed and all the people trying to break into his bubble had just sorta keeled over. Steven hoped they'd just forget about going crazy and get back to their lives. It would probably be easier that way.

But that wasn't important right now! What was important was Garnet. Steven shoved Amethyst and Pearl's gems into Lion's mane. They'd be safe there at least.

And then he heard the roaring.

Steven looked up. He could see the creature in the distance flying around and shooting lightning everywhere. If he squinted he could see a little black square dodging in between the thunderbolts. He felt his heart swell and urged Lion to run even faster. Garnet was still fighting! He wasn't too
late to help!

Then, just like that, it went wrong. Steven couldn't do anything but watch in horror as the monster made a sudden dive and caught Garnet. He felt something inside him sink as he heard Garnet scream. He'd never heard her sound like that before.

Steven got angry.

Ever since this whole thing had started he hadn't been able to do anything! He'd had to stay back, hiding in his bubble or wait at the house while the gems put themselves in danger. And now this monster was hurting Garnet.

Well, he wasn't going to hide this time!

"Lion! Throw me!"

"Rowr?"

"Just do it!" Steven ordered, bringing his feet up and crouching against Lion's back. Lion obeyed, locking his front paws against the ground and bucked like a bronco. As the cat's body went vertical Steven felt himself start to slide free. He braced his legs and thought of everyone returning home, safe and sound, with all the pain and anger and fear laid to rest.

And then he jumped.

Steven shot through the air like a bullet, shooting straight for the crackling monster and screaming fusion.

"Get away from Garnet!" Steven's belly glowed and a bubble materialized around him.

There was a sickening crunch and the lightning cut off with a screech. The monster went flying away, rolling across the ground ripping up rocks, dirt, and trees alike. Its tail unraveled and Garnet dropped in its wake, flopping lifelessly against the ground. The sight of her motionless on the ground brought Steven to a sudden stop. He dropped the bubble and knelt beside her.

"Garnet! Are you okay? Garnet!" Steven shook the fusion but she didn't move. He grabbed her arms, ignoring the sparks that zapped him as he did so, pried open her clenched fists. Steven swished his tongue around and spat on her palms.

"Come on! work! I need you to work!" Steven could feel angry tears building behind his eyes but he forced them away.

A shadow fell over him and on instinct Steven threw up a bubble around them. The monster slammed against the bubble and flew into a frenzy at the prey denied. It clawed and bit at the pink barrier and Steven could feel it starting to crack.

"Would you just GO AWAY!" His bubble shimmered and large spikes shot out of its surface stabbing into the monster's body and throwing it off.

Steven blinked, anger momentarily forgotten.

"I, uh, didn't know I could do that."

There was a groan beneath him. Steven's head snapped around.

"Garnet?"
"…Steven?" The fusion blinked blearily up at him, her shades had been shattered to pieces and her eyes were half-lidded, but she was awake!

"Garnet, are you okay?"

Garnet winced. "My…head. I can't…"

"Don't worry! I can help!" Steven gently grabbed either side of her head and spat in her face. As the spit dripped down her cheeks it began to glow pink and the blurriness disappeared from her eyes.

"Steven! Where are the others?" She asked, getting shakily to her feet.

"They got poofed. I think we're on our own."

"I see…" Garnet stared through the bubble and Steven followed her gaze. As they watched, the monster was getting up again. Steven felt like tearing his hair out, why couldn't this thing take a hint?

"Garnet? What do we do?"

Garnet was silent for a moment and then looked down at him, her gaze calm and contemplative. "We need to finish this," she said. "And I have a plan, but I need your help."

"What is it?" Whatever she needed, he was ready.

Garnet held out her hand.

"Fuse with me."

"…What?" Steven's eyes bugged out.

Garnet knelt and looked him in the eye. "Steven, we are the only ones who can stop this monstrosity. I know what I'm asking of you, but I know you can do it. I need you to help me. Will you do it?"

Steven swallowed. Then, pushing away his doubts, he nodded.

"That's my boy." Garnet smiled, she placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the forehead.

Everything disappeared in burst of shining light.

It was warm.

Steven was floating in a sky of quiet night. He tried to move, but he couldn't. It was like he didn't have a body to move anymore. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to worry about that.

Two stars appeared, lighting up the sky with a wondrous radiance.

'Hello Steven.'

'Sapphire?'

'I'm here too.'
'Ruby?'

'Duh, who else?'

'What is this place?'

'This? This is us and it is you.'

'Like it?'

'Yeah. Its pretty.'

'Yeah. It is. But we can enjoy the scenery later. Right now, we have a job to do.'

'Indeed. Are you ready.'

'...Yeah. Let's do it!'

And then he could feel two pairs of arms, one hot and one cold, wrapping around him like the promise of home. He could feel his doubts, his fears, slipping away leaving nothing but the steely grip of confidence in their wake.

Everything was going to be okay.

Steven closed his eyes.

And opened them in a field of stone under a blue sky.

They grinned, stretching their body under the light of the sun. They blinked, they were much taller than they had been a moment ago.

Who am I? They wondered, adjusting their round tinted shades.

They held up their arms, two short and two long, and examined them. The longer arms had two stones on their palms, red mixed with orange and speckled with pink. Ah, that's who they were.

They were Sunstone.

Sunstone's grin widened. They could feel the power flowing through their body—strong, confident, and ready to take on the world. Their fifth eye was closed; there was no need to gaze into the path of fate, not when they already knew all that they needed.

Everything was going to be okay.

Sunstone turned their attention back to the matter at hand. There was the monster, hunched against the ground. Sunstone tilted their head to the side, the monster looked weird. Its body was sagging as though it had gone numb. Its eyes were sunken as it gazed at them and it was shaking, if they didn't know better, Sunstone would have said it was holding back sobs.

Sunstone shrugged; perhaps it was afraid, it wasn't completely unintelligent, after all.

When Sunstone stepped forward the creature snapped out of its daze. Its head whipped back and its gem filled the air with a harsh glow and a thunderbolt split the air.

Sunstone raised the shorter arms, palms extended. They glimmered and a pair of gloves materialized—scarlet and fine, with pink rose petals stitched into the cloth. The gloves sparkled
and a barrier materialized, a glistening square of pink with a star in the center.

The thunderbolt struck the wall of light and dissipated like a cloud of smoke.

Sunstone grinned.

"My turn."

One of their longer arms bent back and an ebony gauntlet formed—dark as the night sky and etched with pink thorns. They punched the barrier and sent it silently soaring through the air and slamming into the creature's face. It had dug its claws into the ground to keep from being thrown back, so its face was pressed flat against the barrier—wide-eyed and smooshed.

Sunstone snickered.

The creature shuffled backward, shaking its head. It coiled its tail and shot itself upward, taking wing. Sunstone tapped a finger against their chin, considering the creature as it flew overhead. Well, if wanted to play that way, they were up for it.

Sunstone leapt, rising into the sky until they were at eye level with the creature once more. A gloved hand was held out and another barrier appeared beneath them. Sunstone's boots clicked against the barrier and waggled their eyebrows at the monster.

It snarled and filled the sky with thunder.

Sunstone laughed, leaping away and jumping from barrier to barrier as they danced through the lightning.

This was fun!

Eventually, the lightning slowed and halted.

"All done?" Sunstone smiled. "Then it's my turn again."

They leapt forward, as they neared another lightning bolt came shooting their way, they snapped their fingers and another barrier appeared, blocking it easily. Grabbing on to the edge of the barrier they swung it around, slamming it down on the creature's back and striking it from the sky. It hit the ground hard and Sunstone descended, snapping her fingers to summon more walls of light, boxing the creature in. They added a final barrier to top off the box and landed on it.

"Had enough?" They asked pleasantly, their hands behind their back as they bent down to examine their captive.

The monster went berserk. A whirlwind of teeth and claws slashing in every direction. But to no avail, its might was no match for their power and the barriers held strong.

Sunstone watched its struggles quietly, the smile slowly falling from their face. They could practically feel the rage and desperation radiating from beneath them, which was to be expected. But beneath those feelings, like a silent undercurrent driving the tide, was fear.

Sunstone shook their head, satisfaction gone.

A final barrier formed in their hands, they placed it against the surface of the prison and willed a slot to open. The monster lashed out screaming in rage, slamming its claws against the underside and the barrier bulged, ever so slightly.
"I'm sorry."

Sunstone slammed the barrier down, cutting the creature in half. Its body vaporized, leaving only a puff of smoke behind.

And then… all was still.

Sunstone crouched motionless, then sighed. They let the barriers dissipate and landed lightly on the ground beneath. Sunstone crouched, rooting through the dirt and rock until they found their prize.

Sunstone held up a gemstone, tilting it and admiring for a moment the way the sunlight bounced off it. They smiled sadly and raised their head, contentment returning.

"Be at peace."

Sunstone's eyes closed.

And Garnet's opened.

She stood still for a moment, considering the gem resting in her palm. To think something so small could have caused so much trouble, that it was something even the Diamond's feared…

She shook her head.

"Did, uh, did we win?" Steven's voice was groggy. He was sitting against the ground and rubbing his head. Garnet tilted the gem, letting its glimmering catch his attention. He stared up at it for a moment before a grin nearly split his face in two.

"We did it!" He whooped, jumping to his feet and doing a little dance.

"Yes, we did." Garnet grinned, she held the gem still and willed a bubble to form around it.

"And Sunstone! Oh man, that was just… I can't even! I have lost the all ability to even!" Steven hands were clutching his face, practically vibrating with excitement. "Those barrier-dealies, and the warmness, and the jumping… that was so cool! I can't wait to tell Connie!"

Garnet patted him on the head, swelling with pride. She had to admit, Sunstone had, indeed, been cool. She hadn't been expecting them to be that powerful together. Steven had grown so much.

It was moments like these; where Garnet truly understood.

She understood just what Rose had seen in these humans. What she had seen that led her to give up everything to create Steven. Even in her darkest, most secret moments, when the she gazed into cold futures and everything was terrible, Garnet could not bring herself to fault Rose for the choice.

She turned back to the bubble and tapped it, sending it to the temple in a burst of starlight.

Garnet smiled.

"Come on Steven, let's go home."

Chapter End Notes
I had to wrestle with this chapter quite a bit. It's taken me a while to figure out exactly how I wanted it to go but I got there in the end.

As usual, I plan things poorly (Sunstone was sort of a last minute eh-why-not? thing)

Let me know what you thought. I'm DYING for some feedback.
Old Friends

Chapter Summary

Pearl feels a lot of things, like, a lot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a burst of light Pearl popped back into existence, bursting out of her gem and finding herself awkwardly standing on the familiar counter of Steven's kitchen.

"Pearl!"

A pink, slightly chubby, rocket shot through the air and wrapped around her waist, nearly sending her back over the edge to the floor.

"Hello Steven." Pearl smiled, hugging the boy back.

"I wasn't expecting you to come back so soon!"

"Why? How long have I been gone?" when one was within their gem, time became a tricky thing to keep track of. Generally gems just took as long as they needed to reform, it wasn't really possible to rush them. Of course, there were variations in the average regeneration times; quick forming quartzes like Amethyst versus slow formers like herself. But beyond that it depended on the state of mind a gem had when they were disrupted. Pearl could recall the sense of urgency, of the lightning spitting the air. She had been in a rush, but it had still probably taken her two or three days.

"About seven hours."

"Seven hours?" Pearl gaped, her mind boggling.

"That's gotta be a record for you." Amethyst was sitting on a stool nearby, clutching a box of light bulbs. She did a slow clap, looking impressed. "Well done, Wonder Bird."

"I, uh, thank you… did you come back faster than normal as well?" Pearl asked, still trying to wrap her mind around it. Seven hours? For a Pearl? That was ludicrous!

"Nah, took me ages; like, thirty whole minutes," absentmindedly, Amethyst shoved a couple of the light bulbs into her mouth and chomped down, the glass crunching between her teeth. "Bit embarrassin', really." She finished, spewing bits of glass onto the floor, to Pearl's displeasure.

Pearl thought about this. Perhaps it had been because they had been fused when their forms were disrupted? Normally a fusion dealt such trauma just split up. But if they'd been hit hard enough to poof on the spot… perhaps their individual reformation times had been averaged? Amethyst's becoming longer and hers shorter?

"Uh, Pearl? Can you put me down now?" said Steven, awkward squirming in her arms.

"What? Oh. Of course." She stepped down from the counter and lowered Steven to the ground.
Pearl straightened, a thought suddenly striking her. "The monster! What happened with it?"

"Steven and Garnet took it down." Amethyst said, grinning. "And just wait until you hear how they did it."

"Oh, good. That's good." Pearl relaxed; at least that whole fiasco was over with. "What about the city? Are the humans unharmed?"

Amethyst shrugged, finishing off the last bulb and then shoving the box into her mouth. "Good question, I haven't heard nothin' about that."

"So you do know?" Pearl replied, raising a brow.

"What?"

"Haven't heard nothing' is a double negative, Amethyst." She chided, smirking.

Amethyst blew a raspberry. "Don't get grammatical on me, Bookworm, I don't know. What about you Steven, have you heard anything about the people? They all gone nuts or something?"

"I don't know, either," Steven bit his lip, worry clouding his face. "They all sorta fell over when the portal closed. I've been watching the news, but there hasn't been anything."

"What about Garnet?" asked Pearl, "she might be able to tell us something."

"She's in her room. I think she's taking a nap or something?" Steven shrugged. "She did look pretty tired when we got back."

"We could ask that freaky computer pearl of yours, Steven." Amethyst suggested, rummaging through the trash for something else to munch on. "Didn't you, like, plug her into a satellite?"

"You did what?" Pearl demanded, her head swinging around towards Steven.

"Connie and I tried to see if Blaire could go in my phone." Steven said brightly, "turns out, she could. I think she's always surfing the Internet now," he frowned, perhaps noticing her expression. "Did I not tell you that?"

Pearl stared at him, flabbergasted. He stared back, smiling somewhat nervously.

"Why?"

"I thought she might be bored." Steven raised his hands, as if to say: what can you do?

Pearl pinched the bridge of her nose in aggravation. That was so like Steven. Why did he have to be so careless with gem technology? The Frybo incident, her replicator wand in the hands of that disturbing Onion boy, the paradoxical horde of Stevens that they'd all watched die…well, she might as well see what the potential damage might be this time.

"Fine," she sighed, waving him off. "Go ahead and ask it."

"Alright." He moved over to the living room, where Blaire's pyramid had been left. He knocked on the side of it and said, in a mock serious tone. "Madam Blaire, might I trouble you for a moment of your time?"

"Of course."
Pearl blinked, the projection's voice sounded much smoother, more natural, than the last time she had heard it. The pyramid lit up and began to whir; the top unfolded and Blaire materialized. She looked different as well, instead of the flowing dress Pearl remembered; the projection had donned a pair of jeans, a neat crop top, and, somewhat inexplicably, a sombrero.

"Wow! You look really good." Steven beamed, his eyes the shape of stars. "I really like the hat."

"Thank you," the projection smiled, or tried to. Its face was still much the same, mostly expressionless with those twin bright lights where her eyes should be. "As you instructed, I have been exploring the data storage system of the internet. Some of the phenomena observed piqued… interest." it stumbled over the word, as though the idea of personal preference was an alien idea. Pearl supposed for a gem that had always been installed into a computer, it was.

"Really?" Steven sounded interested. "Like what kind of things?"

"Fashion, for instance. Humans do insist on decorating themselves in the strangest of accouterments. I have attempted to emulate some of the simpler concepts of the former, as can be seen from my current visual representation. As for other things I have observed on the internet." It paused for a long moment. "Humans are very strange creatures."

Pearl stared, not quite sure what to make of the interface—or Blaire, she supposed. Just a week ago, interface had clearly been nothing more than an interactive computer; now she—and it was she—was acting distinctly sentient.

Pearl honestly considered smashing the device right there and then, or at least bubbling it, regardless of how Steven might object. Gem technology could be quite dangerous if allowed to run wild, a fact the boy just could not seem to grasp. Pearl had explored the internet once or twice, from its creation about fifty years ago it had expanded to influence much of humans modern culture, they stored most of their collective knowledge on it, their economies where plugged into it, their military organization was connected. There was quite a lot you could do if you could manipulate that data flow with the skill of gem mind, no matter how securely the humans might endeavor to build security against such a thing. She doubted those endeavors would amount to much once a piece of gem technology started poking at it.

And now a living, possibly malicious, gem technology had been plugged into the human's information network. Today she might be trying on hats, tomorrow she could be pulling the rug out of human economies; starting riots, depressions, and possibly wars. The day after she might be participating in those wars, perhaps launching and guiding those nuclear missiles that had been all the rage a few decades ago.

Pearl listened, nearly hyperventilating, as Blaire explained one economic business a human entrepreneur had created revolving around selling coffee beans that had passed through the digestive track of a cat and the related implications to a somewhat glassy-eyed Steven.

Or maybe she would be completely harmless. There was a chance Pearl was overreacting.

She decided to focus on the matter at hand, the people of Empire City. She could deal with the potential doomsday weapon tomorrow.

"Excuse me, er, Blaire?"

Those twin spotlights turned from Steven to her. "Yes?"

"I'm sure what you're talking about is fascinating, but we had a task we wished you to perform."
"Of course." Blaire's projection shifted, leaning away from Steven and taking up a more professional air. "How may I be of assistance?"

"I, that is to say we, wish to know if you can locate any reports of the current state of the citizens of the Empire City."

"Of course." Blaire's eyes winked out, replaced by spinning wheels of four multicolored diamonds, the symbol of Homeworld; a fact that was all too plain to Pearl. The eyes remained like that for about half a minute then Blaire's eyes returned to their normal color. "I have found a relevant source of information. The larger human news companies do not intend to report the situation until tomorrow morning. But I have located a current live report being presented by a smaller company. Please turn you televisual device to channel two hundred and fifty six."

"But we don't get that channel." Steven protested.

"Understood," Blaire nodded and her eyes glowed for a second. "I have remedied the situation, taking the liberty of establishing a link between a televisual broadcast satellite and my processor. I can maintain it for as long as you desire."

Steven's eyes grew wide and a grin split his face. He attempted to place a hand on the projections arm, only for it to pass through. "That," he said solemnly, "is the most amazing thing I have ever heard." He rushed up the stairs to his bed, there was some light rustling. "Pearl? I can't find the remote."

Pearl sighed, "I thought I told you to leave it on your bedside table?"

"Yeah, but that's so much work."

"Fine." Pearl said, walking up the stairs herself. "I'll find it for you Steven."

"Allow me." Blaire said, her eyes flickered and Pearl saw the television turn on. She eyed the projection warily; it already had the ability to manipulate other electronic devices, which could be found in almost every home and back pocket throughout the human world. Once again Pearl felt her hand itching to summon her spear and start stabbing. She suppressed it.

'One calamity at a time. One calamity at a time.' She mentally chanted, focusing her attention on the television. It showed the city, along with a news reporter in a large raincoat that Pearl found vaguely familiar.

"And this is Terry Mchormishwansin from DEM news, live from Empire City."

"Oh hey," Steven said brightly, "That's the guy from that time you fought the giant duck."

"Oh, yes." Pearl muttered, remembering now; that human with poor self-preservation skills who had seen fit to record that battle, broadcasting images of her nearly being eaten by an overgrown waterfowl across the nation. She'd tried to forget that particular experience. Despite Steven's insistence of how awesome it was that she had been on TV, she couldn't bring herself to be half as thrilled.

"So tell us, Terry." A woman's voice said from the television. "There seems to have been quite the brouhaha there in that city. Was this just a case of the Empire City Crabs losing their championship match again? That's started riots in the past."

"Indeed it has, Debbie. However that does not seem to be the case here. Earlier today, it seems that anyone in the vicinity of the city limits were taken up by some kind of cloud of mental fog. For the
period of about an hour, early this afternoon, nobody can recall what exactly happened. Once it had passed, every person in the city woke up on the ground. Some in great piles of bodies, others on the roofs of buildings they'd never been in before. One or two were floating in giant pink bubbles. No one can really seem to recall what has happened. Although there were some reports of a giant flying lizard over the city shortly before the incident.

"Oh my." The woman's voice laughed. "So it seems that some kind of dinosaur attacked the city and made everyone experience a light case of amnesia. How exciting!" she finished, her tone striking Pearl as inappropriately cheerful.

"Perhaps" said Terry. "But for now, the danger seems to have passed. Most of the people are unharmed, with only bruises and a few pulled muscles. There was also significant structural damage to a hotel, but nobody was hurt so nobody cares. On the whole, all's well that ends well is the phrase of the day."

"And that's it? No UFO or Bigfoot sightings?"

"Afraid not. There is one thing however." Terry started walking, the camera panning to follow him. "In the wake of this incident, there is one thing here in the city that wasn't here before." The newscaster stopped beside a woman standing at attention on the sidewalk. "Can you tell us anything that happened here today, miss?" he held out his microphone.

"Do you wish to engage in combat?"

Pearl's hands slapped over her face in mortification.

"No thank you, miss. There are a number of ladies, identical to this one here that have appeared in the city after the incident today. Nobody knows where they came from or who they are. All we know is that they are wandering the city asking everyone if they would like to engage in combat. If you say no, they move on. But if you say yes, they proceed to fight you. At least three notorious gangs have already been beaten into unconsciousness by this fine band of ladies."

Pearl sank onto Steven's bed, groaning as Amethyst's laughter echoed from the kitchen

"It has already been suggested that the ECPD deputize these ladies as a sort of street crime cleanup initiative."

"Turn it off." Pearl groaned, unable to listen anymore.

She heard the TV switch off as Steven placed a hand on her shoulder. "Wow Pearl! You're like a superhero now, like Nocturnal-Flying-Mammal-man! That's SO COOL!" She peeked through her fingers and saw that he was beaming at her, his eyes replaced by stars. Somehow, his excitement didn't make her feel better.

She was saved from having to explain to Steven exactly why having copies of herself wandering a city and beating up any human that challenged them to a fight was, in fact, not cool, by the whoosh of the warp pad.

"Hello fellow Crystal Gems! I, Peridot, have returned to from my mission victorious!" A voice said, filling the room with the sound of smugness.

"Hey Peridot! Hey Lapis!" said Steven, bounding down the stairs to greet them. "Welcome back and- Why are you two carrying gems?"

Pearl blinked at the question as Steven interrupted himself. She stepped down the stairs to see what
he was talking about. Peridot and Lapis looked the worse for wear. The short technician was
covered in specks of dirt and some kind of luminescent powder. Her visor was streaked with grime.
Lapis was a bit better off, her dress and form mostly clean of dirt, but damp, like she had taken a
moment to rinse herself off with water before returning. Pearl saw the source of Steven's question,
two green bubbles containing a green and a red gem.

Ah, well. It seemed they had encountered trouble and that Peridot had learned to bubble gems.
Good for her.

Peridot seemed to hesitate at Steven's question, for some reason shooting a nervous glance Pearl's
way. "I will... get to that in a moment," she said, smiling awkwardly. "Where's Garnet? I believe
she should be present for what we have to say."

Pearl furrowed her brow, taken aback by Peridot's nervous tone. Nonetheless, she nodded to
Amethyst, who moved to the temple doors to fetch the fusion.

"Good." Peridot nodded, sliding the backpack off her back. "I believe we might want to sit down
for this."

Pearl sat still, staring blankly at the green bubble in between trembling fingers; listening as Peridot
ran through her story, a tale of deep places and buried lights and gems whose bodies twisted in the
darkness. Beside her, Garnet sat equally still, the other bubble in her hands. Amethyst, Steven, and
Lapis was standing around staring at them awkwardly, not sure what to do.

She felt sick. Like someone had shoved a handful of butterflies made of sandpaper down her throat
and she couldn't get them out. The embarrassment from minutes ago was a distant memory, buried
beneath what she was being told.

Evergreen.

Sparks.

She knew the names, even if she didn't recognize the gems themselves. The Crystal Gem's ranks
had swelled in the last couple centuries of the war. Nobody, not even Rose, had the time to get to
know everyone on a personal level. In a way, it hadn't even truly mattered who you were. If you
were there, among the ranks, it was clear what and whom you stood for.

But names... those had been important.

Whenever a downtrodden gem of Homeworld had made the decision, had experienced enough
abuse at the hands of the Diamonds, to join Rose; they'd been given a chance to change their
names. To change who they were and thus, their destiny.

Some hadn't, like Pearl herself; She was proud to keep her name: the pearl who picked up sword
and fought, the first to join Rose Quartz in the fight for this world. Keeping her name had been
defiance, spitting on the traditions of Homeworld. It had been much the same for Garnet, a
declaration of who Ruby and Sapphire were together.

But she had a vague memory of these two; an olivine and corundum that had joined the ranks
together. Pearl had been by Rose's side when the two had been welcomed in, as she had for all the
gems who had united for their cause.

She also remembered them from the memorial.
It was secret, hidden away from the elements in one of Rose's quiet grottos—Pearl wasn't sure if even Garnet knew about it—a giant stone monolith with the name, self-chosen or otherwise, of every gem who'd ever sworn themselves to Rose's cause. Pearl had helped Rose carve each and every name into that stone. After every skirmish, every battle for all those years of war, Rose had visited that place and would carve a mark beside the names of those who had given their lives. It had hurt Pearl to watch her beloved Rose weep over those names. Pearl had shared those sorrows as Rose had planted a flower in that cavern for every name lost, their petals always perfectly matching the sheen of the fallen gem.

To this day, that lonely cave still brimmed with flowers. They never wilted, blooming eternally with their own inner light. Rose never forgot. She never left anyone behind. Pearl knew that Rose had visited that grotto at once a year, to tend to the flowers, to read the names, and to remember.

For the last fourteen years, Pearl had gone there in her place; to remember and to tend to the rosebush she herself had planted there. Every year she'd wondered if she should take Steven there, and every year she'd decided against it… perhaps this would be the year she finally did.

"And," she swallowed hard, her voice cracking. "You're saying that she, that Evergreen, was uncorrupted? That her mind was intact?" She looked up at Peridot, who stared back in uncertainty.

"To a degree." Peridot said at last. "There was, in hindsight, a great deal of corruption in her form, but her mind seemed relatively undamaged, until she got set off by seeing that Sparks gem. Perhaps a trigger to her dormant corruption? After that, well, we had little choice but to bubble her."

Pearl nodded shakily, taking that in. After the final battle, when all the gems on earth save for Rose, Garnet, and herself had become corrupted, Rose had stopped planting flowers in that secret garden. The gems that had once been their comrades in arms hadn't been dead after all… merely changed. Rose had always been certain that whatever Homeworld had done to them; it could be undone, if only she could figure out how.

Pearl had watched that belief slowly break Rose's heart over the following millennia. Every time they captured a corrupt gem, and worse, every time it had been someone they recognized, Pearl had seen Rose shed tears, desperate for some kind of change, of some kind of restoration. Rose didn't care if it was of a former friend or enemy, just something.

It had never come, and Rose could only weep. There was a reason she'd had enough tears for an entire fountain. She wondered if Steven had ever thought about that. If so, he'd never asked.

But Pearl was holding in her hands a gem, a former ally, who hadn't been corrupted, not completely. What could it mean? How had the Crystal Gem's not found this before? With some effort, she pulled back her perspective, attempting to look at the bigger picture.

Peridot had been led to this place by information gathered at that Dead Sea Spire, which they had been lead to by that PF-dash whatever creature. What had been its connection to this place? What had Homeworld been doing there?

The obvious answer was that they were attempting to brainwash captured rebel. Had that just gone wrong? Led to corruption instead? That seemed likely, Pearl couldn't recall facing any brainwashed allies on the battlefield…

But wait, that monster had been imprisoned on earth before the rebellion even began, before Rose had even set foot on earth! So what had Homeworld been doing with it before then?
Pearl felt like tearing out her hair in frustration. Questions! Questions! Questions!

"We'll need to go there."

Garnet's declaration cut through, Pearl's aggravation like a splash of cold water.

"What?"

"This place. Peridot, you said there are more gems there?"

"Er, yes. Quite a few, if my reading were accurate."

"And would those be former Crystal Gems?" asked Steven, the sadness in his voice making Pearl's metaphorical heart ache.

"The evidence I have seen points to that conclusion, yes." Peridot's voice was quiet.

"Understood." Garnet stood, she walked over to the technician and knelt before her. "Peridot?"

"Y-yes?"

"If it wasn't for you, we might never have known about this at all." Garnet pulled off her shades and looked the shorter gem in the eye. "Thank you."

"N-no problem." Peridot squeaked.

Garnet got back to her feet and replaced her shades, her head turned towards Lapis. "And thank you for accompanying Peridot. She might not have made it back without you."

Lapis blinked, clearly taken aback at the gratitude in the fusion's voice. "Uh, sure."

"We can sort out the details of getting there and what we'll do tomorrow," said Garnet, turning away. "The gems down there have been there long enough, one night won't make a difference. For now, it has been a long day, I, for one, need to rest. I'll see you in the morning." And with that, Garnet strode through the temple doors and was gone.

Pearl watched her go, then turned her eyes back to the gem in between her fingers, wondering if she might see more former friends tomorrow, and wondering if she wanted to.

Far from the field of rock, bathed in the faint glow of ancient machinery, Jasper grinned.

She had been right to follow those two traitors in silence, rather than attacking them on sight. She had been moving through an irritatingly dense tangle a jungle, hunting for more broken soldiers, when she had spotted the pair flying overhead: Peridot and… her.

The sight of the technician, that treacherous, defective little runt, out in the open had made nearly made her attack on general principle, but Jasper had held herself back. She was a disciplined soldier, not some wild attack dog. She wanted to know what those two traitors had been doing so far from their merry little band of disgusting rebels. So far from Rose.

So she had followed, rushing through the undergrowth to keep up with the flying gems. They hadn't a clue that they'd been followed, not even when she'd had to abandon the cover of the forest. It hadn't been a difficult achievement; no matter what Rose may have told them, they weren't soldiers. They'd never have her honed instincts or situational awareness. It had been like stalking a boulder, easy to spot and completely oblivious.
There had been one or two close calls though; when Jasper had seen them free that old rebel gem, she'd nearly struck right then and there. The thought that there were more of Rose's rebels; fully formed and unpunished for their treachery had made the quartz boil with fury.

But still she'd held herself back, and was glad she had. The rebels had led her to even more discovery. She had stayed by the entrance to the lower lab and listened, her keen senses picking up every word with ease.

She had listened as a forth gem was freed. She'd heard the frantic yells and crashes of battle. She'd heard the cry of a gem whose mind was broken—a sound that was becoming all too familiar with nowadays—and then the pair of traitors had returned, passing no more than a dozen paces from her and never noticing in the dim light, clutching two bubbled gems.

And hadn't that been interesting.

This place was just what Jasper had been looking for: a treasure trove of broken gems. Even better, the gems were former rebels; the thought of turning Rose's own soldiers against her filled the Homeworld soldier with a dark glee.

But there was another reason this place was so interesting, so full of potential. Something she doubted the other two had realized. This place was more than just a prison for captured gem. Jasper had never been here before, her place being more on the frontlines, but its true purpose hadn't been hard to piece together.

Captured rebels.

A secret laboratory.

Corrupted traitors.

She was soldier; the art of warfare was the very air she breathed. The facts crystalized inside her head, nudged into place by her instincts, leading her to the obvious conclusion.

This was a weapons development facility.

A weapons facility that her enemies had left her all alone in.

Jasper grinned.

Chapter End Notes

I think I was in good form for this one. My complete and clearly detailed plan I've definitely had from the start has lead me to tie Jasper back into the plot. I have the best plan, it is me.

Let me know what you thought.
Chapter Summary

In which, nobody is very happy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything about this blows.

Everywhere Amethyst looked there was nothing but the grays and greens of a jungle stretching out into the distance—which wasn't the problem, Amethyst liked these kinds of places; all those animals and plants and dirt to run around in? She loved it. Just… not today.

Steven was next to her, bouncing up and down on the warp pad nervously. So was Lapis, who wasn't bouncing and looked about as happy to be here as Amethyst felt. They weren't the problem either.

"This place is so cool!" said Steven, attempting to force some of his good-natured cheer into the situation. "Just look at those birds!" He tried, pointing to a flock of rainbow feathers flying over their heads. It didn't catch on and his grin fell into an unhappy grimace.

"Which way do we go now?" asked Pearl quietly, ignoring Steven; and if that didn't underline just how wrong the situation was, Amethyst didn't know what would.

"This way," said Lapis, pointing. "It might take us awhile to get there on foot."

"That's fine," said Garnet, "Lead the way."

Lapis nodded, stepping off the warp pad and into the tangle of plants. Garnet and Pearl followed stiffly, leaving Steven and Amethyst to trail behind them.

Amethyst frown at their backs; that was the real problem right there: Garnet and Pearl. It was clear they wanted to be here less than anyone else.

She could have offered to turn into a helicopter and carry everyone there, just get it over with, but knew better. Neither Garnet nor Pearl were in any rush to reach this place. Both of them wanted the time to prepare themselves for what they might find out here.

They'd both been tense and jittery ever since they'd heard Peridot's story the night before. The signs were obvious to anyone who'd knew them and she'd had millennia to learn all their little ticks.

Pearl had been cleaning all night and well into the morning. Not the happy, humming affair where she danced while she worked. But the silent, almost frantic, deep scrub of the house from floor to ceiling that she did when she want time to pass faster, but also wanted it to stand still.

And Garnet?

Garnet had gone quiet.
Sure, she was always quiet; but that was a warm, slightly distant thing where you could tell that it wasn't that she didn't want to talk to you, it was just that she was already in a deep intimate conversation with herself. But now Amethyst could tell that even her internal conversation had fallen quiet, and the resounding silence had filled the temple like the peal of a bell.

It'd been ages since she'd seen either of them in this bad of a shape—fourteen years, at least.

"I don't like this at all," Steven muttered. He'd managed to catch on to the gloomy mood pretty quick and had spent all morning trying to lift it.

"Preaching to the choir, dude," Amethyst muttered back. It was totally unfair. They had defeated the monster, the latest threat to humanity, just yesterday. Normally the Crystal Gems had a few days to pat themselves on the back before some other crisis popped up outta nowhere. After the stressful week they'd had, Amethyst knew they all needed that down time. But no, the world couldn't even wait one measly day before dropping this mess on them.

The other Crystal Gems…

Amethyst knew about them, of course. She knew there had once been a lot more than just the four of them, until one day there weren't. None of the others, not even Rose, had been willing to talk about it the few times she had bothered to ask. Just saying vague things like how they'd been comrades-in-arms, united against Homeworld—all that jazz. Eventually, Amethyst had just stopped asking; and if the others ever froze up, a name on their lips, when facing a crystal monster, or if she ever saw any of them holding a bubbled gem and crying, she never mentioned it.

If what Peridot had told them was right, there were going to be a lot of gems like that where they were going.

But this time, there was a chance that they might be saved. If these gems weren't completely corrupted, like this Evergreen chick, then maybe they could still be saved; Steven's spit or Rose's fountain might be able to cure them so they wouldn't be corrupted anymore.

There was hope.

Amethyst couldn't help but wonder if that's why Pearl and Garnet looked so scared. If it turned out they couldn't save anyone, would it be like losing their friends all over again?

Lapis came to a stop, she glanced around.

"What's the matter?" Pearl demanded. "You aren't lost, are you?"

Lapis shot her an irritated glance. "Everything down here looks the same. Give me a moment."

Water shot out of her gem and she took to the sky, leaving them behind in the hot, humid noise of unseen animals. Somehow, despite all the noise, it was way too quiet for Amethyst's liking.

She wished Peridot was here; the technician would have undoubtedly filled the void with her chattering, completely oblivious to the mood. It would have been a nice distraction at least. But the technician had stayed at the house; rambling about all the data she'd found or something.

Which was great and all, but didn't help make the situation any less sucky. Amethyst glanced at Garnet and Pearl. They were having a hushed conversation about something or other. Pearl was whispering unhappily and when the fusion replied, judging by the stricken look on Pearl's face, must not have been what she wanted to hear.

Yeah. No thanks. Someone else would have to deal with that.
Amethyst turned to Steven. The kid was looking completely absorbed in examining an orange flower he’d found hanging from a vine. Amethyst sighed, plopping herself down and closed her eyes. She tried to just immerse herself in the cacophony of life all around her. She listened to the sounds of birds, singing out mating calls or warnings or whatever it was birds sung about. She listened to the chattering of monkeys and other furry things that were slinking around just out of sight. She just listened to it and tried to tune out everything else.

The sooner this was all over with, the better.

Jasper could scarcely believe it.

Rose had actually come. She and her rebels were just waltzing through the jungle without a care in the world. It was obvious where they were headed and though she had suspected they might come here, she didn't think it'd be quite so soon.

In hindsight, she supposed it wasn't so surprising. Rose was infamous for her bleeding heart; the thought of her former soldiers trapped down here must have just itched at her mind in the worst sort of way, desperate to save what was left of her treacherous little army—as if such loyalty meant anything from someone who had betrayed the only one who truly mattered.

Either way, Rose was here and that demanded the question of what she should do. Jasper assessed the ragtag bunch of rebels. It seemed like they were almost all here: Rose, the fusion, the runt, the servant, and her. Only that defective excuse for a technician wasn't here. Whatever. It wasn't like she mattered; Peridot would get what was coming to her in good time.

Jasper weighed her options.

She could confront them directly, but the fusion was going to be a problem. A good soldier didn't try the same tactic after it had failed once. If she'd had a form disruptor, perhaps. But she didn't.

It also didn't help that she was here. Jasper stared up from her hiding place in the jungle canopy, watching the blue figure fly around above the treetops. Jasper felt something inside her tremble, an aching wave of what could only be described as longing. If only…

Jasper quashed the feeling immediately. Now was neither the time nor the place for that… whatever that was. She forced mind back onto the track of tactical thoughts.

Lapis was dangerous, more so than Rose could ever understand. The depth of her rage, her hate, was breathtaking. If given half a chance, her would boil the seas of this wretched planet and wipe everything else away like drawings in the sand.

But this place was far from the ocean. Jasper could take her, if she had to.

Still, that didn't change the fact that confronting them head-on would be a mistake. She hadn't brought any of the few corrupted gems she'd managed to tame. But then again, perhaps she didn't need them.

This would be the perfect opportunity to test some of her new… assets. If Rose was that eager to see her old rebels again, well… who was Jasper to deny her that?

Jasper dropped silently from the canopy and took off running.

Lapis' feet touched down on the gritty stone, staring at the familiar opening in the vine-encrusted
She was not happy about being back here.

The image of a twisted green figure lunging for her flashed past Lapis' eyes and she grimaced. Not happy at all.

She wondered if she could get away with just staying up here and letting the Crystal Gems explore themselves. She glanced over her companions as they worked their way through the mist. Their expressions ranged from grumpy to grim. She focused on Steven, he looked especially unhappy; trudging along behind the fusion and looking down at the ground.

Lapis sighed. She didn't really have a choice did she? Steven would be disappointed if she tried to stay behind.

Lapis paused for a moment, then snorted. Amethyst had been right, she really was a part of the Steven Squad for life. She'd never be able to get away. Oh well. It wasn't so bad. At least she got the occasional donut.

"This is the place?" Pearl asked, staring over Lapis' shoulder to the hole.

'No. I just saw this hole and thought it'd be a really cool thing for you to see.' Lapis thought, but didn't say. Everyone was crabby enough without her making it worse. Instead, she nodded.

Pearl swallowed, and nodded back. A change seemed to come over her. Her back straightened and her face became resolute. It was the visage of someone with an unpleasant job to do and the determination to see it through.

Garnet looked much the same, silently stepping forward to take the lead. The fusion stepped into the gloom and the rest followed. All the sounds of the forest seemed to cut off, becoming muted as they descended. It seemed quieter than Lapis remembered, like the place was some giant creature that had been sleeping before, but now it was awake and holding its breath, waiting. She chalked the feeling up to nerves; she knew what was down here. Wasn't that supposed to be less scary than not knowing?

"So, uh," Steven's voice echoed strangely off the walls, filling the air with repeated sounds and questions. "Any idea why you guys didn't find this place before? Seems like every other day we're finding some new Homeworld place."

"Well you have to understand, Steven," said Pearl, even this creepy atmosphere unable to repress her need to lecture. "The war went on for a long time, and there were skirmishes all over the planet. We didn't have access to technology that could allow us to keep track of the whole thing. While we generally caught on to any construction Homeworld attempted, we couldn't be everywhere. Furthermore, if you think about it logically, it is actually impossible for us to know just how many such places we missed."

"Why's that?"

"Because if we knew about them, we wouldn't have missed them."

Steven took a moment to wrap his head around this. "I guess that makes sense. It's like how I know The Big Donut has the best donuts in the world because I've never tasted one better than theirs."

"I suppose that is an acceptable analogy." Pearl nodded. "It doesn't help that some of these places
had been built before we came to earth. Construction is easy to spot, but if it has already been built…” she shrugged. "Hiding their comings and goings from us wouldn't have been particularly difficult. Our attentions were usually focused on places where kindergartens could be built."

"That makes sense. So, uh, run it by me again; what's the plan here?" Steven asked hesitantly. "We go down, we find gems, and bubble all the corrupt ones?"

"Exactly."

*Out of one prison and into another.*

"…And if we find one like Evergreen?" It took Lapis a moment to realize that the question had come out of her own mouth. She flushed as the others, sans Garnet, stared at her. "Well?" she pressed. What were the Crystal Gems going to do if they found one of their own still clinging to their sanity?

*Are you just going to bubble them too? It's what you wanted to do to me. But Steven wouldn't let you.*

"The first thing we do is apply Steven's healing power to them," said Pearl firmly. "Hopefully it will stabilize them. Then we get them back to the temple as calmly as possible."

"Yeah. I'm totally prepared for it!" Steven said, brightening a little. He reached into that burgerpack of his and pulled out a couple of small bottles. He held them up proudly, swishing around the liquid inside. "I've been spitting in these for weeks!" he held them out. "I think we should all take one, just in case we need them."

Pearl's nose wrinkled, but she took one. "Er, thank you Steven. That's very… thoughtful."

"Nice." Amethyst grinned, taking one and tucking it into her hair. "I thought you'd been drinking a lot of water lately."

"I can only make so much spit at a time. I just hope it still works."

The passageway began to brighten, filling with the dim green glow. They were getting near the mushroom chamber. The Crystal Gems stepped out into the open and stopped dead.

It was a scene of ruin.

The towering forest of fungi had been leveled; knocked to the ground and torn to pieces. That glowing green powder still filled the air, rising from the destroyed plant in a desperate wheeze instead of the gentle shower from yesterday.

"Geez, Sea Queen, rampage much?" Amethyst joked, smirking weakly at her. Lapis scowled back.

"This wasn't me." Lapis growled, annoyed. Just because she was strong enough to drown the world, didn't mean she went around destroying stuff.

"Peri, then." Amethyst grinned, somewhat weakly. "I knew she could throw a mean tantrum, but *dayum!*" she whistled.

"It wasn't Peridot either." Lapis replied, unamused.

"…Yeah, I know." Amethyst sighed. "That was a joke."

"Everyone be on guard." Garnet commanded, her hand rising to adjust her shades. Like Lapis had
needed to be told that. She hadn't really wanted to come back here anyway, so she was already on edge. There was something itching in the back of her mind, like someone was staring at her. It was grating on her nerves.

"What do you guys think happened?" Steven asked, glancing around nervously.

"When you were here yesterday," said Pearl, addressing Lapis. "Is there a chance you may have disturbed a gem and not noticed? Perhaps a corrupt gem woke up and did this."

Lapis considered this. "It's possible." She shrugged; she didn't know how these mushrooms had kept the gems imprisoned. Maybe they had disturbed them somehow.

"If a monster did all this, wouldn't it have to be kind of big?" said Amethyst. Squinting as she peered through the haze of glowing spores, now that the most of the mushroom had been felled it was possible to see almost all the way across the chamber. "I'm not seeing squat."

"Well, I didn't notice any unusual damage through that passageway," said Pearl, gesturing back the way they came. "If a corrupt gem did all this, they probably would have torn up the passage trying to get out. So whatever did this, it is likely still down here."

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

"Thanks, Pearl," said Amethyst. "Just... thanks for that."

"Everyone calm down." Garnet ordered. "Peridot told us there were dozens of gems down here. We need to fan out and search. Steven, you stay close to me. Pearl and Amethyst; you stick together and keep us in sight." Garnet marched off, a sense of purpose practically radiating from her. Steven hurried after her.

Lapis hesitated, unsure what to do. She hadn't thought this place would be creepier this time around, but it was. There was a prickly feeling running down her back, tickling around her gem. It was times like this that she hated the placement of her gem; jutting out of her back in the one place she couldn't see or reach. It made her feel vulnerable.

"You can stick with us, Sea Queen." Amethyst grinned at her, "Don't worry, I'll protect you." Amethyst puffed out her chest and flexed her muscles.

Lapis snorted, the eerie feeling popping like a soap bubble. "Oh good, I was starting to worry."

"S'what I do. Now let's find us some gems." Amethyst strutted over to fallen mushroom stalk and pushed it aside, rooting around underneath. "It'll be like an easter egg hunt."

"Amethyst, take this seriously," said Pearl, warily leaning down to help.

"How bout this, P? I don't do that, and you take it seriously enough for both of us. You're pretty much doin' that already."

Despite herself, Lapis could feel a smirk working its way onto her face. To her surprise, even the thought that a corrupted gem would probably be trying to kill her soon didn't seem quite so bad anymore. She wasn't alone, and even if she was, she could handle it.

Lapis bent down and joined the others in poking through the dying fungus. It wasn't particularly difficult. The fungus wasn't very dense, even the pieces larger than she was were pretty easy to move. The only difficulty was that every time they shifted a piece, more of those spores shot into the air.
After a particularly large cloud enveloped Pearl's head and sent her into a coughing fit, she reaching into her gem and pulled out a white cloth. Wrapping it around her nose and mouth, she held out a second strip to Amethyst.

"Would you like a dust mask, Amethyst?"

"I'll pass. The dust makes my nose all tingly, it's kinda fun."

Pearl rolled her eyes and held the strip out to Lapis. Who blinked in surprise and shook her head. Instead, Lapis summoned a film of water and molded it to her face. They continued searching silence.

"Hey, guys, I found one!" They all looked up at Steven's words. The boy was a little ways off, holding something up in triumph.

They all hurried over, Pearl reached him first, "Let me see it, Steven." Pearl took the gem from him and examined it with a tense frown. Lapis couldn't help but try to take a closer look of her own. The gem was a smooth, metallic black, like some kind of giant beetle.

"Well, what kind of gem is it?" Steven asked.

"It's an onyx." Pearl said at last.

"Was it someone you…knew?"

"I don't believe so, no." Pearl shook her head, the relief clear as a picture on her face. "There weren't many onyxes in the Crystal Gems and I don't recall any of the few being captured."

"So this isn't one of…mom's guys?"

"No." Pearl frowned. "Which does raise the question of what she is doing here, if this place was indeed a prison for rebels."

"Maybe she tried to rebel but got captured before she could reach mom?" Steven said, hopefully.

Pearl shared a meaningful glance with Garnet. "Perhaps."

"Maybe she tried to sabotage Homeworld from the inside!" Steven continued, starting to get excited. "It's just like Spy Guy, one guy, working undercover against the machine." Steven's eyes became stars as he started to ramble.

"Steven." Pearl cut him off, looking upset. "It's better not to dwell on who these gems might have been."

"Why not?" now Steven just looked confused. "What if they could have been friends? If we can heal them, they might be friends."

"It just is," said Garnet, her tone declaring the topic finished. Steven looked uncertain, but seemed to accept this.

But Lapis understood.

Using gems to power magical objects was as common on Homeworld as it was morbid. The actual act of harvesting and installing gems into things was left to one specific class of technicians; that way, it was easier for everyone else to ignore, it practically became second nature.
Lapis remembered owning a harp that could play itself, due to a jade inserted into the frame. It had been quite beautiful, but she hadn't liked thinking about it either, so she hadn't.

*Did you even wonder who I used to be?*

She didn't like it, but she understood it; she imagined the Crystal Gems considered the corrupted gems in much the same way. You couldn't fix them. They had no way to undo it. It was better to just not think about it.

Sometimes, back in the mirror, she had thought back to that harp and wondered what had happened to it, to the jade inside it. Had some other courtesan taken it? Or had it been thrown away, left to rot in the void of space?

At some of her darkest moments, when all she'd had for company were the view of stormy skies and the sound of shrieking wind, she'd wondered if the jade had been screaming at her every time she'd made it play music.

Lapis shuddered.

"Okay." Steven sounded uncertain, but dropped the subject. "Then what's that ring thingy?" he asked, poking at the metal band wrapped around the gem.

Pearl's face somehow managed to sour even further. "*That* is a particularly unpleasant piece of Homeworld technology. I'd almost forgotten all about them. It's been a very long time since I've seen one." She grimaced, continuing before Steven could ask. "It's called a prison ring. Homeworld would place them on gems they'd captured but not shattered. It allows the gems to gather their energy but keeps them from reforming. They aren't conscious." She insisted.

*You hope.*

"But they are stuck in their inert form."

"So, it's like a bubble?" Steven clarified.

"Almost." Pearl muttered. "There's one important difference. Anyone can pop a bubble without harming the gem inside. But it's very difficult to get a prison ring off without shattering the gem inside."

Steven looked horrified.

"Homeworld was quite fond of that little feature." Pearl continued, a deep bitterness seeping into her voice. "It made rescue… difficult."

"But we can get it off? Without hurting the gem?" Steven asked.

"If we can get it back to the temple, perhaps. I have several devices for such things. But..." Pearl turned to Lapis. "There is a deeper laboratory, correct?" Lapis nodded. "Then we may be able to find a release device there. Prison rings are designed only to open from a signal of a specific controller. If the Homeworld gems working this place were using them and left the gems behind, they likely left the controllers as..." Pearl trailed off.

The little silver band around the onyx was starting to glow, then, with a loud beep that sounded unnaturally loud in the silence, fell off.

"Or they could just kinda fall off?" Amethyst asked, sticking her hands behind her head.
"But it shouldn't have…" Pearl's brow furrowed. Then yelped as the gem in her palm began to glow.

"Let go of it!" Garnet ordered, smacking the onyx out of Pearl's hand and sending it sliding across the floor.

The gem slid to a stop and began to float, the light brightening as forms began to flicker around it.

"Ready yourselves." Garnet ordered, summoning her gauntlets. The instructions were hardly necessary, Pearl's spear and Amethyst's whip were already out and ready for battle, as was Steven's shield. After only a moment's hesitation, Lapis conjured her wings as well.

The forms continued to flicker, stopping for a moment on a tall, lithe form. It seemed to hesitate.

"Maybe she's not fully corrupted?" said Steven, lowering his shield slightly. But then the form stretched, arms and legs becoming unnaturally tall, and turned black.

The gem monster loomed over them, easily twice Pearl's height, but just as skinny. Its feet filed down into points and its hands were nothing more than a spikey set of claws. Its skin was just a solid shade of glossy ebony and its gem jutted from its featureless face. It looked like the shadow of an emancipated scarecrow on stilts.

Then a white hole opened in the side of its face and peered down at them. As one, the Crystal Gems, plus Lapis, bristled.

"Hey you." said Garnet. The white hole swiveled around to gaze at her. "Can you understand me?"

It seemed to consider this, that white pit roving around its face to stare at each of them.

Then it took a swipe at Garnet, its claws spread like hooks. Garnet's gauntlet shot out and caught it around the wrist.

"Corrupted," Garnet sighed. She shook her head, "take it down."

Pearl leapt forward, her spear stabbing towards the creature's face. It recoiled, the arm still caught in Garnet's vice grip stretching like taffy. It's body wriggled and it slipped past the point of the spear like a snake, whipping its head forward to head butt Pearl. Before it could hit, Amethyst's whip wrapped around its neck and yanked it towards the ground. A slit opened up on the creature's face and it started to yowl, a silky warble that echoed around the cavern.

Garnet's gauntlet slapped over the mouth, cutting off the noise. Her other wrapped around the gem on its chin and began to pull. Its chin stretched out, pulling away from its face like putty, and it flailed; its claws curling around to slash at Garnet's back. One of its arms bounced off Steven's shield as he leapt foreword. The other stopped when Lapis slapped it with one of her wings wing and froze it solid.

Garnet pulled harder, stretching the monster's face taught until, with a snap, its gem pulled free. There was a puff of smoke and the creature disappeared.

Garnet bubbled the onyx and tapped it, sending it back to the temple.

"Good job everyone," she said. "It was corrupted… a pity. But at least it won't be anymore trouble."

"Why did the ring thingy pop off like that?" Steven asked.
"Something must have triggered an unlocking signal." Pearl answered, sounding suspicious.

"Or someone." Garnet's voice was grim.

Before anyone could ask her what she meant, the quiet was broken by a series of beeps. All around them, from under clumps of fungus and beneath patches of disturbed dirt, lights began to glow.

Chapter End Notes

HEY! Just so you know, I'm probably going to need more than a few new corrupt gem monsters for the next few chapters. If any of you want to, feel free to pitch an idea or two for a gem monster. I might just use it (And if you choose to give me a little feedback on how you liked/disliked the story, so much the better!)

Till next time!
We were the Crystal Gems

Chapter Summary

Battles are fought.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pearl twirled as a chunk of ice whistled past. She raised her spear and fired off several laser blasts towards her assailant—a translucent, floating ball of ice that was firing giant icicles in every direction. Her efforts were rewarded with a shriek like a distressed iceberg and she allowed herself a grim smile.

She wasn't happy with the situation, but at least it was familiar territory.

After they'd dealt with that onyx, other gems had started popping out of the rubble all around, their glow lighting up the dim chamber like a field of fallen stars. By the time the glow faded, the cavern had been filled with monsters of every shape and size.

It hadn't been a pretty sight. Pearl hadn't seen so many corrupt gems in one place for a very long time. Such gems tended to avoid each other when they could, either wandering around alone or staking claim to their own territory like some kind of primitive earth beast.

As such, everything had descended into chaos immediately. For every monster that attacked the Crystal Gems, another decided to pick a fight with other corrupted gems; filling the cavern with a discordant chorus of shrieks, bellows, and roars accompanied by the flash of fire, the crackle of ice, and other kinds of attacks, both elemental and physical.

Still more of the beasts had wanted nothing to do with the fight at all, instead turning tail and trying to flee. Some of them attempted to tunnel away or squeeze through the entrance, and Pearl was sure she had seen a giant spiky fish slip into the rock like it was water and out of sight. Others, finding no immediate escape, went berserk, throwing themselves back into the fray with a blind fury.

Garnet had rallied them immediately, keeping them together and fighting off any beast that came too close. They'd attempted to cut a path to the entryway, but there had just been too many. After a near miss where a giant spotted cat with forelegs like a mantis nearly took Lapis' head off, Garnet had switched tactics.

As Lapis busied herself with furiously drowning the leopard-mantis, the fusion had ordered Steven to throw up a bubble as strong as he could make it. The rest of them had quickly joined him inside. Pearl could see the logic; they couldn't escape from this place as it was and throwing themselves against the throng of rampaging beasts would be suicidal; but if they hunkered down and tried to attract as little attention as possible, the corrupt gems would do their job for them. Reducing their numbers to a more manageable level as they either escaped or defeated each other.

It was an excellent idea, in theory.
But a giant, glowing pink bubble was hardly the subtlest of hiding places, and its light seemed to
draw the undivided attention of any corrupt gem that wandered too close. Steven's bubble wouldn't
be able to withstand the assault of half a dozen monsters, so the gems had no choice but to step out
and fight.

Amethyst had immediately thrown herself at a walking tangle of vines before it could reach the
bubble. It attempted to swipe at her with thorn-like claws, but the quartz had just spin-balled
straight through, ripping the flowery creature to pieces. Amethyst stopped only to bubble the gem
before charging at the nearest monster, which looked a little like a massive grey lobster with more
than one pair of claws.

Garnet's full attention had been taken up by a squirting mass of spiny red tentacles. They wrapped
around her; tearing into her form even as the fusion's gauntlets tore them apart.

Pearl hadn't had the chance to see what happened next as she'd had to dodge a shower of icicles the
size of baseball bats; which brought her to the present dilemma.

She glared up at the floating ball of ice, it was one of the weirder corruptions as it had no defining
features to speak of, just a smooth sphere of frozen water that wouldn't stop shooting off shards of
itself with wild abandon. But the strangest thing about it was that its gem—a deep blue azurite, if
Pearl were to hazard a guess—wasn't on the surface, but floating in the middle of the ice, and
unfortunately well shielded from attack.

When she'd shot it with her laser blasts, the ice had cracked and Pearl's hopes had risen. But all it
appeared to have bought her was a brief respite from the icy bombardment, and even as she
watched the cracks in its surface were closing. Pearl scrambled back as the icicles began falling
again, slipping through an opening in Steven's bubble the boy had made for her.

"Hang in there, Pearl! You're doing great!" said Steven, giving her the thumbs up.

"Are you alright, Steven?" she took moment to look the boy over, he looked a little nervous to be in
the middle of such a vicious fight, but otherwise seemed to be keeping his spirits up.

"Oh you know, just holding down the fort," he grinned at her. "Or I suppose in this case, it be
holding it up." He smiled. "So, uh, you need any help out there?

"No. I want you to stay in here." She gave him a meaningful stare, "I mean it, Steven. It's much too
dangerous out there." She turned her attention back to her icy aggressor, trying to decide what to do
about it.

"Yeah. I figured." Steven sighed.

"Hey." Pearl felt something tap her on the shoulder.

She turned to see Lapis looking at her with a particularly grumpy expression. The blue gem's dress
was torn in several places and her water wings looked smaller than usual, as though she was
running low on water.

"What?" Pearl demanded, distracted by the sound of ice drumming against the bubble.

"We're switching partners." Lapis replied. She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder at a black and red
lizard that's maw was frozen to the ground.

"Why?" Pearl arched a brow.
"Mine's annoying. Also," Lapis stepped past Pearl and raised her hand. The crackle of falling ice stopped. Lapis raised her other hand and the ice on the ground melted, the water flowed through the air and into her wings, swelling them back to their normal size. "I need more ammunition."

"Oh." Pearl shrugged. It didn't really matter who dealt with the beast as long as it got done, "very well then."

Lapis grunted and gestured back at the lizard "I think its gem is on its belly, its scales are hard, and watch out, it likes to scream." Lapis stepped out of the bubble and raised her hands. The ice ball jerked, shooting upwards into the darkness of the poorly lit ceiling, then there was the earsplitting crash like a glacier splitting in half.

Pearl turned away, rushing toward the lizard just as it tore its head free of the ice. It opened its mouth and screamed, sending a shockwave ripping across the ground towards her. Pearl pressed the butt of her spear into the ground and vaulted over the wave of sound. Spinning her spear around, she launched a blast straight towards its face. The lizard opened its mouth and screamed again, blowing away the laser blast.

Pearl landed lightly, smirking. She'd seen similar tricks once or twice through the millennia, and knew exactly what to do. She twirled her spear in one hand and gestured with her other, taunting it. It began to shake, its body puffing up and its scales rattling like maracas as it opened its mouth to blast her.

At the moment its mouth began to open, Pearl spun her spear and slung it one-handed. The gem lizard was still inhaling in preparation for its attack when the spear arrived and the weapon went straight in. The lizard's eyes bugged out and it gagged. It reared back onto its hind legs as it clawed at the spear lodged in its throat, revealing a pale, scale-less underbelly and a shiny black gem.

"Gotcha." Pearl grinned, lunging as she summoned a second spear. The lizard had no time to react as her spear struck home, stabbing into the soft belly mere inches from its gemstone. Pearl used her momentum to level the spear downward, neatly popping out the gem and lizard monster went up in a puff of smoke.

Pearl hand flicked out, bubbling the gem and sending it away in a single smooth motion. She spun on her heel and glided back towards Steven. Lapis had long since finished the ice ball and was sending waves of water against something that looked like a swarm of giant orange bees, connected to a central mass by brightly colored strands. Amethyst was sticking near the bubble, her whip wrapped around a feline gem with dozens of blinking eyes. The creature hissed and charged the purple gem. Amethyst sidestepped and kicked some dirt onto it, making the creature howl as dust got into its eyes.

"Eye see what you did there, Amethyst!" Steven laughed.

"Weak, dude." Amethyst snorted, conjuring a second whip and poofing the many-eyed gem. "Totally weak. No one's gonna get that one unless they saw it written out."

"Hey, eye'm just doing the best I can. No reason to resort to such dirty tricks."

Amethyst blew a raspberry over her shoulder as she bubbled the gem.

Well, those two seemed to have things well in hand. Pearl glanced over and saw that Garnet was still grappling with the tentacle monstrosity; the ground around her was covered in torn off tentacles that seemed to be wriggling back toward the fight. Pearl immediately moved to help, but only covered half the distance when the ground beneath her bulged outward, Pearl immediately
leapt away, but something caught her around the ankle and threw her to the ground.

She hit the ground head first, and lashed out blindly with her spear. She felt it bite into something and was rewarded with a sound like water pouring over hot metal. Pearl rolled, jumping back to her feet her spear at the ready and froze.

"...Bismuth?" Pearl gaped, feeling like something hot and heavy clawing its way down her throat.

The monster hissed, towering over her. It looked like someone who's legs had been cut off then dipped in a molten rainbow. It swiped at her with a hand of boiling metal and Pearl flinched backwards, her spear falling from her nerveless hand as she attempted to scramble away from the lumbering creature.

"B-Bismuth. Stop! It's me, Pearl!" Pearl could feel herself panicking, but couldn't help it. She felt her back press up against something, stopping her dead. The Technicolor sludge of molten metal raised both arms, ready to melt her into nothing.

"Pearl!" There was a screech as something huge and red slammed into the rainbow monster, knocking it aside.

And then Garnet was there, her hand grabbing onto Pearl's shoulder and hauling her to her feet. Pearl blinked, watching the ball of red rubbery tentacles wrestle with the molten monster.

"G-Garnet? I'm sorry. It's, that's-"

"That's not our Bismuth." Garnet's voice was resolute. "Look at the gemstone."

Pearl blinked and took a closer look. The two monsters were grappling, their former opponents completely forgotten. As they thrashed against each other, through the steam and writhing as the boiling metal cooked the ball of tentacles, Pearl glimpsed a rainbow gemstone; triangular, slanted, and unfamiliar. Pearl shook her head, feeling ashamed. Of course this couldn't have been their bismuth.

Their bismuth had been shattered in the battle for the ziggurat. Rose had told them so.

"Even if this was her," Garnet continued, "you know she would have expected you to cut her down rather than let her hurt you."

"...You're right." Pearl took a deep breath and summoned another spear; she steadied herself, glaring out across the multitude of fighting monsters. "Bismuth would want us to fight, no matter what. I apologize, Garnet. It will not happen again."

"I know." Garnet nodded.

With a sizzling roar, the corrupted bismuth threw its assailant aside in a puff of smoke. It rose again, turning back towards them, throwing droplets of burning metal everywhere.

Pearl leapt forward to meet it, spear held at the ready.

She would not stop fighting, no matter what.

Garnet nodded as Pearl sliced the gem out of the metal monster's shoulder. Garnet glanced down and saw the red gemstone that remained from the gem she'd been fighting. Scooping it up, Garnet examined it for a moment, grimaced, and bubbled it.
She hadn't needed to see that.

Since the immediate surroundings were cleared of corrupted gems, Garnet beat a retreat back to Steven's bubble. Pearl trailed behind her, the unknown bismuth's gem in hand. She rapped her knuckles on the pink force field and Steven opened a space for them to slip inside. Lapis was already there, arms crossed and frowning as she watched more of the gem beasts fight.

Steven tried to smile, but couldn't seem to generate his usual energy. There was a tapping on the bubble and Amethyst slipped inside as well.

"Sup dudes?" she asked, though without any of her usual carefree attitude. "Crazy party, huh?"

Nobody replied.

"Yeah, sounds about right." She muttered, taking a seat and staring out at the fight.

Garnet turned and surveyed the cavern. The numbers of corrupt gems were thinning, as predicted. A large, birdlike creature landed on the bubble and stared down at them with beady eyes. It made to peck at the bubble only to be snatched away as a horned beast flew down and clamped its jaws around its neck. Garnet watched as the creature flew off, the bird-thing struggling feebly in its grip. She watched as the horned gem's jaws tore through the birds form. But she looked away as the jaws snapped shut on the falling gemstone, though she couldn't tune out the sickening crack of breaking stone.

"That's awful." Garnet could hear the shock in Steven's voice and she winced. She had been hoping he might not have noticed that. He was sitting now, arms wrapped around his knees and looking so upset that it was all Garnet could do not to sweep him up in her arms and shield him from everything around them.

But she couldn't. this wasn't the kind of thing she could make go away. Instead, she just crouched next to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

This whole thing made Garnet want to scream.

When Peridot had told them about this place—about Evergreen—she'd tried to control herself. She had tried to tamper her expectations. Tried not to set herself up for disappointment.

She'd failed.

For the first time in thousands of years, she had dared to let herself hope that they might find one. Just one of the original Crystal Gems, whole, sane, uncorrupted or at least partially so; someone who could be saved.

And instead, she'd found this. This nightmarish scene of insane gems fighting and shattering each other for no reason.

It was like the after the last battle of the war all over again.

There was a part of Garnet that wanted to curl up and cry until everything went away. Another part was drowning in fury.

Someone had done this! Someone or something had disturbed these gems. Someone had destroyed the first glimmer of hope she'd had in millennia.

She wanted to find the person responsible and grind them into dust.
But Garnet couldn't. She couldn't afford to break down screaming, she couldn't afford to start cry, and she certainly couldn't afford to go on a rampage.

Not yet.

She was the leader, and she had to keep ahold of herself, lest the others break down too.

Right now, she needed to focus on getting everyone through this unharmed.

"I think things are starting to calm down now," said Pearl, peering out of the bubble.

Garnet glanced up, and realized that Pearl was right. The roars, screams, and other noises of battle were falling silent. It was neither a happy silence, nor a peaceful one. It was the silence of shattered gems and fallen friends.

Not that all the corrupt gems were gone. There were still several skulking around the cavern. Garnet examined them; these gems were different, bigger and more savage looking than the others they'd fought so far. Garnet realized belatedly that although her plan of waiting it out had thinned the horde; it ensured that the remaining gems were the strongest ones. The gems that had been able to defeat any other monster that challenged them.

They also seemed to have no interest in picking a fight with each other. She watched a grey horned beast supported by long sturdy legs, like those of an ostrich, paw at the ground near an enormous snake with glittering green feathers. The snake just watched it, unmoving.

"What now?" Steven asked. "Do you think we can escape?"

"Most likely…" Pearl murmured. She was eyeing the distant stairwell they'd entered. There was only one of the corrupt gems blocking their way: a spiky, yellow beetle that sat motionless in pools of umber-colored liquid. "If we can just get past that one, we can make it to the stairs before the others attack. Even if they followed us, only one or two of these would be capable of fitting in that stairwell."

"We can't do that." Everyone stared at Garnet.

"Why not?" asked Lapis, skeptically, "I'd rather just get out of here."

"Because if we don't take them down now, we'll have to hunt them down later." Garnet gestured around. "These gems will escape this place. They might bring the whole place down trying to do it, but they will. Once that happens…"

"They might hurt someone." Pearl finished, sighing. "You're right, of course. We can't leave such dangerous gems running around free. That said, how should we go about this? If we attack one, we can't be sure the others won't attack us as well."

"Meh, don't be such a downer, P." Amethyst grinned, cracking her knuckles. "We can take em. Why not just form Alexandrite? It'd take us like, what? Ten seconds?"

"Alexandrite might bring down the roof on our heads." Pearl replied, rolling her eyes.

"We'll split up into teams," said Garnet, cutting them off. "Pearl and Amethyst, you'll attack one of them. I'll take another. If that draws in more of them, fine. We can handle it. Lapis, I'm entrusting you with keeping Steven safe. Can you do that?"

Lapis glanced around at the chunks of ice still surrounding the bubble. "Yeah." She drawled. "I
think I can just about handle that."

"Good." Garnet looked over. "You two ready?"

They nodded and the Crystal Gems moved out.

"Come on, Lapis! I can help fight!"

"I'm pretty sure that's the opposite of what Garnet wanted." Lapis shrugged at him apologetically. "Also, no offense, but what would you do? Throw a shield at them? I'm not sure that would make much of a difference."

Steven frowned, watching Garnet leap over that big snake's head and punching it as it shot past her. He didn't like it, but he had to admit that Lapis had a point. These corrupt gems looked really tough!

Even so, he hadn't been able to do anything since they got here! And he was fed up with it. He just wanted all this fighting to stop so they could go home! But how could he help with that if he didn't fight?

He watched Amethyst sling her whip around the rhino-bird's legs, attempting to bring it crashing down. Instead of falling, the whip snapped and the monster tried to stomp on the purple gem.

He looked around, that giant beetle still wasn't moving. But he could see another corrupt gem ambling towards the fight. There had to be something he could do! Then his eyes alighted on something behind the beetle and he got an idea.

"Hey, Lapis, can you help me reach that mushroom?" He pointed. It was one of the very few specimens of fungi still standing and it was tiny compared to the broken ones lying everywhere, but it was still bigger than any mushroom he'd seen anywhere else.

"Uh, why?"

"I think there's something I can do. I just need to reach it."

"Garnet wanted you to stay put. Besides, in case you didn't notice, there's a giant bug in the way."

"Actually, she just said keep me safe," he grinned. "She didn't say anything about me staying still. But if you don't think you can handle one itty-bitty, little bug..." he trailed off, shrugging nonchalantly.

Lapis stared at him, eyebrow raised.

He raised his eyebrow right back, trying to look innocent.

Lapis snorted. "For the record, I know exactly what you're doing. But the sooner we deal with all this, the sooner we get to go home, so..." she shrugged. "Let's squash us a bug."

"Alright!" Steven let the bubble disappear, no point trying to roll it over all the debris. He raised his arms and Lapis scooped him up. She took to the air, the chunks of ice around them lifting to the air and hovered around them like a squadron of fighter jets. Lapis soared towards the entrance; the beetle's antenna twitched, but otherwise it made no movement.

It stayed still until they were almost over it, then the beetle reared upwards and spewed a thick golden liquid at them. Lapis banked hard, letting the liquid pass harmlessly past. The water gem
flicked her fingers and some of the ice shards shot downward, only to bounce off the beetle's carapace.

It made a furious clicking noise, then its shell opened up and a pair of thick leathery wings unfolded. It took to the air, shooting straight towards them with a speed that belied its size.

Lapis dived, just barely managing to swoop underneath it, as it zipped by accompanied by a manic buzzing noise.

"Oh, that's the way you wanna play, huh?" Lapis muttered, her wings flapping wildly to spin them to a stop after the sudden turn of speed. "Steven, can you still do that floating thing?"

"Yeah?"

"Okay, I'm going to drop you so you can get to your thing while I drown this thing."

"Uh," Steven glanced down. "Okay."

Lapis let go. Steven felt a something in his belly flutter as he started to fall, but he thought of laughing babies and managed to slow his fall before he hit the ground. He touched down in a pool of yellow goop and immediately tripped. Falling to all fours as he feet stuck fast. He tried to push himself upright, but the goop had a hold of his hands now and wouldn't budge.

"Oh, this is gross." Steven muttered, trying to ignore the glistening shards of what may or may not be shattered gems trapped in the goo. "Hey Lapis, don't let that guy hit you with his goop. It's really sticky!"

"Noted." There was the sound like the rush of water out a fire hose, followed by a enraged clicking. Steven ignored it. Lapis could more than handle herself. He just needed to figure out how to get out of this... sticky situation.

"Heh, that's a good one." Steven chuckled. "Need to tell Amethyst that one later." He thought of telling that joke and used the happy feeling to push himself into the air. The goop stretched like taffy, but didn't let him go. He could feel it trying to pull him back to the ground, but he held on to the joy of being hilarious and held himself in mid air. "Alright, half way there. I wonder if I..." he made a bubble. The goop separated, clinging to the outside of the bubble, while the bits inside stuck to his body. The sudden snap broke his focus and the he fell, the bubble landing in the sticky goop with a splat.

Steven examined himself. Well he was definitely going to need a bath after this. He looked up; Lapis seemed to be doing all right. As he watched she sent a wave of water over the beetle's wings and froze it, sending it tumbling to the ground with a pained clicking.

Steven turned back to his own dilemma. He wasn't stuck to the ground anymore, but his bubble was. He needed to time this just right if he didn't want to get stuck. He crouched and thought of happy things. When he jumped, he made sure to make the bubble disappear the moment after his feet left the ground. To his relief, he got it right the first try and he soared free of the sticky goop. He landed neatly on a clear patch of ground and hurried the rest of the way to the mushroom. He placed his hands against the stalk.

He paused.

He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to bring the mushroom to life and make it fight the corrupt gems, like the Watermelon Stevens only on purpose. Mushrooms were like plants, right? He didn't see a reason it wouldn't work. But now that he'd reached this point, it occurred to him...
that he wasn't quite sure how to make that particular power work on demand.

"Um…Hi, Mr. Mushroom… do you think you could help me out?" He looked at the giant fungus hopefully, but nothing happened. He could feel a sliver of doubt working its way into his mind, but he shook it off. He could do this. He was the son of Rose Quartz and he could do everything she could do… more or less.

He closed his eyes, thinking about how his powers worked. They tended to be emotion based, so what kind of emotions made plants pull themselves out of the ground and fight? Bloodthirstiness? He recalled something about Garnet mentioning his mom's plants living for combat. But that really wasn't his thing…

What did soldiers do? They fought, right? He pictured gemstones shattering beneath the jaws of corrupted monsters and shuddered. He didn't want that. But that wasn't the only thing a soldier fought for, was it?

He pictured Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst: standing strong between countless monsters and helpless peoples. They fought, not for the sake of shattering their enemies, but for the sake of protecting people. For the sake of people who couldn't fight back on their own.

He liked the feel of that thought and decided to follow it. He thought of Garnet, of Pearl and Amethyst, and his dad and everyone else he couldn't bare the thought of seeing hurt. He thought of being able to do something to protect them and the thought felt good.

Something underneath his hands shifted.

Steven opened his eyes. A pink glow was spreading up and down the mushroom and it started to grow its squishy stalk thickening and growing harder to the touch. The ground at its base churned and hundreds of tiny roots erupted, lifting the whole thing off the ground. Two pink lights gathered in front of Steven's face and bored into the stalk. A glassy liquid filled the holes and became something that looked an awful lot like eyes.

The eyes blinked slowly at him.

"Oh." Steven blinked back, suddenly feeling awkward. "Um…hi? Can you, uh, understand me?"

The mushroom's cap shook and showered Steven in a pink powder, Steven chose to take that as a yes. "Do you think you can help my friends?" More pink powder. Steven grinned, he pointed out across the chamber. "Well, let's do it. If it's not human-shaped, then it's not one of my friends."

The mushroom shook some more and started to move, slowly at first but with gathering speed. It shot across the chamber and plowed past Lapis, slamming cap first into the beetle and knocking it backward.

Steven jogged behind it, stopping next to Lapis, who was floating in midair, one hand outstretched and a totally bewildered expression on her face as she watched the living mushroom whack the beetle with it's cap over and over again. She glanced down at Steven and pointed wordlessly at the fighting fungus.

"Yep." Steven beamed proudly. "I made that!"

"…One of your mom's powers?"

"You betcha!"

"So you can summon shield, bubbles, float, and… bring mushrooms to life? Steven, no offense, but
"Awesome?"

"I was gonna say weird, but sure. Let's go with that." They watched as the beetle lunged forward, spraying more of that sticky goop. The mushroom blitzed to the side and lashed out with its cap, flipping the beetle over so that it landed on its back in a pile of its own goop. The giant insect struggled fruitlessly, its legs beating the air furiously as it tried to flip itself over.

"What..." Lapis started, "I'm don't even..." she tried again. Then she shrugged, giving up. With a hand gesture, she gathered up some of the water lying around and formed a giant ice spike. She shot it at the beetle, aiming for the joints on its underbelly. The ice pierced its carapace and the giant bug disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Steven's mushroom hopped up and down, releasing puffs of multicolored powder in what Steven could only assume was a victory dance, before it rushed off towards the battle on the other side of the cavern.

"Well, I think that went well." Steven said brightly, stepping carefully around the piles of sticky liquid, he scooped up a dark yellow gem and bubbled it. "I think my new friends going to need a name. Any suggestion, Lapis?"

"I have absolutely nothing to say."

"Okay, then I guess I'll think of something later. Come on, let's go help the others."

Garnet slammed her gauntlet into one of the snake's fangs, shattering it. Before it had a chance to recoil, she grabbed the broken fang and stabbed it through the beast's head. It gave of a rattling hiss, then vanished, leaving behind a vivid green gemstone.

That was one down. Garnet took a moment to breathe, these last few gems were tougher than expected but nothing the Crystal Gems couldn't handle. She turned, ready to help her companions, but they seemed to have it under control. As she watched, Amethyst summoned several whips at once and sent them wrapping around the bird-rhino's legs. It screeched and tried to break free, but the whips held and it went crashing to the ground. Pearl was on it in a heartbeat, stabbing her spear into its face and reducing it to smoke.

Garnet smiled grimly. That was two down; they were almost done.

Then something slammed into her from behind and sent her flying. Garnet righted herself in midair, landing in a crouch as she looked at what hit her. It appeared to be some kind of enormous elephant. Its body was covered in thick purple plates, except its trunk, which was long and ended in a wicked point. It stared down at her with furious beady eyes and gave an earsplitting trumpet.

Garnet scowled. How could she have let something that big sneak up on her like that?

"We're coming Garnet!" she heard Pearl yell. Garnet nodded, preparing to charge. If the three of them hit it together, hopefully it would go down quickly and they could finish up quickly. As she saw Amethyst and Pearl leap, weapons at the ready, she charged.

Then the elephant's front legs burst into flame, it reared up and used the flames to propel itself into a spin. It caught all three of them with its trunk and hurled them away. The Crystal Gems landed hard in an undignified pile to the sound of a triumphant trumpeting.
"Oh man." Amethyst groaned, pushing Pearl off of her. "Did we just get smacked around by Dumbo? I'm so done with this place."

"Agreed." Pearl muttered, helping Garnet to her feet. "I find myself quite ready to be rid of it as well. Amethyst, shall we fuse? I'd like to be done with this quickly."

"Yeah, sure. You mind if we take this thing, Garnet?"

"Knock yourselves out."

Twenty seconds and half a dozen arrows later, Pearl was bubbling the former elephants gem and sending it to join the rest of its companions in the temple.

"Aw, is it over already?" The gems looked over at the sound of Steven's voice. Lapis was carrying the boy in her arms, accompanied by a large shambling… thing.

"Steven?" asked Pearl, "What is that?"

"This." Steven said proudly. "Is one Mr. Funguy, I brought him to life to help you guys." Steven frowned. "Although I guess you guys finished without us." He sighed.

"I see. Well done," Pearl said, rather weakly. "You are aware that mushrooms aren't plants, correct?"

"Uh, I did not know that." Steven frowned. "Why?"

"Well your mother could only bring…plants to…" She trailed off as Steven stared at her. "Never mind," she looked around. "I don't see any more corrupt gems, do you?"

"No." Garnet answered, lost in thought. She stared around at the wreckage. It appeared all the corrupt gems had either been defeated or escaped. She doubted there was anything left for them to find here. "I think it's time to go home."

"Finally!" Amethyst declared, falling backwards with a dramatic huff. "Ame needs her beauty sleep."

"I can be bring Mr. Funguy with me, right?" Steven asked hopefully.

"Er, no Steven. I don't think he'd be able to fit up the stairs." Pearl answered, staring up at the mushroom awkwardly. "We'll have to leave him here."

"What? But I only just met him! We can't leave him down here alone." Steven wailed, wrapping his arms around the fungus' stalk.

"You could revert him back into his normal form." Pearl suggested, looking away as Steven considered this; he turned to the mushroom, "Would you be alright with that, Mr. Funguy?" The mushroom shook and rained pink powder onto the boy's head. "Well…okay, as long as you're sure." Steven hugged the mushroom. "I didn't get to know you long buddy, but I'll always remember you—the best mushroom I have ever known."

The mushroom released little more powder and rooted itself. It began to glow pink, and went rigid.

"Mr. Funguy?" Steven asked, taking a step back nervously. The mushroom shook violently and a slit opened up on the middle of its stalk. It heaved back and forth like it was choking until; at last,
it spat something out and went still, the glow fading.

A slivery-white gemstone clinked against the cavern floor.

Everyone stared at the gemstone, unmoving.

The gem began to glow.

"Ugh, not another one." Amethyst groaned, stepping forward. "Anyone mind if I just take it out now? Save us the trouble so we can go home?" she raised her whip, but a gauntleted hand closed on her hand. "…Garnet?"

Garnet didn't respond, the fusion had gone rigid, staring at the glowing gem

The light began to coalesce as the gem formed. Several forms flickered; pausing at one of normal stature, then began to warp, stretching out unnaturally long.

Garnet's hand snapped downward, digging into Amethyst's hair. Garnet withdrew her hand, clutching a plastic water bottle, flicking the top off with her thumb; she sprayed the contents over the glowing form.

The form stopped stretching as a rosy light mixed with white. It began to stutter, growing and shrinking until, with a pop, it snapped into a smaller shape and the light faded.

The gem's eyes snapped open and she gasped, collapsing to the ground. Garnet examined her; tall as Pearl but not quite as slim, the gem was garbed in a long white coat, silvery blue hair spread stretched down her back, the gem's form was complete, symmetrical, wholly uncorrupted… and totally unfamiliar.

Garnet closed her eyes, refusing to acknowledge the sharp stab of disappointment. "Pearl?"

"Yes, Garnet?" Pearl sounded upset. Garnet could relate.

"Steven gave you a bottle of healing spit as well, give it to this gem."

"Are- are you sure, Garnet? She's not one of ours."

"I know," Garnet sighed. She turned, pulling off her shades and looking Pearl in the eye. "But this is the first time we've ever truly had a chance to save a gem from corruption. I refuse to let that stop us."

Pearl met her gaze and nodded, all hesitation gone as she knelt beside the shaking gem. Gently, Pearl rolled the gem onto her side, giving Garnet a clear look at her gem. The stranger's gem was at the base of her neck, its sheen the same silvery-blue as her hair. Dark grey eyes blinked blearily up at Pearl.

"W-who…?" the gem's voice was ragged.

"Someone who wants to help." Pearl pulled a bottle from her gem and slowly dabbed the liquid onto the gem. As the liquid shined pink the gem's eyes began to clear, she blinked and sat up.

"T-thank you." then the gem's eyes closed and she slumped forward. Pearl caught her awkwardly and just looked at Garnet.

Garnet felt a hand on her leg. "Yes, Steven?"
"Is that gem going to be okay?"

Garnet reached down and ran her fingers through his hair. "…I hope so."

"So…" Amethyst said, stretching her arms above her head. "What now, Garnet? I know this is kinda a big deal, but are we still heading home?"

Garnet considered this. She looked at the gem hanging limply in Pearl's arms, the long hair falling like waterfall over her back and shoulders. This changed things. The fusion hadn't thought that there would be any more gems left to be found here.

But this gem's presence meant that there might be more of gems here yet to be discovered. Garnet recalled that there was also the laboratory below this chamber that Peridot had spoken of, which warranted investigation.

But Garnet doubted the Crystal Gem's were in any condition to do that. Steven looked excited, but tired. Lapis and Amethyst both looked ready to leave.

But Pearl… Garnet could see something in her eyes. A sort of tiny spark, like a fire had just been reignited. Garnet recognized it.

It was hope.

Despite herself, Garnet felt it too. Maybe it wasn't too late to save someone.

But there was something else to consider: the torn up state of this place when they arrived, that Lapis swore hadn't been like that when she left, the gems wrapped in prison rings and left lightly buried, the convenient way the rings had come off just when the Crystal Gems had been right in the middle of the minefield.

All these things pointed to one conclusion: someone had intentionally laid this trap and there was no doubt that it had been meant for them.

Garnet also had her suspicions about who had done this.

Jasper.

Oh, Garnet didn't have any solid proof; she hadn't seen so much of the glimpse of the soldier's helmet. Maybe it was just that Ruby had seen the Homeworld soldier recently, which made her seem tied to this whole situation in some way…

But Jasper was the only answer that made sense.

Garnet could even guess how it had been happened, if she assumed that Jasper had been in the area yesterday and spotted Lapis and Peridot, she would have been on their trail like sharks on a patch of bloody water. Jasper would be looking for any weapon to use to continue the war against Rose, a treasure trove of gem monsters ripe for the taking? Jasper must have torn the mushrooms to pieces in a frenzy, snatching up any gem she could lay her hands on.

And no doubt she found the prison rings here too, this place was meant to hold gems captive, after all. Prison rings were old war technology; Jasper would have known exactly how to use it. She must have been hiding in the jungle and seen them coming, the Crystal Gem's certainty hadn't been in a hurry to get here.

Which meant, undoubtedly, that the soldier was still nearby. Which presented a whole new set of
problems.

Her presence made it far too dangerous to split up into groups. If Garnet stayed behind to investigate the rest of this place and sent the others back to the temple, Jasper would be free to attack either group. Garnet knew she could beat the soldier outright, but the Homeworld warrior had surprise on her side. Since she hadn't actually seen the soldier, Garnet didn't know for a fact that Jasper was here, which infuriatingly crippled the effectiveness of her future vision.

And if Jasper went after the others… Garnet glanced at Lapis. There was no way of knowing how she might react. Garnet couldn't bear to entrust Steven's safety to such a wild card. Jasper still thought the boy was Rose, and wouldn't hesitate in trying to poof him… Garnet didn't know what would happen then, and she didn't plan on finding out.

"Uh, Garnet? You've been quiet for ages now." Amethyst asked, poking her leg. "You still there?"

"Yes."

"So what are we doin'?"

Garnet hesitated for another moment, assessing the risks, "Steven, how many more bottles of healing spit do you have?"

"Uh…" Steven rummaged around in his backpack, "Four. Oh, wait this one got broken in the fighting. Gross, my spits all over my stuff. Oh well, at least they're just my germs... anyway, I got three left.

Garnet nodded, "Give them to me. We're going to send this gem and you back to the temple in a bubble."

"Is that a good idea, Garnet?" Pearl asked, looking up at her in alarm. "We don't know if this gem is truly safe."

"No. It's not a good idea, that's why we're sending Amethyst too."

"Nice. I always wanted to know what bubble travel felt like."

"But still…" Pearl began.

"Don't argue." Garnet cut her off, she gestured to their surroundings. If it had been a scene of ruin before, now it was an absolute wasteland—fires burned, chunks of ice were everywhere, and there were other, less identifiable substances lying around. "It's not safe here. But there still might be more gems we could save, and I'm not abandoning them." Not when they were so close. Jasper hadn't found all of them, and even if any gems that remained were completely corrupted, Garnet wasn't going to leave them behind for the soldier.

This was the only way she that she could do that and keep Steven safe, which was always the most important thing.

Pearl caught the look in her eyes and nodded.

"Sounds like a plan, come on Steven." Amethyst said, strolling up beside the white gem and dragging Steven with her.

Garnet turned her head and caught Lapis' eye. "I want you to go with them too."
"Really?" Lapis arched an eyebrow at her. "But I've been having so much fun."

"Get your sarcastic little butt over here, Sea Queen." Amethyst laughed, pulling Steven the rest of the way. "I know you want outta here as much as I do."

"Don't I get a say in this?" Steven complained, pulling against Amethyst's grip. "I wanna help find gems too! What if you need my healing powers?"

"We have some of your healing spit." Garnet hushed him and looked him in the eye. "I don't know if we'll need it, and I'd rather have you with the one gem we know for a fact exists and might need it."

Steven opened his mouth, ready to argue.

"Steven. Please."

Steven paused, catching the look in her eye. He closed his mouth and nodded. He stopped resisting Amethyst's pull, and took up place beside her. "What do you need me to do?"

Garnet grinned. She ruffled his hair.

That's my boy.

"Form a bubble around all four of you." Steven concentrated and a pink bubble enveloped the three.

"Are you guys going to be alright?" He asked.

"We'll be fine." Garnet assured him. "Pearl?"

"Ready," together, Pearl and Garnet reached up and tapped the top of the bubble and it winked out of sight. And suddenly, the two gems stood alone in a field of carnage, silence, and shattered gems.

"...Do you think we'll find anyone?" Pearl asked softly. "Anyone we know, I mean?"

"I don't know." Garnet replied, she hesitated for a moment wondering if she should say what she was thinking. In the end, she couldn't stop herself. "I think I saw Topaz."

Pearl flinched, looking away as tears began well up in her eyes. "...I saw Jade. Amethyst poofed her... I-I thought she'd been shattered in crystalline canyon."

"Me too..." Garnet could feel her own eyes watering now, but it was too late to stop. "That octopus was Crazy Lace." She placed a hand on Pearl's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Pearl placed her hand over Garnet's and squeezed back.

"R-remember when she managed to get an entire platoon of a-gates to chase her, then got them all lost in a swamp?" Pearl grinned, hiccupping as water began to carve streaks through the dirt on her face.

"Yeah... she always liked to do crazy things." Garnet rubbed a hand into her eyes.

The dam broke.

"I miss them." Pearl murmured, her body shaking with sobs. Garnet pulled her close. She wasn't sure which of them needed it more.
"Me too."

Garnet wasn't quite sure how long they stood there. But eventually, with a final sniff, Pearl wiped her eyes dry and stepped away.

"...Sorry."

"S'alright." Garnet shook her head, wiping her own eyes. "Come on. Let's see if we can find anyone else."

Pearl nodded.

Without another word, they turned away and began their search for friends long lost.

High above their heads, hidden by the darkness clinging to the cavern's ceiling, Jasper was watching.

She had barely managed to reach the ceiling before Rose and her rebels had wandered in. It's a good thing she'd knocked down all those glowing earth plants, or there might not have been enough darkness to stay hidden.

Jasper considered all that had happened. She wasn't surprised that Rose had survived her little trap. Though she was a little disappointed all her little band of rebels had made it through as well.

However, Jasper couldn't help it when a treacherous sliver of relief swept through her that… She had made it through unharmed. She couldn't help it, but she could just about ignore it.

All in all, she'd call this a success.

She'd gotten a chance to see her new troops in action, they'd been as wild and uncontrollable as she'd expected. It had been quite an enjoyable challenge to get capture all those gems. Many of them had formed fully corrupted and ready to fight, it had been a struggle to get them all under control as quickly as possible.

But even better, was that some of them had been only partially corrupted, and Jasper had recognized them. She'd seen old rebels, some of which she'd personally captured all those millennia ago. Seeing those rebel's squirm, their fear as their bodies turned against them had been unpleasant, but it was exactly what those rebels deserved for their treachery.

When those half-mad rebels had seen her, or rather seen the diamond's symbol proud upon her chest, they'd gone berserk. One or twice things had gotten dicey when more than one gem had reformed to attack her. But still, she'd naturally overcome them, and it seemed her beat down had tipped what was left of their minds over the edge.

Heh. She'd have to be sure to let Rose know just how close she had come to saving some of her precious rebels. Only for Jasper to push them beyond the point of salvation.

More to the point, Jasper now knew what to expect when she released the gems in future. They wouldn't obey her, not without being broken in over a long period of time. But still, they'd make an excellent tool with just a bit of clever application.

Jasper examined the fusion, working her way through the rubble, searching for any lost friends like a desperate little child. The soldier considered attacking, but decided against it. The fusion might be distracted, but Jasper herself had spent the night subduing dozens of corrupted gems and was in
no condition to attack. Furthermore, Rose had already left.

Which meant there was no reason for her to stay anymore.

Jasper began to climb across the ceiling, digging her fingers into the damp rock until she found herself hanging before a hole in the ceiling, she'd seen one of the more cowardly corrupt gems fly upwards and burrow out through here. She could use this to tunnel escape without being noticed by the fusion or her service drone.

Jasper started to climb upwards, a smug grin working its way across her face.

She had much to do: leads to investigate, gem beasts to subdue, plans to make. But if what she'd read about down in the laboratory was true, it wouldn't before she'd have a way to make Rose lose *everything*.

Climbing up through the darkness, Jasper began to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

So. Many. Corrupt. Gems. Ugh... thank you to everyone who suggested a corrupt gem, it would have been a nightmare trying to come up with this many all by myself. I tried to incorporate as many of your suggestions as I could.

Being unable to depend on my own creativity aside, I think I'm mostly happy with how this chapter came out. I got real inspired with it and powered through all this in a couple of days. A lot of fun, a lot of typing.

Be sure to review and let me know what you thought of it all.
There was a feeling of pressure, then of movement that was as slow as it was impossibly fast. Then, with a pop like a cork from a bottle made of starlight, they were in the temple.

"Are they going to be okay?" Steven asked, thinking back to the look on Pearl's face. He hadn't quite been able to figure out what she had been feeling, but whatever it was, it had been fragile.

"Who? Pearl and Garnet?" Amethyst gave a dismissive snort. "Course they will. It's not like we left many monsters behind, right?"

Steven bit his lip; even so, "I'm still not sure we should have left them all alone."

"Look, Steven, don't worry about it." She looked him in the eye, her expression uncharacteristically serious. "They have something they gotta do and we'd just get in the way. It's not like they didn't think we could handle it, it's just…” Amethyst waved her hand carelessly, searching for words. "One of those things, y'know? Emotional junk. They wanna do it themselves."

"...I guess so." Steven sighed.

"Don't sweat it, dude. Those two can handle it. Now, you gonna help me move Sleeping Beauty to the couch, or what?" She gestured to the gem at their feet. Steven looked at her; the new gem hadn't seemed to notice the sudden change in location and was sprawled across the floor.

"Sure."

"Cool. I'll take top, you take bottom." Amethyst slid her hands under the white gem's arms and pulled her off the ground. Steven did the same with her legs, the gem's hair and coat were still dragging against the floor, but he guess that was okay.

"You feel like helping, Waterbird?" Amethyst looked over at Lapis. She got no response, as the blue gem was staring upwards at the bubbled gems overhead with a grim expression. She blinked, shaking her head and looking back to Amethyst.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You. This gem. Help us carry, maybe?"  

"You two seem to have it under control." Lapis replied, "I could get the door for you, if you want."

"The doors are hands-free." Amethyst answered, shooting her a flat look.

"Really? Darn. I guess I'm just useless then."


The temple's doors opened to the sound of an argument.

"Cheater! My superior gem mind has already calculated all the possibilities! There is no conceivable way that you haven't drawn the last four."
"I don't know what to tell you… oh wait, yes I do! Go Fish."

"You cloddy human meat sack! If you're going to cheat like that…oh"

"Let me guess, you just drew the last four?"

"… It seems there was a flaw in my calculations, yes. But the joke is on you! That gives me yet another complete set. My victory is assured!"

Connie and Peridot were sitting at the kitchen counter. Peridot was wildly waving a handful of cards under Connie's nose while the human girl just sat there, resting her head against her palm and looking amused.

"Connie!" said Steven, perking up at the sight of his best friend. "You're here!"

"Steven!" Leaving Peridot to her weird victory dance, Connie hopped off the stool and ran over, "Sorry to crash at your house when you're not here, but my parents-" she stopped, catching sight of their burden. "I, uh, wow." She blinked, taking in their messy clothes and unconscious guest. "I can already tell, this story is going to be a good one!"

"You bet!" Steven grinned. "I've got so much to tell you. Just one sec," with great care, Steven managed to maneuver the gem onto the couch. She still wasn't showing any signs of waking up, but at least she'd be more comfortable.

"So who is this?" Connie asked, eyes burning with curiosity. "Peridot filled me on what you were doing, is she a former Crystal Gem?"

"I don't think so," Steven shook his head, remembering the way Garnet's whole body had seemed to sag when she first saw the gem. "We don't know who she is."

"Hmmm… bummer." Connie turned towards him, "So what happened with you? No offense, but you're kind of a mess."

Steven looked himself over and had to admit that Connie had a point. He was still covered in the beetle's sticky goop and that was coated in that glowing pink powder Mr. Funguy had showered on him. Man, he looked like some kind of powdered jelly donut!

He could hear the voice of his inner-Pearl whispering, 'Make sure you take a bath before sitting on the furniture, Steven. '

He could do that. But that'd take ages and he didn't want to leave Connie waiting. Luckily, he had a faster option. "Hey Lapis?" he said, turning to the water gem. "Do you think you could do that thing?" he gestured at himself.

The blue gem had deep in hushed conversation with Peridot, but looked up at the sound of her name. Once she caught his meaning, she nodded and snapped her fingers. A muffled sloshing came from the bathroom and a stream of water came flowing through the air. The water wrapped around Steven, gently lifting him off the ground and leaving only his head exposed. Lapis waved her hands like a conductor and the water churned, scrubbing him down all over.

"Well, that's one way to keep yourself clean." Connie grinned, watching the process with interest.

"I know, right?" Steven said, trying to keep himself from giggling; it was like a full body massage, except soggier. It was a bit chilly but he could live with that; especially given the alternative. Lapis didn't have the best grasp on the range of temperatures that a human could live in. The first time
they'd tried this, her efforts to make it more comfortable had left him feeling a bit like a steamed lobster.

After a minute or so, Lapis pulled the water away, leaving his clothes dry and clean… well, reasonably clean. They wouldn't stain the furniture, at least. Pearl wouldn't be satisfied, but he could at least sit down without feeling guilty. Lapis made another gesture and the water shot out the window.

"Alright." Steven said, clapping his hands. "Story time!"

Connie listened attentively with only the occasional interruption, her expression changing from interest to worry to excitement as the tale went on. Peridot quickly joined them while Lapis moved off to the kitchen area. Above them, Amethyst had settled herself down on the second floor, sitting above the couch with her legs swinging off the edge. The quartz occasionally her own commentary, mainly about how awesome she had been, but for the most part let him get on with it.

"…And then we were sent back here on the bubble express." Steven finished.

"Wow." said Connie, leaning back with a wistful look in her eye "wish I could have been there. I could have helped fight."

"Oh please." Peridot rolled her eyes, chuckling. "I hardly see what difference you could have made. A mere human would be little more than a chew toy for a corrupted gem, let alone a horde of them."

"Hey, I can fight!" Connie huffed. "Pearl's been training me to use a sword. Besides, it's not like you would have been much help if you'd been there."

"That's because I'm not a combat gem." Peridot said matter-of-factly. "I am, quite literally, not designed for anything as barbaric as combat. As for yourself, well, I'm sure you try very hard, but you're still only human." Peridot shrugged, "No offense, of course, but your species is far too squishy to be of use in a real combat situation."

"That's not very nice Peridot." Steven frowned. "Connie is really good! If she'd been there, those gems wouldn't have stood a chance."

"You can't be serious," Peridot grinned, as though expecting him. "She doesn't have any powers, or anything. Just look at her."

"If that's how you feel." Connie muttered, glaring at the technician. "I'd be happy to show you what I can do."

"I already told you, I'm not a combat gem." Peridot snorted, rolling her eyes. "Being able to overpower me proves nothing. Besides, if I still had my limb enhancers, I could best you with three of them behind my back."

"Pearl's not a combat gem either." Connie pointed out. "And look at what she's capable of."

"Pearl is an anomaly." Peridot said dismissively. "You can hardly build a logical argument citing her as an example."

Connie opened her mouth, but Steven cut her off. "Come on guys, don't fight! Connie, you're a really good fighter and I promise to bring you with us next time we fight a bunch of monsters. And Peridot…" Steven hesitated, "don't be mean."
"What?" Peridot looked affronted. "I don't see why you're all getting so upset, I'm just stating the facts."

"You know what, forget it." said Connie, looking back to Steven. "Steven's right, I don't want to argue about this. Besides, there are more important things I want to hear about, like the gem sitting on the couch is. Do you really not know anything about her?"

"Nope." Steven sighed, glad for the change of subject. "She didn't have the chance to say much before she... fainted? I guess. I'm not really sure what happened."

"Can gems actually faint?" Connie said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Humans faint when our brains get deprived of oxygen, but gems don't have organs... do they?"

"Of course not." Peridot snorted. "Our forms are far more efficient than those bloated sacs you humans have—no offense of course."

"You know, just because you say 'no offense' doesn't mean you're not being rude." Connie said, frowning at the technician. "But since you're such an expert, why don't you tell us what's wrong with her?"

"Well. I am far from an expert on how the phenomena of gem corruption works," Peridot replied, puffing herself up. "But if I had to guess I'd say that when Steven's healing powers were used on her, presumably curing her of corruption, it healed her body. But the recovery of her mind is lagging behind. As you know, a gem normally retreats into their core in order to speed recovery. But I would hypothesize that since the problem is so directly related to her form, she may have subconsciously maintained her ordinary shape so that her mind would have a template to shape itself to."

"Is that really what you think happened?" Steven asked.

Peridot shrugged. "It makes as much sense as anything else. We can only assume she'll wake up given time, once her mind catches up with the rest of her."

"So we just have to wait." Connie sighed. "Well, do we know anything about else about her?"

"Not really," Steven sighed. "We don't even know what her name is."

"Allow me." Peridot declared, getting to her feet and strutting over to their unconscious houseguest. "I, as a licensed kindergartener, naturally have a wealth of experience in gem identification."

"Really?" Steven perked up.

"Of course," Peridot preened. She bent over and poked at the gem's neck. "Let's take a look at what we have here" Peridot frowned, "Hmm... she can't be a pearl, the nose isn't nearly pointy enough. Not a howlite, either—she's far too shiny... white jade?" Peridot bent closer, her eyes narrowing. "I don't think so, not with that blue shimmer. How about..."

Steven tried to wait patiently as the technician rattled off and rejected a dozen different gemstones he'd never heard of. After the number of rejections reached upwards of twenty, he started to get a little bored. "You know, if you don't know what she is, you can just say so. We won't think less of you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Peridot snapped. "She's clearly a... a... a zircon! No, wait..."

"She can just tell us when she wakes up," Steven shrugged. "It's no big deal, Peridot. Really."
"Well, it's not my fault!" Peridot snapped, turning around and crossing her arms with a huff. "She's clearly from White Diamond's court, how am I supposed to know anything about that?"

"White Diamond?" Connie asked, sharing a glance with Steven. "Which one is she?"

"Oh just one of the Diamonds, obviously." Peridot said dismissively.

Connie and Steven shared a look. *Just* one of the Diamonds?

"You don't sound very impressed by her," said Connie.

Peridot shrugged. "Personally I've never seen her. Granted, she's a Diamond and must therefore be very magnificent and everything. But of course, there's no way she could even begin to compare with the radiance of my former Diamond." Peridot paused, noticing their looks. "Er, yes well," she coughed awkwardly. "The sectors of the galaxy under the control of the White Court are quite far from where I worked, the other end of the universe, really. What little I know of her gems comes from the few technicians I worked with on joint projects. I didn't care for them much." She added as an afterthought. "They tended to be clods."

"…Okay?" Steven wasn't really sure what to do with that information. The organization of the universe wasn't something he knew a lot about, He tried to picture it split up into a color-coded chunks, like a political map of the world's countries, but he just couldn't quite wrap his head around it.

He decided to abandon the mystery for now. They could make guesses about who the gem was or what she was doing here all day and get nowhere. "So you know what I've been up to," he said. "But what about you, Peridot? Did you find anything out while we were gone?"

Peridot's expression soured. "No. I did not."

Steven's brow furrowed, taken aback by her cranky expression. "Why not?"

"Ask that thing." Peridot huffed, pointing to the side. Steven followed her finger to Blaire's pyramid thingy. Steven blinked and glanced at Connie for help.

"Don't look at me." She shrugged. "Peridot was sulking when I got here and refused to tell me why."

"I was not sulking!" Peridot snapped, crossing her arms. "That cloddy excuse for a computer just refused to be cooperative. I lacked the proper device to process the files I retrieved. I could build one, of course, but that would take some time and you have forbidden me from disassembling your household devices for parts. To save time I decided to utilize the projected interface, as I knew it would be more than up to the task." Now Peridot was scowling, her eyes narrowed into grumpy little slits. "But once the cloddy thing had the files she refused to let me access them! Then, when I tried to retrieve the data drive, the wretched thing locked me out completely. I can't even download them to another system to attempt to bypass the security!"

"What?" Steven stared at the azure pyramid. That didn't sound right—Blaire had always been a picture of polite helpfulness to him. He'd better get to the bottom of this. Stepping over, he knocked, "Blaire, can I talk to you?"

"Of course, Steven." The pyramid glowed and the projection materialized. She'd changed outfits again, looking like she'd stepped straight out of a medieval ballroom. A voluminous dress, adorned with countless ruffles hid her legs from view and long dainty gloves covered her arms. Her glowing eyes peered out at him from behind a glittering mask. "How may I be of assistance?"
"Well first, I think it is important that I tell you that dress is really pretty. But I was wondering why you won't tell Peridot what she wants to know."

"Of course." The hologram curtseyed. "I'm afraid all of the data files she requested are highly classified. Peridot is not authorized to access them."

"Oh. Well, could you tell me about them instead?" Steven asked hopefully.

"You do not possess the necessary clearance either." Blaire said simply.

"Give it up, Steven." Peridot plopped down onto the stairs, a grumpy scowl on her face. "The classification of those files appears to be of Flawless-Level. Unless you have the authorization passcode, you might as well try to fly a starship without gravity engine—you'll get nowhere." She added, noticing his blank expression.

"Well, do you have any idea where we can find the passcode?"

"My guess? Either the Diamonds or the gem researchers they gave it to." Peridot shrugged. "Somehow, I calculate a very low chance of success from either."

"Peridot said you wouldn't give the data drive back." Connie said, looking at Bliare. "Why?"

"Upholding security of classified information is a central part of my programming." Blaire answered. "Allowing her to reclaim the data files and access them through other means would have been a failure to uphold that programing."

"Oh." Steven "well, can you give the data thingy to me?"

Blaire's eyes focused in on Steven with a rather uncomfortable intensity. "No. I have concluded that you would simply return the files to her. Which would invalidate the point of refusing her them in the first place."

"Come on," Steven smiled up at her, "Please?"

"Steven." Peridot groaned, face palming. "That is not going to work. As I've tried to tell you several times now: What you call Blaire isn't really a person, she's a computer, a tool."

"That's not true." Steven protested, "Blaire is a gem. Just look at her dress! I may not be big on technology, but I'm pretty sure a computer wouldn't care at all about fashion."

"Oh, I will admit that your interactions with her are having some peculiar effects. But I have first-hand experience of the madness you inflict upon people." Peridot shrugged, "But that," she jabbed a finger at the projection, "is just a computer. You heard her yourself; she's just operating according to her programing. Even your influence can't change something that fundamental."

Steven frowned. He looked at Blaire. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

The projection tilted her head. "Why? Nothing has been stated that is incorrect."

Steven groaned, rubbing his hand against his forehead. He didn't really want to argue about this. He just thought Peridot was being kind of rude.

"It's nothing worth getting so upset over." Peridot raised her hands wide, "It simply means that we have arrived at a deceased conclusion."

"I believe the human colloquialism you are looking for is: hit a dead end." Blaire corrected.
"Gee, thanks." Peridot glowered.

"You are most welcome," Blaire smiled sweetly.

Peridot glowered at the projection. She stood up and clapped her hands together. "Well, I have concluded that my continued presence here will accomplish nothing further. So I believe I shall take my leave. Hey Lapis!"

"Over here." Lapis was leaning against the kitchen sink, idly twirling several balls of water over her head into various shapes.

"You wanna go?"

"Sure." Lapis let the water splash back into the sink.

"Excellent. I will require that you carry me. As I don't want to have to walk all that way on my own."

"Fine." Lapis waved as she stepped out the door. "Later Steven."

"Bye Lapis." He waved back.

"Goodbye Steven."

"See you later, Peridot."

The door shut behind the green gem and he saw Lapis saw Lapis sling the smaller gem under her arm and fly away.

"Do you require any further assistance?" asked Blaire.

"What? Oh, umm..." Steven thought about it, he was still pretty sure that Blaire was a person. "Before you go, can you tell me what you do? When you're not helping us, I mean."

"Well..." Blaire's head tilted, "Before being brought to this location. I simply waited until I was needed. Now, however, I explore the informational depths of the Internet. Before you called upon me today, I was analyzing a rather fascinating document on the reproductive capacity of the common sea slug."

"Oh." Steven blinked, trying to picture that last bit might be like before realizing he didn't want to. "Well, cool. I guess. I'll let you get back to your slugs."

"I shall, thank you." Blaire's form disappeared and the glow around her pyramid faded.

"She's totally a person." Steven declared. "Even if she has weird tastes."

"I'm inclined to agree, for a given value of person." Connie nodded. "She's still kinda computer, though. Anyway, what do you want to do now?"

"Actually, there's something I want to ask you, Connie." Steven turned and smiled at his Jam Bud. "Now that we've got all the gem stuff out of the way, I want to ask. What brings you to my home? You started to tell me but we got kind of sidetracked."

"Oh. Right." Connie took a deep breath. "Here's the thing Steven, my parents are actually out of town. My dad is out of the state, working security on several beaches with endangered birds nesting on them. The problem is that my Mom has to work every day this week. She's gone all day
and most of the night. I know she'd actually rather sleep in the hospital to save time from commuting, but she doesn't want to leave me all alone." Now Connie's grinned, a sneaky light entering her eyes. "I...may have used that information to convince her to let me stay here. She thinks your dad lives in the house too and as long as we stay with your dad the first night so that he can talk to her on my phone..." she trailed off with a grin and waggled her eyebrows.

Her explanation was cut off as Steven raised a finger. "So what you're telling me," he said slowly, looking her in the eye "is that we are looking at a week long sleepover?"

Connie's grin widened.

"This is gonna be great!" Steven beamed. "This calls for a celebration. I'm thinking... donuts?"

"You know it!"

Amethyst watched the kids rush out the house, their voices quickly fading into the distance and grinned. They'd better bring back a donut for her. She settled herself more comfortably against the floor and stared down at the unconscious gem. Someone should keep an eye on her and, for once, Amethyst was feeling somewhat responsible.

But their houseguest didn't seem inclined to move her butt off the couch any time soon, so the quartz allowed herself to relax, the quiet rush of the sea and wind lulling her into a doze and the hours slipped by peacefully.

The sun was just slipping beneath the sky when the telltale rush of warp pad pulled Amethyst back into the land of consciousness. She was on her feet in an instant, peering towards the temple doors. The lighting was dim, but she could just about see the familiar silhouettes of her friends—that blocky head and pointy nose were unmistakable.

"Sup dudes." She yawned.

They turned to face her and Amethyst felt something inside her sink.

"Amethyst." Garnet's voice was clipped. "Report."

Amethyst sighed internally and answered. "Steven's out hanging with Connie. I think they're gonna crash with Greg tonight. That one," she nodded towards the couch. "Hasn't done squat since we got back."

Garnet made no reply. Amethyst watched her turn, step through the temple doors, and vanish from sight.

Amethyst turned to Pearl. She was still standing there, not saying anything. She looked like a sandcastle under siege by the rising tide—feebly holding herself up as the waves washed her away piece by piece. Pearl stared blankly at Amethyst for a moment before wordlessly steeping across the floor and out into the darkening night air.

Amethyst closed hers eyes and swore under her breath. She rubbed her fingers into her eyelids and groaned. Then she pulled herself up and followed her friend out the door.

Pearl hadn't gone far, Amethyst could see her sitting just on the edge of the waves, her arms around her knees as she stared out to sea. Amethyst joined her, plopping down next to her and trying to decide what to say. After several minutes and a completely blank slate, she decided to just wing it.

"Hey."
"...Hello." Pearl's voice was empty, without a single shred of the powerful gem Amethyst knew.

"I'm..." Amethyst hesitated. "Gonna go out on a limb here and say that you guys didn't find anybody?"

"We found plenty," Amethyst had to strain her ears to hear the words over the sound of the sea. "But if you meant in one piece, no. We found nobody."

Amethyst looked away. Yeah, she'd guessed as much.

She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came to mind. What was she supposed to say? Are you okay? It's alright? Don't worry about it?

Yeah, that would be really helpful.

In the end, she said the only thing she could say, which was nothing. Instead, Amethyst wrapped her arm around Pearl and pulled her close.

Together, they watched in silence as the moon arced across the sky until it sunk back beneath the sea.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to be honest. This chapter was the closest thing to filler I've ever written. I think the only thing this accomplished was pulling Connie back into the plot, something I've been meaning to do for a while but never managed to fit in. But I could argue that I wanted to go back to character interactions that make Steven Universe such a good show.

I feel like Connie and Peridot would actually get on each other's nerves. Or at least, Peridot would get on Connie's. Peridot is actually really rude... like, all the time. And nobody ever seems to call her on it. I feel like Connie would be the character who would.

Anyway, If you'd take the time to leave a review. Well, that'd be just the knees of bees.
Awakened Moon

Chapter Summary

New friends and upsetting news,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steven concentrated, turning the steering wheel just enough to weave his vehicle around a dangerously placed road sign. He swerved around several old ladies walking their dogs, bicyclers, and a lamppost without a scratch. Then, with the utmost care, sent his car spinning off a cliff. The falling vehicle narrowly missed hitting a flying bird and slammed into a parked trailer, which exploded in a giant fireball. Synthesized rock music started playing as the words 'you killed it!' scrolled across the screen.

"Alright!" Steven cheered. "New high score!"

"What's this game called again?" Connie asked, peering over his shoulder.

"Road Killer," Steven answered, entering his initials into the second place all-time high score. The letters ONN blinked just above his, with a score almost twice his own. Whoever ONN was, they were way better at reckless driving and senseless destruction then he could ever be. "Isn't it cool?"

"It's certainly destructive," said Connie. "But you go on real adventures with real magic all the time, don't you think that makes these video games kinda trivial?"

"Of course not!" Steven shook his head. "Just because the danger isn't real doesn't mean it's not fun."

"I guess…" Connie said doubtfully.

"Hey, Steven."

Steven looked up. "Hey Mr. Smiley!" he smiled, "How are you?"

"Fine. Fine." The manager nodded. "But I'm afraid your time's up." He finished, crossing his arms.

"Is it? Already?" Steven sighed. "Oh well." He slid out of his seat. "Come on Connie, let's go." He made his way towards the exit with Connie trailing behind. He waved back at the Funland manager. "Thanks for having us, see you next time."

"Yeah, yeah. Nice seeing you too Steven." Mr. Smiley followed them all the way to the exit, taking care not to take his eyes off either of them for even a moment. "Come back some time, but not too soon."

"What was that about?" Connie whispered as they left the arcade behind.

"Oh, Mr. Smiley says I'm not allowed to stay in the arcade for more than an hour at a time."
"Why not? That doesn't seem like very good business practice."

"He said something about how his machines always seem to break when I'm around. He has the same rule for the rides at Funland park." Steven shrugged. "I'm just glad he didn't ban me forever after what happened with zoltron… again. You hungry?"

"Nah. Wanna go skip rocks? I bet I can skip one farther than you can."

"Oh yeah?" Steven smirked. He started bouncing towards the beach, it was an off day, and there weren't many tourists around. So they reached the shoreline in no time.

"Well, don't just stand there." Connie said, already on her hands and knees. "Help me find some flat rocks."

"I could. But I've already won." Steven declared, giving a broad smile.

"What do you mean?" Connie frowned, shooting him a quizzical glance as she pulled a rock out of the sand.

"Well, I just skipped a rock all the way from the arcade to here. You'll never get one farther than that." Connie just furrowed her brow. Steven lifted his shirt and pointed to his belly button. He waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh." Connie snorted, a giggle slipping out. "That's cheating!"

"Is it?" Steven said philosophically. "You challenged me to see who can skip a rock farther. I am a rock. I skipped here. It counts."

"Well I don't have a rock inside my body," Connie replied, putting on an equally philosophical tone. "Ergo, you feat should be discounted as unsporting."

"My dear Connie," Steven placed a handover his heart and tried to look wounded. It was difficult because he had to fight to keep himself from giggling. "I cannot help how I was made. Alas, none of us can. To treat me in such a way is discrimination, and discrimination is wrong." He wagged a finger at her. "Shame on you."

"Hmmm. Perhaps. Perhaps…" Connie rubbed her chin pretending to stroke a long a beard. "But when I said skipping stones, I meant across the water, and I would like to put forth that you knew that."

"Maybe I did. Maybe I did." Steven nodded sagely. "However, I believe that lack of clarification is your own fault. Not mine." He raised his eyebrows at her, she frowned at him, and then they both broke down laughing.

"Alright, alright." Connie said, as her giggle fit subsided. "Now are you going to help me gather stones or what?"

"I believe I shall." Steven got onto his knees and started searching through the sand. After a few minutes, they managed to assemble a good pile of stones and the contest began.

Steven sighed, watching Connie's rock skip three times more than his before sinking and reached for another walk.

The last four days had been so great! There weren't any missions to go on, no monsters that needed their immediate attention, no calamities descending upon the helpless citizens of earth. It had just
been him, Connie, Beach City, and, when she could be woken from her nap, Amethyst, but mostly just Connie and him.

He wished everyday could be like this. Well, almost. There was still some tension floating around the temple and he hadn't seen much of Garnet or Pearl. In fact, he only saw them when they were standing guard over the gem that had taken over his couch. But it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been for the last couple weeks before that.

"Hey Steven?" Connie said, skipping another of her rocks past his yet again. She was just so good at that. He was pretty sure he could throw harder and farther than her, but her technique was so good her stone kept skipping long after his had splashed out of sight.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Pearl is alright?" Steven blinked at the question. It could be a little creepy how Connie seemed to read his mind like that, but in a good way—it just went to show how well he knew him or something.

He gave the question the thought it deserved. He knew Pearl had been upset from the events from four days ago. She'd probably been hoping to save more gems, he had been hoping that too. When he'd seen her after he came back from dad's she'd smiled at him. But it had been that overly bright, everything-is-fine, smile she made when she didn't want him to worry.

He sent his last rock into the water and sighed. "I'm not sure." He plopped down onto the sand and stared out over the water. "I can tell she's upset and I think I know why, but I'm not sure what to do about it."

Connie sat down on the sand next to him. "Are you sure you need to do something about it? Is it really that big an issue?"

Was it? Pearl might be keeping to her room, but it wasn't like she was locking herself in there. She was coming out to make sure he ate and stuff. But she just seemed kind of distant. He'd asked Amethyst if he should be worried. She'd said no, but well… Amethyst. If not worrying about stuff were an olympic sport, Amethyst would take home the gold every time.

"Pearl's tough," Connie said after he didn't reply. "And its only been a couple of days, I'm sure she'll bounce back."

"Yeah." Steven smiled. "I guess you're--he cut off as his pocket started vibrating.

"Clean up! Clean up! Ev-ery-body do your share! Clean up! Clea-"

"That's Pearl's ringtone." Man, speak of the devil. He answered the phone. "Hey Pearl!"

"Hello Steven," Pearl's voice was perfectly calm, if a bit distorted by the phone. He guessed Connie was right, Pearl would be fine.

"What's up?"

"Garnet said you needed to come back to the house."

"Um, okay?" Steven frowned, trying to think if he'd forgotten some kind of appointment or something. He'd done his laundry yesterday, so that couldn't be it. "Why?"

"She says our… houseguest, is about to wake up. She wants you to be there for it." It was hard to
tell through the phone, but he sort of thought she sounded like she disagreed. Not that he tried very hard, he was too excited.

"I'm on my way!" ending the call he shot to his feet.

"Something wrong?" Connie asked.

"Nope!" Steven smiled. "Come on, let's go meet a new friend!"

"Are you sure having Steven here is a good idea?" Pearl asked, staring skeptically at Garnet. Pearl had been busily arranging some of her swords just the way she liked them when the fusion had barged into her room and told her to call Steven for their houseguest. Pearl glanced at the recumbent gem, she wasn't sitting motionless anymore, but tossing and turning on the couch and letting out the occasional moan. She'd likely awaken soon.

Garnet adjusted her shades, "Probably."

"Probably? This gem could be dangerous."

"Could be," the fusion nodded. "But I believe his presence is necessary. We should allow him to do the talking."

Pearl opened her mouth to protest, but paused. Perhaps Garnet had a point. Steven did have his mother's gift for talking people over to their side—the point was moot anyway as the boy was already on his way.

She turned away with a huff. She was feeling fidgety, she needed something to do with her hands. "Amethyst. Get off the stove."

"Why?"

"Well, firstly, it's not a chair, it's a cooking implement. Secondly, we have plenty of perfectly serviceable stools, all of which are for sitting. But most importantly, I wish to make myself some tea."

"Oh… about that." Amethyst grinned guiltily.

Pearl put her hands on her hips. "Amethyst, if you've done something to my teapot again…"

Amethyst look scandalized. "Oh come on, P! I know how much you like that thing. I wouldn't do anything to that." She paused. "But, uh, well… let's just say we're out of teabags."

Pearl pinched the bridge of her nose. "You ate them, didn't you?"

"Hey, when you get the munchies, you gotta munch."

"Yes, but you couldn't leave me just one?"

"I mean… I could've," Amethyst shrugged. "I didn't though."

"Well I'll just make do with whatever spices we happen to have." Pearl snapped, opening some of the cabinets. "Unless you ate all of those as well?"

"Only the spicy ones and the garlic."
Pearl rolled her eyes and shooed the purple gem off the stove. She did her best, it wasn't the first time Amethyst had left her without ingredients and at least there will still some lemons in the fridge. She was just taking the pot off the stove when she heard the door bang open.

"Hey guys, we're back! Is she awake yet?"

"Not yet, dude." Amethyst answered, she'd moved to sit on top of the fridge. Additionally she'd used a stool to reach it, which Pearl was sure she'd done just to irritate her. "She's making noise though, shouldn't be long now."

"Awesome!" Steven turned to the fusion leaning against the wall. "How much longer do we have to wait?"

"Mmm…anywhere from five minutes to three months." At Steven's expression, she added, "…But probably within the hour."

"Alright." He moved over to the living room and sat by the couch.

"So, um… I was wondering." Connie said, "What are we going to do with her when she wakes up? She's not a Crystal Gem right?"

"Definitely not." Pearl answered, stepping closer to Steven, a mug of tea steaming in her hand.

"We could move her into the barn?" Steven suggested. "You know, after she wakes up and we become friends. I'm sure Peridot and Lapis won't mind."

"Oh sure." Amethyst snorted. "They'll be thrilled."

"Well, I suppose we could keep her in the bathroom. That's where we kept Peridot."

"It is something we can discuss." Said Garnet. "But more importantly, I want you to talk to her first, Steven."

"Uh, why?"

"You're good at talking to people."

"Okay?"

There was a particularly loud groan, and the unconscious gem twitched, nearly rolling herself onto the floor. She started to mutter things; fast paced cries and half-formed words until, with a cry, she sat bolt upright.

Everyone went still as the as the gem's eyes darted around the room, turning this way and that with unfocused eyes. After a few moments, Steven stepped forward.

"Hi!" the wild eyes snapped to him and Pearl tensed. "My name is Steven."

The gem stared at him for a few moments. Then she blinked, her eyes clearing and refocusing on the boy in front of her.

Pearl examined them; they were a pale white, like tiny moons, and were staring at Steven with a detached curiosity. Despite her caution, Pearl felt something her stomach uncoil, easing a tension she had not realized she'd been holding. Those eyes were not those of a gem tip over the edge into insanity.
In that moment, Pearl knew they had succeeded.

No matter who this gem might turn out to be—to know that they had saved someone—it kindled a tiny candle of hope in Pearl's chest that others might be saved as well.

Of course, that left them with another problem: they didn't know who this gem was. The only thing they knew for sure was that she hadn't been a Crystal Gem. Which likely meant she was loyal to Homeworld, which meant was most likely a potential enemy.

In and of itself, that wasn't necessarily an issue. Lapis and Peridot had been loyal to Homeworld. Then Steven had worked his magic on them and now they were living in the barn. Steven's ability to befriend others had always filled Pearl with a mix of wonder and nostalgia; it was like watching Rose inspire gems to their side all over again.

But they also didn't know how dangerous this gem might be. Her slim stature made it clear she wasn't from a soldier caste, but that didn't mean much—Lapis looked like a stiff breeze could knock her over and she could drown a planet if she felt like it.

Then the gem spoke. Her voice was tired, but level. "W…what?"

Steven kept his grin, "Steven," he pointed to himself. "That's my name."

The gem blinked owlishly at him, thrown off balance by the boy's grin. "Steven?"

"That's right." Steven beamed. "Can you tell me your name?"

The gem was quiet for a moment. "I am… Moonstone."

That was… interesting. Pearl had heard of moonstones in passing; they were neither fighters nor low-class workers. Likely this gem had either been a researcher or technician of some sort before the Diamonds had decided to bury her.

"That's a really pretty name." Steven said.

Moonstone didn't reply, she had noticed Pearl and was staring at her with an oddly focused look.

"How did I get… wherever here is?" Moonstone asked, still not taking her eyes off Pearl.

"We rescued you from a secret Homeworld facility." Pearl answered. "Can you remember?"

"Perhaps." Moonstone nodded slowly, her words coming together more clearly. "… I am uncertain as to whether my recent memories could be considered reliable." Pearl could practically see the wheels spinning in Moonstone's head as thoughts began to click into place. After a few long moments she asked: "Who exactly are all of you?"

"Perhaps." Moonstone nodded slowly, her words coming together more clearly. "… I am uncertain as to whether my recent memories could be considered reliable." Pearl could practically see the wheels spinning in Moonstone's head as thoughts began to click into place. After a few long moments she asked: "Who exactly are all of you?"

"Oh well, I'm Steven, but I already told you that. That's Pearl. Back there is Garnet, don't worry, she's really nice! Amethyst is the one eating that jar of mayonnaise, and this is my best friend Connie!" each of them nodded or waved at their introduction, happy to let Steven break the ice. Pearl could see Steven's charm working, Moonstone's began to relax slightly with each introduction. "And together, we're the Crystal Gems!"

Moonstone froze.

Her body seemed to wilt; her head fell, causing her long hair moving to block her eyes from view as sagged towards the ground, as though not looking at them would make them go away.
"I see…” She murmured, staring resolutely at the floor. "So that's how it is."

"Uh… are you okay?” Steven asked. Pearl tensed, ready to move if things went south.

The gem ignored him, lifting her head and meeting Pearl's gaze again. Pale eyes went wide and Moonstone lurched backwards, recoiling away from Pearl until her back hit against the wall.

Pearl blinked, she hadn't seen a gem look at her like that for a very long time. It was a familiar look.

Moonstone was afraid of her.

"Now I know why you look familiar…” Moonstone whispered tremulously "You're her, aren't you? The pearl that fights. The Gem Cutter."

Pearl's eyes widened and she winced. It had been a long time since she'd heard that name. Her gaze flicked downwards to meet Steven's confused look.

"Pearl? What is she talking about?” he asked, uncertainty swirling beneath his words. Pearl didn't answer. Moonstone body went slack. She clearly wasn't stupid; Pearl's reaction must have been as good as a confirmation.

Moonstone gave a little sigh and asked: "are you going to shatter me?"

Silence rippled out through the room like ink in clear water.

"WHAT!” Steven exploded, causing the white gem to recoil in surprise, "Pearl would never do something like that! How could you say that?” Pleading eyes turned to her, “Go on, Pearl, tell her!”

Pearl opened her mouth to say something, anything, to make the pain building behind Steven's eyes go away. But… as she looked into his face, so earnest and full of injured kindness, she knew that if she lied to him right then and there, she would never forgive herself.

Very deliberately, Pearl closed her mouth.

"…Pearl?” Steven's voice, so tiny and brittle, broke Pearl's heart, just a little.

Steven was such a wonderful person and anyone who said otherwise would be quick to learn of her displeasure. But he could be a little naïve; he had seen some of the old battlefields where the Crystal Gems had fought, Garnet had told him of the gems who were shattered there, and yet he had never seemed to connect those two facts to them personally.

Rose had abhorred the idea of shattering gem as well. But… when you were fighting a war against quartz soldiers that, when cut down, would be back in the fight within minutes if you didn't do something about their gemstone, well…

Mercy did not win wars.

Steven was still staring at her, his eyes starting to glisten with water; she stared back, wishing she could think of something to say. Pearl thought Steven was going to run off, to find a place to be alone while he tried to piece part of his personal universe back together. But to her surprise, he shook his head and something determined filled in behind his eyes. Running a hand across his face to wipe away the tears before they could start, he turned back Moonstone.

"Pearl's not going to hurt you,” he declared, daring anyone to challenge his statement. "None of us
I don't know how things used to be and I don't care. All I know is that the Crystal Gems don't do that anymore."

Moonstone just stared blankly at him, disbelief written across her face. The white gem's eyes flickered around the room. They lingered on the warp pad.

"Don't try it." Garnet's voice struck the air like a hammer. "You won't make it." the fusion's tone made it clear that her words were neither a threat nor a warning, but simply a statement of fact.

Moonstone flinched and, as the fusion stepped closer, trembled as though she expected any moment now to be her last—that's probably what she was thinking, in fact. Pearl couldn't help but feel a sliver of sympathy at such naked terror. Who knew what horrible tales the Diamond's had fed her about Rose and the Crystal Gems?

Garnet stopped just out of arms reached and crouched, bringing her head level with the shaking gem's, she didn't take off her shades. Probably a good move, demonstrating her fused nature likely do little to calm a Homeworld gem. "Listen to me," said Garnet, not unkindly. "The war is over. It has been that way for a very long time."

Moonstone sat very still as she absorbed this information. Nobody had to clarify who had won. The fact that the Crystal Gems were still around was answer enough. Strange… Pearl had expected some outburst of denial that Homeworld could have been defeated. But Moonstone just seemed to accept it.

"If you are truly not going to destroy me," she said at last. "Then… what do you want with me?"

"Information." Garnet replied. "We found you underground with dozens of other gems, some of which were our former comrades. You are the only one we managed to save. We want to know how they got there and why?"

Moonstone remained silent, her head bowed

"Please?" Steven pleaded, and forcing her to look him in the eyes. "It's really important, do you know anything about it?"

Moonstone stared at him, and whispered. "…I do."

"Can you tell us about it?" Steven said eagerly.

Moonstone's eyes flicked to Pearl. "Do I have a choice?"

"Uh…" Steven blinked, taken aback, but recovered quickly. He nodded sharply. "Of course you do! We aren't going to force you to do anything you don't want to! But… it'd be really nice if you did tell us."

Moonstone hesitated. Pearl could practically see the loyalty to Homeworld battling with her fear. Pearl didn't like using fear as a tool, and she knew Steven wouldn't approve…

But, she wanted answers. No, she needed answers. She had to know what Homeworld had been doing with her comrades, her friends. It wouldn't take much… just leaning forward and maybe making her gem glow a bit. It was nothing she hadn't done before back during the war. Steven probably wouldn't even notice and it would get her the answers.

Believe in Steven.
Pearl blinked. The thought had glided through her mind like a bird and for a moment she felt a deep shame. Steven was right; the Crystal Gems didn't do things like that anymore. It was *beneath* them. Pearl forced herself to take a step back and to relax.

She would always believe in Steven.

With more space between them, Moonstone seemed to relax. The tension left her and, at last, she said. "Very well. I will tell you what I know."

Steven beamed.

"I am, or rather *was*, a high-level scientist of the White Court."

"What were you doing on earth?" Pearl asked, raising a brow. "The colonies of earth belonged to Pink Diamond, White Diamond's colonies lay on the other side of the galaxy. None of her court participated in the war."

"White Diamond sent no soldiers to the planet, that is true." Moonstone nodded, pointedly keeping her eyes on Steven. "But... I was already on the planet before the war began." sensing the incoming question, she continued. "I was sent along with my peers to work on a ... rather special project here on earth."

"This project," said Garnet. "Wouldn't have had anything to do with a something called PF-01-2, would it?"

Moonstone's head snapped around and she stared in astonishment, "how did you know that?"

"We have been cleaning up Homeworld's messes since the war ended." Pearl began, her voice turning cold. Some of the pieces of this puzzle were starting to fall into place and she didn't care much for the picture they were forming.

A gem scientist? That was troubling. In Homeworld's terms, scientists were meant to experiment and develop technology exclusively towards the diamonds ends.

And this scientist just happened to be working with a 'special project' involving a creature capable of controlling minds by the thousands? That was beyond troubling.

But there was one thought beyond those that chilled Pearl to the bones she didn't have. The one thing that made her want to pull out her spear and start stabbing, was the fact that both of those things had been in a place that had housed dozens of gems with broken minds. *Corrupted* minds.

None of the Crystal Gems had ever been able to figure out exactly what Homeworld had done as they fled the earth. How had Homeworld forcibly broken the minds of thousands of gems across the surface of an entire planet all at once? None of them had known such a thing was remotely possible. How had Homeworld been able to develop such a weapon without even rumors getting out? Deserting gems that had joined Rose's cause always told her as much as they could. But they had heard *nothing* about this; even Sapphire had been taken by surprise.

Unless, the weapon had already been long in development before the war had even begun. It couldn't have been completed then, otherwise the Diamonds would have used it at the very start of the war, wiped out the Crystal Gems, and proceeded to colonize the planet unopposed. Such development would have required a great deal of... experimenting.

And test subjects.
"It's been a big job, you see," she continued, drawing a concerned look from Steven. "As we are always finding new nasty little surprises. That creature was one of them, and it led us too you…" she trailed off meaningfully.

"I see…" Moonstone said slowly. For the first time since she had recognized Pearl, the gem's fear seemed to abate, replaced by a thoughtful expression. "I… how did you find out about it? Did you come across the creature's description in a hidden data silo?"

"Not quite." Garnet answered, arms crossed. "We found out about it the hard way."

"You mean… " Moonstone leaned forward, staring at Garnet intensely. "It escaped?"

Garnet nodded.

Moonstone's reaction was… curious. Pearl had expected alarm or perhaps fear, considering how seriously the Diamonds had taken this creature. But instead the scientist merely sat back in quiet acceptance.

"Where is it now?" she asked. "If you are intend to ask me about its weaknesses, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"That won't be an issue." Pearl smirked in satisfaction. "We dealt with it."

"You mean you shattered it?"

"No." Pearl answered sharply. "Steven was telling you the truth. The Crystal Gems do not shatter other gems anymore. We defeated the creature and placed its gem in a stasis bubble."

"…oh." Moonstone's gaze fell to the floor, "I see." Pearl's brow furrowed. The white gem almost sounded as though what they had done was worse.

After a long moment, she asked; "both of them?"

Pearl blinked. "Pardon?"

"Both of its gems." Moonstone glanced around. "PF-01-2 was a permafusion."

The words were swallowed up in a sudden vacuum of silence.

"You…did capture both of its gems, didn't you?"

Chapter End Notes

…I've been waiting for this moment since chapter one.

As for the whole Gem Cracker thing. Does anyone find it weird how Garnet said that countless gems were shattered, enough to form the cluster, and yet Rose fought with a sword that is apparently incapable of shattering a gem? who did the shattering then? I bet Pearl would do it, for Rose.
Several days ago

The sun was setting on a quiet field of rocks and blackened ground. What little vegetation that had dotted the landscape earlier that day had been burned to the ground.

Where lightning had strafed the land, great channels of melted crystal dimly caught the sun's waning light. In the midst of this destruction, a crater larger than the others and bordered by a square of furrows cut into the ground, the earth between was torn, churned and broken as though it had been plowed.

Within this crater something stirred.

The song of birds and chirps of insects fell silent as burnt earth pushed aside. A burnt orange light began to shine, driving back the encroaching dark like a campfire. A gemstone floated into the air, pulsing with energy and sparking. For a moment, the light cut off and the stone hung motionless, then it exploded. Light poured from the gem.

Almost gently, the form floated to the ground, its clawed feet sinking into the dirt. As the light faded, two beady eyes shot open. The creature stood stock still and all around the land seemed to hold its breath. A pair of burning eyes narrowed into slits. There was something… different. Something had changed.

Something was wrong.

Slowly, with increasing urgency, it jerked its head around in search of some clue, some hint as to the source of this wrongness. Its thoughts, such as they were, had become scattered, unfocused, like something inside was absent.

It went still.

Something wasn't just wrong, something was missing.

Like the creeping tendrils of winter's first frost, chills spread through its body.

It could not feel her.

She was silent. Where was she? Its other? Its light in the dark? The one it had stood beside and held in the dark waters of the void?

She was gone.
It was *alone*.

It threw back its head and screamed.

Garnet ran.

She leapt across scree and grassy gravel, desperate to get there before it was too late. As she raced across the sparse land, Moonstone's words echoed in her mind:

"*PF-01-2 was a permafusion... you did capture both of its gems, didn't you?*"

Garnet ran faster.

When she had heard that, she had not hesitated. She had not waited to discuss it with the others. She had not stopped to consider Moonstone might have been lying. Instead, Garnet had bolted for the warp pad. If there was even a chance that she might not be too late, she had to take it; and so Garnet ran for all she was worth.

But it had been almost a week. The chances that she wasn't already too late were slim. But she had to see it for herself. She had to make sure.

Her legs flew across the ground, carrying her to the battleground of charred trees and melted rock. She slid to a halt and gazed out over where Sunstone had struck the monster down.

The landscape looked very different. Big black spots of charred rock dotted the ground all around, and any vegetation that had remained after her battle had been reduced to ash. An idle part of Garnet's mind noted that it would take a long time for anything to grow here again.

She could almost feel the raw emotions radiating from the scorched earth and even now the air still prickled with an electrical charge which tingled against her skin like a silent scream.

Something had pushed its way out of the ground after they had departed. Something furious, and it had vented its rage on everything around before leaving.

Garnet bowed her head. She was too late. She sunk to her knees on the patch a patch of churned earth. She could still see the four furrows in the ground where Sunstone's barriers had trapped it. The dirt and rock had melted together into a shiny shell. Garnet punched through it, breaking the crust and began to root through the disturbed earth. She knew she would find nothing there, but thoughts were racing through her head like lightning and she needed something to occupy her hands.

A permafusion.

Even as her mind raced around and around in a vortex of angry whirlpools, that thought alone kept fighting its way to the surface.

The creature had been a corrupted permafusion.

Amongst the whirlwind of wild thought, several fragments collided, forming an oddly clear epiphany.

PF. Permafusion.

Ha.
Homeworld had always taken a rather straightforward stance to classification. If she had been captured during the war, would she have been PF-02-2? The thought made her give a strangled sort of laugh.

The whirlwind moved on, leaving that unpleasant thought far behind.

Certain things made so much sense now: The mons - the creature's remarkable strength, its durability, the sense of wrongness about it that made Garnet's skin crawl... and the Diamond's scorn. Garnet could hear blue Diamond's voice, bubbling up in her memory from millennia ago.

"How dare you fuse with a member of my court! You will be shattered for this!"

The memories of that disgust, that deep-rooted hate that promised nothing but destruction... oh yes. They must have hated it, but they hadn't destroyed it. They had found a use for it.

Garnet felt something inside her run cold. Something was clawing its way up her chest, it was like when she had stared into the face of the twisted fusion experiments and everything turned dark, but worse. Oh so much worse. This creature wasn't just an insult to everything she stood for; it was more personal than even that.

'This could have been us!'

'That's not true.'

'The hell it isn't, Saph!'

Several droplets of water fell onto the back of her hands as she continued to dig, though the sky was absent of clouds.

Garnet had been fighting corrupted gems for eons, it was horrible at first, seeing gems lose everything and knowing that could very well be you one day. It still was. But it over the years she had hardened her heart against it. But now... it was like she was fighting her first corruption all over again.

Corrupted gems couldn't hold fusions together. She'd always understood this to be true. With their minds twisted by fear and hate, no such gem could ever maintain the trust, the stability, or the focus needed to sustain a fusion.

But this one had.

Had the two gems fused after the fact?... No. That was too unlikely. They must have been already been fused when they went mad. Another thought blew into her mind; she had grasped the shape of it immediately and tried to stop it. But was too slow.

She pictured two gems holding hands as they stood upon a disk of shining light. All around dark waters churned and roiled like the grip of madness. She saw one of the gems slip, touching the water and beginning to sink. She imagined the other, hands still locked together, pulling desperately. Trying to pull their other half to safety. But as they pulled, twisted hands rose from the depths and tugged against them. She imagined the sinking gem, struggling against the other's grip, pleading with them to let go, to save herself. She saw the standing gem shake their head just once and in a single moment that lasted an eternity, step off the disk into empty space. She saw the gems
wrap their arms around each other in one final embrace before the waters closed over their heads forever.

Garnet felt sick.

Was that how it would go with her? If she ever lost her mind? If Ruby were to become corrupted, would Sapphire be strong enough to let her go? Would Ruby?

'Absolutely not!'

Had it, had they, been conscious? She thought back to where they had found it, floating in that cage of tubes filled with that nullification liquid. Blaire had said the substance was meant to interfere with the minds of fusions… why would that be necessary if it hadn't been awake?

She tried not to think about what it must have been like. All that time down there in the darkness, trapped and alone.

No. Not alone. It had never been alone.

It was now.

Her whirling thoughts came to a screeching halt. Garnet's hands stilled and she blinked, soaking the ground with several more droplets. The fusion sat back. She'd already dug the hole out completely. Great mounds of dirt blocked the surrounding carnage from view.

There was no gemstone to be found.

All at once, Garnet felt so very, very tired. The stress of the events of the last few weeks wore down upon her mind. But nonetheless, she needed to be strong. She forced herself to her feet. She needed to go back to the temple. She needed to fix this. She… she couldn't…

Like a bridge with one too many cars on it that, Garnet shuddered.

And fell apart.

Ruby and Sapphire hit the ground and stared at each other. They were so close they could reach out and touch each other. But, for the first time since either could remember, they made no effort to do so.

"What are we doing here, Saph?" Ruby asked. The fiery gem's arms were wrapped around her knees.

"Trying to decide what to do." Sapphire sounded hesitant, her hands were tucked together and her knees folded beneath her. "Garnet has sustained a shock, she needs a moment to rest."

"That's stupid! She-we've never needed rest!" Ruby snarled. The air around her began to shimmer with waves of heat. "I hate this!"

"Which part?"

"All of it!"

"…As do I."

Ruby snorted and looked away. For several minutes, managed to sit quietly, her brow furrowed in thought. At last, she spoke: "Do…" she swallowed, "do you think if we found the other one, the
one that got away, and released the one back at the temple, they'd fuse together again?"

"...That would be very a very foolish thing to do." Sapphire observed.

"No, really?" Ruby snapped, rolling her eyes. "Obviously I know that. But do you think they would?"

"I... doubt it." Sapphire let out a breath like wind over freshly fallen snow. "I imagine those two, whoever they are, will never be able to fuse again. Not as long as they remain corrupted."

Ruby said nothing. She didn't have to, even separated as they were, each knew the thoughts running through the others head. It should have been good news. That corrupted fusion had been dangerous; far too dangerous to even consider being allowed to run free. Putting it down should have been no different than the countless other gems they'd captured.

But... they'd never met another permafusion before. Even among the ranks of the Crystal Gems, while cross-class fusion had been more commonplace than on Homeworld—which was to say that it actually happened—none of their comrades had ever developed a bond like the one they shared. Ruby had always been under the impression that they were unique in the history of gem kind.

To know that someone else like Garnet existed; that two different gems who must have shared a bond like theirs ... and to know that they had been personally responsible for severing it...

It sucked.

Ruby couldn't think of a better way to describe it. The whole thing just sucked from start to finish. Just one great big pile of unending suck.

"Our path is clear," said Sapphire. "We must find the other and grant it rest."

"...Yeah." Ruby looked down, she could already feel herself starting to calm. "Shouldn't be too hard, right? Once we find it, I mean. It'll only be half as tough as before, less." Ruby took a deep breath. That was how fusions worked, they could do this; it may have been strong before, but the surely the remaining gem would truly be no different than any other monster.

Yeah, Right. And she was going to fuse with Jasper.

"Perhaps." Sapphire voice was level; only someone who knew her as well as Ruby did would have heard the hesitation.

"Saph?"

Sapphire raised her head, her hair parted and Ruby could just barely catch a glimpse of that beautiful blue eye she loved so much. "Ruby, how would you feel, if someone took me away from you? Forever?"

"I... I" Ruby swallowed hard, like she was trying to force down charcoal. "I'd want to set the world on fire."

Sapphire nodded gravely, "I would feel the same." with a rustle like the falling of snow; she got her feet and straightened her dress. "We must find it quickly. I fear for any human who crosses its path." She offered her hand.

Ruby closed her eyes and nodded. She took Sapphires hand and encroaching night was pushed back by brief flash of light.
Garnet leapt out of the hole. She glanced around at the carnage all around. She for a moment, she considered charging off in an immediate start to her search. But the gem beast could be anywhere by now. If she couldn't hear it screaming than it was likely already a long way off. It would be wiser to regroup with the others. They could help her search and perhaps Moonstone would be able to tell her more.

Squaring her shoulders, the fusion set off for the nearest warp pad.

This was a wrong that could not be righted. But at the very least, she would bring it peace.

Chapter End Notes

This is a short chapter. I know it. But I just really felt like this one part had to stand-alone. I was really excited for it and I've been thinking about Garnet's thoughts here since chapter one.

I may have gone a little over board here, I admit. Garnet's a tough cookie both emotionally and physically… maybe that's why its fun to make her feel sad? I can totally get why Rebecca Sugar loves this kind of stuff. Making fictional characters sad is a treat.

But… when I first started this story. I tried to think up a single sentence prompt to describe it. This is what I came up with:

"What kind of enemy would it take to make Garnet scared?"

Originally I was going to have Garnet figure out it was a fusion while fighting it, but that didn't work out. I like this better.

Whaddy think?
The Moon's Assessment

Chapter Summary

Moonstone evaluate her situation. It could be better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moonstone sat very still, her mind awhirl as she tried to decide what to do.

It didn't help that she still wasn't certain whether any of this was actually real. Never in a million cycles had she expected to find herself sitting in what was, apparently, the home base of the Crystal Gems.

It was just too surreal.

Perhaps she had been driven insane and all of this was just some mad delusion born of terror and hope…

But even if it was all just a fantasy, she might as well try to make the best of it. She didn't know what was going to happen next, but at the very least she hadn't been shattered yet, so that was a good start. Perhaps if she made herself useful then this happy state of affairs would continue. Though perhaps she hadn't made the greatest start towards pleasing her captors, that tall gem, Garnet? Had certainly looked upset when she ran for the warp pad. Moonstone wasn't quite sure why her information had caused such a severe reaction.

The other Crystal Gems seemed just as confused by the tall one's sudden departure as she was. They had turned to each other and immersed themselves in deep conversation with one another. Moonstone found her eyes straying to the warp pad once more; it was a tantalizing sight. With the garnet gone, she had a clear path to it. No one appeared to be paying her any attention at the moment, especially not that the gemthirsty pearl, perhaps if she moved quickly enough she could…

Could what, exactly? Escape?

Moonstone snorted softly, berating herself for even considering such a foolish move. Supposing she could reach the warp, where would she go? Her knowledge of the planet's warp system was limited. And who knew how much of it was still intact?

The Crystal Gems had won the war; or so they said. Assuming they were telling the truth, there was no doubt the galaxy warp had been deactivated. Even if returning to Homeworld had been a viable option, there was no way to for her to get there.

No, the wisest course of action at the moment would be to do nothing. So nothing is exactly what Moonstone did. She just sat quietly, taking the time to examine her captors in more detail.

There was the amethyst. Sitting on a raised platform and doing… something with her mouth. It seemed to involve inserting solid objects and chewing them.

Strange.
She was shorter than an amethyst should be, likely a sign of defectiveness. But despite the error in her scaling, she was properly proportioned and functional. Overpowering a quartz of any size was well beyond Moonstone's ability.

Then there was her. The pearl.

Moonstone shuddered.

She looked a little different now, but Moonstone was sure this pearl was one and the same. It was something about the way she was carrying herself. The firm confidence, the lack of subservience in her stance. It was unmistakable and frightening. Moonstone quietly scooted a little farther away. As far as she was concerned, there couldn't possibly be enough space between them.

Then there was the Steven. She couldn't tell what he was. His skin was pink, perhaps some strain of gem from Pink Diamond's court? Whatever he was, he seemed friendly enough. At the very least, he seemed dead set against the idea of shattering her. If he could keep the pearl away, then Moonstone was prepared to call him an ally.

Moonstone turned her focus to the last one, and found the connie staring back at her.

"Hello," the connie nodded, staring at her with a not unfriendly look in her eyes.

Moonstone nodded back, hesitating. She was even less sure what this one was and wasn't sure whether it would be acceptable for her to ask… but she'd always hated leaving questions unanswered. “If you do not mind me asking, what kind of gem is a connie? I'm afraid I'm not familiar with your strain.”

"A connie?...Oh!" she laughed. "I'm not a gem, I'm a human. Connie is just my name."

"Human?" Moonstone shuffled through her memory, trying to recall where she had heard the term. "Ah, yes. This planet's native dominant species." Moonstone nodded. "I did not know the Crystal Gems had recruited your kind to their cause."

"Well, to be honest I'm kind of a new addition." Connie shrugged. "But Pearl's training me to fight, and I'm really excited to be helping Steven."

"Ah, Steven is a human as well?" that would explain his strange appearance.

"Well," Connie hesitated. "Technically yes, he is. It's a bit more complicated than that, but I'll let him explain it." Connie glanced at the boy, deep in conversation with the pearl. "Say, do you want to get cleaned up? No offense, but you're kind of a mess."

Moonstone blinked and looked down at herself. She had to admit that the human girl had a point; her boots and coat were stained with grime, muck, and other, less unidentifiable, substances. "I suppose so," she admitted, grimacing. "Do you have a mirror I may use?"

"Sure. Follow me." Connie turned and started walking away. "Pearl, I'm taking Moonstone to the bathroom so she can freshen up." The pearl looked up from her conversation and nodded distractedly, but not before she gave Moonstone a look.

Her message was clear: don't try anything, or else.

Such a message was unnecessary, as she had already resolved to do exactly that. Nevertheless, Moonstone dropped her gaze to the floor and tried to project as much subserviency as possible. It wasn't particular hard; she had a great deal of experience in stepping gingerly around dangerous
quartz soldiers from back in the laboratory; as long as you acted like you were utterly beneath their notice, they tended not to notice you. She hurried after the human girl, eager to be out from under that chilling gaze.

The girl led her to a tiny room. Smooth tiled floors and white objects of unidentifiable purpose were fixed to several of the walls, as well as a serviceable mirror. A sudden thought made Moonstone rush to it and peer anxiously at her reflection.

Well Connie had been right, she certainly was a mess. But that's not what truly caught her attention. Moonstone leaned closer, carefully drinking in every detail. Underneath the layer of dirt and disarray, her form appeared exactly as she remembered it. Her gem was clean and uncracked, gleaming in the dim light as though it were winking at her.

It was one of the most beautiful sights Moonstone had ever seen.

That wonderful moment was followed by a metaphorical hammer blow as the situation truly dawned on her.

This was actually happening. She wasn't trapped in some deluded fantasy. She had been rescued from the facility with her mind intact. Despite the identities of her rescuers, despite the looming uncertainty of what would happen to her next; the sheer relief that filled her in that moment was a truly beautiful thing.

"Um… are you alright?" Connie asked, making Moonstone blink. "Sorry, but you're, uh, crying. Not that there's anything wrong with that!" she added, waving her hands in front of her. "That kind of thing happens a lot around here, but-

"Do not concern yourself," Moonstone smiled softly, "my reaction had nothing to do with my appearance." She paused and her lips quirked slightly. "Or rather, it has everything to do with my appearance. Merely not in the way you're thinking."

Moonstone turned back to her reflection and set about cleaning herself up. Running her fingers through the long tresses of hair and the bangs framing her face, she set them aglow, gently erasing the dirt and grime from existence. Sweeping her hands along her scalp, she gathered her silvery hair behind her head, smoothing any uneven clumps of hair back until it was to her liking. Pinching her fingers together, she willed a band of light to materialize, holding the locks in place in a neat ponytail that went halfway down her back.

"Was that because you were expecting to be corrupted?"

The question came as she was in the middle of cleaning her science coat. Moonstone paused and slowly turn her head to consider the human girl. "…What makes you say that?"

"Well…" Connie shuffled her feet nervously. "I wasn't there when Steven rescued you, but he told me all about it. There were a lot of other gems there that were corrupted. You said you knew things about that place and… well, I'm just guessing."

Moonstone stared at her for a few long moments. "A well reasoned conclusion." She nodded, impressed. Connie was more perceptive than she had expected a human to be. "Indeed, when my form was last disrupted, I did not expect to wake up as myself again. I'm assure you that you can only scarcely begin to imagine my delight upon finding that this was not the case."

"Yeah, I'd be pretty happy too." Connie nodded, smiling back. "You know, Steven's pretty happy that you're okay, too."
"...Is he?" Moonstone finished cleaning off her coat and set about scrubbing the grime off her knee-high boots, her hands paused over the pair of diamonds decorating the brim. Should she remove them? Walking around baring the symbol of the Diamonds amongst some of Homeworld's most vicious enemies might not be the wisest idea. It was not like she had a right to wear them anyway... but they had been a part of her identity since formation, could she really just throw them aside like that?

No. These Crystal Gems knew where her loyalty had laid; continuing to bear the diamonds would be unlikely to drop her into any more trouble than she was already in.

"You bet." Connie nodded emphatically. "You should have seen how excited he was when he heard you were waking up. He had trouble staying on the ground." Connie paused, although it was clear there was something else she wanted to say. After a moment, she added: "The other Crystal Gems were excited too."

Moonstone looked over at her.

Connie frowned at her look, but plowed onward; "You don't need to be afraid of them, you know."

Connie looked quite convinced of this. Moonstone was sure that the girl truly believed it. But.... behind her eyes, she could still see flash of swords and the dying glow of broken stones.

"...Really?"

"Yes, Really. I'm not sure why you're so scared of Pearl, but she's really nice! None of them are going to hurt you."

"..."] Moonstone tilted her head to the side. "Connie, you said you were a recent addition to the Crystal Gems, yes? Can you tell me how long it has been since the war ended?"

Connie blinked, likely surprised at the sudden change of subject. "I'm not exactly sure, none of the gems go into specifics about it. But it had to be at least a couple thousand years. Why?"

"So would it be safe to say that you weren't around during that time?"

"Weren't around?" Connie mouthed, her brow furrowed. "Of course not! Humans only live about one hundred years." She crossed her arms. "How old do you think I am?"

"I honestly haven't the slightest idea." Moonstone admitted, taken aback. "My knowledge of organic life is extremely limited." Only a hundred years? Was that normal? How in the name of the stars did humans ever get anything done if they keeled over so quickly? "What have the Crystal Gems been doing since then?"

"Fighting gem monsters, protecting the earth, that sort of thing. They're the good guys!" Connie glared up at her, daring her to deny it. She put her hands on her hips "And I'm twelve and a quarter years old." She added.

Moonstone blinked. Twelve? Dear diamonds, the girl was practically a newformed! "I see. Well-"

There was a knock on the door. "Connie? Is everything alright in there?" asked a voice dripping with suspicious voice. The pearl! Moonstone flinched backwards, nearly tumbling backward into a wide white basin on the far wall.

Connie frowned, surprised by the severity of her reaction. "Yes, Pearl, everything's fine." She answered, distracted by the sight of Moonstone struggling against the shower curtain.
"Are you sure? I heard raised voices."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Moonstone's eyes were glued to the door as though she expected it to grow teeth and attack. "Moonstone just got startled when…" Connie thought quickly, "I told her what the toilet was for."

"…Oh." Heh, nailed it. Connie could just picture Pearl's nose wrinkling in distaste. "Very well then. Are you almost done in there?"

"Yep, we'll be out in a minute." There was the sound of footsteps moving away from the door and Moonstone relaxed.

"My thanks." She said, smiling weakly at Connie.

"No problem." Connie said frowning absentmindedly.

Something was amiss here.

Connie had read war stories before, they were always more exciting than the mathematic books her parents insisted on giving her every birthday. Several of those books had situations similar to this one: characters waking up surrounded by their ancestral enemies. Based on those, she'd thought she understood what Moonstone was feeling.

She'd thought that Moonstone was just worried because Homeworld and Crystal Gems were enemies. Maybe Homeworld had spread nasty war propaganda about how all Crystal Gems were monsters? It sounded like something they'd do.

So a little nervousness was to be expected, but that didn't seem to quite match up with Moonstone's behavior. She wasn't just nervous; she was terrified. Even more strangely, all of that fear seemed directed at Pearl, and Pearl alone. The moment they'd left the room, more specifically once Pearl was out of sight, the Homeworld scientist had immediately relaxed. It had been subtle, but Pearl had been teaching Connie all about body language. Moonstone's shoulders had relaxed, her movements became smoother, and no longer kept her head submissively lowered when she spoke.

A flag waved in her memory. What was it Moonstone had said to Pearl not ten minutes ago? Now I know why you look familiar? Had she seen Pearl fight during the war? Pearl certainly hadn't seemed to recognize her…

Hmmm. This warranted a closer investigation, but that could happen later.

"Are you all done?" Connie asked.

Moonstone glanced at her reflection. "Yes, I do believe so."

"Alright then," Connie turned and grasped the door handle.

"Er… may I ask you one more thing?" Connie paused, looking back at Moonstone. She recognized that expression, it was the look of someone who wanted to ask something, but wasn't sure if it was safe.

"Yeah?" Connie urged.

"what is a toilet for?"

As Connie came back, Steven couldn't help but notice the mischievous grin on her face, nor the
fact that Moonstone was looking vaguely intrigued, or maybe disgusted, it was hard to be sure.

Now that the white gem was cleaned up, he was totally ready to believe that she was a scientist. She looked a like one who would be fully comfortable around lightning coils, beeping machinery, and, perhaps, the occasional maniacal laughter accompanied by a backdrop of thunder and lightning.

Then he got distracted when his stomach growled, he gazed forlornly at the fridge for a moment. But knew it was empty of anything he'd be willing to eat. Amethyst kept getting into it. He knew Pearl sometimes thought about getting a special lock for it, but the simple fact of the matter was that if Amethyst got hungry enough, any lock would only work as an appetizer.

"Hey Connie, I was thinking about going into town and getting some lunch, want to come?"

"Sure, I'm getting kind of hungry as well…why don't we bring Moonstone with us."

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Steven grinned. He couldn't wait to show their new friend all his favorite places. That way she'd know there was really nothing to be afraid of.

"If you're going out, I believe I should accompany you," said Pearl.

"Oh come on, Pearl," said Connie. "We don't need a baby sitter. We'll be fine on our own."

Pearl frowned. "Even so."

Connie and Pearl looked at each other and Steven got the weird feeling they were silently sending messages back and forth. He wasn't really sure what that was about, he was going to ask but something else caught his attention first. Moonstone was standing by the kitchen counter, pointedly staring at the portrait above the door.

Mom's picture.

Her expression was… complicated.

"That's Rose Quartz." He said helpfully, leaving Connie and Pearl to their conversation and moving over to her.

"I am aware," her words were cautiously neutral. "I have seen images of her before, although none looked nearly so… peaceful." She turned to him. Her eyes were kind of strange; they made Steven feel like he was sitting on an examination table—not in a creepy way like she was about to dissect him or something gross like that. Just in a way that made him feel really examined. "Where is she now?"

Oh boy. Was it too late to go back and join that secret conversation?

"She's... gone." He answered, fidgeting under her scrutiny.

"Gone?" Moonstone raised an eyebrow. "Did she not survive the war?"

"She did." Steven hesitated. Oh, well. This bridge was going to have to be crossed eventually, might as well do it now. "But she disappeared when she became my mom."

Moonstone looked politely perplexed, "and a mom is?"

"It means she, um, made me?" He got the impression he wasn't really explaining things very well. "Here let me show you." Steven lifted his shirt. Moonstone stared. She turned back to the portrait,
then back to him.

"That's her gem," she stated.

Steven nodded.

"But you're... not Rose Quartz?"

"Not really. I'm a human."

There was a long tense moment, where the intensity of her stare turned up to eleven.

"Fascinating!" the word seemed to breeze through the air, blowing away the tension, and suddenly Moonstone was kneeling in front of him, her eyes gleaming. The sides of her head started to glow and Steven noticed for the first time that she had two diamond shaped hair clip thingies where her ears should be. The glow intensified and a silvery liquid seemed to flow from the clips, moving across her eyes and solidifying into a clear visor.

Steven froze as she reached out and lightly pressed her hands against the skin of his belly. "Fascinating." She repeated, rolling his skin between her fingers. She tilted her head left and right, and Steven could just about make out numbers and symbols flying across the inside of her visor. "You're clearly an organic life form, and yet the gem is integrated perfectly into your form. I see no scar tissue from insertion, and your body doesn't seem to show any form of rejecting a foreign body. I've never seen such a thing! How could anyone have possibly achieved such-" Steven mind went a little static-y as the words started to fly faster and faster.

It was a bit like listening to Connie or Pearl once they really got going; an endless stream of words and passion that rolled right over him and left him far behind wondering what it all meant. He decided to just do what he always did in such situations, which was smile and let them get on with it. The smile was usually genuine too, even if he didn't understand what they were saying, he'd always enjoyed watching how excited they would get. Moonstone was no exception; the fear and tension she'd been carrying since she opened her eyes had vanished, unable to sustain itself under the assault of such complete fascination. It was a good look for her.

"Ahem."

The sound cut through Moonstone's words like an icy knife, cleaving her excitement in two and leaving her frozen. Pearl was standing just behind Steven, arms crossed and staring at the Moonstone with a look that could only be described as arctic.

Very slowly, Moonstone removed her hands from Steven and shuffled backwards, shivering beneath the subzero stare. After she'd moved what Pearl considered an appropriate distance, Pearl spoke.

"Steven, why don't you and Connie go get lunch? You can take her with you." she nodded to Moonstone. "Show her around beach city. Have some fun. Amethyst will accompany you," she added.

"I will?" said Amethyst; she'd been laying back on the couch, likely about to doze off and looked a little disgruntled at the disturbance of her imminent beauty sleep.

"Yes. You will."

Amethyst blinked. "Uh... okay, and what are you doing?"
"I believe I should stay here, Garnet will likely be returning soon and someone should be here to fill her in on what's happening." Pearl sniffed. "Well? Off you go."

Steven took Moonstone by the hand, "Come on, I want to introduce you to the wonders of the Big Donut.

"What's a Big Donut?" she asked, looking suspicious.

Steven just smiled at her, this was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

So I have this truly fantastic friend who has been helping me with this story: Beta-ing, checking my ideas, suggesting her own, etc. The same one who gave me the idea for the Dead Sea salt monsters. She’s quite the artist and she actually drew a picture of what Moonstone looked like. If you’re interested here’s a link to it:

Moonstone: http://kaniai.deviantart.com/art/Moonstone-669751074

And now I’d like to take a moment to jot down my thought on OC’s.

There’s nothing wrong with creating your own characters. All fictional characters are someone’s OC anyway. But if you’re going to write fanfiction about someone else’s and introduce your own OC, they should be a supporting role to the original cast.

Personally, I consider Moonstone to be the first meaningful OC in this story. I literally made Evergreen for the sole purpose of having her become corrupted, so I made no effort to develop her. Blaire… she was added on a whim and she sort of just serves as a plot device to move the story forward, though I do have fun messing around with her.

I suppose PF-01-2 is an OC, technically two, but that doesn’t feel the same for some reason.

No, I consider Moonstone the first real OC I’ve put into this story. As I’ve developed her backstory and intend for her to stick around for good.

I’d like to know your thoughts on how I’m writing here. Are any of you at all interested in her? Or should I just stick with focusing on the normal Crystal Gems?
"May I present to you," Steven paused for a moment to let the wonder sink in. "The Big Donut!" He flourished his arms like a ringmaster presenting his opening act. Amethyst and Connie obliged him by applauding.

Moonstone stared blankly at the building, as though waiting for it to stand up and run through a dance number.

"Don't worry, it's even better on the inside!"

"That's… good?"

"Come on, I'll show you." A bell jingled as he opened the door as he led them inside. "Hello Big Donut! I'm here for sweet sustenance."

Sadie looked up from mopping the floor and smiled. "Hey Steven. Good to see you, you too Connie."

"Hey Sadie," Connie waved. "Working hard?"

"As hard as ever." Sadie grinned. She looked to Moonstone. "Oh, I'm afraid I don't know you." she gave the gem a once over. "I'm guessing you're another one of Steven's friends?"

Moonstone blinked, nonplussed by the warm greeting, she glanced sideways at Steven.

"Yes she is." Steven answered for her. "She's new, so I'm showing her all the wonders of Beach City, and where better to start than the single best donut restaurant town. " He looked over to the counter. "Hi Lars! How are you on this finest of days?"

The boy in question looked up and scowled. He stood up. "I'm going to the back room to do… I don't know, inventory or something."

"Lars." Sadie put her hands on her hips. "Don't be like that, you know I took care of that this morning."

"Whatever," Lars rolled his eyes. "Weird stuff happens whenever Steven's 'friends'," he made finger quotes around the word, "show up. I'm not sticking around for it to happen to me. Again." He shuffled away through the backroom door and out of sight.

"Sorry about that," Sadie sighed, grinning helplessly, "It's just… well, you know Lars."

"I don't mind." Steven waved it off. "My buddy Lars is a complicated individual." Steven
suspected Lars wasn't comfortable unless he had something to complain about. If he had to be the thing that Lars complained about, then that just meant he was the reason his friend was happy!

"Thanks." Sadie grinned, putting the mop aside and moving behind the counter. What can I do for all of you?"

"Well, first," said Steven. "May I introduce my new friend: Moonstone. Moonstone, this is Sadie, the mistress of donuts. Sadie, Moonstone."

"Nice to meet you." said Sadie, giving the gem an easy-going grin. "I like your coat."

"Erm, thank you, Donut Mistress." Moonstone glanced around, floundering. "Your donuts are certainly… look nice." She finished weakly.

"Well, that's good at least." Sadie raised an amused eyebrow, turned back to Steven, "on that note, who wants donuts?"

"An excellent question." Steven examined the racks of donuts critically, should he go with a classic glaze? Or the rich thickness of a chocolate? Of course, the maple syrup apple twists were certainly beckoning to him.

"Um, did we actually bring money to pay for this?" Connie asked.

"Oh yeah…" said Steven "Well, I'm sure Sadie won't mind looking the other way for her favorite customer, right? Not for a few teeny donuts?" he batted his eyelashes at her.

"No, she shouldn't have to do that," said Connie firmly. "Paying for goods and services is an important part of living in a society. The tenants of mercantilism demand it. Also, we have Amethyst with us," she added. "She'd have to overlook more than just a few donuts."

"Ok, that's a good point." Steven admitted. The expression 'eat you out of house and home' didn't cut it when it came to Amethyst. She could eat the house too if you let her.

"Don't worry, Squirts." Said Amethyst, stepping forward and rummaging in her hair, "I got this." she pulled out two shiny coins, and slapped them onto the counter. "Here you go, Donut Girl. Hook me and my dudes up with that sugary goodness."

"Sure thing, Amethyst." Sadie grinned, sliding the coins towards her. "Have as much as you'd like."

"Don't mind if I do." Amethyst stretched across the counter and started sweeping up donuts into her arms by the dozen.

"What are those coins?" Connie asked, peering curiously at the shiny disks. "They don't look like legal tender?"

"Well all coins were legal tender at one time or another." Sadie shrugged, holding one out for examination. "Who am I to deny the values of historical cultures?"

"Fair enough." Connie nodded, peering at the coin. "But these look kind of old, does your company really let you accept as payment?"

Sadie looked around theatrically and leaned forward. "Officially? No. But I take these to a guy over in Shore City, and he buys them from me for two thousand each. I pay the bill out of that and split the rest between Lars and I."
"Really?" Connie's eyes were saucers. She whistled, "That's one heck of a tip."

"To be fair, Amethyst eats a lot of donuts," said Sadie, glancing sidelong as the gem shoved half a dozen donuts in her mouth at once.

"Still though," said Connie. "Don't you think you're kind short-changing Amethyst?"

"awt? owoor oos 'ings?" Amethyst snorted, spraying crumbs all over the place. She tilted her head back and swallowed, letting out a contented belch. "Nah, I got a chest full of em back in my room."

"Really?" Connie said. "Where'd you get them?"

"In a shipwreck. Had to be, what, a couple hundred years ago now?" Amethyst shrugged. "There wasn't a lot going on with the Crystal Gems back then, so I went out exploring. There's all kinds of neat stuff at the bottom of the ocean."

"Like chests full of treasure?"

"I mean, sure." Amethyst nodded breezily. "If you're into that stuff. But I remember this one rusty anchor I found once, still got it in my room somewhere. Hoo man, that anchor, let me tell you…"

as the gem started telling Connie all about cool patterns of rust and pitted metal, Steven moved over to Moonstone, who was gazing at the racks of donuts in incomprehension.

"See anything that catches your eye?"

Moonstone glanced at him. "These would be those food things Connie informed me of, correct?"

"That's right! We humans eat them. Gems can eat too, you know. Amethyst can tell you all about it."

"Ah, so that's what she was doing earlier." Moonstone nodded in satisfaction at a mystery solved. "I believe I shall pass. Connie has also informed me of the end result of such an act. I have no desire to experiment with a toilet at this stage."

"Well, that's okay. Pearl doesn't like eating either. Why don't you take a seat at one of the tables, I'll join you in a minute." Steven settled on three different flavors before joining her: a chocolate, a glazed, and a powdered donut—the classics.

"So," Steven began, biting into the glazed ring of dough with relish. "How are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"Considering where I have been for the last few millennia," Moonstone replied, watching Steven eat in fascination. "My current situation can only be called an improvement."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Steven swallowed. Moonstone leaned closer; those hairclips materializing that visor of hers again as she examined him take another bite. "So, what's with the cool shades?"

"The what?"

"Your," Steven gestured towards his eyes, "visor thing."

"Ah my data scanner." Moonstone nodded. "Well, as I told you I am a scientist, an academic. Not a warrior. While quartz soldiers can materialize various forms of weaponry, moonstones and other research gems have scanners and other analysis tools."

Steven nodded, licking some sugar from his fingers. He could just about make out Moonstone's
eyes behind her visor. But he could also see flashes of color, scribbles, and charts scrolling across their surface, it reminded him of Peridot and her finger screens. "What are you doing with them now?"

"Analyzing you, of course."

"Uh… okay." That was a little creepy. "Why?"

"Why?" a brow arched upwards over her visor. "You are objectively one of the most fascinating things I have ever seen. A gem assimilated into an organic life form? Never have I heard even rumors of such a phenomenon." she paused, frowning slightly. "On that note, I would like to apologize for my… outburst… back at your base." She shifted uncomfortably. "I am a scientist and it is a role that I enjoy. When something catches my interest, I can get a little…passionate."

"It's no big deal." Steven smirked, placing his hand against his chest. "I'm a very interesting person. So what's your scanner telling you right now?"

"At the moment, I'm analyzing the way your organic body is incorporating the energy from your donut." She tilted her head to the side. "The energy transfer does not appear to be very efficient, a twenty-five percent efficiency at most. The rest of the energy appears to be lost as heat entropy."

"…I'm guessing that's not great?"

"Not in relation to gemkind; our forms can convert energy from our cores into mechanical energy at ninety-eight percent efficiency, leaving only two percent lost as light."

"Wow. I'm not sure I understand, but that sounds really good."

"It is, few other machines, organic or otherwise achieve such high levels of efficiency." she hummed to herself. "Is such a low energy efficiency natural among organic life forms? Perhaps your gem is affecting it in some way. Hmmm, I'd need a control group to be sure. Do you think Connie would mind if I examined her?"

"Probably not. In fact," Steven perked up, "that's actually a great idea! Connie's way smarter than me and she'd probably understand what you're talking about. If you have questions about science or stuff, she's your girl."

"I'll keep that in mind." Moonstone nodded, there was a dim glow and her visor flowed away from her face. "But such inquiries can wait. Would you mind if I asked you another, more personal question?"

"Uh," Steven blinked. "Sure?"

Moonstone looked crestfallen "You do mind?" she sighed, "then I shall refrain."

"I mean no!" Steven said hurriedly, she looked like he'd told her she couldn't have a puppy for her birthday. "No, I don't mind, ask away."

"Excellent." Moonstone perked up. She leaned forward, her eyes shining eagerly behind her visor. "What can you tell me of your genesis?"

"Um… my what?"

"Your creation." Moonstone answered patiently. "How did a hybrid such as yourself come to be?"
"Oh, well. My mom really wanted to have me with my dad. So she kind of became me, I guess?"

Moonstone frowned. "You cannot mean that you are merely Rose Quartz shape shifted."

"Oh, of course not. I was born like a normal human baby."

"Assume for a moment that I have no idea how organic creatures function, how are human babies normally created?"

"Well... babies come out of the mom," he said firmly, thanks to Onion and his inability to properly suppress his memories, he was quite clear on this point.

"And how did you get into the mom?"

Steven hesitated. This conversation was quickly moving into uncharted territory. He'd asked his dad about this once, but he'd just muttered something about a stork and that he'd tell Steven when he was a bit older. "Well, I think my dad was involved somehow." He hazarded.

"Did this dad need to operate the drill?"

Steven blinked. "What?"

"Well," Moonstone explained. "As you may know, gems are created using a gem drill create a hole and insert an inert gem seed into the earth. After absorbing energy and minerals from the surrounding rock, the gem grows stronger and is eventually able to emerge from its hole. Although," her brow wrinkled with thought, "I doubt that this method was used in your creation as Rose Quartz's gem was already fully formed. Therefore, I can only conclude that your genesis must have been more related to the organic side of things. Perhaps this 'dad' operated an organic drill of some sort?" Moonstone frowned. "Perhaps I would need to ask this dad of yours to ascertain the details."

"Uh, maybe?" Steven muttered. He was starting to get distracted. Amethyst had sat down at a table behind Moonstone and as the white gem spoke, he had been watching the purple gem's face break out into an ever-widening grin. He couldn't help feeling nervous as the purple gem got out of her seat and sidled over. He knew that look, it meant mischief was coming and he couldn't quite be sure that the joke wasn't going to be on him.

"There's no need to involve the ol' Greggo," Amethyst said, sliding a chair over and plopping down. "Not when I can tell you all about it."

Moonstone blinked, looking at Amethyst uncertainly. But as he watched Steven could see her trepidation being overpowered by curiosity. "Then how was Steven created?"

"Well," Amethyst began, leaning forward with an eager grin. "You were on the right track, Moonpie, Rose had to make a hole-"

"Um, I'm not sure I want to hear this," said Steven, shifting uncomfortably. Something about the way Amethyst said that made him feel like he needed a bath.

"Well," Amethyst said, leaning forward with an eager grin. "You were on the right track, Moonpie, Rose had to make a hole-

"It's fine, dude." Amethyst waved his concern away. "You're going to have to learn about this sort of thing eventually. As I was saying. Rose made a hole, and Steven's dad really liked it."

"And... this 'dad' person use an organic drill to insert a seed core into the hole?" Moonstone asked, looking intrigued.
Amethyst's grin nearly split her face in two.

"That," she drawled, "is a very accurate way to describe it."

"Amethyst!" Connie gasped. The girl had finally managed to get her order and had made her way over to the table just in time to get the gist of the conversation. "You're being really crude!"

"And this surprises you?" Amethyst snorted. "What, have I got anything wrong?"

"Well… no." Connie admitted. "But still!"

"Do, uh, you know what Amethyst means?" Steven asked, looking at his friend uncertainly.

"Well, yes." Connie replied, her face flushing slightly. "My mom's a doctor. When I turned twelve, she sat me down and explained everything to me." Here Connie's face took on a greenish tinge. "She said that no daughter of hers was going to approach adolescence with ignorance to the facts of life… I really would have been happy being ignorant a little longer. There were diagrams."

"I'm still kind of lost," said Steven, uncertain if he was glad of that fact or not.

"I too, feel like I'm missing some of the nuances here," said Moonstone. "Do you think you could provide me with more specifics?"

"How important is it that you know?" Connie asked. "Because I'm not really sure if I feel comfortable giving someone who is literally thousands of years older than me The Talk."

"I suppose, if you object that strongly…" Moonstone began, frowning.

"Hey, I'd be happy to tell you." Amethyst said, that grin of mischief still stretched across her face. "Human bodies are really funny. I can tell you all about the weird things they do."

"I think you've said enough." Connie pointed her finger in Amethyst's face. "If you keep going, I'll tell Pearl you've been corrupting the minds of innocents."

"This after I paid for your lunch out of the goodness of my heart?" Amethyst placed a hand over her eyes and leaned back her head. "Where is your sense of gratitude young lady?"

"Oh hush." Connie shoved Amethyst away. "You're also thousands of years older than me, I shouldn't have to babysit you."

As girl and gem descended into an argument over the values of innocence, Steven caught Moonstone's eye and grinned. "Isn't this nice?"

"I appear to have caused strife between your companions," said Moonstone, frowning.

"Oh don't worry about it. Arguing is just how friends show affection for each other here on earth."

"Is it?" Moonstone looked mystified. "How strange."

Pearl looked up at the sound of the warp.

"Hello Garnet, welcome…" she trailed off.
Garnet looked...less than her best. If she had looked tired after fighting the horde of corrupted gems in the mushroom cavern, she now looked completely dead on her feet.

"What happened?" Pearl asked, putting down her book.

Garnet didn't answer. She looked around the room "Where are the others?"

Pearl blinked at the raggedness in her leader's voice. "Steven wished to show Moonstone around Beach City."

Garnet was silent.

"I wanted to accompany them," Pearl continued, feeling the need to explain herself. "I did not wish to leave Steven alone with our new guest. But Connie requested that I stay behind, as Moonstone is quite wary of me. I did insist they take Amethyst with them." she added hurriedly when Garnet continued to stare at her.

After a moment the fusion nodded. She stepped off the warp pad and began to stride with purpose towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Pearl asked, getting up. Garnet's behavior was starting to alarm her. The fusion was stoic at the best of times, but Pearl liked to think she'd gotten rather adept at reading the silences and this one promised nothing pleasant.

"I have for questions for Moonstone." Garnet's words were clipped, and she didn't stop moving even as Pearl hurried over to her. "I want them answered. Now."

"Now wait just a moment," Pearl caught her leader by the shoulder. It was like trying to hold back an avalanche; the fusion just pulled Pearl along with her. Garnet didn't even seem to notice as she threw open the door and stepped out onto the hot midday sun.

"Garnet!" Pearl yelled, her feet leaving furrows in the sandy soil. "Wait!"

"WHAT?" Garnet snapped, and snapped really was the word. Pearl let go, stumbling back and falling as the fusion's head whipped around to glare at her.

Pearl stared back, flabbergasted and more than a little bit afraid by the explosive response. Garnet could be frightening when she lost her temper. Something of this must have shown in her face because Garnet paused. The fusion let out a sigh and a little of the tension went out of her shoulders.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"It's quite alright." Pearl replied, getting to her feet and brushing herself off. She looked her friend over; Pearl had never seen her looking quite so visibly unhappy. It was unsettling; as though she'd woken up to find the sky had turned bright, neon pink. "Garnet... what happened?"

The fusion turned her head away and kept silent. Pearl frowned; this really was serious. The only reason Garnet would be acting like this was if both Ruby and Sapphire had been thrown for a loop. She couldn't allow Garnet to wander off in this state. As her friend, Pearl wouldn't allow it.

"Come back inside." Pearl said, taking Garnet by the hand. "I'll make you a cup of tea. It's actually quite calming and I have just enough ingredients to make one more pot."

"I don't have time to sit around. I need to get moving!"
"Is the world literally going to end unless you talk to Moonstone right now?" Garnet didn't answer.
"Then you can take ten minutes to calm down. I can tell you're upset Garnet," she said gently. "Do
you really want to confront her like this? Steven will be there," she added and the boys name
worked its magic just like she hoped it would. The fight went out of the fusion.

"…Just ten minutes," said the fusion.

"Of course." Pearl half led, half dragged Garnet back into the house. After maneuvering the fusion
onto the couch, she busied herself with cleaning out and filling her teapot. She took care to go
slowly. After all, it wasn't really about the tea itself, it was about getting Garnet to calm down. The
longer she took to ready the drink, the more time Garnet had to sit still and gather her thoughts.

Fifteen minutes later, she set a steaming cup down in front of her leader. She watched closely to
make sure her friend actually drank before speaking.

"So, care to tell me what happened? You ran off quite suddenly." Pearl was quite certain she knew
where Garnet had gone and why. But it was important to get Garnet to do talking.

"…"

"Garnet."

"…I needed to see for myself."

"About the creature being a permafusion?"

Garnet nodded.

"Well?" Pearl prompted.

"She was telling the truth," Garnet began. "There was evidence that something had forced its way
out of the ground in the exact spot where Sunstone defeated it." Garnet reached up and pulled off
her shades and looked Pearl in the eyes, directly into her eyes. Garnet's third eye was closed.
Which Pearl knew meant she wasn't looking into the future at all. Garnet was focusing every bit of
herself into wrapping her head around the current situation. Which was…good, Pearl supposed.
But it also explained why she had tried to rush off like that even though it was clearly a bad idea. If
she wasn't looking into the future at all, she wouldn't be seeing how badly her actions could end.

Pearl could count the number of times Garnet had been in that sort of temper on one hand. The
Crystal Gem's usual modus operandi in such situations was to hide somewhere and come out later
to help clean up the wreckage.

"It was a fusion." Garnet stared down into her teacup as though debating whether she could drown
herself in it or not. "Not one of those abominations from the kindergarten. But a genuine, corrupted
fusion. A permafusion." The words like me went unsaid, but still hovered in the air like a pair of
giant invisible wasps.

"I see." Pearl said, more to fill up the empty space than anything else. A corrupted fusion? She
hadn't thought such a thing was possible. But she was willing to submit to Garnet's authority on the
subject and given how much trouble it had been, Pearl was willing to believe it.

"It was a permafusion," Garnet repeated. "And I broke them apart. Forever."

Oh.
Oh.

Oh dear.

Pearl took a sip out of her own cup to stall for time. What exactly was she supposed to say to *that*? What could she say? She could only partially understand what Garnet was feeling. It was likely similar to what she had gone through the first time she had to strike down a corrupted pearl.

That had been a terrible experience, but Rose had been there to wipe the tears away.

Rose wasn't here now, and Pearl got the feeling that Garnet didn't want Steven to see her like this. The only one Garnet had for support was her. Pearl placed her cup on the table and reached across to place her hand on Garnet's shoulder. The fusion looked up at her. Pearl had never seen the fusion looking so lost, but it was too late to back out now.

"It had to be stopped." Pearl said quietly.

"I know. But I still wish I had known. At the very least, I could have made sure that neither of them had to wake up alone."

"We'll find it, Garnet. I promise."

Garnet nodded and Pearl could see the fusion pulling herself back together. Composure slid back into place as the fusion tamped down on her frustrations.

"Thank you, Pearl," said Garnet. "You were right, I needed to cool down before I did something foolish."

"Anytime, Garnet." Pearl smiled. "Why were you in such a rush to speak to Moonstone, anyway?"

Garnet was silent for a moment. "I want her to tell me everything she can about them. About who they were."

"Are you sure?" Pearl asked gently. "You know as well as I, it will only make it hurt worse in the end." It always did; if you spent time thinking about who corrupt gems once were, you'd drive yourself mad.

"Perhaps. But I still need to know."

"...I understand." Pearl sighed. "I have questions of my own I wish to ask her." Pearl's voice hardened. "About what exactly this 'special project' the Diamonds assigned her to, and how exactly captured Crystal Gems came into it."

"I want to know that too," said Garnet. She frowned, "do you think Steven should be present for this?"

"You're the one with future vision, you tell me."

Garnet shook her head, third eye remaining closed. "I'm still not in the proper frame of mind to future-see. It's not a good thing to do when you're upset. Also, we are a team; I wish to hear your thoughts on the matter."

"Well..." Pearl tapped her fingers against her chin thoughtfully. "I have no doubt Steven's already grown attached to our new friend." Pearl still had trouble wrapping her head around how quickly that boy came to trust and care about people; even Rose hadn't been so quick to form bonds with
others. Pearl assumed it probably had something to do with his human nature. They didn't have the centuries gems had to establish relationships. "He might not like us asking her hard questions. On the other hand, he would have a calming influence to the whole thing."

Which might be very important if they didn't like some of Moonstone's answers. There had been more than a few former friends down in that cavern and Pearl knew Garnet and herself well enough to know that discussing it might leave them… temperamental.

"We are capable of controlling ourselves," said Garnet firmly. "I have no intention of truly harming Moonstone. But we need her to tell us everything. If Steven is there to shield her, we might not have the heart to push for the information we need."

Pearl frowned. "I'm sorry, but why the rush? Yes, we both have questions we want answered. But I don't see why taking a few extra days for Steven to win her over would make much of a difference."

Garnet hesitated. "There is… another concern."

"Yes?" Pearl prompted.

"Jasper?"

"…Jasper?" Pearl blinked. "What on earth does she have to do with this?"

"She's the one who ransacked that facility. Who disturbed all those gems and smashed the computers in the lower lab." Garnet certainly sounded convinced, but…

"Do you have proof?" Pearl asked.

"No." Garnet shook her head. "But I can't think of any other explanation for what happened down there. The way those gems were released all at once was a trap. I'm certain it was her." Garnet leaned forward. "I actually saw her recently, well, Ruby did, while Sapphire was still in her gem. Coincidence? Maybe." Garnet acknowledged. "But I'm not willing to take that chance, not with this.

Garnet leaned forward, her voice lowering into a dead serious whisper. "She wants to destroy us, Pearl. She's a soldier from our time. We both know she's not going to stop. She's not like Lapis or Peridot. Steven isn't going to win her over with kindness and understanding. Either we take her down, or she takes us down."

Pearl swallowed. Garnet was right: this changed things. Peridot had said there might have been hundreds of gems trapped in that cavern. But they'd only fought several dozen. Who knew how many more there were, or rather, had been? If Jasper had them… that was quite a nasty weapon to have in one's pocket. Jasper likely wouldn't be able to control them, of course, but that hardly mattered. Wherever she released them, the Crystal Gems would have no choice but to fight them. Pearl had no doubt Jasper knew this.

Furthermore, all of those smashed computers in the lower laboratory… why would Jasper have smashed them unless she'd found something on them she didn't want the Crystal Gems finding out about?

Spite? Perhaps. But could they really afford to take that chance?

What else had she found down there? Pearl glanced sideways to where Blaire's pyramid glimmered in the evening light. All the information Peridot had managed to retrieve was locked up in that
device. They'd needed to find a way to access it. But until then, they'd have to follow the only other lead they had.

"You're right." Pearl nodded. "We need Moonstone to tell us everything she knows and it would be better if Steven wasn't there for the… interrogation." It was an ugly word, but there was no denying its accuracy.

Garnet closed her eyes and allowed her third one to open slightly.

"I see an opportunity tonight." She said. "After Steven has gone to sleep. We will be able to get her alone and ask her what we want to know."

Chapter End Notes

I have another drawing to share with you all, some months back Kaniai also drew an image of PF-01-2, I didn't share it until now because reasons.

PF-01-2: http://kaniai.deviantart.com/art/PF-01-02-671583984

Or just search Kaniai on google. That will work too.

I enjoyed this chapter. It's been awhile since I stretched some of my silly muscles. That's what I did on the first part with shenanigans and some good old fashion 'where do babies come from?' humor. That one's always a classic.

Not without seriousness though. Garnet and Pearl are conspiring to do stuff. I believe it is realistic that they'd want to leave Steven out of it, Amethyst too. As far as Pearl or Garnet can tell, Moonstone is from some of the nastier sides of war; Prisoners of war, potentially attempted brainwashing of those prisoners, corruption of those gems. The implications aren't pretty, and those two want to leave Steven and Amethyst out of it. They want to protect Steven, and Amethyst wasn't a part of the war.

Also, for Garnet and Pearl, the whole thing is very personal. So there's that too.

Anyway, until next time! And don't forget to leave a review on your way out.
The War's Over

Chapter Summary

Steven talks and Garnet thinks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steven grinned to himself. Everything had been going well.

Sure, when Moonstone had first woken up it had been a little bit of a rocky start. After she realized what was going on, she'd looked so scared. She'd even thought that Pearl might actually shatter her! Talk about a misunderstanding.

He knew Pearl would never actually do something so awful… well, she had during the war, obviously, but that was during the war, which had been over for a long time and the Crystal Gems didn't have to do anything like that anymore.

But Steven had experience with this kind of situation by now, he could still picture that pillar of water rising up into the sky—Lapis had been upset too. When Pearl had suggested that he show Moonstone around Beach City, he'd been all for it. It would give him the chance to show her how great the earth was; that there was nothing to be afraid or upset about.

Considering she'd neither tried to drown anybody nor locked herself in the bathroom, he'd say he was off to a pretty great start.

After they'd finished up at the Big Donut, he'd taken Moonstone all around Beach City. Once the tour had really gotten underway, her attention had turned away from him and towards everything else; constantly asking him questions about the people, what they were doing, how things worked. Any question he hadn't been able to answer, he had been able to neatly direct to Connie. She'd soaked up their answers like a sponge.

It hadn't all gone perfectly, there had been a near miss when Steven had spotted Onion wandering around the commercial part of the boardwalk with a sack and a crowbar over his shoulder. But he had been able to neatly steer the group away from that particular encounter.

He could introduce Moonstone to Onion later… much later—once she'd really gotten used to earth.

Then they'd gone to other places. Fish stew pizza, the fry shop, and Funland, although they didn't have the time to go on any of the rides. They'd gotten sidetracked on the beach by Moonstone's relentless curiosity; there had been a pair of seagulls wheeling through the air and she had asked an exhausting number of questions about how organic creatures attained flight. Steven had no idea, he was pretty sure it had something to do with wings and flapping them really hard, beyond that he had nothing.

It was too bad; he'd wanted to introduce her to dad. But it was starting to get late; Connie had suggested that they go back to the house. Reluctantly, Steven agreed. It wouldn't do to make Pearl worry about them, plus Garnet might be back by now. Besides there was always tomorrow.
Moonstone had finally stopped asking questions, instead preferring to examine everything around them in silence, her visor glowing with numbers and figures in the dim light of dusk.

"Tomorrow, I'll introduce you to my dad." He said, chattering on as the group returned to the temple. "I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you all about how I was made." Steven wasn't one hundred percent sure on that, but it couldn't hurt to ask. "And I'll have to introduce you to Lapis and Peridot, they can tell you all about what adapting to earth is like."

"I look forward to it." Moonstone answered absentmindedly. She wasn't looking at him, instead keeping her eyes locked dead ahead.

Steven frowned. This couldn't be right, that tense look from this morning was starting to creep back across Moonstone. Her pace was starting to slow down and her visor disappearing, as her eyes remained on the dilapidated figure of the temple's statue. She looked like she thought they were walking her into a lion den...okay, to be fair, Lion lived there, so technically it was, but that wasn't the point.

Steven matched her pace, allowing Connie and Amethyst to pull ahead of them. "You alright there, Moony?" he asked, tapping her on the arm and smiling.

She jumped slightly and glanced down at him. "As well as can be expected," She said neutrally. "This venture was quite informative."

"That's good. That's good," said Steven. "It's just, you seem kind of nervous all of the sudden..." he trailed off meaningfully. Whatever's bothering you, you can tell me. I'm a great listener!

"Do I? I suppose that would make sense."

...Okay, not exactly the opening up he'd been hoping for, but he could work with it. "You aren't still scared, are you?" he smiled softly, to let her know he wasn't trying to make fun of her.

"Yes, I am," said Moonstone, as though she was commenting on the weather.

The immediate response wiped the smile off his face and brought him to a stop. "What do you mean?" he asked incredulously.

Moonstone stopped as well. "I mean that I am frightened," She said slowly. "Does this surprise you?"

"Well, yeah!"

He couldn't help the feeling that something was going awry all of the sudden. The whole point had been to teach her that there was nothing to fear. But if she was still scared, then it was like everything they'd done today hadn't happened!

Steven took a deep breath to calm down. It was fine; he could fix this. After all, it had taken a while to get Peridot and Lapis to adapt to the earth. It was unreasonable of him to assume it wouldn't take Moonstone some time to adjust. He was just being impatient.

"Look," he said, "I know it's a lot to take in. But the earth's really not a scary place. Just give it some time; the people are nice and there's a lot more for you to see."

Now Moonstone was frowning back at him. "I believe you have misunderstood me; I am not concerned by this planet's native fauna, human or otherwise. Nothing you have shown me today has frightened me."
"But," Steven furrowed his brow. "Then what are you afraid of?"

Moonstone stared at him as though it should be obvious, "the Crystal Gems."

...What?

"But... we already went over this," he spluttered. "None of us mean you any harm!"

Moonstone tilted her head to the side, her silver eyes boring into his. Steven shifted nervously. It was weird, but somehow it felt like her bare gaze was analyzing him far more deeply than she had with her visor on.

"Yes..." she said at last. "You did. And for what it is worth, Steven, I believe that you truly believe that."

"But... but it's true! We aren't going to hurt you. Garnet told you so and she's the leader. Remember?"

"No," Moonstone shook her head. "She said the war was over. Those are not the same thing."

That didn't make any sense. The war was over, there was no reason for gems to fight or hurt each other anymore.

"But you're safe here!"

"Steven, I am a prisoner of war," she said matter-of-factly. "My safety is hardly guaranteed."

"No you're not," said Steven incredulously. "The war's over."

Moonstone hesitated. "True." she admitted, nodding to him. "Based on what I have seen today, I am willing to believe the Rose Rebellion has ended. Perhaps prisoner of war was a touch dramatic," she shrugged. "Just a regular prisoner then. The distinction matters little."

"But... we aren't keeping you prisoner!" Steven waved his hand back towards the lights of Beach City, glowing in the night like fireflies. "We just spent half a day wandering around, what part of that makes you a captive?"

"I believe the quartz soldier escort does."

Steven blinked. "What, you mean Amethyst?" he shook his head. "She didn't come with us to keep you from escaping or anything like that."

"Did she not?" Moonstone raised an eyebrow.

Steven opened his mouth to deny it, but now that he thought about it, the way Pearl had insisted that Amethyst accompany them had been kind of weird... He closed his mouth and shook his head. It didn't matter.

"Look." He said seriously, choosing to change the subject. "We saved you, remember? If we wanted to hurt you or something, we could have just left you where we found you. But we didn't. So we don't mean you any harm." He finished triumphantly.

There. No way Moonstone could talk her way around that one.

"Yes. You did save me." Moonstone nodded. "And for that, I am very grateful. But I seem to remember Garnet saying that there were former Crystal Gems buried alongside me, correct?"
"Well, yeah. But-"

"I have concluded that *those* were the gems she and the pearl wished to rescue," she sighed, raising her eyes from his and looking over his shoulder at nothing. "I imagine they must have been quite disappointed to only save me."

"But we still saved you." Steven repeated desperately.

"You all had absolutely no idea who I was." Moonstone shrugged. "My point is that my rescue is not a promise of safety."

Steven just stared at her blank, slightly puzzled expression, as though she could not understand what he was getting so upset about. It was like they were speaking different languages. He'd say something, then her response would completely ignore what he was trying to say.

He just didn't understand.

He'd thought that Moonstone had been starting to understand that everything was okay. It had certainly seemed like it. She was talking with them, asking them questions, and generally loosening up. Everything had been going great!

Now it felt like he was back at square one. He'd been trying to show her what the Crystal Gems were all about. So why was Moonstone having so much trouble wrapping her head around the fact that they were the Good Guys? It wasn't a difficult concept!

"But… didn't you have a great time today?" Steven tried. "You really have nothing to be scared of."

Now Moonstone looked perplexed. "Yes, much of what I saw was fascinating. But how does any of that affect my relationship with the Crystal Gems?" she crossed her arms and stared at him. "I served Homeworld in the war. Had I met Pearl or Garnet back then, they likely would have attacked me on the spot." She held up a hand, interrupting his denial. "As you said: the war is over. So the situation is different." She leaned forward and Steven felt a chill at the look in her eyes.

They were like someone standing in the path of an approaching avalanche. They'd seen the danger coming a long way off, but knew that nothing they could do could escape it so they had no choice but to sit still and hope for the best. Not exactly hopeless, but very close.

"The war is over," said Moonstone flatly. "Which means that I am no longer an enemy, merely a loose end." She shrugged once more. "I shall just have to wait and see if they decide to leave it or remove it. I can't imagine that there is much I can do about it either way."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to tell her she was wrong. But she just seemed so completely *certain*. Steven couldn't understand why Moonstone was so convinced the gems might want to hurt her. But whatever her reason was, he couldn't figure out a way to make her see she was wrong.

Moonstone straightened. "I can see my words have upset you. I apologize. I hope you understand that was not my intent. In truth, your efforts today have not been in vain, the things you have told me today have gone a long way towards assuaging my worry." She smiled. "Why, I now believe I might even have a chance of getting out of this situation without being harmed. One can hope." She began to move, following after Amethyst and Connie. "Come, let's go. We've been left behind and I'd rather return to your base on my own rather than have the Crystal Gems come look for me."

Steven stared after her. Not really sure what had just happened. Just trying to wrap his head around it made him feel the start of an oncoming headache. He set out after her, frowning and maybe a
little frustrated. But he knew what he needed to do now.

He couldn't figure this out on his own. He'd need to talk to Connie about this, whatever this was, she'd be able to help him sort it out.

Garnet sat in her room alone.

Of course, countless gems surrounded her, floating above her head in silent slumber, but they hardly counted and she wasn't looking at them anyway. Her attention was focus on a single bubble floating just between her fingertips.

Despite all the new gems they'd sent here a few days ago, this one had been easy to locate. Its bubble was unique, a pale orange orb that stood out from the others, the only bubble of Sunstone's make.

The gem inside was less distinct. It was spherical and neatly faceted, although through the sheen of the orange bub made its hue a little hard to determine, although Garnet knew it was a dark pink.

Comparing it to her memories made her mistake clearer than ever. The gem that had been imbedded in the creature's forehead had been a bright golden yellow and shaped like a blunted diamond. It should have been impossible to miss. But she had been careless. Carried away by experience of Sunstone and euphoria of victory, these details had slipped beneath her notice.

Careless.

She couldn't even properly identify what kind of gem it was—not that it truly mattered, but the lack of knowledge irked her. Hopefully, Moonstone would be able to tell her what she wanted to know.

The fusion looked up at the sound of footsteps.

"Hello Pearl."

"Yes hello," said Pearl irritably. "You know, we really should all get together and decide on a single layout of the temple. It took me three tries to find this room. The route that I normally take now leads into a pitfall with a whirlpool at the bottom."

Garnet noticed that Pearl was looking decidedly soggy and was dripping water onto her floor. She chose not to mention it.

"I suspect it's Amethyst's fault." Pearl continued, gearing herself up for a full on rant. "Oh, certainly she makes no attempt to redesign the layout of my room, but I suspect she's constantly expanding or rearranging the dimensions of her own. It plays havoc on the pathways between the permanent rooms…"

Garnet waited patiently for Pearl to let it all out. She knew her friend didn't really want any input; she just wanted to vent some frustration. Pearl would get to the reason for her visit in good time… Besides, the fusion sometimes rearranged the side corridors in the temple when she was bored, so she felt like she owed it to Pearl to least listen to her complaints.

"…I swear, sometimes I suspect this place has a mind of its own. Do you know just the other day I found a giant trout living in my sword pool? I haven't the slightest clue how it got there…"

Oh. Right, that was probably from the fishing competition between her and Amethyst several years back. She'd won, of course, but she had wondered what Amethyst had done with her winning catch.
Maybe the temple had kept it alive? That wasn't actually too farfetched. The temple had a lot of
gem magic poured into it, sometimes this manifested in strange ways.

"...should really sort all of this out one day." Pearl huffed, shaking her head in disgust. "But
another time. I just came to inform you that Steven and the others have returned, nothing's
happened but I wanted to ask you how you wished to proceed with our venture."

Ah yes. They needed to find a way to separate Steven and their guest without arousing the boy's
suspicion. Garnet looked at the gem in her hands, and then tilted her head back to gaze at the sea of
gems above her.

"It won't be hard," said Garnet, standing up. "You wait here, I'll be back with out guest soon."

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm. I’m not sure about this chapter and it is kind of short. I know what I was
trying to do. The Moonstone I envision is level-headed and logical, she likes to think
about things before acting. Her view of the Crystal Gems are those directly out of the
war, which is to say that they are violent extremist rebels. Which from a gems point of
view is exactly what they are.

It is like this, imagine that humans wanted to develop a forest, and a group of people
said that this was wrong because a bunch of unique species lived there and the
protesters started murdering the developers to get them to stop. That’s the Crystal
Gems. They are basically eco-terrorists.

Steven has trouble with this. Because to him, the Crystal Gems are the Good Guys.
The noble protectors of the earth. Any evidence he sees to the contrary, Rose
shattering pink Diamond for example, he sort of ignores. Steven’s not the best critical
thinker, so he has trouble wrapping his head around the nuances of a situation.

In Moonstone’s place, I’d be very worried about my own safety. She wasn’t a rebel,
she worked with Homeworld. She knows, the Crystal Gems know this, and it worries
her. But at the same time, she’s not prone to panic so she’s scared but dealing with it.

I’m not sure if I pulled any of that off very well. Does it feel forced?
Chapter Summary

Conversations are had, some more pleasant than others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So humans and other organics periodically shut off their senses for extended periods of time?" asked Moonstone, experimentally fluffing a pillow between her hands.

"Yep," said Connie, putting away her toothbrush and moving toward her sleeping bag. "People need to sleep every night."

"Why?"

"Because…” Connie hesitated. "Actually, I don't really know why we need to sleep," She admitted. "But if we don't do it, we kind of fall apart."

Moonstone looked alarmed. "You mean your bodies break apart?"

"Not like that." Connie snickered, shaking her head. She had forgotten how literal-minded gems could be. "I mean we get forgetful, we think slower, sometimes if we stay awake long enough, we hallucinate. It's not pretty."

"And you have no idea why?" Moonstone clarified.

"Nope."

"Strange."

"Hey, don't knock it till you try it, Moonbeam," said Amethyst, stretching herself out on the couch with a yawn. "Sleep is awesome. That feeling you get when you wake up from a nap instead of being responsible is, like, the best thing."

Moonstone peered at her. "You eat, you sleep, your mannerisms…you act more like an earthling than a gem."

"And?" Amethyst asked coolly. "I am an earthling. Got a problem with that?"

"No. " Moonstone looked away quickly. "It was merely an observation."

Amethyst stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. She rolled over and was snoring in moments.

Connie heard the woosh of the temple doors and looked over as Garnet stepped into the room. "I wished to speak with our guest." She inclined her head toward the white gem who had gone very still, a look of frightened resignation on her face.

"About what?" asked Steven.
"The corrupt gem," said Garnet. "Half of it is still free, I wish to know anything she can tell us about it that will help us track it down."

"Oh, that makes sense." Steven nodded; he could certainly understand why Garnet would be so eager to get on that immediately.

Garnet turned to the white gem. "If you examine the gem we captured, will you be able to tell me more about the other one?"

Moonstone hesitated, looking at her uncertainly. But Garnet could outstare a snake, so giving in was more of a formality than anything. "...I suspect so. Part of my research involved studying the capabilities of both of PF-01-2's gems. I have confidence in my ability to identify them both."

"Good. Follow me," Garnet turned and moved back toward the temple doors. Moonstone hesitated once more, but sighed and followed quietly. As Garnet opened the doors, the white gem turned back and bowed towards them.

"Thank you for showing me your world today, it was a pleasure." Then she stepped through the doors and was gone.

"Do you think she will be alright?" Connie asked, perturbed. "That sounded kind of… final."

Steven nodded, his expression un-stevenistically serious. "She'll be fine. I know Garnet and Pearl aren't going to hurt her." Connie blinked, that was Steven's I-need-to-talk-about-something-but-don't-really-want-to-voice.

"Something wrong?" she asked, rolling over to look at him.

Steven squirmed around. He was frowning, although the effect was sort of ruined by his caterpillar sleeping bag. It made him look like a grumpy bug and Connie had to fight to resist the urge to giggle. She needed to find out where he got that bag; it was really cute.

"Yeah." Steven sighed. "The problem is that Moonstone doesn't believe me when I say she's safe here."

"This have something to do with that talk you two had when you hung back earlier?"

"Man, nothing gets by you," Steven grinned weakly. "And yeah, I just don't get it. But Moonstone really thinks that we might hurt her, in fact, I'd almost say she expects us to. Can you believe that?"

Connie considered the question carefully. After that panic attack back in the bathroom, she had been paying close attention. She'd noted the way Moonstone flinched back ever so slightly whenever Amethyst got close or made sudden movements. But that wasn't half as bad as how she reacted to Pearl. Moonstone was jumpy around Garnet and Amethyst, but she was downright terrified of Connie's teacher.

"Yes, I can."

Steven frowned at her, she half expected him to demand how she could say something like that and it looked like he wanted to. But instead: "in that case, can you explain it to me? Cause it doesn't make sense at all."

"Well, try to look at it from her perspective," said Connie. "We already know she was on Homeworld's side during the war."
"That again?" Steven groaned, flopping back down. "I understand that, but the war was ages ago. Besides, the Crystal Gems are the Good Guys!"

"Well, I doubt Homeworld saw them that way. But look at it this way: If she was kept dormant underground, doesn't that mean she was unconscious?"

"Probably, why?"

"Because that would mean that from her point of view the war was literally being fought yesterday. We don't even know how she got buried. Maybe it happened right after a big battle?" Connie shrugged. "She's probably suffering from whiplash or something, it's unreasonable to expect anyone to adapt to a change like that overnight."

"I guess that makes sense." Steven mumbled begrudgingly. "But how do I get her to believe me?"

"You can't." Connie said simply, then, seeing the disappointed look on Steven's face, she added hurriedly: "I mean, you can't make her to believe you. That's not how trust works."

"Why not?"

"Well, Rome wasn't built in a day." Steven looked at her blankly. "I mean that things like this take time. You want Moonstone to believe you when you say that she's safe here? No great gesture or warmhearted action is going to help make that happen; you just have to wait. In the end time will prove you right. That's evidence not even Moonstone will be able to ignore."

Steven didn't look particularly happy with that answer, but he didn't protest it either. He looked at the temple door dejectedly. Connie's heart went out to him; patience had never been the boy's strongest skill. He wanted to be everyone's friend and the thought that Moonstone refused to trust him must have stung.

She wanted to help, but there was nothing she could do to make that trust come faster, all she could do was try to help make the wait more bearable.

"So, where do you want to take her tomorrow?" she asked. "Didn't you say something about taking her to see Lapis and Peridot? I bet testimony from Homeworld Gems who've gotten to know the earth may help."

'Hey, yeah" Steven perked up, his frown doing an about-face and crashing in the wake of his sudden smile. "That's a great idea!"

Connie smiled to herself as Steven started rattling off a bunch of ideas and plans for the next day.

Mission accomplished.

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Pearl fidgeted uneasily as she waited for Garnet to return with their… guest? Prisoner? She still wasn't sure exactly how to think of the Homeworld scientist. Her eyes kept rising to all the new gems in the burning room and, despite herself, she kept trying to identify how many of them she knew.
Pearl tried, with some success, not to theorize about what role Moonstone may have played in the current condition of the gems above her. Such thoughts invariably went down dark roads and ugly feelings.

She didn't want to hurt Moonstone, for Steven's sake if nothing else. But Pearl wasn't above the thought of bubbling the white gem and leaving her among those she may have experimented on.

But she put such thoughts out of her mind for now. After all, she would be finding out the exact truth shortly. She could decide what to do then.

Pearl was drawn from her thoughts as Garnet entered the gem chamber, Moonstone following behind. When she caught sight of Pearl, the scientist stiffened and averted her eyes. Unfortunately she chose to glance upward instead, getting an eyeful of the hundreds of bubbled gems floating quietly above. Moonstone went completely rigid, her eyes widening as she took a single step backwards, but the door had already shut behind her. Garnet either didn't notice or didn't care, striding to the center of the room before turning back.

"Have a seat." Garnet gestured to a rock jutting from the floor. For a moment, Pearl thought Moonstone was going to refuse, but she sighed and stepped away from the wall; she sat hesitantly, as though they had asked her to lay her neck beneath a guillotine.

"We have a number of questions we'd like to ask you." Pearl began.

Moonstone said nothing, her eyes downcast.

Pearl and Garnet shared a glance, wondering where to start. After several moments of silence, Moonstone broke it.

"Who are all of these gems?" she asked quietly, not looking up.

"Soldiers," Garnet answered, "technicians, artisans, and gems of almost every class from both sides. Everyone we've subdued since the war."

Moonstone glanced up sharply, "both sides?" she asked, eyebrow raised.

The fusion nodded. "Every bubbled gem here have one thing in common: their minds are corrupted. When they take form, they become twisted, out-of-control monsters. A threat to everyone around them."

"Really?" Moonstone looked intrigued. The sides of the gem's head glowed white and Pearl tensed, ready in case of attack, but the light merely solidified into a silvery visor. It hid her eyes from view, as numbers flashed across the screen. "How did such a thing happen?" the gem asked, her eyes riveted on the bubbles.

"In the final battle against Homeworld, a planet-wide retreat was sounded. As the Diamond-loyalists fled to the galaxy warp, Homeworld did… something." Garnet paused for a moment, and Pearl knew the same images were flashing across both of their eyes: A bright light, screams of pain that distorted into guttural cries of rage. "We do not know what. But every gem the light touched became twisted, their minds broke, when they tried to reform they were monstrous. Rose quartz was only able to save a few of us. Since then, we that remain of the Crystal Gems have continued to protect the earth, finding these gems and capturing them. We put them in stasis bubbles so that they do not suffer while we search for a cure." Garnet paused for a moment. "For all of them."

"Interesting." Moonstone murmured, still transfixed by the gleaming bubbles. Pearl felt something hot slither through her stomach. Interesting? That's all she had to say about the fate of these gems?
Moonstone did not seem to notice Pearl's glare, instead shifting her gaze on Garnet. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because we want you to understand who the Crystal Gems are." Garnet answered. "We do not want to hurt these gems. We don't want to fight them. But we do, because if we left them be they would harm the creatures that live on this planet. The goal of the Crystal Gems has always been to protect the life on this planet. Always."

"Ah." Moonstone's visor stopped flashing, turning translucent as she stared at Garnet. "You know," Moonstone said slowly. "You do not need to try so hard."

"Excuse me?" Pearl asked, annoyed at the matter-of-fact tone. "So hard at what?"

"To intimidate me." Moonstone shrugged. "Or win me over—whichever you intended by showing me this. I am completely at your mercy and Steven is not here, hence you do not need to worry about upsetting him. Ask the questions you actually want to ask, I will answer to the best of my ability."

"Oh really?" Pearl hissed, unable to help herself. The gems attitude was doing nothing to mollify her already poor mood. "You aren't concerned that we'll put you in a bubble once we have what we want? or worse."

"Of course I am." Moonstone said simply, flinching back from Pearl's frigid glare, "But tell me, what will you do to me if I refuse to answer you questions? I do not imagine it would be a pleasant experience for me."

Pearl pursed her lips angrily, but had no answer. Forcing answers out of a gem was always tricky. They could insert her into a device like Lapis' mirror. But the process was barbaric and Pearl refused to even consider it. However, the nature of gem anatomy left them with limited options. Physical harm would just poof her and delay their chance at answers.

Garnet answered in Pearl's place: "Do you truly wish to find out?"

Moonstone glanced at her, "No. I do not." she admitted, but added a touch sardonically: "nonetheless, that was not an answer to my question." She shrugged again; the motion was quickly becoming a familiar sight. "Either way, I like to look at things logically: I am alone. I am incapable of fighting in any real capacity, and there is nobody who will come to my rescue should you attempt to harm me."

"Steven would." Pearl replied, more to refute Moonstone's logic than anything else.

"...Yes, he would. Wouldn't he?" Pearl took some satisfaction from the fact that even the Homeworlder couldn't deny that. "How unfortunate for me that he is not here." she shot Garnet a rather pointed stare. Pearl sighed internally, it was rapidly becoming apparent that their guest was going to be far too observant to manipulate. Perhaps after all these years of raising Steven, the Crystal Gems had lost some of their skills at subtlety. Moonstone was just too sharp contrast to the boy's good-natured naiveté.

"That aside, I have no reason to resist you save pride, and I place little value on pride. Call it cowardice if you wish."

How could someone offering their complete compliance and submission be so infuriating about it? Before Pearl could say anything unpleasant, Garnet spoke.

"Fine." The fusion reached upwards and grabbed a low-hanging bubble. She held it up before
Moonstone. "This is the gem we captured after defeated the corrupted fusion. I want you to tell me everything you know about who these gems were."

Moonstone frowned. "Who they were? Do you not mean what they were capable of? That would seem more relevant information if you wish to capture the other half."

"I know what I said."

"My knowledge on who they were is limited, but I do know some things," said Moonstone. "But, if I may ask, why? The identities of those gems are long since gone. Beyond ancient history."

Garnet stared at her for a moment, then reached up and took off her shades.

Moonstone's jaw dropped. "...You're a fusion."

Garnet nodded.

"But your form... I hadn't the slightest clue..." Pearl twitched as the scientist's visor turned opaque once more, flashing furiously as it analyzed Garnet, but the white gem was so entranced she didn't even notice. "It's so compact—the stability, the division of energy between your forms is even more stable than a fusion of the same strain of gem! Beautiful!" Moonstone smiled, a look of delighted awe on her face. "A truly stable permafusion."

"Yes."

Moonstone leaned back. "I see. Now that is fascinating. I'd always wondered what one might look like." Her eyes flicked down to the bubble in Garnet's hands. "Yes, I believe I understand your interest now." She held out her hands towards the bubble, "may I?"

Before Pearl could protest, Garnet held out the bubble. Moonstone took it gently and examined it critically. "I must admit, I was dubious of your claims of bringing down PF-01-2. But there is no question that this is one of the creature's gems. The almandine, to be exact."

"Almandine?" said Pearl.

"Yes, the almandine," Moonstone nodded. She glanced up at Garnet, "you must understand that while I can give you a number of details about the capabilities of these gems, who they were or their history is either a mystery or guesswork. Our purpose was not to determine who they were, but what they could do."

Garnet nodded in understanding. "What can you tell me about the almandine?"

"A hard gemstone, high in iron. Very tough, no doubt a soldier of some sort." She held up the bubble. "My fellow researchers and I concluded that this gem was the source of PF-01-2's empathic capability. We are not certain, but we believe that she was designed to be a sort of general, the ability to directly influence the emotions and feelings of one's soldiers would doubtless be a great boon on the battlefield."

Pearl frowned, uncomfortably remembering another leader who had so skillfully rallied the emotions of her soldiers, albeit it with words and action rather than mind powers. "Is that all you know?"

"On this specific topic, yes." Moonstone nodded. "Understand that both of these gems are ancient. At least twenty thousand cycles old, we have no records dating back that far and in the records we do have, reference PF-01-2's existence are few and far between. The only ones that could have
given us more information were the Diamonds themselves. But none of us were going to bother any of the Four simply to satisfy our curiosity. In truth," she added, her tone becoming more thoughtful. "I have sometimes wondered if perhaps the Diamond's wished everything about these two forgotten."

"And what of the other gem?" Garnet asked.

"Ah, that one." Moonstone frowned. "That one was a little stranger. It was an amber."

"An amber?" Pearl raised an eyebrow. Strictly speaking, amber wasn't a gemstone, just fossilized tree sap and therefore derived from organic life. As far as she knew, the only, non-mineral gems that Homeworld made were pearls.

"Yes, an amber." Moonstone answered, she lightly drummed her fingers on the bubble. "Not a particularly hard stone, so it was unlikely that they were a soldier. But they was the source of the creature's electrokinetic ability. We believed that it enabled the resulting fusion to spread its empathic influence on a far wider scale than what the almandine would have been capable of alone." Pearl thought back to Empire City, to the horde of shuffling people, silent except for the crackle of electricity around their eyes. She forced back a shudder. Yes, that seemed a logical conclusion to her as well.

Nonetheless, this was helpful information. This meant that they were on the hunt for a corrupt gem with just the ability to control lightning. Dangerous, but she would take being electrocuted over having to fight a horde of living zombies any day. Now that she thought about it, she seemed to recall that the fusion creature had been eating its way through several power lines… hmm. Perhaps they should ask Blaire to look for reports of unnatural damages to power plants.

Or freak lightning storms. If it was as anything like Ruby or Sapphire when forcibly separated, its displeasure was likely to be more on the intensely visible side.

"As for who this amber was or what their purpose was, I'm afraid it's all guesswork." Moonstone shrugged. "Each researcher with any imagination had their own theories."

"And what were yours?" Garnet asked.

"Well… In terms of composition, there are no other recorded gems of similar structure, unlike an almandine, which is quite similar to pyrope and other gems of that strain. I believe the creation of an amber gem was likely an experimental endeavor; perhaps meant to be a more advanced form of gem hand servant? Its placement on the hardness scale would indicate such a ranking. Alas, the only ones who would have been able to tell us are the Diamonds. As to why there are no other ambers on record …" Moonstone's eyes went misty with memory. "Well, let's just say the way the Diamond's referred to PF-01-2 made it very clear why both strains of gem were discontinued."

"I see." Garnet nodded, taking in what had been said. "Thank you for telling me this."

"You are welcome," Moonstone answered, half rising and looking suddenly, suspiciously hopeful "Is that the last of your questions?" she asked hopefully, getting to her feet.

"No." Pearl stepped forward. "I have a question of my own I wish to ask." Moonstone went still, the hopeful gleam in her eyes disappearing so fast Pearl wasn't sure if it had ever been there in the first place. She sunk back into her seat.

Pearl narrowed her eyes.

"I would like you to clarify some things for me," said Pearl. "You said you were working on a
'special' project for the Diamonds, correct?" Moonstone nodded. "Now this project involved a
creature who was most notable for its ability to influence the minds of others, correct?"
Another, slower nod.
"There were a great many gems buried in-"
"There's no reason to dance around your point," Moonstone interrupted wearily and, for the first
time, willingly looked Pearl in the eyes. The silvery eyes behind the visor were resigned. "You are
correct. The ultimate purpose of the PF-01-2 project was to reprogram the minds of all the Crystal
Gem rebels. My job was to use the creature to recalibrate the emotions and minds of your allies and
return them to the service of the Diamonds."
"You..." Pearl swallowed thickly, her throat hot and dry. "You mean to tell me, that the purpose of
your research, was to brainwash our friends?
Moonstone closed her eyes, and nodded. "That is an accurate way to describe it, I suppose."
Pearl's vision went red and she lunged.

I am about to die.
Time seemed to slow down as Moonstone watched Crystal Gem fly towards her. She wanted to
move. She wanted to run away. She didn't want to die. But her body wouldn't move. She was
transfixed by the glow of the pearl's gem, of the shaft of the spear slowly jutting its way into
existence.
Even when the tall one—a permafusion? Incredible—had brought her into the temple to resume
her interrogation, Moonstone had held some small hope of being able to leave alive, of hiding the
exact nature of her work. She had thought that maybe, just maybe, she could tell them everything
she had known about PF-01-2 and perhaps they wouldn't have asked about what her role had been.
It had been a foolish hope and she had known it, but it had been a hope nonetheless. Now it was
gone. There was too much evidence, too many clues practically spelling out what she had done.
These gems weren't stupid; they knew how to put the pieces together.
There had been no point trying to hide it. Such an act would have only served to drag the whole
thing out, better to have it over with.
And now she was going to die
Despite that, she wanted to do something to save herself, but what? This was that pearl.
Rose Quartz's pearl.
The Gem Cutter.
She was doomed.
As that fact crystalized in her mind, she was surprised by the wave of calm that accompanied it.
The panic and worry that had been pulsing in the back of her mind for ages was finally gone.
She found herself thinking of another gem, of two gems, floating endlessly without hope in the


darkness.

She supposed, when one got right down to it, there were worse fates. The Gem Cutter tended to finish her enemies off quickly.

As the pearl drew closer, she wondered if it would hurt very much.

And then the fusion's arm shot out and caught the pearl around the waist. Like a bird slamming into a tree, the angry gem came to a short, sharp stop.

...What?

Moonstone stared as the fusion pulled the pearl closer, wrapping one hand around her waist and the other closing around the half-formed spear and squeezing, shattering the weapon into starlight.

"Pearl, calm yourself." The fusion ordered.

"Let me go, Garnet!" the pearl snarled, squirming in the fusion's grasp. "Did you hear what she said?"

"I did. That does not mean what you are about to do is right."

"Not right!" the pearl scoffed. "She attempted to brainwash our comrades. She experimented on them! I knew it!"

"It… is in the past-" Garnet began

"Oh yes?" Pearl snorted, wriggling in the grip. "Would you feel that way if she was the gem who made the fusion experiments?" at her words the fusion recoiled slightly, but kept her hold. "I wouldn't be surprised if she had something to do with that. It's all Homeworld cares about: weapons, weapons, weapons. Who cares what horrible things they have to do as long as they get their precious weapons?" The pearl glared at Moonstone as though she could make the white gem burst into flame through sheer force of will.

"That is not the point." Garnet said, tightening her grip. "What would Steven say if he could see you?"

The pearl flinched, but remained defiant. "Steven's not here. He doesn't need to know. We can say she attacked us. She might as well have. We can say we bubbled her and that he shouldn't look for her."

"Does our behavior only count when someone's watching?" Garnet asked gently. "Rose wouldn't want you to do this."

"Rose isn't here either!" Pearl wailed and, to Moonstone's shock, tears began to flow down the gem's face. "Nor is Bismuth, or any of the others. They'll all gone." Pearl pointed upwards. "That's all that's left." her eyes turned back to Moonstone, anger radiating off of her. "They're broken. We found them broken in her laboratory." She jabbed a finger towards the silent scientist. "What did you do to our friends?"

Moonstone stared back, her body numb as she listened to her death being debated like the purchase of a cheap piece of equipment and then, like a tiny ember bursting into flame, she felt something inside her ignite. Was she not going to die after all? Was it not going to finally end? The serenity she'd felt a moment ago had popped like a soap bubble and it filled her with a sudden rage.
"What did you do to them, you monster?" the pearl repeated, struggling against the larger gem's hold.

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

The sheer level of venom in her words must have come as a surprise, for the pearl paused.

"Wha-?"

"Gem Cutter." Moonstone spat the word like it was something she'd found in the sewer, like it was the most disgusting piece of filth she'd ever had the misfortune to encounter. She rose to her feet, staring the startled gem in the eye. "Stone breaker. Rebel traitor. Murderer," She hissed. "What did I do to you 'friends'? I tried to save them. They were traitors to the Diamonds, doomed to destruction. There was only one possible way that your little rebellion was ever going to end: total destruction and horrific loss of life on all sides. But if our research had worked, we could have fixed it. We could have ended the war in a single day. Without any further loss of gem life, the rebels would have been returned to the side of the Diamonds and nobody else would have had to pay the price for the arrogance of Rose Quartz!"

"You're wrong!" Pearl snarled, recovering. "We won the war! We defeated the Diamonds!"

"Oh yes?" Moonstone sneered. Very deliberately, she looked up, gazing at the countless gems floating overhead. "Good job." She leaned closer, so that their noses were almost touching and asked very, very softly: "Was it worth it?"

Pearl shrieked, her gem igniting and sending a wave of telekinetic energy shot out in every direction. Moonstone was lifted off her feet and slammed against the far wall. Garnet staggered but kept her grip.

"ENOUGH!" the fusion roared, giving Pearl a shake and glaring at the scientist. Such was the authority in her voice that they both froze.

"Garnet?" the pearl whispered.

"Not now, Pearl." the fusion set the gem down and stepped towards Moonstone. "Are you alright?"

"What do you care?" Moonstone snarled, glaring up at the fusion. "Go ahead, destroy me. Bubble me. I do not care. There's nothing else I can tell you that you need to know, and so there is no reason for you to care either."

Garnet did nothing save stare at her. Moonstone didn't like the way those three eyes looked at her.

"You are mistaken. There is one other thing I want to know."

"And what is that?" Moonstone asked, the spark of anger still flickering within her.

"I want to know why you were buried with all the others."

Moonstone went still. "…What?"

"We found a great many gems twisted and corrupted along side you. I am forced to assume that they were failed test subjects, broken rebels of no use to your work that were put away forever."

Garnet leaned closer. "Why were you buried with them? why were you corrupted like them?"

It was like someone had thrown open a window, all the hot anger blew out of Moonstone and left
her cold as she stared into the calm eyes of the fusion.

She crumpled.

"I…I… was abandoned." Moonstone murmured, the fight draining from her and leaving her numb.

"Why?"

"What does it matter?"

"I believe it matters a great deal. Why were you abandoned?"

Moonstone stared at her and snorted, she closed her eyes. "Because I deserved it. I was a traitor. I was punished."

"Tell me what happened. I am listening."

Moonstone looked into the fusion's eyes and slowly, with pauses and great shuddering gulps of air, she began to speak.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened.

Fun fact: Scientists don't actually know why we need sleep. Oh sure, there are theories, to consolidate memories in our brains, processing the events of the day and whatnot. But no actual concrete proof about why people mentally breakdown without it.

Isn't that weird? Humans need to mentally shut off their bodies for roughly a third of their lives and we don't really know why.

Moving on,

So more than one person was hoping that Steven could overhear such an interrogation and get upset at CG's behavior. While that is an interesting route to take, I just wasn't feeling it. I couldn't figure out a way to do this that made sense. Steven's distracted with his own disappointment and worried about Moonstone. But I believe his faith in the Crystal Gem's integrity is absolute, the thought that Garnet and Pearl might be doing something bad to her wouldn't even cross his mind. Connie's a bit smarter and might suspect something, but somehow I couldn't see her pointing out the possibility to Steven when she's trying to reassure him she's not that tactless.

Steven may learn about what's happening here later, but I'm not sure how he would react. We'll see what gets written when I write it.

I think I'm mostly satisfied with this chapter. I got what I wanted to done and I believe it was mostly reasonable. If I had to choose one thing I didn't like, I think that Pearl's angry outburst wasn't built up very well. I mean, sure I think the reason she's angry makes sense, but to me it kind of felt like her explosion came out of nowhere. Did it feel that way to any of you?
Anyway, I hope you enjoyed it and please, feel free to leave a review. I'd be delighted to hear any thoughts you feel inclined to voice.

Till next time!
Where did it all begin for me? My treachery?

Was it when my Diamond, White Diamond, called me before her and instructed me to go to a distant colony of Pink Diamond’s in order to work on a 'special project’?

Technically, yes, but not really. That was the start, it lead to my treachery. But I worked loyally on that project for years. Decades. Centuries, even. In that time, the thought of doing anything that my Diamond did not approve of never even crossed my mind. If anyone had suggested that I would defy my Diamond’s wishes, I would have been insulted... I still would be.

Truth hurts.

But I’m getting off topic. If I had to pinpoint the moment something changed, I would say it was a certain day several centuries after that I arrived on the planet known to its natives as Earth...

"Hey you."

Moonstone sighed, masking her irritation at the rude greeting with the ease of long experience. A quartz soldier stood in the entrance to her research alcove, hulking arms crossed and glowering. She hadn't seen this one before, or at least didn't think so—a blue-speckled aventurine if she had to guess.

Not that it really mattered, the quartz soldiers assigned to this facility were more or less cut from the same hole—large, strong, and not exactly bright.

"Yes?" she asked with somewhat strained politeness. She may not be particularly fond of the towering soldiers, but despite their unpleasant attitudes, they were here to protect her and her fellow researchers from any danger. Whether it was the Crystal Gems or... other things.

"Cap'n wants to see ya."

"Really?" she asked, perking up. It was the work of a moment to shut down her workstation. "Whatever for?"

"Got another couple of filthy traitors for the grinder."

Moonstone sniffed, but before she could say anything the soldier turned and stalked off. She shook her head, no matter how many times she told them. Most of the quartz never seemed to grasp the true purpose of their work here; they weren't trying to punish or torment the rebels, quite the opposite.
They were here to help them.

But she put it out of her mind. In the end, the quartz' attitude was of no real significance. Besides, the captain was waiting for her. Moonstone hurried out of her alcove, pausing only when inadvertently caught a glimpse of her reflection in a nearby console. She had been working hunched over in her alcove for some time, pouring over several of the latest data readouts and trying to determine how to proceed. As such, she was looking somewhat disheveled.

She took a few moments to clean herself up; it would not do to present herself to the captain looking less than her best.

Once she was presentable she made haste through the research wing, nodding to some of her friendlier coworkers and deftly stepping around several soldiers hanging around doing nothing save glaring at the researchers.

While she moved her visor formed and accessed the data stream; assuming the aventurine spoke true, there must have been another battle between the Homeworld and the Rose's rebels. Sure enough, there was a war report waiting to be accessed.

She opened it with a sigh.

**War report S21-37**

**Synopsis:**

Rebels launched assault upon Diamond forces, assault repelled through bravery of the Homeworld soldiers.

**Casualties:**

Twenty-three confirmed rebels shattered.

Seven loyal gems lost.

**Result:**

Glorious victory for the Diamonds!

**Report end.**

As brief and cold as most war reports and one that would be added to the ever-growing data file on this war. But it was notable in the fact that it was an undeniable victory for Homeworld. Rose Quartz was a dangerous and wily commander, often outmaneuvering the more numerous Homeworld forces. No doubt many of the soldiers and researchers would be delighted to see the news of a Homeworld victory.

But while Moonstone understood, she couldn't feel the same.

Twenty-three rebels and seven loyalists—a total of thirty gems needlessly shattered. It did not matter to Moonstone which side they were on. The rebels had been misled by Rose Quartz, her words had ensnared their minds and emotions and turned them against their fellow gems. The blame for all those lives lost belonged to Rose and even if she was brought to justice, those gems were still gone forever.
Moonstone shook her head and closed the data file. Now was not the time to grieve over lost lives, not when her work was critical in preventing the loss of more.

She made her way into the main atrium and immediately spotted the unmistakable figure of the captain.

"Make sure to properly clear away any evidence of our presence at the upper entrance." The captain was speaking to a pair of agates. Her back was to Moonstone and, unwilling to interrupt, she waited patiently for the commander to finish. "The rebels catching on to our operation is the last thing we need." The agates saluted and hurried off. Moonstone cleared her throat and the towering figure turned.

"Ah. Moonstone." The captain nodded, one side of her lips curling into a half-smile. "Just who I wanted to see."

"How may I be of service, captain?" Moonstone asked, inclining her head respectfully. The captain was a howlite, technically a lower class than herself. But, to her, the very idea that the captain was anything but her superior was laughable.

While not as hard or as large as the quartz soldiers, the captain still cut quite an imposing figure. What little of her form could be seen was a subtle shade of ivory etched with a series of jagged black lines. Most of her body was covered by specialized, bismuth-forged armor. Her gem was just barely visible on the front of her left shoulder, and protected by a crested shoulder guard. Her grey hair was tucked back into an efficient braid and pinned in place by a spikey, steel hair ornament.

Moonstone had first met the captain when she was instructed to travel to this distant Pink Diamond colony years ago. The work here required a great deal of rigorous experimentation and discretion, and the captain had been specially charged with ensuring its security and smooth operation. She had quickly proved herself up to the task, not once in centuries had there ever been any breaches to security and, even more impressively, the quartz soldiers deferred to her authority without question.

She worked the researchers hard, but never screamed at them whenever their efforts failed to achieve a desired rate of progress—she had known overseers like that in the past, they tended to be narrow-minded brutes whose general approach to an unresponsive test subject was to hit it very hard. She was glad that the Diamonds in their wisdom had seen fit to send some gem like the captain for this project instead.

Even with the war waging around the surface of this colony, even with the terrifying shadow of Rose Quartz hanging over all of their heads like a sword; as long as the captain was in charge, Moonstone had never once felt any doubt in their safety.

"I assume you read the latest war report?" Howlite asked.

Moonstone inclined her head. "Yes, another thirty gems destroyed."

"A loss and a waste," Howlite nodded gravely. "But not, perhaps, completely pointless."

"I was told that there were prisoners?"

"Two of them." the captain brushed a hand along her hip, where Moonstone knew there was a compartment built into her armor for safely storing captured gems. "I wanted to ask you what you would like to do with them."

That was another thing that was strange about the way the howlite treated the researchers: she
would willingly defer to their, or more specifically, Moonstone's judgment. If the commander had been a quartz, Moonstone had no doubt she would have just thrown the captured rebels at her and ordered her to get results.

Moonstone considered her options, she could take the gems directly to the Chamber of Reconstitution… but she was unconvinced that leaping to that step would yield any meaningful results, perhaps it was time for a different approach? "I would like to speak with them… together."

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

Moonstone nodded.

Howlite hummed. "Very well, I'll defer to your judgment. But first, let's move them to a containment cell. Also, I will accompany you in case these rebels get any ideas." The captain passed her, leading the way to the lower levels, they passed by several gems on the way and Moonstone felt a secret thrill in the way the quartz soldiers straightened themselves and saluted as they passed, well… as the captain passed. But it was still an enjoyable sight.

Then they arrived, a smooth section of wall slid away at the captain's touch. The cell looked as though a portion of stone had been neatly scooped out of the cavern wall and was lit by a single light running along the ceiling. It may not look like much, but Moonstone knew that the walls were reinforced to the point that even a platoon of soldiers would have difficulty breaking through.

As the door slid soundlessly shut behind them, Howlite tapped a finger against her hip, opening a compartment on the side of her armor, and pulled out two gems bound in the silvery bands of a prison ring.

Placing both gems on the ground, she pressed her hand against a blank patch of metal on her gauntlet. There was a soft beep and the rings slid off the gems. Almost immediately, both began to glow, floating into the air as the gems reformed. One of them, a slim green gem with spikey hair landed on her feet, clutching at her chest and looking around in bewilderment.

The other, a bulky figure of burnt red, hit the ground cursing and leapt to her feet. Her enraged eyes alighted on Moonstone and the pupils shrank to pinpricks.

"Homeworlder!" the gem roared, leaping forward, her hands outstretched to wrap around Moonstone's throat. Before she could come close, a silver cord shot past the researcher's head, wrapping around the red gem's neck like a snake and slammed the gem back against the far wall.

"Calm yourself." Howlite's eyes were serene, her left arm was held up and her gem was glowing. On her forearm was a shield in the shape of two elongated diamonds and embossed with the symbol of the Diamonds, the silver cord pinning the gem to the wall sprung from a slot between the shield and Howlite's wrist. Moonstone took a moment to regain her composure and give silent thanks to the Diamonds for the Captain, then turned her attention back to the rebels.

The red gem's feet were off the ground and her arms were straining as she tried to pull the cord from around her neck while the green gem was frozen in place, looking fearfully back and forth between her comrade and the captain.

"Go…go crack yourself!" the trapped gem snarled.

The captain nodded once, and flicked her wrist. The cord twirled through the air, swinging the gem around and slamming her into the ground, not hard enough to disrupt her form, but just enough to stun her and warn her what would happen if she persisted.
"Sparks!" the green gem shrieked, the sight of her ally being assaulted snapping her out of her
daze. Moonstone half expected her to turn on the captain. To her surprise, the gem threw herself at
the red gem. Placing her hands on the gems arms and attempting to hold her still. "Stop struggling,
Sparks," The gem pleaded. Fearful eyes, flicked up towards them. "Please don't hurt her!"

Howlite raised her hand and the cord pulled the red gem to her knees. The cord loosened slightly,
just enough so that the gem did not have to work to maintain her form against the pressure. "You
attempted to attack my subordinate," said the captain coolly, staring the red gem in the eye. "This
is your only warning: do not attempt to do so again..." the hard look in the gem's eyes showed
more promise than threat of what the consequences would be. "Am I understood?"

The red one opened her mouth, no doubt to shout some poorly thought out insult, but was stayed
when the green one laid her hand over the gem's chest.

"We understand," she said quietly. Now that they weren't any other distractions, Moonstone could
identify her as an olivine, likely a low-class technician. The other one was a corundum, which were
almost exclusively used as manual laborers.

"Very well." The whip uncoiled from the corundum's neck and slid soundlessly back into Howlite's
shield. She took a step back and stood at the ready, one hand behind her back and the one with
the shield ready to strike out should the rebels make an unfortunate move.

Moonstone took that as her cue to speak. "Greetings. Welcome to the Pit." She shook her head. "I
apologize for the name, it was so called by the first group of soldiers to work here and,
unfortunately, the name stuck." She nodded to them. They stared back, nonplussed.

"What are you going to do with us?" the olivine asked.

"Oh come on, isn't it obvious." The corundum snorted, half rising into a sitting position. "We've
been captured by Homeworld. They're going to try to interrogate us." She glowered up at
Moonstone, but made no further movement beneath the watchful gaze of the captain. "You might
as well give up now and skip to shattering us, Homeworlder. We are never going to betray Rose."

Moonstone shook her head. "You misunderstand. We are not here to punish you. To punish you
would imply that you are criminals. You are not. You are victims. Victims of the manipulations of
Rose Quartz." She paused to allow that to sink in, but continued before they could protest. "And
we are here to save you."

"Save us?" the corundum scoffed. "From Rose?" She shook her head. "You just don't get it. Joining
Rose Quartz was best damn thing to ever happen to us."

Moonstone nodded sadly. "I understand that she has made you feel that way. She has spoken to
each of you, made you believe that turning on the Diamonds was the right thing to do. It is not your
fault, you are far from the only gems to fall for her lies."

"Lies?!" The corundum surged to her feet and looking like she wanted to attack once more. "What
do you know about Rose Quartz, Homeworlder?" She spat the last word. "I've spent my whole life
slavin' away: lifting this, moving that. All for some oversized gems I never actually see." She
snorted, a small plume of fire shooting out, "I hated it. But Rose Quartz showed me the truth. That
I didn't have to do that if I didn't want to. She gave us a choice and it was the most incredible thing
I've ever known." Now she sneered. "Not that you would understand that, would you? Diamond
slave?"

Moonstone raised a brow, unperturbed by the larger gem's ire. She turned her gaze to the smaller,
green gem. "And you, olivine, do you feel the same?"

The olivine hesitated until the corundum placed a hand on her shoulder and her eyes hardened. "I do," she said. "And my name is Evergreen."

Moonstone glanced back and forth between them, examining the look in their eyes, their stance, and their expressions, then she smiled. "Thank you," she said. "I believe I have heard enough, if you will excuse me." She turned and strode towards the door, brushing her hand against it to open it and stepping through.

The captain followed, "Well, Moonstone?" she asked, shutting the cell behind her. "What is your prognosis?"

"As I suspected, they are a rather typical case. Rose Quartz has manipulated their anger to turn them against the Diamonds."

"And is that helpful information?" she sounded doubtful and Moonstone didn't blame her. Many of the rebels they had captured had been quite angry, railing against their captors and spitting the most horrifying of insults at the Diamond's. The fact that these two were angry at Homeworld was hardly a revelation.

"Indeed. I believe if we can strip away their anger, then we remove their reason for rebelling and they will return to the glorious service of the Diamonds."

Howlite frowned. "We have tried such things before." She said doubtfully. "The results have never been as we desired. Why do you think this will be different?"

"We have learned much from our failures. What you must understand is that emotions are tricky things, captain; they can be most difficult to influence but can also change drastically with the addition of the tiniest variables. And so, I wish to add another variable to our next experiment. I wish to perform the procedure on both of our guests at once."

The captain pursed her lips, and it was clear that she could not see exactly where Moonstone was going with this. Nonetheless, she nodded, "what do you need me to do?"

Moonstone smiled, basking in the warmth of the captain's faith in her. "Escort our guests to the chamber. I will go on ahead and ensure that everything is in order and the proper personnel are present."

Moonstone sat down at her console in the Chamber of Reconstitution and ran a diagnostic check on the system. All of the damage done by their last attempt, a jade that had gone berserk and broken some equipment before being pacified, had been repaired. Around her, other technicians were running their own last minute checks.

She believed they were prepared. Behind them she heard the chamber doors open as the captain lead the captured rebels in flanked by a pair of soldiers. There was a thick cord wrapped around the corundum's head, binding her mouth shut—no doubt she had mouthed off a few too many times. The rebels were put in special restraints that bound their legs and prevented shape shifting near the middle of the chamber, pinning them in place. Then the soldiers backed off, leaving the rebels looking very much alone.

Several switches were thrown and a panel opened up in the center of the room and rising up out of the floor was the reason all of them were even on this distant colony:
Subject PF-01-2.

It looked like nothing more than a giant black ball, floating harmlessly behind an array of glowing golden tubes. It seemed to churn soundlessly in the air, occasionally, Moonstone thought she could see a suggestion of a claws or perhaps a tail before the ball shifted back to perfect smoothness. It looked disturbing, but ultimately harmless.

Moonstone knew better. Without the array of crystalline tubes, filled with the dark, noxious liquid known, rather unimaginatively, as the nullification agent, the beast would awaken and attack; worse, it would seize the emotions of the gems working here, sending them into a mindless rage that drove them to attack everything in sight.

It was a dangerous engine of mindless destruction and, if it were up to her, Moonstone would have had it destroyed ages ago. But the Diamonds were smarter than her; where she saw only danger, they saw potential.

Moonstone had seen firsthand the effects of the poison Rose Quartz dripped into the ears of her followers. She took once loyal gems and molded them into traitors. She whispered discontent into their ears; telling them that they should not be satisfied with the role the Diamonds saw fit to assign them.

Once she put a spark of doubt into her mind, she nurtured it. Fanning the flames of discontent and anger in the minds of these unfortunate gems, turning them against their natural rulers, and teaching them to be loyal and devoted to her and her alone. It was horrifying.

But… If they could just figure out how to control the beast or, better yet, emulate its empathic powers, then they could fix everything! They could reach into the minds of the rebels, and dampen the stranglehold Rose Quartz had on their emotions. They would remember their purpose and abandon the traitorous quartz in a matter of moments!

The war would be end, Rose Quartz would be dragged before the Diamonds to face justice, and no other gem would have to pay the price for her audacity.

The image was as tantalizing as making it a reality was arduous.

PF-01-2 was old, very old. The only gems Moonstone could think of that would be old enough to know the thing’s origins would be the Diamond’s themselves, and on the few occasions any of the researchers had dared ask for information, their glorious leaders had proved very tightlipped. The strains of gem that made up the beast had long since been discontinued, not even records of them remained.

As such, the minds of the gems that made it up had long since vanished, ripped to pieces by the mindless fury of the creature. This made channeling the creature’s power in a constructive way problematic; they wanted to pacify the rebels, not make them even more violent.

And thus, the necessity of the experimentation.

Over the years of war, many rebels had been brought before them. Moonstone and the fellow researchers had done their best, but most of them had lost their minds, unable to take the strain of PF-01-2’s powers.

But they were making progress! The last couple experiments had shown promising results, there were half a dozen rebels in the lower cells whose emotions had been dulled… admittedly a bit more than intended, they had become completely apathetic to everything, even the thought of
loyally serving the Diamonds.

If they could just find a way to repeat that process, but to a lesser degree, they could strip away the unnatural emotions Rose Quartz had instilled in them, while leaving their natural veneration of the Diamonds. Moonstone had determined that the best way to go about this would be to isolate one emotion and remove it. Which was why she had spoken to their latest patients, to determine which emotion would be best to remove.

As suspected, that emotion had been anger. But that still left the problem of controlling how severe the effect of PF-01-2's powers would be. Which was where their variable came in.

Moonstone had been provided with holofiles and reports on the rebels. She had studied these intensely as it was important to know how Rose Quartz altered their minds and behavior of these innocent gems if there was ever to be any hope of fixing the damage.

Her conclusions had been rather strange, ridiculous in fact, but progress was not made by ignoring evidence even if it was peculiar.

Rose had somehow made the rebels interdependent on each other. Once a gem was turned into a rebel, they were introduced and welcomed by other rebels. Whenever Rose's influence began to wane, the other rebels would step in and reinforce her flawed rhetoric; creating a positive feedback loop where the more rebels there were fighting together, the more firm they were in their beliefs.

It was a frightening thought, but Moonstone believed she could turn it to their advantage. A single gem's mind broke under the weight of PF-01-2, but if keeping them together could strengthen their minds and resolve, it was possible that those feelings would take the brunt of the empathic assault and leave the underlying and original emotions intact. Besides, it was unrealistic to assume they could isolate all the rebels and fix them one at a time. To truly end the war without more needless death, they would need to construct a device to affect all the rebels across the planet all at once.

Moonstone was drawn out of her musing when Howlite tapped her on the shoulder. "I believe that this is where you come in."

Moonstone nodded in acknowledgement and took charge. "Turquoises, engage the barriers." Two pale-blue gems stepped forward. The turquoises were here on behalf of the Blue Court. While their combat ability was negligent, they did possess the ability to create barriers that were capable of shielding the researchers not only from physical harm, but mental assaults as well. Which was critical considering the volatile and indiscriminating nature of their test subject's powers.

The diminutive gems raised their arms and a wall of shimmering blue light appeared, cutting off the researchers from the restrained rebels. Now Moonstone stepped up to her main control console. Slowly she began to drain the nullification agent out of several of the tubes—not enough to truly waken it, but enough for its powers to start to slip out.

"Engage the emotional manipulators. Do not forget, we are trying to focus on and nullify their anger." Her orders sent the tech gems around into a flurry of activity, running numbers and typing commands into their screens. The tubes around PF-01-2 began to glow. Moonstone looked up at the rebels, summoning her visor for her own personal assessment.

The rebels had gone stiff, staring at the floating ball behind the cage. No doubt they were nervous, but apart from their natural uncertainty, there didn't seem to be any deeper reaction that would signify the onset of PF-01-2's powers; they'd need to drain more of the nullifier. Moonstone tapped a button and drained two pipes completely.
"It's started!" called one of the turquoise. Moonstone frowned, her monitor showed no spike of activity from PF-01-2. But she was willing to take the blue gem's word on it, they were holding up the barriers after all and no doubt could feel the assault. She turned her eyes back to the rebels and saw that the turquoise spoke true. They were clutching their heads, likely in a futile effort to keep the creatures' mental influence at bay.

The olivine let out a gasp and curled up into a ball, shaking as she pressed her hands into her ears. The corundum reached for her, scooping the smaller gem up into her arms and holding her close as the chains binding them to the floor clinked.

Moonstone was unconcerned; the restraints were far too strong to be broken by just two gems. If holding each other made the process more bearable for them, then she saw no harm in it. In fact, she was counting on it.

Of more concern to her was the data readout on her screen. Despite two pipes having been fully drained; PF-01-2 was not showing enough activity to permanently influence the pair of rebels. She reached for a dial to begin slowly draining a third pipe.

Before she could even touch the controls, the monitor of PF-01-2's activity spiked, shooting from almost non-existent to levels higher than anything Moonstone had ever seen.

Her head snapped up, and what he saw brought her to an abrupt halt.

The rebels were still clutching each other, but their gems were glowing like tiny suns. For a brief moment, the corundum's eyes locked on Moonstone's, then their forms turned to light and began to meld.

And beyond them, the rebels grew larger and more distinct; a brilliant golden eye had cracked open.

Chapter End Notes

Well wasn't this exciting? My first foray into the realm of OC centric chapters. Starring Moonstone, PF-01-2/Amber/Almandine, and the newcomer: Captain Howlite. Plus some other nameless ones.

I'm not sure how I feel about this chapter, I can't possibly be writing the characters wrong, as they are all original and belong to me. But my concern is whether or not they are interesting or not. I felt like I was just going over things you all already knew.

If you have any feedback, criticizing or otherwise, I would REALLY like to hear it.
Waning moon.

Chapter Summary

The situation deteriorates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The light faded, revealing the rebel fusion. Moonstone had never seen an uncorrupted, cross-class fusion. She hadn't expected it to be so huge; it was nearly as tall as the Diamonds themselves! Its body was covered in swirls of red and green and two pairs of bulky arms flexed in delight at their formation. Spikey red and green hair cascaded down the fusions back, framing a furious face. A tiny part of Moonstone was fascinated. But it was only a tiny part, as the rest of her was preoccupied with panicking.

While the fact an emotionally sabotaged fusion was about to go on a rampage in the middle of their laboratory was bad, Moonstone was more concerned with the behavior of PF-01-2. It was… looking at the fusion, as though it was interested in it. Which was ridiculous—PF-01-2 was mindless, the two gems that made it up incapable of anything save lashing out at everything around it.

The implications of… any alternative…were…

Moonstone's train of thought stuttered to a halt as the rebel fusion's eyes fell on her. There was an unpleasant promise in their eyes as the fusion sneered and took a stepped forward, or tried to, the chains that had bound the individual rebels moments ago were still locked around their legs. One pair of eyes rolled and two hands punched downwards, launching a pair of fireballs that liquefied the crystalline bindings. She stepped forward meaningfully, kicking some of the molten metal upwards to splatter against the turquoise barrier with an unnaturally loud hiss.

The shock holding all the gems in place broke, all around researchers and technicians began to scream and stampede for exit, fighting and shoving each other to escape from the slowly advancing enemy.

"Soldiers, to me!" the words rose over the din of panic like the peal of a bell. Captain Howlite had stepped forward, her expression hidden behind a large metal helmet, her weapon was out, the pointed shield with several silver whips hanging from it. The point of the helmet turned towards Moonstone, "Secure the bindings on PF-01-2" she ordered. "I will see to them." she jerked her head at the roaring fusion.

The words cut through her fog of panic. As usual, the Captain had her priorities straight. There were enough soldiers here to deal with an errant fusion such as this one. But if PF-01-2's cage were to be broken, then Diamond knows how much devastation it could cause.

And the captain was counting on her to secure it. She couldn't afford to fail.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the captain step through the barrier of the turquoise gems, the diminutive Blue Courters had not abandoned their posts at the threat and were straining to hold on
as the fusion threw bolts of fire against their shield. The captain's whips cracked out, breaking apart two balls of fire and scoring a hit across the fusions chest. The giant rebel sneered and refocused her fire onto the armored figure as two quartz guards stepped through the barrier to join the fight.

Moonstone put it out of her head—the captain was more than capable of handling herself and she had a job to do. Her fingers were flying across her console as she disengaged the draining process and saw to restoring the flow of nullification agent to the creature's cage. It was slow going, she had to do all the work of a full team of technicians and the seconds slipped by like viscous magma as the machines shunting the liquid out slowed to a stop then reversed direction, trickling the nullifier back into PF-01-2's shackles. Moonstone kept her eye on the creature's activity meter, which continued to remain unsettlingly high as the chamber echoed with the sounds of fighting.

Moonstone glanced back up, gauging the battle. One of the quartz soldiers was down—disrupted or shattered, she couldn't be sure. But the captain and the remaining soldier were holding out, dodging around the fireballs and attempting to push back against the fusion. Moonstone bit her lip, her eyes glancing back down at the activity monitor. The fighting gems were within the mental barrier and she couldn't be sure how much PF-01-2 was influencing them all now.

Then, with a sudden lunge, the fusion scooped up the quartz soldier and hurled her away. She crashed into the barrier with such force that a crack spread throughout the shimmering light, and then broke it into a thousand pieces.

One of the turquoises gasped and collapsed as the quartz landed on top of her, distracting the other. As the barrier wavered, a fireball slammed through it and exploded, reducing all three gems to puffs of blue smoke.

A chill ran down Moonstone's back. The barrier was gone; there was nothing to protect her from PF-01-2's influence. She wasn't a quartz, she didn't have a helmet like the captain's. She had no defense against the empathic assault. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited, expecting to be swept away by rage at any moment.

But nothing happened.

After a moment, Moonstone opened her eyes, her brow furrowing. She glanced at the monitor. The creature's activity was still at an all time high, despite the refilling tubes. She should be frothing at the mouth and breaking things. But… she felt completely fine. How in the name of the Diamon-

A fireball whistled over her head and exploded against the far wall.

Right. Now was not the time to count her blessings; the danger had yet to pass.

She and the Captain were the only loyalist gems left in the chamber. For now the captain was holding strong, the flames of the fusion broke upon her armor like water on a rock. But how long could it last? If the fusion got her hands around the captain… Moonstone shuddered, her form pumping with fear. She glanced toward the stairway, it was empty now and no doubt the evacuated researchers would be sending warnings throughout the facility, it would only be a matter of time before a platoon of quartz came down to secure the situation. She glanced back towards the fight, despite how much she wanted to help the captain; she knew that she would be less than useless in the fight.

Then her eyes alighted on the two turquoise gems, they were sitting helpless out in the open, where a stray fireball could melt them to slag. Before she knew what was happening, she was scurrying between the consoles towards the helpless gems. She had already done as much as she could to secure PF-01-2; either the safety protocols would keep it in check, or they wouldn't. The only
helpful thing she could do know was trust in Howlite and try to get as many gems to safety as she could.

There was a near miss with another bolt of fire, but she made it to the helpless gems unharmed. Scooping up the blue gems, as well as the fallen quartz, she pulled out a test beaker from her coat pocket and shoved them inside. A mere thought was enough to send the beaker and gems inside zipping through a portal to her personal workspace. Their reformation would likely be cramped and awkward, but at least they were out of danger… Come to think of it, it was a pity she couldn’t shove herself in a beaker and escape the same way.

She straightened herself, ready to make haste for the stairs when a silvery shape went soaring past her, crashing through several consoles and leaving a path of destruction in its wake before slamming into the far wall.

"Captain!" Moonstone yelled, horrified. The larger gem stirred, attempting to pull herself up against the wall, her movements jerky and disorientated. For a moment, Moonstone forgot everything, running forward determined to help her commander.

She only made it several paces before an enormous hand wrapped around her waist and plucked her off the ground. She was brought close to the fusion's face, made to stare into four angry eyes.

"Well, diamond slave?" the fusion sneered. Moonstone blinked, she had half expected a guttural discord of two voices mashed together, but the fusion's voice was a smooth baritone. "What's the matter? I thought you were going to fix us?"

"I…I…"

"Shut up." The fusion said contemptuously, moving a colossal thumb and covering Moonstone's mouth with such force that her form almost broke. "I don't know what this place is, I don't know what that thing is," she jabbed a thumb over her shoulder at PF-01-2's cage. "But what I do know, is that I don't like it. So, I think I'm going to tear this place to the ground. But first, I'm going to start with you." An enormous hand rose, hovering over her head and igniting into crackling fire. "Let's see how much your precious diamonds will care if you disappear." Moonstone went numb, staring into the volcanic heat of that flame and knowing that her service was about to come to an end.

Then a set of silvery cords tipped in blunted diamonds shot past Moonstone and slammed into the fusion's eyes. The fusion bellowed, the fireball winking out as the hand clapped to her face. Moonstone's head snapped around and she saw the captain had pushed herself to one knee and holding her shield whips extended. Behind her helmet her eyes were mere slits as she glared at the rebel.

"I warned you not to harm my subordinate." She hissed, pushing herself back to her feet. There was a sound of yelling, and a stampeding of feet and Moonstone saw half a platoon of quartz soldiers making their way down the stairs at last!

For moment Moonstone felt a flash of hope, and then she was flying through the air. The fusion had tossed her over their shoulder. There was a feeling of speed, a painful thump, and she crumpled to the ground.

Dazed, but her form in tact, Moonstone tried to rise. She was aware of the roar of fire and the cracks of whips, but her head was hurting and she couldn't tell where.

She looked up and went very, very still. The situation becoming crystal clear in one horrifying
moment.

She had been slammed into PF-01-2’s cage.

And then, ever so slowly, like a boulder tipping over just enough to come crashing down, that vivid golden eye dropped and locked gazes with her.

She was transfixed. Frozen in place by the sheer intensity of that stare and she expected any moment now to feel herself be swept up by that tidal wave of mindless rage she had seen in so many test subjects.

But the eye merely blinked, then turned back to look beyond her at the fighting fusion.

There was no anger, no bottomless sea of rage. Instead there was… something else.

*Wondersurprise*emelency*melencholy*remorse*longing*regret

They struck her like a hurricane. A blizzard of emotions whirling through her head like snowflakes—churning, colliding and spinning off in new directions, but always, _always_ falling downward into a cold depth of despair.

It was too _much_! She wanted to scream, she wanted to sob, she wanted to break down and tear her hair out!

She wanted it all to stop!

But it didn't.

She felt herself hit the ground, but such things were insignificant under the sheer weight of endless, inescapable numbness.

The last thing she saw was a second eye, this one a dark pink, staring at her sadly. Then her world went dark and she knew no more.

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_She was walking down a long hallway, trailing respectfully behind the robed gem, as was proper. The gem that led her was short and stocky, but carried themselves with a solid air of determination and purpose that made them seem to tower above all others._

_The gem glanced back, a pair of dark reddish-pink orbs considered her from behind a mask of dignified indifference. Then, just for moment, a smile flashed across the gem's face._

_The smile vanished as quickly as it came, but the meaning and memory of it remained. No other gem could have seen it; it had been for her and her alone._

_The knowledge lit a fire in her chest. She knew then, without a doubt, that she would follow this gem wherever she might lead._

"…ake up."

_No matter what._

"…stone."

_Until the end._
"Moonstone!"

Her eyes snapped open and she sat bolt upright. Her vision was blurry and her mind was still whirling with emotions, more than she could possibly name. But they felt different; weakened, and muted. As time went on, she could feel them sinking down, never disappearing, but making themselves scarce.

"Moonstone."

There was that voice again. Calm, commanding, and strong. She knew that voice…

"…Captain?" Moonstone blinked, her vision began to clear. She was in one of the examination rooms and Howlite was standing over her, solid as a rock, arms crossed behind her back and expression stern.

"Yes. It's good to see you're awake." A smile flitted across the armored gem's face, only to become a frown. "How are you feeling?"

"…Like a bismuth has been using my head as an anvil." Moonstone answered, rubbing her fingers into her eyes in an attempt to relieve the ache behind them. "What happened?"

"What do you remember?"

"I…” Moonstone closed her eyes. "The rebels fused, they broke the barrier and attacked. You fought them and… and…"

"You were thrown into PF-01-2's cage." The captain finished.

Moonstone flinched, some of the emotions surging back painfully. "I remember. What happened to the rebels?"

"We subdued the rebels. There were no casualties and PF-01-2 remains secured, however much of the machinery has been wrecked and will take time to repair. Of greater concern is your condition. You were left exposed to its influence for quite some time before evacuation. You have been unresponsive for some time."

"I see." Moonstone murmured, absorbing the information. On the whole, it seemed that everything had turned out as well as could be hoped.

"How are you feeling?"

Moonstone glanced down at herself, to her relief everything was how she remembered it: two arms, two legs, equally sized and symmetrical, which was a promising start. She closed her eyes, turning her inspection inward. She felt… fine, more or less. She felt like herself.

"I believe I am fine."

"Are you certain?" Howlite raised an eyebrow, sounding doubtful.

"Yes. Why?"

Howlite regarded her calmly. "You have been crying since you woke up."

Moonstone blinked and touched a hand to her face. Her fingers came back wet.

"Oh."
The captain sighed, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Moon, I'm afraid you are going to have to remain in this room for the time being."

Moonstone blinked, taken aback by the informal use of her name. "You have no reason to apologize, captain, I understand that it is a necessary precaution, I have been exposed to PF-01-2 and I know I was not unaffected by its empathic influence. While I appear and feel fine, my situation is unprecedented and it would be foolish to assume there are no lingering side effects. I must be monitored and my experience recorded so that it can be analyzed and understood. In fact, I would appreciate it if you could provide me with a blank data log so that I can begin my own analysis… what?"

The captain was grinning now. "Well, you're certainly talking like yourself." Moonstone flushed and opened her mouth to respond, but the armored gem raised a hand to waylay her. "I mean no offense," she said, chuckling. "I am glad to see you are still yourself," she spoke with such sincerity, that Moonstone could feel her face heating up, she wanted to hide her face but there was nothing to duck behind. The captain stood up. "I need to go now, there is a great deal of repair work to do and someone need to oversee the technicians. But I'll have someone send you a data log." She stopped by the door, glancing back. "Oh and one more thing. The two turquoises wish to extend their gratitude to you. Your actions very likely saved their lives. Well done."

The last two words, spoken with such approval made Moonstone feel like her body was on fire… but in a good way. Her whole body tingled with inexplicable warmth and stayed that way long after the door swung shut behind Howlite.

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Weeks passed without my release. Weeks that became months as my initial prognosis of my condition was found to be erroneous. I was not unaffected by my exposure to PF-01-2.

It happened whenever I was alone, whenever I was not occupied with work or conversation… the emotions, the feelings that had been shoved inside of me would rise up. They had woven into my subconscious like undercurrents of the sea, ready to drag me under at a moments notice.

Whenever that happened, I would become unresponsive. My body would go limp and I would do little besides cry and tremble until the fit passed. Naturally, this made me unfit for release. I could hardly be trusted to oversee delicate experiments when I could collapse at any time.

But I did not lose hope; I knew it was important that I understand what happened to me. So I did my best to tame the feelings, to control them.

I cooperated with my fellow researchers, why wouldn't I? What had happened to me was different from what the creature had done to others. As they understood it, PF-01-2 had simply imbedded overwhelming empathic suggestions into my subconscious, which would regularly release through my own emotions and trigger another fit.

I told them all I could. Except… except for the visions.

Whenever I lost consciousness, I would see them… two gems, one pink and one yellow, living and performing services to the Diamonds. I saw the Diamond's too, as strong and radiant as I knew them to be.

If you asked me to describe the events I saw, I would have difficulty. There seemed to be no chronological sense to them. At one point the two gems would be serving the Diamonds, the next
they would be fighting or running from them. It was all fuzzy and unclear. Made worse by the
sheer weight of emotion that overflowed from every image:

Loyalty, Joy, Love, Guilt, Pleasure, Panic, Fear, Outrage, Despair, and then Nothing, Nothing,
Nothing. They struck my mind like hammer blows every time I closed my eyes.

It took quite some time for me to determine what exactly I must be seeing. In truth, it was only once
I saw myself in one of the visions that I realized what they were. I saw myself, standing behind a
barrier and staring up at me, at them, at PF-01-2. Performing an experiment.

They were memories of the two gems, of the Amber and the Almandine, of what they felt in their
lives… of what they were still feeling.

It hurt. It hurt more than I could possibly say.

Perhaps it was that pain that drove me to do what I did. Perhaps it was a selfish desire to bring all
of that pain to an end that led me to betray the Diamonds. To betray Howlite.

I have to wonder, was it my own choice to do it? Did I want to do it? Or was the creature
manipulating me? Making me feel pity for it where none was deserved?

I still do not know.

Chapter End Notes

I'm dying for feedback, is anyone enjoying the direction this story is going? only one
person has bothered to comment on the last six chapters or so...
Dark Moon

Chapter Summary

A story ends. The epilogue is discussed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was reckless, treacherous, and stupid. But I could not help myself. When I had been exposed to its power, it had shown me what it felt like to be imprisoned, to be trapped for countless millennia with little hope of release. I could neither turn a blind eye, nor forget about it.

When I next saw PF-01-2 bound in its cage again, I knew I couldn't live with myself if I allowed this to continue. The weight of the emotions would have destroyed me. Whether those were the creature’s emotions or my own, I could not say.

I wanted to help it, to set it free... But that was impossible. They were far too dangerous to safely move and even if it was possible to get them out of this place, there was no way to be sure that it would leave the planet or rampage across it. If that happened, it could, and likely would, escalate the war to even more terrible heights.

Such an outcome was unacceptable. I could not let its suffering continue, but neither would I let it hurt my fellow gems. Which left me with but a single option:

I had to destroy PF-01-2.

It was the only feasible option, the only form of mercy I could possibly show it.

So I made a plan.

Moonstone strode purposefully through the passageways towards the experiment chamber as though she had every right to do so. In fact, she did. But it didn't feel that way to her, not with the weight of her makeshift explosives weighing down her coat the way they were. But the physical weight paled in comparison to the mental.

She was going to be a traitor.

She wasn't just thinking about it, she wasn't just making idle plans, she had prepared the means of her betrayal and was moving them into place. It made the whole thing seem real in a way it never had before, and it was terrifying.

It had been years since that day, since she had been dropped into PF-01-2's emotions and drowned. After that, she had been viewed with suspicion—a potential time bomb just waiting to explode. It had taken a full cycle of this planet's gravitation just to convince her fellow researchers that she was fit to return to duty.

But she had been patient. She had waited.

Every day had been spent planning, thinking through her options. She had considered taking her
information to the Diamond's, she was certain that if they understood the horror of PF-01-2's situation, in their compassion, the Diamond's would end their suffering. They would never inflict such a fate on a being still capable of understanding, of feeling what was happening to it. If they had felt what she had felt, Moonstone was sure that they would agree with her.

They had to.

But there was no way to arrange such a thing, nor would she ever wish to inflict such a fate upon her Diamond.

She could attempt to release PF-01-2, but that would cause nothing but more suffering all around. No. The only option was to destroy it, to end its suffering without hurting any other gems; and so, the explosives.

She'd made them herself. She had not had a choice. If she had officially requested the necessary explosives, it would have been as good as a declaration of guilt when all was said and done. She would plant the bombs, set the timer, retreat to an innocent distance, and wait for it to be over. Then, they would all be reassigned to a hopefully more benign project and everything would be better.

Even in the throes of the feverish emotions and her own turbulent feelings, Moonstone had the vague feeling that there was a flaw in her logic here, but she couldn't afford to care. She wasn't sure how much longer she could withstand the weight of these sentiments, of these visions.

She needed them to stop.

She stepped into the Chamber of Reconstitution. It was empty, as she knew it would be. The day had been host to yet another failed experiment, another gem whose mind had been ruined and taken away to be buried in the front chamber. Then she had received another war report on her visor. She hadn't read it, just like the last dozen since her release. She knew what it would say: another skirmish, more gems shattered, and nothing had changed.

This was the other reason her actions were necessary. The Diamond's thought that they could end the war peacefully with PF-01-2—but they were wrong. Its powers, its tantalizing potential were a trap. As long as the option to utilize it remained, the Diamond's would not commit the necessary forces to win this war. They would dance around the conflict, unwilling to commit while a more peaceful option dangled in front of their eyes.

The time they had spent trying to tame the creature were a waste, serving no purpose but to draw out the war and allow Rose Quartz to spread her taint to more loyal gems. But once it was gone, the Diamonds would see the truth of this war, the only solution would be to cut out the tumor before it grew too big. There would be no reconciliation, no reunification of the wayward gems.

The mere thought of it made Moonstone want to weep. There would be so many deaths; so many gems destroyed… but not as many as there would be if she allowed the experiments to continue. Sometimes, there are no good solutions.

Moonstone tapped several commands into her main console, rising up PF-01-2's prison. She stared down at the floating ball of darkened light. She took a deep breath and made to step forward, but paused as a final wave of hesitation rolled over her.

Was she truly going to go through with this?

She could just walk away. Dispose of her bombs and immerse herself in her work. Or, better yet,
leave. She could pretend that being near the creature was having a deleterious effect on her mental health—it wouldn't even be a lie. She would be relocated to a different assignment, far from earth and never have to think about this ever again. No one would ever know.

But… she would know. Out of sight, did not always mean out of mind.

"Forgive me, my Diamond." She murmured, a tear pouring down her face.

She stepped forward, her arms felt as though they were made of lead, but nonetheless, she worked efficiently. She needed to do this quickly, get it over with. It was a matter of minutes before the explosives were placed and the timers set.

She took a step back and gazed up at the floating black ball. It was quite surreal. Somehow, she'd expected this whole thing to be more dramatic. This creature had been trapped here under their experimentation for hundreds of years—and Diamonds knew how many more before that—and in a matter of moments, it would be gone. She had expected some kind of reaction, either gratitude or perhaps fear, but the creature had done nothing. Moonstone snorted, berating herself. How could they react? The nullifier agent was still in place, paralyzing them. Even if it knew she was there, how could it possibly understand what she was about to do?

No, there would be no understanding here.

Only the end.

And, perhaps, that was a mercy nonetheless.

She shook her head and turned to go, it would not be a good idea to be in the chamber when the bombs detonated. She had made it halfway up the steps before…

"Moonstone?"

No.

"Captain!" Moonstone froze, staring up in horror at the armored figure. "W-what are you doing down here?" she asked, almost, but not quite, managing to keep the panic out of her voice.

"I'm going to check on the laboratory." Howlite replied, a flicker of concern crossing her face. "Are you all right, Moonstone?"

"Fine. I'm fine." She replied quickly, too quickly. Howlite noticed and Moonstone could practically see the suspicion starting to gather in her superiors mind.

Moonstone took a breath, trying to force herself to remain calm; acting jumpy and defensive would not help the situation. She could not let the captain go into the chamber, no matter what—Howlite could not be allowed to find out what she had done. Or worse, be in the chamber when the explosives went off. She had to stall her. "Why do you want to see it? Is something the matter?"

Howlite continued to frown at her, then shook her head. "No. There is nothing wrong, I just wish to see it." She smiled sadly. "It is a ritual of sorts that I have taken to performing."

"Why?" Moonstone asked, attempting to make conversation as she subtly positioned herself in the middle of the stairs. She knew that Howlite was too respectful to shove past her, all she needed to do was keep the Captain talking and everything would be fine.

They were far enough away that the explosions wouldn't hurt them, and, surely, the Captain
wouldn't suspect her of treason... Moonstone nearly winced as that thought sent a fresh sliver of guilt stabbing through her mind. For some reason, she hadn't really thought that in doing this, she was betraying not only her Diamond, but Howlite as well. Somewhat to Moonstone's surprise, that latter thought seemed somehow worse.

Howlite hesitated. "I suppose you could call it a test of my resolve." She said at last. "Our work here is an ugly thing, Moonstone."

Moonstone blinked. "...Excuse me?"

"I apologize." The captain said quickly, misinterpreting her reaction. She placed an armored gauntlet on Moonstone's shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. "I know you believe in our work here, in its necessity to bring this war to a peaceful end. Rest assured that I share those beliefs." Her expression turned somber and her eyes became distant. "But... there are times. When I see the gems we tried to save, their mindless shells. I confess that I hold... doubts."

Moonstone's jaw dropped. "...You?" Howlite had always been a picture of unwavering devotion. Could... could there be a chance the captain would understand what she had done?

Howlite smiled sadly, her eyes soft. "Indeed." She leaned close. "I do my best not to tell anyone, it would be bad for morale. But if it's just you, Moonstone, I am willing to admit it. I have doubted the righteousness of our work. I am not certain that it is right. But..." now Howlite's eyes became steeled, making her look more like the captain that Moonstone had always admired. "What good is conviction if it is untested? Our work here is necessary, we must end this war as quickly as possible for the good of all gems." She shook her head slowly. "Even so, I will not turn a blind eye from the consequences, to do so would be an insult to the gems we have hurt here," and now she seemed to stand taller in Moonstone's eyes. "That is why I force myself to look upon the creature we have chained below and at the broken shells our work has made of once proud gems. So that I know the cost, and press forward all the harder to see this through to the end. Otherwise, the damage we have done until now would be pointless."

Moonstone stared at the captain, and felt herself a torrent of emotions battling within her: admiration, longing... and shame.

This is what it looked like: unshakeable resolve and duty; a faith so deep it could not be broken.

Moonstone had lost that, for all her sense of loyalty and belief in the Diamonds, it had only taken a single moment of doubt for her to lose it. If she'd ever really had it...

"But don't let me keep you." Howlite smiled, placing her hand on Moonstone's shoulder and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sure you have work to get to. Rest assured, I won't break anything."

She pushed past and started moving farther down the stairs.

Moonstone was yanked out of her rising sense of guilt and despair by a hot flash of panic. "No wait!" she yelped, grabbing onto the larger gem's shoulder and trying to hold her back. It was like trying to hold back a mountain, but Howlite stopped and looked back at her curiously.

"Yes?"

"You mustn't go down there."

"Why not?" alarm spread across the captain's face. "Is there something wrong?"

"No! it's... it's-" Moonstone thought furiously, but her intellect abandoned her. What could she say? That she had betrayed them? That the creature was breaking free? That she'd found bombs and
was unable to disarm them? All these options flashed through her mind like lightning.

In the end, she was saved from the from an echoing boom and flash of heat that shot up from below, engulfing both of them and tossing them up the stairwell like leaves caught in an updraft. Moonstone landed heavily, ears ringing, head pounding, and her body aching.

"What was that!?!" Howlite demanded, already on her feet and cautiously peering down the stares. Her eyes locked on Moonstone's demanding an explanation. She opened her mouth to say something, anything… but no sound came. She closed her mouth, and sudden understanding flashed behind Howlite's eyes. The captain's shoulders sagged and her arms fell to her sides.

"Moon… what have you done?"

Moonstone was once more saved from having to answer as another noise came up the stairs. A deep, loud rumbling that slowing rose to a fever-pitched scream of pain and outrage.

Moonstone went even paler as truth dawned.

She had failed. Pf-01-2 was still alive. Worse…

It was free.

Pearl stood patiently, waiting for Moonstone to continue. But the Homeworld gem just sat quietly, arms around her knees and resolutely not looking at either of them.

"And that's it?" Pearl asked. "There's nothing else you wish to add?"

"What more is there to say?" Moonstone answered dully. "You wished to know why I was buried alongside your comrades; you have your answer. I betrayed the Diamond's, I betrayed Howlite, I attempted to destroy PF-01-2, and released it instead. Half a platoon of quartz and several of the researchers were shattered before it was recaptured and it was entirely my fault..." she paused, frowning. "No, fault implies that it was an accident. It was entirely my doing." She shrugged. "In the aftermath, I was dealt with in the same manner that befits any traitor."

Pearl glanced at Garnet, unsure what to say. The fusion took charge of the conversation.

"You did what Rose would have done."

Moonstone flinched at the words. "...I am already aware that I am a traitor; your reminders are unnecessary."

Garnet shook her head. "I did not mean it as an insult." She crossed her arms, considering the scientist. "You saw an injustice; someone in pain who did not deserve such a fate and you acted. You sought to end their suffering, regardless of the consequence."

"Then I was a fool. And by extension, so was Rose Quartz." Moonstone answered, Pearl felt a stab of anger but kept her temper this time. There was no fire in Moonstone's words, simply resignation. "My actions cost a dozen gems their lives and accomplished nothing. Rose quartz did the same, save her actions cost the lives of thousands."

"You're wrong." Pearl said simply, she kept her anger out of her voice, making her words a calm and ineffable statement of fact. "We saved the earth. Organic life has continued to flourish on this planet despite the Diamond's attentions. Rose accomplished her goal."
Moonstone considered this and looked up, meeting Pearl's resolute gaze. Her eyes were half-lidded, empty of everything except a detached curiosity. "Was it worth it?"

Pearl blinked. When Moonstone had asked that question before it had been brimming with derision and disgust; now it was flat, empty of anything except a detached curiosity.

Was it worth it?

Pearl's eyes flicked upwards to the gems bubbled overhead as her mind flashed with images of the countless things she had seen since the war. Pink flowers in a field of birdsong, an ocean full of countless sparks of life, a grassland thundering with the sounds of hooves, humans moving from place to place changing growing, learning.

Rose, disappearing in a flash of light and leaving a tiny crying figure in her wake.

"...Yes." Pearl answered, her voice cracking. She swallowed. "Yes." She repeated, her voice firmer. "It was worth it. Despite the pain, despite the loss, I would do it again."

Not just for her, but for me as well.

Moonstone held her gaze for a moment then dropped her eyes to the floor and said no more.

Pearl glanced at Garnet again, who failed to meet her gaze. The fusion had that air about her that Pearl recognized as future vision look. She assumed Garnet was teasing her way through the potential futures to determine what to do. Pearl waited patiently until; finally, Garnet gave a definitive nod.

"I've heard enough." She declared.

"...And?" Moonstone glanced upwards. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing," Garnet answered. Moonstone blinked, but otherwise made no response. "You're free to leave the temple." Garnet pointed towards the entrance, and the door whooshed open. "I suggest you try to get some rest." Garnet smiled. "I have no doubt Steven has a busy day planned for you."

Pearl found Moonstone's reaction surprising. She expressed no disbelief, no suspicion, not even relief at having been allowed to live. With the face of one who was truly beyond caring, she stared at Garnet for a moment, then rose, and shuffled out the door into the house.

The door shut behind her, leaving Pearl and Garnet alone.

"...Are you sure it is wise to leave her unattended?" Pearl asked.

Garnet shook her head. "Amethyst is out there. As are Steven and Connie. I foresee no trouble from our guest tonight." Garnet sat down on a rock jutting out of the floor and turned to Pearl. "Well? Your thoughts?"

"Hmmm..." Pearl closed her eyes, putting aside her feelings and going over what Moonstone had told them. "At the very least, I do not believe she lied to us. Everything she told us is either accurate, or she believes it to be so." For one thing, it hardly painted her in an innocent light. She had made no effort to hide or soften how involved she had been in the experiments on their former friends. "But, I still have some questions. Do you believe these experiments of hers are related to how Homeworld... did it? Corrupted the Crystal Gems?"

"It seems likely." Garnet nodded. "But that wasn't the whole story, just a part of it. Did you notice
"I did." Pearl nodded. Assuming that Moonstone arrived just before the war started that still only accounted for, at most, four centuries. What was happening in the last six hundred years of the war? Obviously, the corrupted fusion had been moved from the jungle to that tiny facility that they'd first encountered it in weeks ago. What had the Diamonds been doing with it there? "Do you think she can tell us anything else? About what happened to the creature afterwards?"

"I believe she can." Garnet nodded. "I am unsure how much, but I saw few answers in pushing the issue now. Her mind is too muddled at the moment. If we had continued to try, she likely would have snapped and closed off completely. We can try again tomorrow night."

Pearl nodded hesitantly. There was one question hovering between them—the elephant in the room, to use the human colloquialism—she didn't want to talk about it…but…

"What are we going to do with her?" she asked tremulously, the emotions bleeding back into her voice.

Garnet tilted her head back. "I don't know."

"She experimented on our friends, Garnet. She helped break their minds." The thought of it sickened her, it was something she would not, could not forgive.

"... Do you want to shatter her?" Garnet asked quietly.

Pearl narrowed her eyes, refusing to flinch or back down. "Do you?"

"We cannot afford to." Garnet answered. "I believe we are going to need her. We still do not know what Jasper is up to, what she has found. Moonstone may be able to point us in the right direction. We have no other leads."

"You did not answer me."

"No. I did not." Garnet pulled off her shades and looked Pearl in the eye. The fusion's third eye was closed, her red and blue ones were somber. "Part of me wants to." Garnet admitted. "It would be…justice." Her eyes barely flickered, but Pearl knew she was thinking about the gems overhead. "And yet…" she trailed off.

Pearl closed her eyes. "...I know." she murmured. She understood.

She had shattered hundreds of gems during the war, possibly thousands—she'd stopped keeping track long before it ended. It had been awful. She had done it for Rose, for the earth, and she would do it again!

But it was awful.

When it had finally ended. She had been happy. Even though it ended badly, at least she didn't have to kill anymore. She had never enjoyed it, never taken satisfaction from it.

She didn't want to do it again. Not if she didn't have to.

"We could bubble her." Pearl suggested. "That way, if we need her we can let her out for a little while. Then, once we have what we want, we can shove her back in the bubble."

"We could." Garnet agreed, running her fingers through her hair wearily. "We wouldn't be able to
hide such a thing from Steven." Pearl frowned. Garnet was right. Somehow, she didn't see Steven allowing them to do that.

"For now," Garnet continued. "I think it best if we leave her free. We can decide what to do with her once this is all over."

"...If you think that best Garnet." Pearl replied, nodding reluctantly. She stood, brushing herself off and making for her room. "Good night Garnet."

"Goodnight Pearl."

Pearl wandered through the temple, her feet mindlessly following the path to her room as her mind whirled with half-formed thoughts and emotions. By the time she'd reached her room with its calming series of waterfalls, she still wasn't quite sure how to feel about it all.

She stepped lightly onto the surface of the water and glided to the center of the pool. She stood still looking at her reflection wavering in the water's ripples. She summoned her spear and began to twirl it with the ease of long practice. The physical exertion helped her calm herself, sort through what she had learned tonight. In the end, she still wasn't sure how she felt about it. But at the very least, she knew two things for certain.

She did not trust Moonstone.

She would keep a close eye on the Homeworld gem. If she did anything, gave Pearl any reason to suspect that she was planning something nefarious…

Pearl traced her finger along the edge of her spear, feeling and taking comfort in its keenness.

She would be ready.

The whoosh of the temple door shutting behind her felt oddly menacing to Moonstone; not that she could bring herself to care, not with the memories running through her head. She could still hear them: the roars of rage, the snap of orders, the crack of breaking stone, and the finalistic gong of judgment being passed.

She shook her head, trying to clear it as she glanced around the house; Steven and Connie were lying on the ground almost motionless—sleeping, presumably. As was Amethyst, the purple gem was still sprawled out on the couch, occasionally giving off an oddly irritating grumbly noise, but otherwise appeared oblivious to the world. That was all for the best really, Moonstone wasn't sure she could handle any more questions at the moment.

She sat down by the kitchen counter. Trying to decide what to do. She glanced at the warp pad, but after a moment shook her head. She turned to the screen door. The fusion and the pearl would probably be upset if she left the house… then again, she didn't particularly care what they thought and she doubted one tiny transgression would be enough to get her in any more trouble than she was already in

She wanted to be alone. She needed to think, or purposely not think. Either way, the wooden walls seemed to be pressing in on her. She wanted out.

Decision made, she quickly and quietly crossed the room and went out into cool night air. Then downward the stairs onto the beach, the sand crunched and slid beneath her boots as she made her way to the waterline, then collapsed, folding her legs beneath her so that she sat cross-legged on the sand.
There were no gems around, no humans either. This would suffice.

*So… I’m still in one piece.*

And wasn't that a surprise? She wondered why the fusion had let her leave. She tried to think up several likely explanations, but gave up. She didn't really care.

She felt numb. Empty. The memories she'd gone through tonight had left her ragged. PF-01-2, Howlite, the Chamber of Reconstitution… she hadn't thought about all of it in such detail for a long time. Hadn't had the chance, really. After she was declared a traitor, she had forcefully reduced to her gem state and locked away. The times they'd let her out to run tests had been few and far between throughout the centuries.

Howlite had never visited her, at least, not when she was conscious. Probably not when she was unconscious either, the captain would have had more important things to do than sneer at traitors.

Moonstone didn't blame her, *couldn't* blame her.

She wondered what had happened to the captain. Had she left the planet with the rest of Homeworld? That seemed likely, she was probably still serving White Diamond with as much dedication as ever, on Homeworld or some distant colony in the far reaches of space.

Moonstone looked up. The stars were out tonight, tiny pinpricks of light in a dark purple sky. She wondered which one was Homeworld, if it was even visible from this watery rock in the middle of nowhere.

Again, it didn't really matter. She'd never really spent much time on the planet anyway. She didn't want to think about it.

There was a breeze out here, blowing cool air against her face and drying her cheeks. There'd never been any breeze underground. It felt… nice. Moonstone stared out into the water, watching as wave after wave crashed onto shore, rushed up the sand, and receded. It was hypnotizing, and much nicer to focus on than anything else. So she watched, counting the waves until the number became meaningless. Until her eyes grew heavy and closed.

And covered by a blanket of starry sky, Moonstone slept.

Chapter End Notes

*I HAVE A QUESTION FOR ALL OF YOU!*

I want to ask you all: if you were Garnet and Pearl here, what would you do with Moonstone? Shatter her? Bubble her? Spare her? Forgive her?

A close writing friend of mine read my story and described her as a zealot, one who doesn't care who they hurt or how they do it because they believe they are in the right—the worst kind of scum. (He says Death or Bubbling.)

That is not an invalid statement, though not quite how I see her. I see her as a humanitarian (gemitarian, whatever), someone who wishes to see as few gems hurt as possible. Organic life isn't really REAL to her; she's never had contact with it in any real capacity, so why would she value earth over the lives of gems lost fighting for it.
She has Good Intentions (note the capital letters). That doesn't necessarily mean she's a good person/gem.

But back to the question. What do you think? Ignore the plot, ignore Steven's feelings. What does Moonstone deserve?

I'm asking, because I genuinely Do. Not. Know.

(Also, if you could tell me what you thought of the chapter, that'd be cool too)
Steven groaned as his eyes were assaulted by light. He tried to wriggle deeper into his sleeping bag in a stubborn attempt escape the wrath of the morning sun. But it was in vain, for the sun's opening move had opened his sleep cycle for the finishing blow. Now that he was half awake, the rumbling snores that could only come from Amethyst were pounding his eardrums like a discordant orchestra.

Seriously, if snoring was an Olympic sport, she'd take home the gold no problem—which was weird considering she didn't actually need to breathe or anything. Nonetheless, Amethyst managed to shake the rafters with her patented mix of snuffles, snorts, and groans—it was actually quite impressive. Steven had the sneaking suspicion that Amethyst actually practiced, testing out various forms and sleeping positions until she could produce the maximum amount of genuine snore.

Which meant unless he could will himself deaf, his chances of getting back to sleep had now become only half a step above nonexistent… oh well. Time to greet the day. Steven sat up, stretching his back and yawning as he squirmed out of his sleeping bag.

"Morning Steven!" Said Connie, raising her voice to be heard over the cacophony coming from the couch.

"Mrnin' Cnee." Steven yawned, well, grumbled really. He wasn't much of morning person. At least, not compared to Connie. She was sitting at the kitchen counter, a stack of pancakes with strawberries sitting in front of her. He shuffled over to her and noticed that there was a second plate at the stool nearest to him. He stared at it for a moment, appreciating the beauty of the sight, breathing in the sweet scent. The aroma sent signals straight to his stomach, which awoke with a growl and prodded his brain into wakefulness. "Connie, you are literally the best."

Connie put a hand to her ear, "What?"

"Oh, one sec…" Steven turned and moved over to point zero of the noise bomb. Sticking out his tongue in concentration, he held up his hands and formed a bubble, neatly scooping Amethyst up and trapping her inside. She didn't seem to notice, she just rolled over and gave out what appeared to be a particularly loud snort. Steven bit his lip nervously as the bubble vibrated from the force, but it held.

Ah, sweet silence. Steven sighed appreciatively, and then turned back to his waiting breakfast. "I said: Connie, you are literally the best." he said, picking up his fork and shoveling a bite of sugary, strawberry-y goodness into his mouth… so good!

"You better believe it, mister," she giggled, wagging a pancake-laden fork at him. "How'd you sleep?"
"Not bad." Steven replied in between bites of pancake. "You?"

"Pretty good. The floor feels more comfortable every day."

"You know, you could sleep in the bed? I don't mind."

"Steven that would totally ruin the sleepover experience. Sleeping bags and staying up late are, like, the most important thing."

"If you say so," Steven shrugged. He glanced around. "Hey. Where's Moonstone?" Steven asked, careful not to spit out any of his breakfast. He looked around for his new friend, but couldn't see so much as a thread of her coat. Had she not come back out of the temple last night?

"She's outside," Connie answered. "I went out to stretch my legs and saw her sitting by the shore."

"Really? What's she doing?" Steven asked.

"Nothing much." Connie shrugged. "She was just kind of sitting there. I think she's asleep."

"You don't say?" Steven grinned in delight. It had taken weeks to get Lapis and Peridot to try sleeping. He must be getting really good at this whole introducing-gems-to-earth thing! He eyed the scant remains of his breakfast. Hey! Where had all his pancakes gone? His plate had been full a moment ago… "Think she might want some breakfast?"

"Well it couldn't hurt to offer." Connie answered, picking up her plate. "I don't really feel like eating my last pancake anyway." She hoped off her stool and made for the door. "You coming?"

"Yeah," taking just a moment to lick the last drops of syrup and whip cream off his plate, Steven slid it into the sink. He hurried after his friend, following her down to the beach and towards the hunched white figure on the shore.

"That doesn't look very comfortable," said Steven, staring at the white gem. Moonstone was sitting cross-legged, her head bowed until it was practically between her knees. Her long ponytail had fanned over her face hiding it from view like a veil.

"Tell me about it," said Connie. "We might as well wake her up, the tide is coming in; she'll get soaked if she doesn't move."

"Good point." Steven nodded. "Moonstone?" he called. "Are you asleep? If you are, you should probably wake up." The white gem made no movement, "We've got a delicious pancake for you, if you don't wake up now, Connie will eat it." But still she made no movement. Steven frowned; that always worked on Amethyst.

"Here, let me." Connie stepped forward and put her hand on the gem's shoulder. "Moonstone?" Finally, the gem stirred. Slowly, she raised her head, blinking at them from behind her hair.

"… Connie?" she asked, her voice weary. He looked up throw her hair. "Steven?" she rubbed her hand into her face. "What happened?"

"Good morning!" said Steven brightly. "How was your nap?"

Moonstone stared blankly. "My what?"

"Your nap. You were sleeping." He grinned.

"Oh." Another, slow blink. "I suppose I was."
"So, how was it? Did you like it? Have any nice dreams."

"No." Moonstone looked away. "No I did not." she shuddered slightly. Reaching up, she straightened out her hair, revealing her face. She… wasn't looking too good actually. She looked exhausted. And there were dark dirty streaks running across down her cheeks.

Uh oh. He recognized this kind of look.

A flicker of doubt on the events of last night flickered through Steven. "Moonstone, are you all right?" he asked. "Did… did something happen last night?" Garnet had just wanted to talk to her about the corrupted gem, right? He doubted Moonstone would have kept anything a secret, she seemed pretty forthright.

Not that the gems would have hurt her, if she had!

…Right?

"Things happen every night, Steven," she answered, ignoring his first question and doing absolutely nothing to extinguish that flicker of doubt.

He opened his mouth to ask her again, but she raised her hand to cut him off. "I am… fine. More so then can be expected or deserved." And just what was that supposed to mean? "I do not wish to speak talk it, please."

"Then…" Steven hesitated, she'd said please…but he had to ask. "Why were you crying?"

Moonstone touched her finger to the streaks on her cheeks. "Memories." She said, her tone telling him in no uncertain terms that she would say no more.

Steven decided to drop it, for now. Talking about feelings was painful, and he could tell Moonstone was dealing with a lot. He'd give her some time to sort it out on her own before prying further. Until then, he made a mental note to ask exactly what Garnet what Moonstone had said last night? It might help him figure out what was wrong.

"Moonstone? Would you like some breakfast?" said Connie, changing the subject and raising the pancake plate for inspection. Moonstone glanced at it.

"No," she said. "I am…not in the mood to experiment with earth foodstuffs."

"That's fair." Connie agreed; she proffered the plate to Steven. He shrugged, taking the pancake and eating it. It had gotten a little cold, but it was still good.

Connie sat down on the sand next to Moonstone. "So, we were thinking you might want to explore some more of earth. It really is a great place and we barely scratched the surface yesterday. You interested?" she glanced sidelong at the gem.

Moonstone sighed. "I suppose," she said at length. "The alternative is to do nothing, or return to the temple." Slowly, she got to her feet. "I wish to do neither, so your alternative seems like the most appropriate action." She leaned down and scooped up some seawater in her hands and rubbed it onto her face, washing away the dark tear tracks. Apparently some got into her eye, as she hissed and started to scrub at her eyes.

"Oh yeah," Steven said sympathetically. "Seawater can sting, it's not like tap water. I probably should have warned you about getting it in your eyes."
Moonstone just grimaced and summoned her visor. She tapped a button on the side and it flashed, Moonstone blinked and shook her head. "Much better."

"That thing can clean your eyes too?" said Connie, impressed.

"Of course." Moonstone replied. "Naturally it should prevent chemicals from getting into my vision spheres, but should it happen, it is imperative that I be able to fix the problem—just one of many improvements I made to the standard moonstone data scanner over the centuries."

"That's pretty neat," said Steven, glad for a safer topic. "What else can it do?"

"Many things." Moonstone answered. "For example, it can be programed with data files on the planet I'm on and synchronize itself with its meteorological properties… in… order to." Moonstone frowned; she tapped the side of her visor. "That can't be right," She muttered.

Steven waited expectantly for an explanation, but Moonstone said nothing. Instead she turned her head back towards the house and began to tap her visor in several different patterns, her frown deepening.

"What's the matter?" asked Connie, "is something wrong?"

"No." Moonstone answered, sounding more puzzled than irritated. "Not wrong, just… peculiar. I'm getting a reading that can't possibly be correct."

"Isn't that sort of a textbook example of something being wrong?" Moonstone turned her frown on Connie who shrugged. "I'm just saying. What's so wrong about what you found?"

"I was scanning the area and detected a certain energy signature. One almost identical to my own." Moonstone answered, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized the symbols flashing across it.

Connie looked at Steven. He shrugged, being just as lost as her.

"I don't suppose you have found another moonstone laying around? That might explain the signature." Moonstone sounded doubtful.

"Nope." Steven shook his head. "I'm pretty sure you're the only one around. I don't think I've seen a corrupted one, either."

"Maybe it's a malfunction?" Connie suggested.

"Unlikely." Moonstone scowled lightly. "I have been using this device for three millennia, and not once has it ever given me an erroneous readout."

"Fine. Fine." Connie raised her hands, grinning disarmingly "Maybe it is right then."

"But I cannot imagine what is giving off such a readout." Moonstone frowned.

"I have an idea!" said Steven eagerly, raising his hand. "Why don't we just go investigate?"

Whatever this was, it was the first shred of interest Moonstone had shown in anything since she woke up. He might not know exactly what was wrong, but he did know when someone needed cheering up. A mystery hunt sounded just like the thing to take Moonstone's mind off whatever was bugging her.

"Where is the signal thing coming from?" Connie asked.
Moonstone pursed her lips. "… Just beyond your domicile."

"Alright then! This will take no time at all!" Steven declared, taking Moonstone's hand and pulling her onto her feet. "What do you think it's going to be?"

Moonstone raised an eyebrow at him, but nonetheless let him pull her along. "If I knew that there would be no point in investigating."

"Good point!" Steven grinned, trying to make it as infectious as possible. "But you don't, so there is, and we are!"

Once they passed the house, Moonstone went in front, tapping her visor and moving slowly, guiding them towards the cliff face. She stopped in front of a tiny nook and tapped her visor one last time. "It's coming from in there."

Steven blinked. That was weird; had this little cave always been there? How had he not found it by now? "Well, we won't find anything out just standing here. Let's take a look." He made to enter, but a hand caught his shoulder.

"Wait a second, Steven," said Connie. "Maybe we should be a little bit careful. We don't know what's in there, but it's gem related so it could be dangerous. What if it's a corrupted moonstone or something?"

"That's, uh, a good point." Steven admitted, scratching his head. He eyed the hole doubtfully, it didn't look very big, but that didn't mean much. He'd seen some dangerous crystal beast's that were shorter than he was. "What do you think Moonstone? Can your visor tell how dangerous whatever's in there is?"

"The energy does not appear to be very volatile," said Moonstone, with a detached curiosity. "Although now that I'm closer, I see that it is not one big signature, but a multitude of tiny ones." She adjusted her visor. "Interesting. I have heard that shattered gems can be coax to partially manifest themselves. Perhaps a gem was shattered here and the shards retained a sense of broken consciousness?" she sounded somewhat queasy at the thought. Steven could relate. Suddenly this mystery investigation didn't seem like such a fun idea.

"What do you want to do, Steven?" Connie asked. "Want me to fetch Amethyst? The house is literally right there." she jabbed a thumb over shoulder. "It'd take me five minutes, tops."

"I think we'll be fine." Steven said slowly. If it was a bunch of gem fragments, it'd be creepy, but not actually that dangerous. He couldn't really imagine anything dangerous being able to stay near the temple for long, Garnet would have found it with her future vision in no time. Besides, they could always run to the house if things got dicey. "But you guys get behind me." He held out his arm and summoned his shield. "I'm going in, watch my back." He stepped toward the alcove, holding his shield aloft, and cautiously stepped inside. "…huh?"

"What is it?" Connie asked, trying to peer over his shoulder.

"Mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"See for yourself." He moved aside, dismissing his shield so the others could get a look. The alcove was just deep enough that the back of it was shaded, and in that shade there was a patch of toadstools growing out of the rock. Their size ranged from just barely reaching Steven's ankles to almost level with his waist. Their stalks were a pearly white while their caps were a mix of pink
and ivory swirls. They were kind of pretty.


"Do either of you have any idea what these are?" Moonstone asked, crouching lower so her head didn't hit the rocky ceiling.

"They're mushrooms," Steven explained. "Something that lives on earth. Although these ones kind of look like the giant ones I saw a couple of days ago."

"They might be something similar." Connie mused. Crouching over a couple of the smaller ones, but not touching it. "Didn't Peridot say something about those mushrooms feeding on gem energy and growing huge? Maybe these are the same situation?"

"But I don't think there'd be any gems buried around here." Steven frowned. "Garnet would have found them ages ago."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be a gem." Connie shrugged. "Amethyst might have left some gem artifact lying around, or maybe the temple's leaking a bit?"

"Hmmmm. What do you think Moonstone?" Steven asked, turning back to the Homeworld gem.

"Your theory has holes." She answered, "assuming that these are indeed feeding on ambient gem energy, that does not explain why most of their signature is identical to my own." She frowned, glancing between Steven and the fungus. "Even stranger, the bits of energy that don't match my own, appear to be a perfect match to yours, Steven."

…Okay, now this was starting to get weird. Steven furrowed his brow, staring at the shiny toadstools. But how did these get here?

"Moonstone's and Steven's energy" Connie muttered, her brow furrowed in thought. "It'd have to have happened after we found her…" her eyes went wide. "Wait a sec!" She backed out of the rocky niche and turned to face the house, her face screwed up in concentration. She pointed towards it and traced her finger through the air until it was pointing at the cliff face above the alcove. "Steven! I think I know what these are and how they got here!" she grinned.

"Really?" said Steven eagerly. "How?"

"Remember when you came back from fighting all those corrupted gems? A while ago?" Steven nodded. "You were covered in all that junk, that gold sappy stuff and the pink powder. You had Lapis scrub it off you and she shot it out the window?"

"Uh huh," Steven nodded, he had been there for that.

Connie pointed to the house. "That window was the one she shot the water out of." She pointed to cliff fungus cover rocks. "It must have hit here and trickled down. All of that powder on you must have been mushroom spores, which must have germinated once they trickled down into this tiny cave." She tapped her chin. "Mushrooms don't really need sunlight, so it'd make sense that they'd grow out of it."

"I see!" Steven nodded, then something in his brain went click and he gasped. "Would that make these Mr. Funguy's babies?"

"Uh…maybe?" Connie shrugged. "I mean, my knowledge on the biology of magical mushrooms is kind of shaky. But I guess that makes sense?"
"That's so cool!" Steven pressed his hands to his cheeks and sighed as he kneeled down to take a closer look. Gently he reached out and laid his hand on the cap of the largest one. The mushroom shot out a puff of powder that caught him in the face. He lurched back, coughing out the sweet-smelling, but bitter-tasting powder.

"Steven?" Connie yelped. "Are you alright?"

"Fine, fine." Steven stuck out his tongue, trying to get the taste out. "I'm not hurt, it just tastes bad and…" he trailed off. The mushroom he had touched had started to shake, the pink whorls on its cap glowing visibly in the shady gloom. Then it went rigid and dozens of tiny roots pulled themselves out of the rock. The glow snaked its way down the mushroom's stalk and condensed into two circles. The glow faded, leaving two glossy pink circles that looked like eyes.

The circles blinked at Steven.

Steven blinked back.

"Oh. My. God. It's so CUTE!" Steven squealed. Physical irritation forgotten, he got back down on all fours and looked at the mushroom on eye level. "You guys really are Mr. Funguy's babies!" he gushed. "This is, like, the best thing!" If a mushroom was capable of preening, this one was doing it. It strutted forward across the sandy ground, its cap tilted back like a dog holding its nose high. Steven reached out and petted it, making it quiver with what he could only assume was pleasure.

"… I have no idea what is happening right now," said Moonstone. Steven noticed that her voice sounded different, completely devoid of that unpleasantly sad tinge that had plagued her since she woke up. Maybe the situation was just so weird she needed all her focus to deal with it? Either way, Steven was happy about it. At the sound of her voice, the mushroom straightened, it looked up at Moonstone with narrowed eyes. Then the pink circles on its stalk went wide. It gave a little hop and rushed toward the gem. It stopped in front of her and started to rub its cap against the hem of her coat.

It might have just been his imagination, but Steven could swear that it was purring.

Moonstone stared down blankly at the giant mushroom doing its best to cuddle her legs despite its lack of arms. "Can… can one of you explain this?"

She looked so confused, so hopelessly befuddled that Steven couldn't help himself. He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture.

One for scrapbook, right there.

"One of Steven's powers he got from his mother is the ability to bring plants to life." Connie explained, taking pity on the scientist. "Steven animated this giant mushroom to help fight a bunch of corrupt gems. He had to leave it behind, but it apparently it covered him in its spores. We washed him off and threw it all out the window." Connie gestured to the mushroom. "Apparently the spores germinated."

"I see," said Moonstone. "and, er, why is it… doing this?" the mushroom had stopped rubbing itself against the gem and had taken to scampering in quick circles around her legs, the roots at its base whirling in a blur to skip it across the sand.

"That… okay." Connie shrugged. "I don't know."

Steven rubbed his chin thoughtfully, watching the mushroom prance around Moonstone and trying not to verbally squeal at how weirdly cute it was. It was a good question, why would it like
Moonstone so much? Well, apparently, it had a lot of her energy in it which might mean…

"He thinks you're his mom!" said Steven, pointing at Moonstone in giddy realization. He was pretty sure his eyes were doing that star thing Connie said they did sometimes, but he didn't care. This was just too precious!

"Er… what?" Moonstone blinked. "Mom… as in, the way that Rose Quartz is your mom?"

"Yeah!" Steven said, then hesitated. "Okay, not exactly, but kinda!"

"But…" Moonstone looked more lost than ever. "But I didn't make a hole and I'm quite certain I have not gone anywhere near one of earth's organic drills."

"Uh, not everything on earth does it that way," said Connie, her face flushing slightly. "But if it makes you feel better, I'm kind of lost too." She glanced at Steven. "Why does it think Moonstone is its mom?"

"Not to worry, I can explain." Steven held up his hands. "I'm not sure if you know about this or not, Moonstone, cause you were unconscious, But the place we found you was full of these giant mushrooms. Like, taller than my house."

Moonstone nodded slowly to show she was with him so far. "Would I be right in assuming that their size was unnatural?" Steven nodded. She continued, "You also said that these were… feeding on gem energy?"

"Yeah." Steven nodded. "Apparently all those mushrooms had a gem inside them."

"The test subjects" she murmured, something behind Moonstone's eyes turned somber.

"The what?"

"…Nothing." She shook her head. "Please continue your explanation."

"Um…okay. So most of the mushrooms were destroyed by the time I saw them. But there was a smaller one that wasn't, I used my mom's powers and brought it to life. Okay, not life, exactly it was already alive, but I made it move and stuff. I named him Mr. Funguy. He fought some corrupted gems and stuff. But when we left, we couldn't take him with us, so I turned him back to normal. But before that happened, Mr. Funguy did two things!" he held up two fingers. "One, he covered me in this pink powder, which Connie thinks is what created these little guys." He pointed at the mushroom, which had yet to stop scampering in circles, apparently reveling in its newfound locomotive abilities. "Secondly," he moved his finger so he was pointing at the white gem. "He spat you up."

He could practically see understanding dawn on the gems face; fascination and nausea swam across her face in equal measure. She crouched down and stared directly at the fungus. It stopped moving mid-skip and met her gaze, quivering slightly.

"I see. I was… inside… this Mr. Funguy." For a moment, nausea dominated her expression before intrigue beat it back down. "The creature had likely been feeding off my energy for thousands of years; which explains why its offspring would have a energy signature so similar to mine. Then your own powers animated it, which would explain the presence of your own energy." She tilted her head to the side; the mushroom bent its stalk to copy the movement. "I am uncertain as to how this makes me its mom."

"Well if you want it in scientific terms," said Connie. "Offspring are produced by biologically
mixing of the components of the father and mother."

"Then I suppose that would make me its mom." Moonstone conceded, staring intently at the pearly fungus. "That's…nice?"

"It isn't just nice, it's adorable!" Steven cooed.

Moonstone turned to him and said: "Would that make you the father, Steven?"

Steven froze.

"Uh… um…" he stuttered, distracted by the sound of Connie choking beside him. "Actually, I think Mr. Funguy would be the dad."

"I disagree. From what you have explained and my own understanding, this Mr. Funguy served merely as an intermediary for biologically mixing your energy and mine. It is our energy that gave them life. Based upon Connie's definition, that would make you the dad, and me the mom."

"Uh…uh…" Steven could feel himself starting to sweat. Somehow this wasn't as funny anymore. He heard Connie's coughing fit die down and looked to her for help. To his surprise, and somewhat horror, she was grinning.

"Don't look at me, mister." Connie put her hand on her hip and wagged a finger at him. "It's your child and you should take responsibility for it."

"Oh man!" said Steven, running his suddenly sweaty hands through his hair. "I'm not ready for parenthood! I don't even have a van." He was panicking, he knew it. "I'm sorry Moonstone. I don't think I'm emotionally ready to for this kind of commitment!"

Moonstone blinked owlishly at him and glanced at the mushroom. The edges of its cap seemed to turn upward in some weird fungus-y equivalent of a shrug. She looked back.

"Okay?"

Steven didn't seem to here her. "It's not you! It's me." He babbled. A thought occurred, sending him down another avenue of panic. "What am I gonna tell dad!?" He wailed, tugging at his hair. "He told me he doesn't want to see grandkids until I'm thirty! He's gonna freak! Air, I need air!" he turned and stumbled out of the tiny alcove, leaving them behind as he staggered down the beach mumbling about dad duties and fungus diapers, did mushrooms ever need those? What did they eat? What…

Moonstone glanced at Connie, hoping for a bastion of sanity. "Is he going to be alright?"

Connie shrugged, letting out one last giggle. "Probably, he's just being Steven."

"Is… his concern warranted?" Moonstone asked. "Are there responsibilities to being a mom that I am not aware of?"

"Normally, yeah. For a living mushroom?" she stared at the mushroom. It caught her gaze and waved back, or rather, Connie thought it was. It didn't have arms so it was hard to be sure. "Don't let it throw spores at people, I guess?"

Moonstone considered the mushroom impassively. "I'm stuck with this now, aren't I?"

"Oh yeah. Welcome to parenthood."
QUESTION FOR THIS CHAPTER (maybe I'll make this a thing, get you readers involved in the story or some cutesy thing like that): What Moonstone and Steven name their mushroom child?

I was gonna go with Mr. Funguy Jr. But meh, that pun has run its course and it is an awkward thing to type. Plus, maybe this mushroom is a girl. Who can say?

And so, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of its parent. Mr. Funguy emerges from the spores of its father.

And yes. I always planned for this to happen. What impact will it have on the plot? I have no idea. But I saw a chance to include a bunch of mobile baby mushrooms, and I took it.

And you know what? I never looked back.

But seriously though. Steven, you're only fourteen and you already have a kid. How is Greg going to react when he finds out he's a grandfather? And where is Connie going to fit into all this?! She may find it funny now, but perhaps she's just putting on a brave face. Will she be able to accept that Steven is the father of another woman/gem's child!?

Scandalous. Simply, scandalous.

…You know, when I first imagined Moonstone. I didn't think she was going to be a cougar. Ah well, some times our characters surprise even the writers.

P.S. I don't really think I need to say this, but I've seen shippers go off on weird things, so I'm erring on the side of caution:

I'm NOT actually shipping Steven and Moonstone. It's not going to be a thing. The fact that they have, from a certain perspective, produced a child together means nothing. It's a joke. It will be solely a source of comedy.
Unfortunately, it appeared her first instinct had been correct. The mushroom hybrid, which was her child apparently, was following her. She could hear the sound of its hundreds of tiny roots pulling it across the ground behind her like the rustling of cloth against gravel.

She had gotten over her initial bewilderment over the creature's existence, although admittedly she was still at a loss on what to make of it. Such a seamless mix of gem and organic life... it would normally take a pair of quartz to tear her away from something so fascinating. But the creature's origins were a little... off-putting. It wasn't that she was apparently its mother—her grasp of the nuances of what that even meant were shaky at best, but the thought that she had been trapped in a similar creature, abandoned and forgotten by Homeworld, was upsetting. Was she doomed to see reminders of her treachery in everything she saw?

She shook her head. She had made her choice; of course she was forever doomed to reap the consequences. But that didn't mean she had any desire to stare at such a blatant reminder of her punishment. Somehow, she had a strange feeling that the creature had picked up on her feelings. It still followed her, but less conspicuously, making no effort to scamper in and out of her sight, or maybe it had just worn itself out at last. Whether it was intentional or not, she choose to appreciate this small blessing.

Of more importance was that she was being led somewhere, Steven was being surprisingly tight-lipped about where, something about keeping it a surprise. He seemed to have calmed down, occasionally shooting a smile back at her and her shadow as relaxed vistas Beach City's boardwalk gave way to grass and hills.

She considered the boy's happy attitude curiously, thinking back to the way the fusion had separated her from the boy last night and wondering how much he understood of what the Crystal Gems had done. The act of separation before her questioning suggested the boy had been ignorant of their intentions. But the fusion had not made her swear secrecy, she could easily tell him exactly what had happened. She considered doing it; perhaps as some sort of cheap revenge for last night, but something made her hesitate. If her understanding of the boy's nature was correct, that information could hurt Steven quite deeply. He clearly trusted the gems dearly—to have that trust betrayed like that... well, who knew better than her how deeply the blade of betrayal cut in both directions? The idea of hurting someone who trusted her, however slight that trust might be...well, Moonstone had experienced that enough for one eternity, thanks.

Perhaps the fusion had known that.

Moonstone frowned, that last thought flashing through her mind like the Funland Arcade's neon signs. She had been too fascinated at the thought that such a stable fusion could exist that she hadn't given much thought to just what she might be capable of. Cross-class fusions could be
highly unpredictable in their manifested abilities. Perhaps it would be prudent to try to find out more. It was certainly a better time filler than wallowing in her memories. She could even investigate right now.

With a thought, she accessed the data from when she had scanned the fusion, trying to determine what Garnet's gems were. Hmm. One was a ruby, well that certainly explained the fusion's blocky hairstyle and suggested reasonable combat ability—understandable, but not particularly enlightening. As for the other, it appeared to be a sapphire.

Oh.

Well... that was... informative. Now Moonstone understood the downright unsettling amount of freedom the Crystal Gems were allowing her. Why they trusted that she wouldn't try to escape or harm anyone.

It wasn't faith, it was foreknowledge.

Yesterday this knowledge would have made her feel trapped. But after the events of last night, she couldn't really bring herself to care. What difference did it really make? Perhaps she should be thankful. If the fusion foresaw that Moonstone had no intention of causing trouble, she would be less likely to let the Pearl shatter her.

"Finding anything interesting?"

Moonstone blinked, and glanced down at Connie. The gem realized that she had stopped walking, and the humans had stopped as well. The girl was staring at her—not suspiciously, exactly, but like she was a stubborn mathematical equation that the girl was determined to solve.

"I suppose," Moonstone shrugged.

"Hmmm." Connie hummed, raising an eyebrow. "Well, it's just you're being kind of quiet. You wouldn't stop asking questions yesterday. Not that that's a bad thing," she added hurriedly. "If you've got any more questions about the earth, feel free to ask. I'm happy to help."

"Me too," said Steven. "It's okay to ask for help, you know. The earth can be kind of overwhelming for gems. Even the Crystal Gems get confused sometimes, and they've been here for thousands of years!"

"I'll keep that in mind." Moonstone replied noncommittally.

Connie frowned and looked like she wanted to ask more probing questions. But she seemed to understand that Moonstone had no wish to answer such questions and changed the subject instead.

"So have you thought of a name for our new friend?"

Moonstone glanced back over her shoulder. As she turned her head, the mushroom went very still as though it thought she would not notice it if it didn't move. "...I was not aware a personal moniker was required."

"Of course it needs a name!" said Steven. "Everything deserves a name." He approached the motionless mushroom. "How about... um... actually what do you think, is it a boy or a girl?" He asked Connie.

"Fungi don't really do genders."

"Oh, just like Gems then." Steven nodded understandingly. "Well, I made the Watermelon
Steven's, should we call these the Moonstone Mushrooms?"

"I mean, do you think the other ones will come alive on their own?" asked Connie.

"Hmm, good point." Steven admitted, "We'll put a pin in that one. Let's focus on this just this little guy." He patted the mushrooms cap. The contact was apparently too much for its self-restraint, as it began to hop up and down excitedly. Then it leaned its cap forward and launched itself at Steven. Taken by surprise, the boy had no time to react before the mushroom knocked him off his feet and into the air. He landed on top of its cap and it began to bounce again, apparently unencumbered by the boy's weight.

"Wow!" Steven giggled. "You're stronger than you look."

A slit opened on the mushrooms stalk and it made a happy squeaky noise.

"I have an idea," said Connie. "How about we name him Toad?"

"You mean, like the mushroom guys from that plumber game?"

"Yeah, I think it fits."

"Works for me." Steven nodded. He turned to Moonstone, still being bounced up and down. "What do you think, do you like the name Toad?"

Moonstone shrugged. "I have no idea who these mushroom guys are, nor do I particularly care either way."

"Then it's settled. Your name is Toad."

The mushroom gave another happy squeak and dislodged Steven with a particularly hard bounce he hit the ground and the mushroom froze.

"Don't worry, I'm okay." Steven pushed himself to his feet, he grinned at the mushroom.

"Welcome to the family, Toad."

"...Now that this matter is taken care of, can we move on?" Moonstone asked.

"Sure!" Steven nodded, turning around and starting to walk. "And don't worry, Moonstone, we're almost there."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me where there is?"

"Oh come on, you wouldn't want me to spoil the surprise, would you?"

"Actually, I do not think I would mind."

"Well, too bad" Steven puffed up his cheeks in a pout. "It's going to be a surprise and that's final. But don't worry, it's just over this hill" he pointed. "It'll be a fun surprise, I promise."

It was this exact moment that the wind shifted, carrying the sounds of screaming.

Moonstone looked at Steven. Steven grinned sheepishly.

"That's, uh, just bad timing." He said, picking up the pace. "Come on, we better make sure everything's alright."
Moonstone took a moment to appreciate the faulty logic in running *toward* the sound of screaming. But, to her chagrin, Steven's secrecy had actually aroused her curiosity. As she approached, the screaming became more coherent and she began to pick up other sounds, a rushing sound that reminded her of the ocean's waves and something that sounded suspiciously like laser fire.

"Gahhhhh!" Yelled a nasally voice after a loud blast of lasers. "What are you doing, Lazuli? Hurry up and kill them already!"

"I'm trying. They won't stop moving." Answered a second voice, followed by the whoosh of rushing water.

Moonstone crested the hill and came to an abrupt halt, trying to make sense of what she was looking at.

For starters, there were two gems. A blue one standing by a wooden structure and a smaller green and yellow one dashing around being chased by several green blurs. The scene was made somewhat stranger by several giant hands made of water flying through the air, making grabs at the flying blurs which either dodged around them, or abruptly reversed direction and shot through the watery limbs before they could react. Every now and then the flying blurs would fire a blast of energy at the hands or the green gem. As she watched, one of the blasts struck the green gem, launching her into the air with a pained yelp.

"Ow! Lapis, come on!"

The blue gem's eyes narrowed. "I got it." She clapped her hands together and the watery hands formed together into a giant ball, which swept through the air in a giant wave. The blurs were enveloped but still moved, trying to escape. The blue gem clenched her hands into fists and the water crackled into ice. The ice ball hit the ground with a thump and the blue gem crossed her arms, nodding in satisfaction.

"Peridot, are you okay?" Said Steven, hurrying to the fallen gem.

"Steven?" The green gem blinked, looking sheepish "You, er, witnessed that?" She slumped to the ground, with a sigh. "Of course you did, because Peridot is not allowed to have dignity on this planet. It is not a thing."

"Well, if you're complaining about the Earth, then you're probably fine." Steven grinned, reaching the gem and helping her to her feet. "But that still looked like it hurt. Do you need me to spit on you? I can spit on you if you want." Steven leaned back his head and started to gurgle.

"No thanks," She said hurriedly, clamping both her hands over the boy's mouth. "Spitting on me is by no means necessary. Now or ever. I am fine, the peak of physical fitness, in fact."

"Well, if you're sure..." Steven said, looking over at the ball of ice. "So, uh, what are those things?"

"She said they were supposed to be barn defense drones." Said the blue gem, approaching the pair. She smiled, "hey Steven."

"Hey Lapis!" Steven waved. "I like how you froze the drones. It was really..." he paused. "cool!"

Lapis stared at him blankly in a way that Moonstone could oddly relate to. "Yes. Ice is cold."

"Lapis, don't be an uncultured clod, Steven was clearly attempting to make a joke," said Peridot, grumbling as she rubbed her back. "Admittedly, not a very funny one. It didn't even have a chicken in it." she turned to Lapis. "Personally I would have preferred if she dealt with them a bit faster."
They shot me at least three times."

"You're the one who made them waterproof so I wouldn't," Lapis made her voice slightly higher pitch in a facsimile of the shorter gem's voice. "Short-circuit them by mistake."

"Why were you building barn defense drones anyway?" Connie asked, peering into the ball of ice at the set of robots.

Peridot looked at her incredulously. "What kind of a question is that? Of course, I made barn defense drones. I don't want people to just waltz in and break my stuff."

"So why were they attacking you then?"

"I'm not sure, some kind of glitch in their operating system I suppose." Peridot rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Something clearly went wrong for them to have identified me as a menace."

"Sounds like they're working fine to me," said Lapis. She looked away from the technician's ugly look and finally noticed Moonstone standing awkwardly to the side. "Oh. I see you're finally awake. Good for you, I guess."

"Oh yeah, Moonstone come on down here," said Steven, beckoning to her. "These are who I wanted you to meet." He pointed to the blue gem. "This is Lapis, you and her actually have a lot in common. She's from the back during the war just like you and trapped on earth against her will for thousands of years. She was with us when we found you and helped us rescue you. Lapis, this is Moonstone."

"Hello," said Lapis. Her tone wasn't particularly welcoming, but it wasn't hostile either. Moonstone tilted her head to the side as she examined the blue gem. She'd never seen a lapis lazuli before, but she had heard of them. But of greater interest was the fact that she had no stars on her form. In fact, this blue gem still bore a diamond insignia.

Curious.

"And this," Steven continued, pointing to the other one. "Is-"

"I'm fully capable of introducing myself, thanks," said the peridot, pushing past the boy and standing in front of Moonstone. "Greetings, Moonstone. I am Peridot. I think you should know that while Lapis and the other gems certainly deserve some credit for their grunt work in facilitating your rescue. The only reason that facility was even discovered in the first place was due to my personal investigations." She puffed out her chest. "You're welcome."

Moonstone blinked, uncertain as to what she should say. She supposed, at the very least thanks were in order, but when she opened her mouth, something else slipped out before she could stop it: "Why is your form so tiny?"

Judging by the way Peridot wilted, this was not the right thing to say.

"I'll have you know," Peridot said, glaring up, her arms crossed, "that I am exactly the size is was intended to be."

"I apologize." Moonstone said, backpedaling. "I did not mean to imply you were defective. I was merely confused as most peridots I have known were taller than myself." This did not quite have the effect she'd been hoping for.

The technician just stared up at the white gem, who stood almost twice her height and turned away
grumbling. "I'm going to go work on my drones. Lapis, melt them out half way, I'm gonna turn them off."

Moonstone watched the technician stomp away. "I believe I have upset her."

"Yeah, but she'll get over it," said Lapis. "Seriously, you should count your blessings." She smirked slightly. "I wish I could have got her to leave me alone like that when we first started to live together. It would have been so nice."

"Hey, don't be mean," said Steven, wagging his finger on her. "I know she's grown on you."

"Yeah. Like a fungus." Lapis snorted, she looked past Steven. "Speaking of, what's that?"

"Oh, that's Toad. He's a mushroom."

"...I can see that." Lapis nodded. "I meant, where did he come from."

Connie answered, giggling. "He's Moonstone and Steven's child."

Lapis blinked, her brow furrowing. She looked at Moonstone, then the mushroom, and then back to Steven, her expression could be accurately described as blank.

"Does child still mean what I think it means?" she asked.

"Connie!" Steven groaned, slapping his palm against his face. "That leaves out so many details it's not even funny. Here, Lapis, let me explain. You actually played a part in this..."

Steven launched into the story, offering explanations and going off on tangents, with Connie giving the occasional correction as Lapis just listened, her focus almost exclusively on Steven. Toad was bouncing up and down between them, evidently happy to be the center of attention.

Moonstone tuned out of the conversation; she already knew all this. Besides, it appeared the three of them had forgotten she was even there—not that she minded, she had something else that had caught her interest. Instead, the smaller engineer captured her attention. Peridot was using some sort of earth tool to lever out a drone's circuitry paneling, muttering to herself while she worked. Perhaps it would have been better to leave her to her devices. But Moonstone had a vague wish to examine the security drones, and so, drawn by the almost irresistible call of science, she approached the technician.

Peridot's grumbling was actually quite loud. "-small, huh? That silvery-faced clod wouldn't have said that if I still had my limb enhancers, but Noooo, those got chucked into the ocean-"

"Excuse me?" Moonstone asked, choosing to politely pretend she hadn't heard any of that.

"What?" Peridot craned her head back; her face soured a little further. "Oh, you're still here. Whaddya want?"

"I, er, wished to examine your drones." Moonstone answered honestly, looking them over. "They look like quite the impressive work of engineering." They truly did, despite being frozen solid, their casings showed not so much as a crack. Their optic sensors still glowed with energy and it was clear that their icy imprisonment was the only thing keeping them from taking to the skies again. "Have you been able to isolate the problem in their operating system?"

Peridot blinked, taken off guard by the compliment, answered. "No. Although I am certain that the flaw lies somewhere in that system. Their hardware is perfectly operational."
"Hmmm." Moonstone flashed on her visor and scanned the exposed circuitry. She blinked in surprise. "These… are very advanced pieces of technology." She said, taken aback. Mechanical engineering had hardly been her specialty, but she hadn't been terrible at it. Even so, the techniques and material used in these tiny drones were more technologically advanced than anything she'd ever seen.

"Why yes, yes they are." Peridot preened. "Ah, I had forgotten. You're from back during the war like the rest of the gems on this planet. Well," she moved aside so that Moonstone could get a clearer look. "What you're looking at are the products of nothing less than several thousand years of technological advancement."

Moonstone's interest was anything but vague, now. She knelt before the drone, her visor flashing as she scanned every inch of it: material composition, engineering design, energy usage, she looked at all of it, trying to relate it to her own time's technology. There were similarities, now that she looked closer. But so, so many differences, and she wanted to know them all. But there was only so much her own scanner could tell her; it too, she realized, was a dated piece of technology. She wondered if she could integrate some of what she was seeing into it. To do that, she would need someone to help her fill in the gaps of her knowledge. She turned to Peridot, her eyes alight with the veal of academic pursuit. "Would you be willing to teach me everything I've missed?"

Peridot blinked, then a grin spread slowly across her face like the rising sun. "Nobody ever wants to talk about this stuff with me," she breathed, beaming now. She stood up and rubbed her hands together. "Sit down, old timer, let's talk tech."

Steven smiled as Peridot and Moonstone disappeared in a whirlwind of techno-babble. Just as he'd suspected, Moonstone was way more comfortable around Peridot and Lapis, not actually being Crystal Gems. Well, Peridot was. But Moonstone didn't need to know that.

He'd finished his explanation of Toad. It had gone pretty smoothly and now the mushroom had wandered off to explore the barn, poking its cap into anything that looked interesting to an animated fungus. Connie was following him around, keep making sure he didn't wreck anything. Sure that he was alone with his friend, he lowered his voice, "Hey Lapis?"

"What's up?" Lapis answered, matching his quiet tone.

"I was wondering if you could actually do me a huge favor." Steven began, making his voice as sweet as he could.

Lapis frowned and glanced over at her roommate, her eyes lingering on the white gem beside her. "This have something to do with her?"

"...It might."

Lapis sighed. "You want her to move into the barn, don't you?"

"Well, yes." Steven admitted, but continued: "But I have a good reason, I swear!"

Lapis crossed her arms and tilted her head skeptically. Well, at least was taking this better than when she found out about Peridot. "Alright, let's hear it."

"Here's the thing. I don't really get it, but Moonstone is scared of the gems, like, really scared. She thinks they're going to shatter her or something crazy like that."

"Is that so?" Lapis raised an eyebrow, a strange look in her eyes. She didn't look nearly as skeptical...
or disbelieving as Steven thought the situation warranted. Instead, she asked: "She was on Homeworld's side, wasn't she?"

"Yeah, she was." Steven shrugged. "Does that matter?"

Lapis stared at him incredulously. "... Yes Steven, it matters quite a bit." She paused, looking conflicted. Like she wanted to say more, but also didn't want to. "It's... look, you understand there was a war, right?"

"Yes, I do." Steven frowned. "I understand that Moonstone and the gems were on opposite sides." Why did people keep telling him this? "But that was a long time ago, and I've been always taught that forgiveness is important."

"Oh wow." Said Lapis, rubbing a hand against her face, "I am so not the right gem to be talking about this."

"What do you mean?" Steven asked. He was starting to get annoyed; Lapis was doing the same thing Pearl did when he asked her uncomfortable questions—talking around the issue instead of telling him what it was.

"Steven, do you know how long Gems live?" Lapis asked.

Steven blinked at the sudden change of subject. "I mean, I know Garnet and Pearl are, like, a million years old."

"Well, they might not be that old." Lapis shrugged. "It's hard to tell. But the answer is basically forever. We don't age, Steven, our gems don't wear out."

"That's pretty cool," Steven admitted. He'd never really thought about how long the gems might live. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"We view time differently than you humans do." Said Lapis. "Months, years, centuries—those aren't such a big deal to us. Even millennia aren't necessarily that long, it depends how you... spend them." Lapis eyes became distant and she shuddered slightly. Steven got the feeling she was thinking about mirrors. He reached over and put a hand on her arm.

"Lapis..."

The blue gem shook her head, snapping out of it.

"Anyway, my point is that gems can have problems with holding grudges." Lapis paused, and gave a sad little smirk. "Actually, maybe I am the right gem to be talking about this..." she sighed. 
"Anyway, because we live so long, we can have trouble letting things go. We don't have to. We don't have natural expiration dates. Anger, regret, sorrow, hatred... we can hold onto those for a long time."

Steven shifted uncomfortably, a bad feeling creeping over him. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that the reason Moonstone is scared the Crystal Gems might try to hurt her, is because they might actually want to." She held up a hand to cut off his immediate denial. "You say the war was a long time ago; for humans? Sure. For gems? Not so much. Just think about it."

And Steven did. He didn't want to, but he did. What Lapis had told him made sense. It seemed like the gems were having emotional breakdowns every other day over memories or feelings from ages ago. Such as Pearl's regret over her feeling for his mom, Amethyst's lack of self worth from being a
"Hey? Steven?" His conflict must have shown on his face because Lapis put her hand on his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

He stared up at her worried visage, wishing he could say yes. "I... do you really think they'd hurt Moonstone?"

"I wouldn't know." Lapis said simply, but not unkindly. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Steven assured her. "I just... need to think about this."

"Alright." Lapis leaned back, looking past him to the pair of gems working away. "Well. I guess I could tolerate another roommate. I mean," she grinned. "I got used to Peridot. Anything else should be easy by comparison."

Steven smiled and hugged her. "Thanks Lapis"

Lapis hugged him back. "No prob, Bob."

Moonstone sat back as Peridot slid the drone's paneling back into place.

"DO you believe that is sufficient?" The shorter green gem asked.

Moonstone tapped her visor "I see no flaws in the operating systems that I can detect."

Peridot nodded. "And since I built them, I know there are no flaws in the construction. Therefore," she held up a remote with a single green button. "Let's do it." She pushed the button. The drones whirred to life and began to hover into the air. Their cameras turned towards the gems, scanning them. They waited with baited breath, and the drones turned away and flew to the roof of the barn and settled there like green gargoyles.

"Victory!" said Peridot, standing up and doing a little dance. She turned to Moonstone and held up a hand "high five!"

"...What?"

"Oh, right. You're new. This is an earth custom to celebrate success or achievements. Just slap my hand."

Moonstone stared for a moment, then slowly reach out her hand and patted it against Peridot's palm. 

"... We'll work on it," Peridot said. She grabbed her tools and starting to drag them back towards the barn. "Strange earth behaviors aside. Thank you for allowing me to utilize your face screen. It would have taken me sometime to locate the glitch without it. I wish I had something like that programed into my gem."

"You are welcome," Moonstone answered, grabbing some of the tools and following the shorter gem. "Thank you for your technological guidance." A sudden feeling of something being off occurred to Moonstone and she looked up. The sky was starting to grow dark. Moonstone blinked, she must have been working with Peridot for hours! She hadn't even realized.
It had been… nice—to lose herself in pursuit of scientific knowledge again. She hadn't had to think about her treachery, or her imprisonment, or strange mushroom children, or anything. It had been so long since she had been able to do that…

Peridot, despite her stature, was quite brilliant when it came to engineering. Though perhaps a little too excitable, the technician had quickly and effectively brought Moonstone up to speed on much of the technology she had missed out on. And was quite willing to go back and clarify anything Moonstone had not grasped immediately.

And the time had just disappeared.

Moonstone shook her head as the first genuine smile she'd had all day stretching across her face. She stopped next to Peridot and helped her put her tools away, then stood up, looking around the barn.

The mushroom—or rather, Toad—was in the corner. The creature appeared to have rooted itself into the ground and was wither asleep or something very much like it. There was also some kind of feathery earth creature perched on its cap, it was mostly brown, but a heart-shaped patch of white surrounded its face.

"That's Lady Feather-face. She lives here." Moonstone jumped at the voice. Lapis was lounging in a hammock, a book in her hands and staring at Moonstone mildly. "She seems to have taken a liking to Toad. Enjoy your tinkering?"

Moonstone nodded uncertainly. She looked around, blinked, looked again, and swallowed. "Where is Steven?"

"He left. Went back to the house." Lapis answered, closing her book and jumping down to the floor.

"He… left?" Moonstone blinked. Was she supposed to return as well by herself? She did not relish the idea of traveling without Steven. What if she encountered Pearl?

"You're staying here." Lapis answered the unasked question. "Steven thought you might like it better here than by the temple."

"What?" said Peridot, shooting Lapis incredulous look. "And you agreed? Just like that?" she crossed her arms with a huff. "Considering what I had to go through, that feels kind of unfair."

Lapis shrugged. "Well, I knew that he was going to talk me into it eventually. I decided to just save us all some trouble and skip to the end." She gave Peridot a level look. "Do you have a problem with it?"

"Hmmm." Peridot rubbed her chin, scrutinizing Moonstone. "No. I find her acceptable, and I still have much to teach her about modern gem technology. It will be far more efficient to keep her close at hand."

Lapis nodded, then turned to Moonstone. "What about you?"

"Me?" Moonstone blinked. She hadn't expected to have a say in the matter. But… "I'm fine with it, just surprised." Steven hadn't been wrong, the more distance between herself and the Crystal Gems, the better she would feel.

"That's good." Lapis climbed back into her hammock. "I think I'm going to give this sleeping thing another try. I've almost got the hang of it."
"Very well, good night Lapis."

"Night, Peri." Lapis rolled over so her back was to them and fell silent.

Moonstone blinked, not sure what to do with herself. Peridot reached up and tugged on her coat. "I for one do not feel like sleeping, you?" Moonstone shook her head. "Excellent. I believe that we should take a break from gem technology for awhile." She gave Moonstone a sidelong long. "Tell me, how would you like to explore some of the cultural achievements of planet earth?"

Moonstone hesitated. There was something about the way Peridot had said that… "Um, I suppose?"

An uncomfortably large grin spread across Peridot face.

"Excellent." She said, rubbing her hands together. "Come. Allow me to introduce you, to the stimulating wonder that is Camp Pining Hearts."

Connie frowned as she watched Steven shuffle down the road. Something was wrong. He was wearing that intense, vaguely pained, expression he wore when he was thinking really hard and he'd been wearing it since they left the barn.

"… Something on your mind?" she asked.

"Huh?" Steven blinked owlishly at her. "I'm sorry, what?" she repeated the question and he rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "It's… something Lapis told me. About the gems. I'm not sure what to do about it…" he told her what Lapis had said. It made… a lot of sense, but Connie could understand why Steven didn't want to believe it. She didn't want to believe it either. When he finished, Connie spoke.

"That's some heavy stuff. What do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know!" Steven moaned, clutching at his hair. "Should I just not believe it? Should I ask the gems? Should I just forget about it?"

"I think you should ask the gems directly." Connie said gently, "it's the only way that you're ever going to know for sure."

"But what if they don't want to tell me?" he asked, looking at her desperately. "They've done it before, when they thought talking to me would upset me."

"That is… something they might try to do." she could easily see Pearl refusing to tell Steven anything that might hurt him. But… "You still have to try." she insisted, wrapping a hand around his shoulders. "Make best case scenario, they tell you the whole truth. Worst case scenario, they don't. In which case…" she gave his shoulder a squeeze. "You'll make them tell you. If their scared of telling you one way or the other because they're afraid it'll hurt you. Then you need to make them understand how much not knowing is hurting you. I'll help you do that. Sound like a plan?"


Connie smiled back. "Don't worry, Steven. we'll get to the bottom of this."

Back in the temple Garnet raised her head and closed her third eye.
A vision had just crystallized into imminent reality, one that she could not say she was terribly fond of, but also one that could not be avoided.

She sighed and stood up. She needed to find Pearl. Amethyst too.

They had a decision to make, and Garnet did not have the strength to make it alone.

Chapter End Notes

So the name of the mushroom is Toad. More than one person suggested this, and yes, it is a reference to Mario. This actually gives me some ideas because The Mario Toad is actually supposed to be supernaturally strong and fast, he just can't jump. I envisioned Moonstone riding around on Toad with a "I guess this is my life now" expression on her face, and it was funny. Also, I like the noises Toads make. "MEE-HEH!"

The runner-up name was Mushstone. I quite liked this name, it feels kind of clever when paired with moonstone, but I chose Toad over it because Mushstone is kind of a pun and I was kind of sick of typing Mr. Funguy. Toad will be much softer on my Pun-Tolerance... bu-dump, TSSS!

Fun fact: I typed over half of this chapter on my phone. It was less of a hassle than I thought it would be.

Also, it has been pointed out to me that there is, in fact, a warp pad by the barn. I acknowledge this fact and that it makes a sort of plot hole in how I move people to the barn. I have also made an artistic choice to ignore this fact. Let's say that warp pad was destroyed or something. It's probably Peridot's fault. Things are always breaking around her.

Anyway, unless my mood changes, I think I've done just about enough in character development and stuff, next chapter will start getting back to the plot.

As always I love to hear your thoughts, and stay tuned for Chapter 32: Are you sure you want to know?
Steven has a talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steven could feel his trepidation growing as the familiar silhouette of the temple grew larger and closer. It seemed more sinister than usual as the sun set behind it. He'd always thought its many arms seemed ready to embrace him, but now they seemed more like a vipers waiting to strike. He understood why, of course; Lapis words were still chasing his doubts around in tight circles in his head.

'Anger, sorrow, regret, hatred... we can hold onto those for a long time.'

Lapis thought it was possible that the gems might want to hurt Moonstone and Connie didn't seem to think that as ludicrous as it should be.

He just couldn't understand it. It just didn't make sense!

Sure Moonstone had been an enemy to earth, but so had Peridot, and the gems hadn't wanted to hurt her! They'd just wanted to lock her in a bubble and never let her out.

...Okay. When he thought about it like that, it sounded bad.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked over at Connie. She was staring at him in concern.

"Are you feeling alright, Steven?"

He shook his head, no point in denying it, Connie knew him too well. "I feel awful."

"We don't have to do this, you know," said Connie. "Even if the gems think they need to hurt her, once they see that Moonstone isn't a threat, they won't do anything."

"No." Steven shook his head. "I can't do that, Connie, I just can't. I can't stand it when people do things like that; when they pretend everything's normal and okay when they aren't. It was so frustrating when the gems did it to me about Peridot's arrival. I'm not going to do that now. Truth can be ugly and it hurts. But it's never as bad as lying when everyone knows something's wrong but won't admit it. I have to do this Connie. I have to know the truth."

Connie considered this, then nodded. "That's a very mature decision, Steven."

"I…guess." Steven sighed. "Is it too late to stay a child?"

"I mean, I'd say no. But for you, that technically is an option." Connie grinned.

Steven hesitated; the idea did have its charms…but, nah. That would just be running away from the problem.
Steven stared at Connie and smiled. When he looked back, somehow the temple had lost almost all of its menacing presence. He was still worried, but he didn't feel like it was going to stand up and crush him anymore.

Steven took a deep breath, and walked on.

"Are you sure about this, Garnet?"

Garnet looked at her friend, whom she had known, trusted, and fought alongside for millennia. Garnet would like to say that in that time, she had grown fairly adept at reading her moods. That said, pearl was biting her lip and wringing her hands so hard Garnet was somewhat surprised her form didn't break.

"...No. I am not sure this is a good idea.

"Then why go through with it?" Pearl demanded, her words laced with a feverish desperation. "It's not that I wish to keep secrets from Steven, but I don't think he's ready for this. He won't understand!"

"It is very possible he will not." Garnet acknowledged.

"Then we should wait." Pearl declared, throwing up her hands. "Surely your future vision can foresee a way to waylay his suspicions until he's older."

"It's possible, but I have already decided not look for such a thing." She looked at Pearl. "Steven's feelings are not ours to manipulate for our own peace of mind."

Pearl recoiled; hurt crossing her features and Garnet winced internally—that had come off more accusatory than she had intended. But before she could apologize, Pearl said quietly: "this is going to hurt him, Garnet."

"Yes." Garnet nodded. "Yes, it will." She didn't need to gaze into the future to know that. The way Steven saw them, saw the Crystal Gems, was going to change; most likely not for the better...

And that scared her.

"Alright. I'm gonna need you two to hold it right there!" Amethyst declared, jumping up onto the table and glaring at them. She had been listening to their conversation for some time and had only barely kept quiet. Apparently, she'd had enough. "Got your attention? Great." she crossed her arms. "You two are starting to freak me out, so you'd better tell me what's going on, or I'm gonna go nuts. What's happened and, more importantly, why are we hurting Steven?"

"Amethyst," Pearl sighed. "Please understand this is a complicated situation-"

"Oh my god," Amethyst groaned, rolling her eyes. "No offense, P, but I'm not in the mood for one of your overly wordy explanations. Just get to the point. No wait, better idea." Amethyst turned. "Garnet, you hate talking. Explain this to me in three sentences or less."

Garnet nodded. "We have been debating as to whether we should shatter or imprison Moonstone behind Steven's back. He has become suspicious and intends to confront us on the issue tonight. I believe that we should tell him the truth."

"... Seriously?" Amethyst groaned, rubbing her hand against her face. "Why is it that we can't go a week without some kind of drama bomb getting dropped? I swear, sometimes I just wanna move
back to the kindergarten. The fam never stressed me out like this." She glared at them. "You guys are making my hair go white."

"...Your hair has always been white." Garnet pointed out.

"It's pale lavender, thank you very much." Amethyst huffed, plopping herself back down. "So, I'm going to go ahead and assume you have a good reason for you wanting ta get all smashy smashy with the moon nerd."

"We do." Garnet confirmed.

Amethyst raised an eyebrow. "Good enough for Steven?"

Garnet and Pearl said nothing.

"Yeah. That's what I thought. You two got any plan beyond just saying it outright or talking him to death?" she asked, looking at Garnet and Pearl in turn. Again, they said nothing. "Well, you better come up with one. Otherwise Steven will go running off and, I don't know, try to build space ship to get her off planet and away from you two, or something."

"And how, exactly do you suggest we do that?" Pearl snapped.

"Not a clue." Amethyst shrugged.

"We...need to make him understand," said Garnet slowly. "Not just explain our reasoning, but actually understand why we are considering shattering Moonstone. Why it would be... justice."

"That's...hmmm." said Pearl, suddenly looking thoughtful.

"Yes?" said Garnet.

"I...may have an idea."

"Well, P." said Amethyst. "It better be a humdinger, cause I can hear him coming up the steps."

As she said that, the door opened and Steven stepped into the room, Connie close on his heels. The moment she saw him, saw the nervous, almost fearful, look on his face, Garnet knew her vision was going to come true.

"Sup, Stee-man." Amethyst waved when neither Garnet nor Pearl said anything. "Have a good day?"

"It was...alright." Steven said awkwardly, looking back and forth between the gems. It occurred to Garnet that the way they were huddled close together was likely doing little to waylay his trepidation. It probably made them look shifty.

"So what happened to your shadow? Coulda sworn Moonshoes was stuck to you like glue or something?"

"Oh..." Steven scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "We, uh, left Moonstone at the barn. She and Peridot kind of hit it off, and I thought she might be more comfortable there."

_Away from the Crystal Gems._

"Neat."
Garnet couldn't take it. The awkward atmosphere was building and congealing and the fusion just wanted to get this over with. "Steven," she said, "do you have something you want to ask us?"

Steven flinched slightly, but nodded. "Yeah actually."

"Why don't you come have a seat?" Garnet patted the couch cushion next to her. Steven looked at Connie, who nodded and they both took a seat. "Now, what do you want to ask us?"

"Okay, here's the thing," Steven said slowly. "I've been talking with Moonstone and Lapis and stuff..." he paused, shifting uncomfortably, as though the thoughts alone were giving him physical discomfort. "...And it made me think, or rather, they seem to think, well, I'm sure I'm just being ridiculous, but..."

"Yes?" Garnet prompted.

Steven shot her a pained expression. "Don't you know what I'm going to ask already?"

"I might," Garnet admitted.

"Then can't you go ahead and tell me?"

"...Because it is important that you say it. This is a very serious matter Steven, and I want you to know that we will tell you the truth. The whole truth. But first, I want you to promise me that you will listen to our answer." As she spoke the expression on Steven's face went from nervous to downright alarmed. He looked like he was about to bolt. But then Connie reached over and took his hand in a light squeeze and he calmed slightly; the nervous fear shifting into a tremulous determination.

"I promise."

Garnet allowed herself a small internal smile. With these two standing together, she doubted there was anything they couldn't handle. "Ask your question."

"Do you guys want to hurt Moonstone?" He blurted, clearly wishing to get it out into the open. "I mean-"

"Do we want to shatter her?"

Steven nodded "I know, I know, it's cra-"

"Yes."

"-zy. You're the Crystal Gems. You wouldn't hurt anybody, but-" Steven blinked. "What did you say?"

Garnet closed her eyes, resigned. "I said yes, Steven," she repeated. "Pearl and I have discussed the possibility of shattering Moonstone."

Steven stared at her blankly, wordlessly his gaze shifted to Pearl. She didn't reply, didn't meet his gaze, she merely nodded.

Garnet thought she could hear the sound of something breaking. It might have been Steven's heart... or maybe hers.

"But... why?" The question was full of an unbearable mix of disbelief and horror. "How could you guys... we're the good guys. I didn't want to believe—we don't-" he trailed off, tearful eyes falling
to the floor as he tried to absorb what he'd been told. Beside him, Connie had wrapped a hand around his shoulders. She did not look as heart-broken as Steven, though disappointment did mingle with the curiosity in her eyes as she stared up at Garnet, urging her to explain.

"Steven..." Said Pearl, "last night, Garnet and I were talking with Moonstone-" Steven's head snapped up.

"Last night..." he began, his eyes narrowed. "You know, when we met Moonstone this morning, she was really upset. And I mean really upset. I kept trying to figure out what made her feel so bad, but she wouldn't tell me." He looked back and forth between them. "Was it you?" He asked softly. "Did you guys do something to her? What else have you been hiding from me!?"

"... Pearl and I interrogated her," Garnet answered. "We asked her questions about what she did during the war. We did not hurt her," she added. That was true, they hadn't laid so much as a finger on her, though if she hadn't restrained Pearl, the Homeworld gem might be dead now... perhaps Steven didn't need to know that exact detail. "But I cannot say we were kind."

"And what? She said something that made you mad?" Steven snapped.

"It is more what she did, than what she said."

"What, did she attack you or something?" Steven put his hands on his hips. "Cause I don't think I believe that."

"...No." Garnet admitted. "She did not attack us."

"Did she threaten you then? Threaten me?"

"No."

"Then what did she DO?"

"She hurt our friends, back during the war." Garnet answered. "Hurt them very badly."

"And that makes it okay?" Steven glared, his eyes hard behind the shimmer of tears. "I'm not stupid. I know what a war is. I know the Crystal Gems probably hurt a lot of Homeworld gems, am I wrong?"

"...yes." Garnet sighed, "We did, but-"

"But what?" Steven interrupted. "Killing people is wrong, no matter what they've done or when its happening. So she did some bad stuff, you did bad stuff too, during the war, and the war is OVER!"

"It's not that simple, Steven-" Pearl began.

"Why not?" Steven demanded throwing his hands into the air. "How is it not that simple? You've always taught me to forgive." He blinked, and his hands fell to his sides. "Was... was that all just talk." He looked back and forth between them. "I... I don't understand."

Garnet's heart fell. She... didn't know what to do. Should she tell him what Moonstone had done? Somehow she didn't think the boy would be very receptive of that information, not with how upset he was. How could Steven understand just what they had lost when Homeworld corrupted their comrades, their friends? To him, the Crystal Gems had only ever been the three of them.
"Do you truly want to understand, Steven?" Pearl asked quietly, an odd timbre to her voice.

Steven looked at her in disbelief. "Yes! Of course I do! How can either of you think that killing someone is ever okay?"

Pearl nodded and stood up. "Very well. I do not think I can explain it to you, but I think I can show you." Pearl made her way towards the warp pad, not looking at him. "Come with me, Steven. I think there's a place you need to see."

Steven stared at her, slack jawed. "Are you serious? You're not going to actually explain anything?" Steven grimaced. "You're just going to take me to some random place and try to distract me?"

"I did not say that!" Pearl snapped, her voice making Steven flinch back in surprise. The gem whirled on the boy and glared. "You're not listening to me, Steven. Do you honestly think I want to deceive you?"

"I, uh… no?" Steven shrunk back, wide-eyed. Garnet wondered if this was the first time Pearl had ever been angry with him like this.

Pearl straightened. "Then come with me. I promise you that I will do everything I can to make you understand." She looked around. "The rest of you should come as well."

Garnet could feel Amethyst looking at her in askance. She shrugged, unsure what Pearl was planning. But, nonetheless joined her on the warp with Amethyst. After a few agonizing moments of hesitation, and a subtle nudge from Connie, Steven joined them.

With a familiar whoosh, Steven found himself standing on an unfamiliar warp pad. He glanced around halfheartedly, it was pretty dark and he couldn't see much. As near as he could tell, they were somewhere underground. Beside him, Connie and the Crystal Gems stepped off the warp pad.

"So, where is this?" Connie asked.

"Beats me." Amethyst shrugged. "Never been here before," she looked over at Pearl. "Well, P? You gonna tell us where we are?"

"I'd… rather just show you. It will be easier."

"Why can't you just tell me? How hard can it really be to just tell me the truth?"

"Well that's just unhelpful." Amethyst rolled her eyes. "See, this whole secretive thing you and Garnet do is what got us into this situation in the first place."

"Amethyst." Pearl's voice was strange, brittle. "Please. Not here."

Amethyst blinked, taken aback. She glanced at Steven and Connie, who shrugged back. "Um… sorry?"

"It's alright." Pearl sighed. "Just… all of you, follow me. Our destination isn't far." She tapped her gem and their surroundings filled with a soft glow, revealing a large stone cavern with a narrow path of glowing stones leading across it. Pearl set off down the path without a word.

Steven followed, barely noticing the others moving with him. He just… didn't know what to think.
The Crystal Gems wanted to kill Moonstone.

As in, kill *kill* her. So that she would be gone. *Forever.*

He hadn't believed it. Not *really.* Sure, he'd had his doubts. He thought maybe they just didn't like her, which was fine. People didn't have to like other people. But… hurting them? *Killing* them?

He shook his head.

"You doing okay, dude?" He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up at Amethyst.

"What do *you* think?" he asked, sniffling.

"…Okay, fair enough." The gem shrugged awkwardly.

"Did you know about all this?" Connie asked, falling in step beside them.

Amethyst shook her head. "Nah, I found out about it, like, five minutes before you two walked in the door."

"And what do you think about it?" Steven asked, relaxing slightly. At least he wasn't the *only* one being kept in the dark. "Are you okay with this?"

"I… dunno."

"And what do you think about it?"

Steven asked, relaxing slightly. At least he wasn't the *only* one being kept in the dark. "Are you okay with this?"

"I… dunno."

Amethyst scratched the back of her head. "I'm not used to seeing Garnet and Pearl like this. But I wanna hear what they to say about this." she shrugged. "I've known them for a long time, and I'd bet they have a darn good reason for feeling the way they do."

"If you say so…" Steven said doubtfully.

"We're here." Pearl called. Steven blinked and looked over. Pearl had led them to a large door; in the dim lighting he could see it was etched with a rose. So this was something of his mom's then.

"Pearl?" he asked, but she shook her head and laid a hand on the door, which swung open at her touch.

And then there was light.

Steven squeezed his eyes shut on reflex, but slowly reopened them; the sudden light wasn't burning his eyes like he'd first thought. Instead it felt soft and welcoming.

The first thing he noticed was that there were flowers. Lots of them.

Flowers of every color imaginable, and each was glowing as though they cradled a candle within their petals. They were arranged in a giant ring around the cavern and on the far wall was a giant slab of smooth crystal covered in a bunch of messy scribbles. It should have been pretty. But for some reason, all the flowers made Steven feel sad, like they were waving goodbye.

He heard Garnet give a sharp intake of breath.

"I… remember this place." She murmured, her voice soft. She looked at Pearl. "I understand."

"Well I don't," Steven said. "What is this place? And what does it have to do with Moonstone?"

"One moment." Pearl stepped into the middle of the room, where there was another plant. Steven hadn't noticed it before because, unlike all the others, this one didn't shine. It looked kind of ordinary, actually; green leaves, brownish-grey stem, and it looked kind of wilted.
Pearl crouched before the plant and reached into her gem. She pulled out a corked bottle, popped out the cork, and upended it over the plant. Then she stood up and turned back to Steven.

"As I'm sure you've guessed." She said, her voice quiet yet determined. "This place is connected to your mother, but that's not the whole story. It would be more accurate that it is connected to all the Crystal Gems. If you need to give it a name, call it the memorial." She pointed to the giant, carved crystal. "Whenever a gem decided to join Rose, to take up arms in defense of this planet and their own freedom, Rose engraved their name here."

"That... just looks like a bunch of chicken scratch," said Connie, then her eyes went wide. "I mean-"

"It's fine." Pearl assured her. "I know you meant no disrespect. This is proper gem script. Despite the fact that humans managed to adopt our language, you never quite got the hang of our writings."

"Oh. Okay." Connie nodded, then frowned. "Wait, what was that about adopting your language?"

"Is my name on here?" Amethyst asked, eyeing the carvings with interest.

"If you'd actually tried to learn how to read gem script, you'd know." Pearl answered, raising an eyebrow at the gem.

"Why bother?" Amethyst snorted. "The only people who would even use it are you and Rose. If I wanted to communicate with you I could, I don't know, talk to you?"

"There's nothing wrong with appreciating one's culture." Pearl sniffed. "But to answer your question, yes, of course your name is here." she pointed to a scribble at the bottom of the list. "I watched Rose carve that myself." Pearl sighed, shaking her head. "That's when I finally knew that we were keeping you."

Amethyst blinked, reaching out and tracing her fingers through the scribble. "That's... uh," her voice had gone hoarse, "cool."

Steven craned his neck back. The Crystal was massive! In the glow of the flowers he could barely see the top. And...

"There's so many names." He murmured.

"Yes." Pearl nodded sadly. "There used to be so many of us, Steven. Gems flocked to your mother's banner. We recorded them here so that, no matter what happens, they would be proof that they existed, that they were willing to fight for what they believed in. Your mother came here at least once a year, to tend to it." Pearl reached into her gem again and stepped forward, pulling out a pale pink spike. She tapped it against several of the names, causing them to glow pink and etching an image of a rose beside them.

"What are you doing now?" asked Steven.

"Making note of gems who have recently given their lives for the earth." Pearl answered.

Connie furrowed her brow. "Recently?"

"In the facility where we found Moonstone." Garnet answered. "We recognized some of the gems that were shattered in the fight."

"Rose always marked someone who gave their life," said Pearl. "Then she would plant a flower
here the same hue as their gem." She gestured to the fields of color around them. "Rose made them special, these blooms shall never die or wilt."

Steven looked at all the flowers, which made him feel sadder than ever. He could feel the tears starting to form, but he didn't want to start crying. He knew that if he started, he wouldn't be able to stop. "But what about the one you just-". He stopped, looking at plant in question. It was no longer wilting, but was instead bursting with green growth. As he watched, leaves uncurled, buds formed and bloomed.

It was a rose bush.

"I'm sorry, what was that Steven?" Pearl asked, looking up from the monolith of names.

"Um... nothing."

"There's actually something else I thought you might want to see," said Pearl. She pointed to the bottom of the writing, to the only scribble beneath Amethyst's. "You probably can't read it. But, that's your name, Steven."

Steven felt something inside him grow soft and the weight of wetness behind his eyes doubled. "Mine?" he whispered.

Pearl nodded. "I carved it there the day you first summoned Rose's shield."

The floodgates released and Steven wiped at his face, unsure what to make of it all. "Look, thanks for showing me this. But, I have to ask. Why? What does this have to do with you wanting to hurt Moonstone? I feel like you're trying to distract me."

"I promise you that this has everything to do with it," answered Garnet. "I told you that we interrogated her and she told us about her role in the war."

"Here's the simple version," said Pearl. "She was a head researcher on a project to use that corrupt fusion to brainwash captured Crystal Gems."

"She what?" Said Steven, aghast. That was pretty awful.

"The experiments never worked, according to her." Pearl answered flatly, her hands tightening into fists. "But apparently, there were permanent side effects on the gems she experimented on. Some of their minds were broken and they became corrupted."

They gave him a moment to absorb this before Garnet asked him very quietly: "Do you know just how many of the Crystal Gems are still alive, Steven?"

"I… don't know." Steven shrunk back, feeling like he had been cornered. He looked at the names. Now that he looked for it, he could see many names with that rose etched beside them. But for every one that had a rose, there were at least two that didn't.

"We don't actually know." Pearl said, not looking at him, her eyes instead locked on the names. "But I can tell you that, save for the gems in this room, not a single one would be able to recognize us. In fact, they would attack us if we met them."

Pearl pointed at one of the names halfway up the list, it had a rose next to it. "Evergreen." She read. She pointed to another just below it. "Sparks. Those are the two gems that Peridot and Lapis brought back. They have roses because we thought they were dead." She turned to Steven. "Moonstone mentioned them to us as well. She personally oversaw an experiment meant to
Steven stared at the ground, unable to meet Pearl's gaze, and not just because he could barely see through the veil of tears. He... didn't know what to think.

"So... you're saying that Moonstone corrupted all these gems?" Connie asked. Steven was glad she was here to ask these questions, he didn't think he'd have the strength to do it himself. "Is that why you want to hurt her?"

Pearl and Garnet looked at each other, hesitating.

"Not...exactly." Pearl admitted. "It was not her intent to corrupt them, nor was she the only gem who worked on this Homeworld project. And we cannot say how much of a role she played in the widespread corruption of our friends." Her eyes hardened. "But she played a role nonetheless and that is something I can't forgive."

Steven just stared at her unable to say anything. He felt like a sandcastle before the rising tide, he wanted to stand tall, to stick to what he believed. But everything Pearl and Garnet said were like waves, eroding his footing until there was nothing left.

"You're right to say that forgiveness is important," said Garnet, bringing another wave. "But, there are some things... that cannot be forgiven, cannot be forgotten. Moonstone may not have wished to hurt anyone, but she did. Maybe she regrets it, but that will not undo what she has done."

Steven let his gaze drop to the floor. The cavern was spinning around him like a merry-go-round.

"You say the war is over, Steven." He couldn't even tell who was talking anymore, didn't think it mattered. "That is true, but not the whole truth. The war defined us. Choosing to stand against the Diamonds has defined every part of our lives ever since. Just as it did for every name on this list."

"How can we forget the sacrifices our friends made?"

"How can we forgive what was done to them?"

"We can't."

"...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry we've let you down like this."

"But your feelings do not invalidate our own."

It was too much. Steven clutched at his head; turning away he stumbled blindly for the door.

"Steven!"

"No. Let him go. We've said our part. All we can do now is let him come to his own decision."

Steven broke into a run, leaving behind the cavern of names and flowers and everything else. With a desperate, tearful lunge he reach the warp pad and activated it, leaving everything behind in a dizzying blur of pink light.
I'm interested to hear your thoughts on how I did the confrontation between Steven and the CG. Here is kind of what I was going for:

Steven feels kind of betrayed and is lashing out at the gems and the gems themselves are no good at these sorts of situations. Garnet and Pearl don't like/want to talk about any of this. They don't want Steven to disapprove of them, but they have to explain themselves.

I mentioned this memorial place as a passing note in a previous chapter. I liked the idea enough that I decided to make it a thing.

What do you think?
Chapter Summary

Thoughts are had.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I managed to get this chapter out faster, so that's good. As always, reviews are helpful for inspiring me to work faster.

Chapter 33: And yet, life goes on.

S&DS&DS&DS&D

Lapis stared grumpily at the wooden wall.

This whole sleeping business was still giving her trouble.

She thought she'd gotten the hang of it, it was actually a pleasant experience— being able to shut down her mind and not think about anything… if only she'd been able to develop the skill earlier, then maybe the last few thousand years would have been more bearable.

But she'd been laying there for hours, body relaxed and vigorously forcing herself to think about nothing… and she was still staring at this stupid wall.

Well… whatever. Maybe tomorrow.

Lapis sat up, and stretched her arms out, reveling in the feeling of being able to move. Sure, Steven had let her out of the mirror months ago, but she'd never take the ability to just wiggle her fingers for granted ever again.

With nothing better to do, she rolled out of her hammock and dropped down onto the floor. The first thing she saw was their new roommate, kneeling in the corner while she watched that mushroom wiggle around the room. Lapis glanced around, but didn't see Peridot anywhere, maybe she'd gotten bored of tinkering with her machines?

Lapis considered her, wondering why everyone was making such a fuss over her. The Homeworlder certainly seemed harmless enough. But she knew better than to trust appearances, and Moonstone may not be a Crystal Gem, but Homeworld had just as much to blame for what had happened to her.

Still, Steven had asked her to be nice. She'd have to talk to the scientist at some point, might as well get it over with.

Moonstone didn't react as she approached, and now that Lapis got a better look, she saw that Moonstone looked dazed, as though her head had been through a harrowing encounter with the business end of a baseball bat. Lapis frowned, then considered who she had left the Homeworld scientist alone with.
"Camp Pining Hearts?" She asked.

Moonstone blinked at the name and looked up at her. "G-go... team Percy?"

"I thought so." Lapis sighed. "How far did she make you go?"

"Episode eight... I think. There was a toboggan."

"That's from the winter special, episode twelve."

"...oh."

Lapis shook her head, wincing. Twelve episodes? With Peridot? In one sitting? No wonder Moonstone looked like her brain had been hit with a truck. Lapis was surprised she hadn't heard it happening. Either she HAD actually gotten to sleep, or Peridot had made an effort to control her volume...nah.

Well, there was no telling when Moonstone was going to recover, so Lapis sat down, watching Toad explore. The mushroom was trying to stick its head into a pile of junk in the far corner, but its cap was too big and kept getting bumped back, which did nothing to stop it from trying again.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, Moonstone spoke. "Do... do you want to discuss... shipping charts?"

"No."

"Oh, thank the stars." Moonstone sighed.

"Yeah." Lapis agreed. "The show's not bad, but Peridot..." she shrugged, not really sure what to say.

"I believe I understand." Moonstone nodded. "She's certainly... excitable."

"You get used to it." well, more like you didn't have a choice; it was either build up a tolerance or go insane. "Where is she, anyway?"

"She said something about going outside to test something. She wouldn't say what."

"Hmm..." Lapis let the conversation trail off into silence. She didn't really do small talk—too out of practice. But as she sat watching Toad investigate the barn in silence, she couldn't help but noticed that Moonstone was staring intently at her.

"What?" Lapis asked flatly.

Moonstone flinched. "I apologize, I did not mean to stare..." she trailed off. Lapis raised an eyebrow, unused to a roommate who didn't blurt out every thought that popped into their head.

"Just spit it out." Lapis said, "I won't attack you."

"Er, spit what out?"

Oh right, she was new. Moonstone hadn't had time to pick up all these weird earth sayings. "You want to ask me something. Just ask it."

"You... do not mind?"
Lapis shook her head. "If I start minding, believe me, you'll know."

"Very well," Moonstone turned so she was facing Lapis directly. "From what I understand, you are... not a Crystal Gem?"

"Definitely not." Lapis agreed immediately. She might get along with them; she might even work with them. But there was no way she would even wear a star. That's where she drew the line.

"And, neither is Peridot?"

Lapis shrugged. "She wants to be, but I'm not sure if that's official yet."

"Yes, about that... you are from the same era as myself, correct?" Lapis nodded, they'd both been around during the war, so close enough. "But Peridot is not? She is significantly younger? A modern gem, if her technology is anything to go by?" Again, Lapis nodded. Moonstone furrowed her brow. "Then... how did she come to be on earth? I can't imagine that the Crystal Gems allow Homeworlders to travel to and from this planet freely."

Well... that was a lengthy topic; one that Lapis didn't really want to get into. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

Moonstone looked sheepish. "I wanted to. But..."

"You couldn't get a word in edgewise?" Moonstone nodded and Lapis rolled her eyes. "Well, just talk over her, it's what I do."

Moonstone nodded uncertainly. "Then, may I ask what you are doing on earth?" Lapis shot her a look and the scientist flinched back. "My apologies, its just, you say you are not a Crystal Gem, and yet here you are on earth, not their enemy, associating with them..." she trailed off. "Never mind."

Lapis sighed. "I have no interest in going into the details, but I will say this: I'm not on this planet for the Crystal Gems. I'm here because of Steven."

Moonstone tilted her head. "Steven?"

"I'm part of the Steven Squad... I guess. You'll see—" Lapis was interrupted by the unfortunately familiar sound of laser fire.

"Lapis! Get out here!" Lapis would know that scream anywhere; Peridot was in some kind of trouble.

Forgetting the conversation Lapis got to her feet and moved to the door. Peridot had sounded kind of panicky, and she should probably at least check on what was happening. She hoped it wasn't the drones malfunctioning again.

Opening the doors, Lapis stepped out, Moonstone just behind her. Peridot was standing a little ways away, clutching her giant wrench and staring at the ground, turning her head in every direction. Her drones were in the air too, but, unlike yesterday, they weren't shooting at Peridot; instead they were hovering around her, their blasters also pointed at the ground.

Lapis furrowed her brow. This was strange, even for Peridot. "What's the matter?"

Peridot didn't look up. "No time for chatter, Lapis." She snapped, hefting her wrench nervously. "We're under attack!"
Lapis blinked. "We are?"

"Don't take that tone with me, Lazuli. They're in the ground!" There was a faint rumbling noise, and the dirt behind Peridot began to shake, like something just beneath the surface was tunneling toward her. Peridot spun around as something erupted from the dirt, Lapis only had enough time to get an impression of size—roughly the size of a cat—before Peridot wacked it with her wrench.

The thing flew back with a sound like crumbling stone, hit the ground, and tunneled back into the dirt. There was more rumbling and two more of the things burst out beside Peridot, before Lapis could react, the drones turned their lasers on them and blasted them back.

Lapis summoned her wings, and keeping her eyes on the ground as she questioned the technician. "Any idea what these things are?"

"Some kind of corrupted gem, obviously." Peridot answered, waving her wrench around every which way. "I was just standing investigating the local loam, trying to see if I could figure out how this farming business works. Then these cloddy things started popping out of the ground like daisies and tried to bite me! They chased me back here, not that they could catch me. If there's one skill I've picked up on earth, it's how to run away." Peridot huffed. "Also the drones are working now, so that's nice."

There was another rumbling, the soil at Lapis' feet churned, and another one of the things popped out of the soil, making a noise like pebbles falling onto concrete. Lapis promptly slapped it with a wing and froze it solid. It hit the ground with a thump and Lapis bent over it, examining the frozen creature. It looked like some kind of mole, tiny mouth and stubby legs, but tipped in long, broad claws. Lapis waved her fingers and the ice shifted, disrupting the creature's form and leaving behind a tiny shard of brown stone. "So we've got a pest problem on our hands," she commented, melting the ice and grasping the stone shard. "Any idea how many of these things there are?"

"Not a clue." Peridot huffed.

"Er… I may be able to determine that," said Moonstone, raising her hand and shuffling awkwardly under their gaze. When neither of them protested, she pointed to the gem in Lapis' hand. "May I see that?"

Lapis handed it over wordlessly and Moonstone flashed out her visor. "This is not a full gem, just a fragment," she said after a moment.

"Wow. We hadn't figured that out." Lapis rolled her eyes.

"As for how many there are…" Moonstone directed her visor downward.

"Yes?" Peridot prompted.

"Er… quite a few." Moonstone answered.

And then the ground all around them started to rumble.

The glow of the warp faded, but Steven still couldn't see anything through the veil of tears. He wasn't even sure where he was; he'd just wanted to get away from everyone. He staggered off the warp pad and collapsed.
He needed to think. But… he didn't want to. He didn't want to think about anything. Instead, he just cried—he knew it wouldn't help the situation. But he knew it wouldn't hurt it either.

Tears were only water and everything on earth needed water to grow. So crying could never hurt, could be good thing… Pearl had told him that, way back in the distant past when he thought he knew who she was… that thought brought another wave of waterworks and he sobbed, great heaving gasps that made his chest hurt.

And so, he cried.

He cried and cried until he felt he had nothing left. He wasn't sure how long it took him, but eventually, the tears slowed from a waterfall to a stream, then a trickle, and then, at last, they stopped.

Steven wiped his eyes and looked around, his vision was still kinda blurry, but he could make out a lot of green and red. He wiped his eyes again and took a second look.

Strawberries. The red shapes were giant strawberries that covered a field for as far as he could see. He knew this place; the gems had brought him here on a mission once or twice. He'd thought it was really pretty and amazing and incredible back then. Now though, his eyes could only focus on one thing.

Weapons. All throughout the field, stretching as far as the eye could see, were weapons: swords, axes, spears, clubs, and more. He'd seen them before, of course. Multiple times.

He could remember things the gem had told him:

"This was a gem battlefield…"

"Countless gems were broken here. It was a maelstrom of destruction and death."

"But we won! Your mother led us to glorious victory!"

Which meant that Garnet and Pearl had killed a lot of gems here… which also meant they'd probably seen a lot of their friends die here. They'd basically told him what they'd done. Why had he never really thought about it? Why had it never really seemed real?

Steven shook his head. He didn't want to be here. He should leave. Steven stood up and moved back to the warp pad, he placed his foot on it and paused.

...No.

Steven shook his head. He'd ignored this, all of this, for ages. He could have figured this out, understood what the gems had done if he just sat down and thought about it. But he didn't, he either ignored it or didn't notice or ran away from it. He'd even run away now; he'd left the gems and Connie behind without a thought about how much that must have hurt them.

Well… he'd already done it, so he might as well make the most of it. Steven turned around, took a few steps, and sat back down, staring at all the weapons.

It was time for him to face this.

It was time for him to think.

The Gems, or at least Garnet and Pearl, wanted to hurt Moonstone.
He needed to warn her!

But… she already knew, didn't she? She'd known she was in danger since the moment she woke up and realized who the gems were. She'd known that they wanted to hurt her, she'd told him as much, and he hadn't believed…

How? How was possible that she understood the gems better than he did when she hadn't even known them for a week?

He couldn't begin to wrap his head around that. So he switched his train of thought. Connie had once told him that whenever she was confronted with something she couldn't completely understand, she'd try to break down what she knew into bite size chunks to see what became clear.

The gems were old. Like, really old. At least, what, Five thousand years? He'd been a part of their lives for fourteen years. He'd always sort of known they'd fought and killed in defense of earth way back in the ancient past. But he was okay with that. If they hadn't done that, there wouldn't even be an earth anymore.

Steven shook his head. He wasn't upset about what the gems had done in the past. He hadn't been there; maybe there hadn't been any other way. He was upset about what they were thinking about doing now.

They wanted to hurt Moonstone. They believed she deserved it. Did she? She didn't seem that dangerous to him. But they said something about her trying to brainwash the Crystal Gems… he didn't know the whole story there… but still, that didn't mean they shouldn't forgive her or give her a chance. Peridot had sort of come here to oversee the cluster's destruction of earth, and now she was a Crystal Gem!

So why weren't they willing to extend the same chance to Moonstone?

He tried to look at it from the gems' view. If Moonstone had tried to hurt Connie, had succeeded in hurting her in an irreversible way. He'd… he'd be pretty mad.

He'd hate her.

If Moonstone had really hurt all those gems, and wasn't sorry for it. If she really was a Bad Person…then…

He'd cross that bridge when it came to it. Whatever happened now, he knew one thing for certain. He needed to talk to Moonstone.

Peridot dove and scooped up the last shard before it could hit the ground, bubbling it and sending it away in one smooth motion. "Please tell me that was the last one of these clods." She said, looking over her shoulder at Moonstone.

The scientist carefully scanned the ground in every direction. "Yes," she said slowly. "I believe so, at the very least, I am seeing no other energy readings."

"Finally!" Peridot groaned, rolling over to lay spread-eagled on churned up dirt. "I have earth particles in places I didn't know I had." She complained.
"Tell me about it." Lapis answered, sitting down on a nearby log with a sigh. Lazily, she conjured up a wing and started to scrub the grime from her body. "That. Sucked."

Moonstone glanced around at all the carnage. She had to agree, that whole ordeal had sucked.

Beyond the first clawed creature Lapis had taken down, there had been at least three-dozen others—all of which had attacked at once.

They had moved through the earth like fish in water. Darting out to attack, then slipping away faster than her visor had been able to track. Lapis had been able to poof several of them quickly with deft slices of her wing. But the beasts had caught on quickly, staying low to the ground so that they couldn't be caught in midair, instead going after their legs and attempting to knock them to the ground.

In truth, they hadn't been especially dangerous: their claws, while large, were blunt and not suited for combat, and their teeth were sharp but not large enough to do much more than pierce their clothing.

What they had been was destructive.

They churned up everything: rocks, plants, dirt, and anything else that happened to be on the ground. Their immediate surroundings were completely destroyed, an ugly patch of brown in a field of green.

It hadn't helped that Lapis had lost her temper half way through the scuffle, flooding the area in an attempt to drive them above ground.

All that had accomplished was turning everything into a sea of mud, which, if anything, had increased their mobility and left the three of them knee deep in muck... well, four; Toad had come out to try to help, but had just wound up half sunk in the mud, unable to get traction in the goop.

Speaking of, Moonstone bent down to help excavate the trapped fungus. She still didn't like the thing, but it just looked so pitiful with only its cap sticking out of the ground as wiggled futilely. Plus its eyes were just above the ground and we're shooting her a look that could only be called forlorn.

Moonstone had been unsure what to do. She wasn't a soldier, and she certainly lacked any of Lapis' frankly impressive offensive capacity. She had just tried to stay out of the way, using her visor to detect when one of the creatures was about to surface near her. She hadn't been totally successful, and the mole creatures had nearly dragged her down into the mud at least twice.

Still, Peridot had a harder time with it; her short stature had nearly drowned her in the mud from the start. Only a timely intervention on Moonstone's part had saved the technician from being dragged away completely. Nonetheless, it had been Peridot who solved the problem. She had thought to link the drones and the scanner in Moonstone's visor, thus enhancing their accuracy and response time to the creature's emergence. Their concentrated fire quickly disrupted the forms of the small beasts; thenm Lapis had moved the gem shards to Peridot for bubbling.

The danger had passed, even if the mess had not.

"Do you think," said Peridot, "that if we ignore this mess, it will go away? I mean, it'll dry up on its own and earth flora will cover it right? That's how this planet works?"

"I guess?" Lapis shrugged. She looked around at the mire of muck. "It might take awhile."
"I blame you, you're the one who flooded the place." Peridot complained.

Moonstone tuned them out. The danger had passed, so she busied herself with getting clean. She scrubbed the muck from her visor and coat. She considered doing the same for Toad, but the mushroom seemed to like it. At least, it kept jumping up and down in the shallower pools of mud. With nothing else to do, Moonstone wandered back into the barn.

Immediately, her gaze was drawn up by a green glow; dozens of bubbles floating among the rafters, casting the space into a lime green glow. So that's where Peridot had sent them, she'd thought they'd go back to the temple. Either way, it made for an eerie sight.

"They are kinda creepy, aren't they?" Said Peridot, lugging her wrench behind her. She set the makeshift weapon against the wall and straightened. "Just ignore them, when Steven or one of the other gems visit we'll have them send these to the temple.

"Do... these attacks happen often?"

"Not really," Peridot shrugged. "It's only happened once or twice and the gem in question usually isn't that dangerous. If it were one of the big ones, my fellow crystal gems would have shown up to take care of it. It was kinda weird how there were a bunch of tiny ones this time, but meh. No big deal, not like they were any match for my superior technology."

"I see." Moonstone nodded, her eyes still glued on the gem shards. There was something about them that was nagging at mind, demanding closer investigation.. "May I, er, examine one of them? If it's not too much trouble."

Peridot shot her a weird look. "I mean, if you really want to. Be gentle, though, my bubbles are kind of fragile and I'd rather not have one of those running around inside where we live."

"I shall, thank you." Moonstone reached up and just barely managed to grab one of the lowest hanging bubbles. Holding it gingerly she carried it over to a corner and sat down. Summoning her newly cleaned visor she began to analyze the gem shard inside.

One of the first things she noticed was that the energy signature of this particular shard perfectly mirrored the ones floating over her head. Which meant they had all been part of the same gem.

That had… unsettling implications.

She had known that it was possible for the shards of a broken gem to manifest some kind of form. She had even seen it once; a vision of phantom limbs groping and crawling in the dark without hope. To say it had been an upsetting experience would be understating it.

The thought that if one was killed, if she was killed, it wouldn't be the end… That the broken fragments of herself would wander the worlds, desperately trying to find each other again…

Moonstone shuddered and put it out of her mind.

But these creatures had been strange; their forms, though corrupted, had been neat and complete, there was no sense of pitiful, desperate incompleteness around them. Despite traveling as a pack, each had acted as individuals; adapting to the threat Lapis posed and changing tactics.

Based upon the data from that single gem shard experiment she had been forced to perform, and several data files from other researchers who had performed such tests, that…shouldn't have been possible.
Which was why she had wanted a closer look at one of these gem creatures. The depth of their corruption, the granting of a complete mind to these broken fragments was odd in the extreme, and her curiosity had kicked into high gear in response.

So she scanned the gem more thoroughly, tracing energy signatures both old and new. This sort of thing couldn't have just happened, something had to have been done to it.

It was difficult, based on what she could see on the surface, these gem shards had been like this for a very long time, and for the most part they stayed the same, although occasionally the energy increased in intensity from outside influence—perhaps the individual shards finding each other and attempting to fuse?

No. That was not a train of thought she wanted to pursue.

But as she looked a little deeper, peeking beyond the millennia of this gems existence; her visor came to an automatic halt, flashing as it detected an altogether different signature.

Eureka!

Moonstone frowned, turning the bubble in her hands this away and that in order to get a better look.

What…what was she looking at? It looked like an energy signature had been imposed on this gem—before or after it was shattered, she couldn't tell—but it appeared to be the most likely candidate for these creatures' odd corruption. It was true that she had rather expected to find such a thing, but…

Why her visor telling her she'd seen this energy signature before?

It…appeared to be a remarkably good match to the energy released when PF-01-2 had been awake and exerting its empathic influence. It wasn't an exact match, but it was too close for it to be nothing but coincidence.

Moonstone looked up at the bubbles above her, biting her lip. When the Crystal Gems had interrogated her, they'd told her that Homeworld had done something to corrupt all the gems remaining on earth. She hadn't thought much of the implications at the time. She'd been too busy dealing with their veiled accusation that she had been directly responsible for the deed.

Which simply wasn't true. Her research had never been directed towards the singular goal of corrupting a gem's mind. Such a result was a tragic accident, not an intentional result.

But… she had been removed from the PF-01-2 project centuries before the end of the war and she'd hardly been kept in the loop by the colleagues she had betrayed—the colleagues she'd betrayed had hardly kept her in the loop. Could… could the project's goals have shifted from saving the rebel to ruining them?

Moonstone shook her head. No. She couldn't believe that. The Diamond's weren't that ruthless, would never condone something so awful.

Well… Yellow Diamond might. Her ruthlessness against those she considered her enemies was legendary, as befitting such a great general. But even so, she doubted any of the others would allow such a thing.

Especially since this planet had been Pink Diamond's colony. The pink paragon's compassion was renowned, in fact, she had been the one to beseech White Diamond's help with the PF-01-2 project, in order to spare the rebel gems.
The Diamond's might rule the collective gem empire together, but for the most part each one had the final say in what happened in their personal colonies. Pink Diamond would never have allowed Yellow Diamond to do such a thing.

But… nonetheless, something had happened. The gems on this planet had been corrupted on a wide scale somehow. But if it had been intentional, then why had Homeworld left this planet be for millennia? Corrupted gems were dangerous, yes, but they would have lacked the organization of Rose Quartz's rebels and would have been easily swept aside by the armies of Homeworld.

She had to be missing something—several somethingsomethings, in fact—there were too many pieces to this puzzle missing and all she had to fill the holes was mere speculation.

She could feel the gaps in her knowledge burning in her mind like an itch she couldn't scratch. It had always been that way when she lacked answers; she'd always had a need to investigate, to discover the truth. It's what had made her an excellent researcher.

Moonstone nodded, she would investigate this. She needed to know what had happened over the course of the war…it's not like she had anything better to do while she waited for the Crystal Gems to decide her fate. She might as well spend what could quite possibly be her final days doing what she loved.

But where to get the answers she sought? There were only a handful of people she could ask. She considered her knew roommates. Lapis had lived through the war and could likely know something of what had happened… but… she was kind of scary. Sure, the blue gem had been polite enough earlier, but Moonstone had gotten the feeling that Lapis was only being nice for Steven's sake.

There was Peridot. But the war predated her and Moonstone couldn't be sure how much the technician would know.

The Crystal Gems? Oh yes, they'd be delighted to answer her questions about what happened to their former comrades.

Yes, and she still had a place on Homeworld.

Which only left one real option on who to start with.

She needed to talk to Steven.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm… another chapter focusing on Moonstone. More than one person has wondered what's going on with my corrupted monster. I admit, amber has sort of fallen off the radar for the moment. That's just where the story has taken me. But they will return… eventually. We'll also get back to the more action side of things… soon.

Very soon.

Till next time!
Searching

Chapter Summary

For resolution, for one who is missing, for distraction, and for truth. The gems are searching.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thunder rolled and lightning split the sky. Garnet watched it strike a nearby tree, carving a blackened scar along its trunk. Fire bloomed from the tree for a moment, only to be extinguished by the torrential downpour soaking the landscape.

Garnet turned away, directing her attention skyward to the roiling sea of clouds above, searching for some hint of the unnatural; a wing, a scream, a flash of orange—anything. But there was nothing.

This storm, despite its fury, was completely natural.

She shook her head and turned back to the warp pad, leaving the hurricane far behind in a burst of light and reappearing on a towering mountaintop. The skies above were a clear blue, but that was fine—she could use a moment to dry off. The fusion stepped from the pad and sat upon a nearby boulder, shaking most of the water from her soaked hair in one forceful movement.

Thus far, her search for the remaining corrupted half, the amber, had proved fruitless. She had visited a dozen different thunderstorms across the world in the past few hours. She had thought the creature would be venting its rage on anything that moved, hence her storm chasing, but perhaps she had been mistaken. The fact that it wasn't going on a rampage wasn't a bad thing, but that also made it difficult for her to locate.

She didn't know what it looked like, how it acted, or what its presence felt like. The ignorance crippled her future vision. It could be anywhere on the planet by now and that left her wondering around on random hunches. If it was laying low, licking its wounds… her chances of finding it were slim.

She could easily picture it, hurt and alone, hiding in some remote cave rendered cationic by the weight of its loss. She tried not to.

It may be in mourning for now, but it would only be a matter of time before grief turned to rage. It was likely that it would seek out the Crystal Gems, her specifically; she had been the one who played the biggest role in taking it down after all. Such an outcome would be preferable, but she couldn't afford to rely on that as there was nothing to stop it from trying to level a city before seeking them out.

Time was running out and she couldn't afford to delay or give into any distractions—the people of earth were depending on her… and so was the amber, even if they didn't know it. She would reunite them, even if it was just in a bubble. She owed them that much.
Shaking out the last of the water from her hair she moved to the warp pad and left the mountain far behind.

Pearl strode quickly down the wooden boardwalk of Beach City, glancing left and right through the dim morning light in the feeble hope that she might catch a glimpse of a familiar mop of curly black hair.

Steven hadn't come home last night.

She should never have let him run off like that. It had been an inexcusable lapse in judgement, she had been distracted by visiting the memorial, but that was no excuse. Jasper, a deranged corrupted gem, common criminals—it was far too dangerous for Steven to be all by himself. She needed to find him.

Garnet could have located him in a matter of minutes, but the fusion had infuriatingly refused point-blank to do so, choosing instead to disappear through the warp after insisting that he be allowed to work his way through it by himself. Which was fine. Pearl was willing to allow Steven to come to terms with what the Crystal Gems had done without her interference, she had faith in him. But she did not see why he couldn't do that in the safety of the house.

Which brought her to her current endeavor. She had tried putting herself in Steven's shoes, attempting to figure out where he would have run off to after being put through the events of last night. After giving it some thought, she was fairly confident she knew where he had spent the night.

Speaking of, she had arrived.

She raised her hand and rapped it neatly on the door of the van, once, twice, three times, before calling out. "Greg? Are you in there? I must speak with you." There was a clatter from inside the van and a muffled yelp, then the door opened and a balding head peeked out.

Greg blinked sleepily, "…Pearl?"

"Hello Greg," Pearl nodded impatiently, trying to peer past him to see if she could spot Steven in the van.

"Um… Greg blinked again, glancing around but not seeing anyone else, looked back at her, "Hi. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much. I was just wondering if you had seen Steven last night."

Some of the sleepiness left the man's face. "No, I haven't seen him." he answered, his brow scrunching up. "Why? Has something happened?"

"No. Nothing has happened. I apologize for disturbing your sleep and will let you get back to it." Pearl turned on her heels and began to stride away. This wasn't good. Steven had always had trouble making up his mind about things, he had come to her for advice more times than she could count. She had been sure that Steven would go running to Greg.

But he hadn't. Connie was staying out the house, so he couldn't have gone to her. Where could he possibly—

"Hey! Wait just a second!" Her train of thought was interrupted by Greg's shout. She turned back and saw that he had clambered out of the van and was scrambling after her. "You can't just say
"something like that and walk away!" he declared. "Why are you asking if I've seen Steven? Do you not know where he is?"

"Don't worry about it," Pearl rolled her eyes and turning away. She did not have time for this. "It's none of your concern."

"None of my…? Are you kidding me?!" a hand grabbed her shoulder and tried to pull her back, not that he had any chance of actually doing so. But she stopped nonetheless and glanced back in irritation. "Pearl, come on. I know I don't get involved in your magic stuff. But I have a right to know what's going on with my son. What's going on with Steven?"

Pearl glowered at him, but he refused to let go. She sighed, she had forgotten just how stubborn he could be. If she wanted to get a move on, it would probably be quickest to just offer him an explanation. "Steven learned something last night that upset him," she said simply. "He did not take it well and ran off. I thought he would come back during the night but was mistaken. I am trying to find him now, so if you wouldn't mind letting me get back to that…"

Greg let go, and she turned away. But as she walked off she realized the man was following her. She shot him a look, but he just crossed his arms and stared right back. "Look," he said. "I know Steven wouldn't have run off if it wasn't something serious and you're probably pretty upset right now. Just tell me this, do you think he's in danger?"

"I…" Pearl closed her eyes and let out a long sigh, letting some of the tension flow out of her body. There isn't any reason to think he is in any particular danger, no. It is possible that he is all alone, but he is capable of taking care of himself," she admitted. "Nonetheless, I still wish to find him."

Greg stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. I believe you. How can I help?" Pearl blinked. Greg just smiled, "as I said, he's my son. I want to help."

"I… very well."

"I had thought maybe he had come to you for advice. But he has not. Can you think of anyone else he might have gone to?"

"Hmmm." Greg scratched his head. "Not sure about that one, but we can ask around town."

"It's a start."

Amethyst didn't bother knocking, instead just pushing through the unlocked door and collapsing onto the couch with a groan.

"Um… come in?" said a voice. She glanced up, a boy in red pants and sweatshirt was staring at her.

"Sup Sour Croute?" She nodded. "Your mom around?"

"Greetings, I'd tell you to make yourself at home, but you've clearly got that covered," the teen answered, rolling his eyes. "And yeah, she's upstairs." He turned away and slouched his way out of the room. "Yo mom?" he called. "Aunt Amethyst is on our couch again."

"Really?" a voice yelled back. "I'll be right down." A few moments later the house echoed with the sound of someone coming down the stairs and a women entered. "Well hello there, you piece of trash," she said with a grin. "what brings you to my garbage patch?"

"Well, its certainly not the view," Amethyst smirked, sticking out her tongue. "Hey Vidalia."
Vidalia laughed, "Hey Amethyst. Good to see you."

"Back at'cha." Amethyst flopped over on the couch and stretched herself out. Vidalia took a seat beside her.

"So," she said conversationally. "You're back in my house again."

"I am?" Amethyst glanced around. "Oh wow, You're right. How about that?"

"Any particular reason for this Ame-visit? Or are your just here to eat my garbage and chill?"

"I mean, if you're offering," Amethyst shrugged. "But really, I just wanted to get out of the temple."

"Uh oh." Vidalia said, raising her brow. "Trouble in paradise? Pearl and Garnet still not talking to each other?"

"Nah, they hashed that junk out awhile back." Amethyst sighed. "But yeah, there's been another drama bomb."

"Sounds like business as usual then." Vidalia commented, reaching down the side of the couch and pulling up a wastebasket. She offered it to Amethyst, who took it gratefully and started shoveling bits of junk into her mouth. "You get caught in the blast radius?"

"Not this time," Amethyst answered, spewing bits of paper and plastic everywhere. "Steven was the main casualty. Little dude's pretty upset." Amethyst sighed. "He ran off last night, haven't seen him since."

"Really?" Vidalia blinked, taken aback. "Steven ran away from home?" she whistled. "Didn't know the kiddo had it in him. I mean, sure, I used to do that almost every other day when I was his age, but Universes have always been a bunch of goody-goodies." the amusement slipped off her face and she gave Amethyst a serious look. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Mmmhh… nah." Amethyst shook her head, "There's kinda a lot of heavy stuff getting thrown around back home, but I wasn't really involved in this one," she shrugged. "I kinda want to just ignore it and let the others work this stuff out. y'know?"

"Mmm… if you say so." Vidalia leaned back. "So, you want to hear what trouble I've been getting into?"

Amethyst grinned. That's what she loved about Vidalia—she just got it. "Lay it on me," she said.

"Well, just the other day I started teaching Onion how to hotwire…"
What are you even expecting her to tell you? That everything the gems said was a lie? Grow up.’

He shook his head, hard. Those kinds of thoughts were the exact opposite of helpful.

’Just deal with things one at a time.’ Steven paused; that thought had sounded an awful lot like Connie—and much like her, it was right.

He had run away. But that was in the past, all he could do now was keep moving forward.

The gems were definitely worried. But he could apologize later, once he'd sorted this all out.

He didn't know what the expected Moonstone to tell him. But he wasn't going to let that stop him from finding out. He'd already come this far after all, turning back wouldn't accomplish nothing anything.

Resolve bolstered, he moved on a bit faster than before.

As he approached, he saw Lapis and Peridot standing at the edge of a large patch of mud—a huge stain of brown and black in an otherwise grassy, green field.

"This thing is such an eyesore," Peridot's voice carried across the flat plain. "Remind me again, Lazuli, why you can't just move all the water somewhere else?"

"I'd lift the dirt too." Lapis replied matter-of-factly. "Trying to separate it all would just make a bigger mess. Also we'd still have a giant hole in the ground."

"Right, right. Well, your inability to precisely control your powers aside, we've gotta do something about it. I for one refuse to have a giant soggy pit right on our doorstep."

"It's not that big a deal." Lapis shrugged.

"Says the gem who can fly." Peridot snorted. "I have no desire to slog through this filthy muck every time I wish to enter our home base."

"We could break open a hole in the wall around the back." Lapis suggested. "You could enter that way."

"Okay, first of all, it bothers me that your go to solution is smashing holes in our home. Secondly, that is not a good solution. It wouldn't even solve the issue, merely avoid it! I believe—"

"Hey guys." Steven called out.

"Hey Steven." Lapis answered, turning to greet him with a smile that slid away when she caught sight of him. "Are you alright? You look kind of…" she trailed off.

"Terrible." Peridot supplied.

"Yes. Thank you, Peridot." Lapis rolled her eyes.

"It's okay." Steven answered, smiling weakly. "And I'm okay, I just… had a rough night."

Lapis raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask for more details. He was grateful for that. "So, what brings you here?"

"I, um, want to talk to Moonstone. Is she around?"
"Of course." Peridot jammed a thumb over her shoulder, "She's inside, as she had no interest in helping us solve our... landscaping problem."

"To be fair, we didn't ask her to." Lapis pointed out.

"Yeah, uh, what's the story with that?" Steven asked, looking at the giant patch of mud which definitely hadn't been here yesterday.

"Corrupt gem." Lapis answered, "We dealt with it. By the way, do you think you can send the bubbles to the temple? I think they're freaking out Lady Featherface."

"Oh yes," Peridot snorted. "Stars forbid that bag of feathers and talons be uncomfortable."

"Yeah, I can do that." Steven nodded, grinning awkwardly. He didn't really have anything else to say. "Well, I'll let you get back to your hole." He stepped past the gems. "Good luck with it."

"Thanks." Lapis nodded, "Enjoy your talk." She turned back to the hole, "should I just freeze it solid?"

"How would that help?" Peridot demanded. "...don't just shrug at me! If you're not going to think your suggestions through, don't bother telling me them!"

Steven left the debate behind him as he stepped through the barn door and swung it shut behind him. Everything in the barn was lit by a green glow, he glanced up and blinked at the number of bubbles floating overhead. It looked like each one held a tiny shard, he should probably move all of those into one bubble before he sent them to the temple. But he could deal with that later.

"Now just hold still, please." Moonstone was standing in front of a crate, on which Toad was sitting. She had her hands on the mushroom's cap and was examining it, or trying to. The toadstool kept on attempting to wriggle away. She held out a glass vial beneath its cap, "If you could just provide me a little bit more, we'll be done." The mushroom almost seemed to sigh and shook its cap, releasing a stream of fine silvery dust into the vial. "Thank you." Moonstone smiled, releasing the mushroom which immediately hopped off the box and skipped across the barn. The scientist followed it with her eyes and caught sight of him.

"Oh, Steven," She nodded politely at him. "Hello there. I did not hear you enter."

"That's okay. It, uh, looks like you had some fun while I was gone." He said weakly, gesturing up at the bubbles.

"Ah, indeed." A frown slipped across her face as she stared at the bubbles. "Although, fun is not exactly the word I would use to describe that particular experience. I would say it was... troubling."

"You weren't hurt, were you?"

Moonstone shook her head. "No, Lapis and Peridot handled them quite effectively. But the ordeal has left me with several mysteries. On that note, your presence is quite fortuitous as I was hoping you could help provide me with some of the answers I seek."

"Oh?" the scientist took a seat on the crate and gestured to a barrel across from her. "Have a seat." As Steven did, she wedged a stoppered stopper into the powder-filled vial and tucked it away in a pocket. "Why don't you go first?" she asked, looking at him expectantly. "I owe you a great deal,
Steven took a deep breath, and examined the Homeworld gem. She looked so harmless, her calm stature and polite attentiveness made it was hard to connect her with the things Garnet had told him. But… Garnet might try to hide things from him, but he'd never once known her to lie.

"I… spoke with Garnet and Pearl yesterday," He began. "They told me some stuff. About you."

"Ah," Moonstone leaned back, a neutral expression on her face. "I see. And what, exactly, did they tell you?"

"They told me that they interrogated you behind my back" —which stung, but whatever— "and what you told them."

Moonstone nodded slowly "…and?"

"Is it true?" Steven blurted. "Did you do the things they said? Did you experiment on gems? Did you hurt them?"

"Yes. I did."

The simple, matter-of-fact admission set Steven back on his heels, like a fluffy puppy he'd been petting had reared up and bitten him.

"How could you do something like that?" he whispered.

Moonstone gave him a very serious look. "How could Rose Quartz start a war against her Diamond that ultimately destroyed thousands of her fellow gems?"

Steven gaped. That was...how could...those weren't even close to the same thing! "She was trying to protect the earth! To do the right thing."

"That's interesting." Moonstone replied, nodding thoughtfully. "I remember thinking the same thing about my own work." She frowned, a bit of sadness leaking into her eyes. "I'm still not sure if I was wrong."

"Not wrong?! How could experimenting on people's minds possibly be the right thing to do?" Steven demanded.

"I have never pretended that my work wasn't cruel." Moonstone sighed, her gaze dropping to the floor. "But the situation was more complicated than I believe you understand." She glanced up at Steven. "Did they tell you the whole story, or just that detail?"

Steven hesitated. He couldn't really recall what else the gems had said. He'd kinda been too upset to really listen much at that point.

Moonstone nodded. "I can see that you are upset; that you are having trouble understanding me or my actions. One thing I have learned in my vocation is that any conclusions drawn on limited facts are mere conjecture at best and very likely to be flawed. Would you be willing to listen to the complete version of my story? I cannot promise it will make you feel better, but perhaps it will aid your understanding."

Steven hesitated, but nodded. Moonstone was good at explaining things. Maybe, just maybe, she could help all of this make sense.
Moonstone began to speak. She told him of dark places, of long and fruitless work, of a pair of silent screams trapped beneath the earth, and of betrayal. He didn't interrupt; letting the words flow over him like a river, trying to keep his head above the water to find the island of reason somewhere in the middle of it all.

"-and then, for my betrayal, I was imprisoned. And there I stayed until I was found by you."

Moonstone paused. "Ah, I do not believe I ever thanked you for that. It has taken me awhile to determine how I felt about that. But I have decided that I am, in fact, thankful for my rescue." She inclined her head. "Regardless of what shall become of me in the future, I thank you for saving me."

Steven sat still, trying to sort through what all he had been told. It hadn't really made things much clearer; he still couldn't tell if the scientist had been a Bad Guy. Sure, she had been experimenting on gems, but she'd also tried to put a stop to it in the end. That had to count for something, right?

"I just," he said uncertainly, he had so many things he wanted explained. But every explanation he got didn't seem to help. Where was he supposed to start? "Why did you—did Homeworld—feel like they had to do all this?"

Moonstone stared at him thoughtfully, then said gently. "Steven, I fear this may be a little awkward of me to ask in light of the stone resting in your navel, but do you have any idea as to just how terrifying your mother was?"

Steven blinked. Rose, his mom, scary? Everyone who'd ever met her had told him a lot of things—Pearl especially—but scary had definitely not been one of them.

"In all of known history, there had never been a war between gems. Our kind had always been unified under the light of the Diamond's leadership. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, your mother appeared; rejecting her diamond and lashing out viciously at any gem that attempted to carry out their Diamond's will." Moonstone shook her head. "Nobody knew what to make if it. But her tactics were brutal and effective." She shuddered. "I was never on the battlefield, I never met the rebels first hand. But there were many video logs of their exploits. They were sent to my fellow researchers and I for study; that we might better understand what the rebels were and how to stop them. Most of them focused upon Rose Quartz herself, but wherever Rose went…" Moonstone swallowed, a sickly look on her face. "She followed."

Steven's furrowed his brow. "Who?"

"The Gem Cutter, your pearl." Moonstone rubbed one of her hands against her face, a faraway look in her eyes. "There are surprisingly few instances of your mother shattering a gem; but she hardly had too, not with her pearl there." She looked gently at Steven. "I do not wish to upset you, but the simple fact is that, if we are comparing, your pearl has slain more gems than I could have ever experimented on."

Steven squeezed his eyes shut, each breath he took felt like something was stabbing him. A week ago, he would have shouted out a denial of that, would have defended Pearl's name on general principle. But now… how could he defend her if it was actually true. And it had to be true, didn't it? There had been dozens of hints throughout his life to this, to all of this. He just hadn't wanted to see them, hadn't even thought to look for them.

But they were there. He couldn't ignore them anymore. Pearl, Garnet, his mom… they'd killed people. Lots of people.

"…Why?" he whispered, tears leaking out through his eyes like liquid fire. "Why did things have to
be that way?"

He heard Moonstone sigh. "It was a war, Steven," she said, calm resignation in every word. "Your mother would not let her Diamonds have their way and the Diamonds could hardly allow such open defiance stand. Conflict was the only way such a scenario was ever likely to end."

"You're wrong!" Steven snapped, his eyes shooting open; anger and indignation warring within him. Why was it that people always had to fight!? There were better ways of doing things! "It didn't have to be that way! If Homeworld had just tried to talk to my mom, maybe the whole thing could have been avoided."

Moonstone looked taken aback at his outburst, but answered him as calmly as ever. "There was no way the Diamonds could have accepted anything but her total surrender. Something which Rose Quartz made quite clear that she was never going to do."

"Then Diamonds could have just left the earth alone!" he shouted, throwing his hands up. "My mom only wanted to protect the earth, if they had just left it alone, found some other planet, then there would have been no need for gems to fight!"

"I'm not so sure that is true. While I admit I saw no record of Rose Quartz herself ever stating that she had any plans beyond defending the Earth, the same cannot be said for her rebels. Many that were captured made ominous claims of how they would win the war and take the fight back to Homeworld, starting that they would not stop until every gem loyal to the Diamond's lay broken at their feet, that they would shatter even the Diamonds!" Moonstone shook her head. "No. Rose Quartz could not be left alone, lest she grow her forces and take her war to the stars." The scientist leaned forward to look him dead in the eye. "Can you imagine that, Steven? A war spanning across the galaxy? Countless planets and colonies reduced to stone-covered battlefields. Can you imagine the amount of needless death and destruction such a thing would entail? Because I can, and the Diamonds were right to ensure that such a thing never be allowed to happen." She glanced up at the bubbles overhead. "No matter how extreme their methods may have been…"

"There… had to have been another way."

"It would have been nice," Moonstone agreed. "It would have been wonderful if the whole thing could have resolved peacefully. But, unfortunately, sometimes one must take terrible steps to achieve their goals. Especially in the face of such a catastrophic alternative."

"I don't believe that." Steven whispered.

"Well—" Moonstone began, her voice calm and gentle like she was talking to a baby… It made something inside Steven boil.

"And I don't think you do either," he said sharply.

"That," Moonstone blinked. "...What?"

Steven narrowed his eyes, his head felt hot and hazy, as though he was sitting in a desert; but several thoughts were lining up in his mind like a row of icicles. "I don't think you believe what you just said about doing bad stuff."

"If I did not believe it," Moonstone said slowly, a faint smile on her face—like she was just humoring him. "Then why would I say it?"

"Because you're trying to fool yourself. People do it all the time. The gems have done it, my dad has done it, I've done it." Steven shook his head. "You want to believe what you're saying; it makes
sense to you. It comforts you. But you can't."

Moonstone raised an eyebrow, "and how have you come to this conclusion about me?"

"Because if you really believed that doing terrible things were necessary, if you were really willing to be the one doing that bad stuff, then why did you try to stop those experiments?"

The Homeworld scientist's smile vanished, wiped away like his happy ideal of who the Crystal Gems were and Steven felt a brief stab of satisfaction.

"Well?" Steven crossed his arms and glared at her in defiance. "runRun it by me again, why did you betray Homeworld?"

Moonstone blanched, "I… that," she swallowed hard and Steven couldn't deny a certain, unpleasant satisfaction from her discomfort. Since the moment he'd walked in, the scientist had been a picture of calm; saying all these terrible things like they were reasonable like logic was the only thing that mattered. Well, this wasn't about logic now, it was about feelings—and emotions were his universe. "I… do not believe you understood me," she said weakly, "The situation back then—"

"Actually," Steven interrupted. "I'd say this is the one thing I've heard since yesterday that I understand completely." He leaned back, tucking his hands behind his head nonchalantly, "It actually couldn't be simpler. Back then, you saw something that was wrong, something that all the logic in the world couldn't justify, and you tried to do something about it." he paused, giving her a sidelong look, "and you didn't care about the consequences."

Moonstone shook her head violently. "No. noNo, you misunderstand. I—my mind—was compromised by PF-01-2's powers. The creature destabilized my sense of judgement, made me betray everything I held dear!"

"Mmm, nope. Sorry. Don't believe that. You see, before we managed to defeat it, it went to this city and took control of a bunch of people's minds. It made them attack us—"

"There you go then!" Moonstone declared, "That is exactly what it did to me!"

"You didn't let me finish," Steven snapped. "After we defeated it, the people fell unconscious, and when they woke up? They couldn't remember a thing. Nothing they did to those people had any lasting effect."

"You can hardly base your conclusions on that case alone," Moonstone rolled her eyes. "I worked with that creature for centuries. I saw it permanently effect hundreds of gems." She sneered, "Would you like to see the data files? I still possess many of them and I warn you, they aren't at all pleasant."

Steven waved this off. "See, now that's actually different. What happened to those gems was something you made happen, something Homeworld made happen. But when it affected you, it wasn't. I bet it didn't even mean to do it! It wasn't trying to change you, you; it wasn't trying to hurt you. It was just sad, so sad it couldn't keep all those emotions in and they spilled over into you."

"What does the distinction matter?" Moonstone threw up her hand in the air. "What does it matter if it influenced me intentionally or not? It does not change what happened after."

Steven stood up, his hands behind his back. "I'll tell you why it matters," he said. "It matters because it means that what you did wasn't because of it, it was because of you." He jabbed a finger at her on the last word and she flinched back like it had bitten her. "Building those bombs, trying to end its suffering, betraying that captain gem; it didn't make you do any of that, you chose to do it!"
Moonstone gapped at him, and something in her eyes seemed to break. She sat back down heavily. "I… no. That cannot be correct." she muttered, her body sagging so much she nearly tumbled off the crate. "I… did not choose to betray them. I was forced to it. I had to be. I would never… I…" she began to run her fingers through her hair, pulling it out of its silvery ponytail and knotting it around her fingers.

Steven's triumphant grin froze as tears began to hit the floor.

What… what was he doing?

Moonstone had told him her story in the hope it might help him understand things, and not five minutes later he'd used what she'd told him to hurt her. It wasn't Moonstone's fault that the Crystal Gems weren't what he thought they were—she hadn't even made him confront the truth; he'd chosen to do that all by himself.

"Moonstone, I'm…" he swallowed, shame hot and heavy in his throat. "I'm sorry. That was an awful thing to do, I didn't mean to… I just..." he trailed off. The scientist said nothing, her eyes still locked on the ground. There was a squeaking noise and Toad came scampering back over. The mushroom reached them and squirmed its way up the crate and into Moonstone's lap. She blinked, staring down at the fungus as it crooned up at her. But she didn't shove it away; instead she just rested her hands on its cap and squeezing it lightly. She stayed that way for several minutes, the occasional tear dripping from her face. Just as Steven opened his mouth to apologize again, she looked up at him.

"All I ever wanted, was to help my fellow gems." Her voice was quiet, neither angry, nor sad. "To ensure the lasting peace of the empire…I was forc-…no, I chose to betray that desire and I paid for it… I cannot say if I have paid enough. I believe that will be up to the Crystal Gems." Steven opened his mouth to protest, but she raised a hand to cut him off. "Actions have consequences, Steven. That is a fundamental fact of the universe. I do not believe… it does not matter why I chose to do what I did, it is the consequences that matter. I can either choose to accept those consequences and move on, or I can… not. "Perhaps the same could be said for the Crystal Gems." She shrugged and fell silent, stroking the mushroom in her lap.

Steven bit his lip. He'd seen more than enough people putting up a brave front to know that it really did matter to her. The distinction did upset her. But he didn't call her out on it…he'd already said enough.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "I guess that answers my questions, so thanks…um…" he thought desperately for a way to change the subject. "You said, you had some questions for me?

"Ah, yes. I did." Moonstone smiled appreciatively, grateful for the change of subject. "Thank you for reminding me. It has come to my attention that many things happened on this planet while I was… indisposed… I wish to fill the gaps in my knowledge of the war. Perhaps, more specifically," she glanced upwards at the bubbles overhead. "In regards to what exactly how Homeworld continued my research. Is there anything you can tell me about the war and how it ended?"

"Well," Steven scratched the back of his head. "Not really, I wasn't there after all and the gems never really told me much. As for what happened to your research stuff." he shrugged. "That's what we were trying to figure out when we went there, but all the computers were smashed up."

"Ah." Moonstone sighed. "Unfortunate. You were not able to retrieve any data files at all?"

"Well, I mean, Peridot apparently got a lot of them before the computers got all smashed up. But
then she gave them to Blaire, and she won't let us see them for some reason."

"…Blaire?"

"Oh that's right! youYou two haven't met. Blaire's this gem computer thing the gems found in an underwater lab place." Moonstone stared at him blankly. "We found her when we were searching for information about that black gunk Homeworld used to lock up the permafusion."

The scientist's brow furrowed, "this computer would not happen to take the form of a dark blue pyramid, would it?"

Steven brightened, "Yeah! That's the one!" he blinked. "Uh, how did you know that?"

"I believe this Blaire you speak of is the projected interface of the Null Spire. That facility oversaw the production of the nullification agent. As the agent was critical to the imprisonment of PF-01-2, naturally, I am acquainted with it." The scientist's eyes turned thoughtful. "I have operated that projected interface before on several occasions. It was used to back up many of the data files of our experiments in case our own data silos were compromised. You say it will not allow you access to the data files, why is that?"

"Something about us not having clearance," Steven shrugged. "Peridot said we needed a password, but we have no way of figuring out what it was."

"Hmmm…"

"What?"

"I was just wondering if my own clearance was ever actually revoked after my imprisonment."

"Your… what?" Steven's eyes bugged out. "Are you saying Blaire might tell you what was on that stuff Peridot found."

"It is possible. I certainly possessed the necessary clearance before my fall from grace. There is a chance it was never decommissioned. Or that I may be able to guess the security passcode." Moonstone stroked her chin thoughtfully. "Do you think the gems would mind if I attempted to gain access to that information."

"Not at all!" Steven grinned. "We all really want to know what was on there too, if you can help us find out, they'll be really thankful." He jumped to his feet. "Let's go now!"

Moonstone blinked, "right now?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"I, oh. Very well." The scientist gently moved Toad onto the floor and stood. "If you will allow me a moment to clean myself up, we can go."

"Sure, sure. Do what you gotta do. I need to take care of these guys anyway." He pointed at the bubbles overhead. "That'll take a few minutes, so no rush." Moonstone nodded and turned away, moving towards a corner of the barn with Toad following in her footsteps. As soon as her eyes were off him, Steven let the grin slide off his face.

He wasn't sure if Moonstone would be able to get them anymore answers. But, either way, he was glad for the distraction.
Talking with Moonstone had helped him. He still wasn't sure what to think about the war, about what the gems had done, about what Homeworld had done… but he could feel the first tidings of a decision building up in the back of his brain.

*Actions have consequences.*

The gems had decided to defend the earth. The consequences for that had been they'd had to kill countless gems.

Moonstone had decided to attempt to end the war as quickly as possible through her experiments. The consequences for that had been that she'd caused the suffering of countless gems.

*I can either choose to accept those consequences and move on, or I can… not.*

He was facing the same choice now. The things the gems had done had already been done. There was no way for him to change it, or undo. He could either accept it, or he could… not. He tried to imagine the latter option, of never forgiving the gems for their actions, of resenting them forever.

The thought was unbearable.

Steven nodded to himself, some of the tension that had building in his gut since last night began to loosen.

He knew what he was going to do.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a bit longer than expected. It surprised me, but I've actually gotten a little bit worn out with all the Steven angst… weird, right? I couldn't get hyped about Steven's emotional distress. Clearly, I need to get back to writing action and or comedy, but alas, this chapter was necessary first.

So I attempted to break up the Moonstone/Steven angst by visiting each of the gems. I thought exploring how they each dealt with the problem was kind of interesting. What do you guys think of it/ how I did it?

But Bluh! The end of this chapter. I struggled with that and ultimately just rushed it so I could move on. There are some things I like about it, some things I don't. Moonstone and Steven's emotions seemed to sort of shift unrealistically and I'm not happy about it. But whatever, the time has come to move the thought forward.

In other news, I'm going to have some more free time for the next few weeks at least, so I'm definitely going to be updating a bit faster for a few chapters. And next chapter, at last, we will finally get back into some action! Whoo hoo!

See you guys next time!
The Return

Chapter Summary

Many thing reappear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jasper marched her way up the beach, shaking the seawater from her hair as she scrutinized her surroundings. There was nothing in sight save rocks, plants, and, behind her, the sea. This tiny hunk of rock looked like it had never known the presence of gemkind.

But if her information was correct, then that couldn't be further from the truth. Despite its benign appearance, this island had played an instrumental part in the end of the war. A role so secret that there wasn't even a warp pad leading here, she'd had to swim all the way. Some kind of earth fish had tried to bite her with its rows of jagged teeth, only to swim away after she introduced it to her fist.

So there had to be some kind of gem structure here, all she had to do was find the entrance. Jasper cast her eyes around one more time. The details had been sparse on the precise spot, but that was fine. She knew it was underground, and she didn't care if she made a mess.

She crouched, coiling herself into a tight ball. Then launched herself into the air like a rocket. She soared past the height of the few leafy trees and once she reached the apex, began to spin. She struck the ground like a meteor.

Dirt, rock, plants— it didn't matter. All of it vaporized before her might as she plowed into the ground. Then she was falling into empty space before striking another, somewhat harder surface. She brought herself to a stop and unfurled. She peered around, the air was full of dust and debris from her entrance, but in the gloomy skylight her hole had made she could see the smooth, tiled floor of gem architecture.

Jasper's grin would have given sharks nightmares.

Pulling herself out of the hole she'd made on the floor, she lit up her gem, casting her surroundings into greater, orange-hued relief. Now that she looked, the tiles were rather sloppily set, giving the hallway a rather disheveled look. Well, this place had only been intended to be used once—no need for it to be pretty.

Picking a direction at random, she marched off. Reaching a wider chamber in minutes. Now this was more like it! This room had none of that slipshod construction, instead every surface gleaned with smooth crystal. It was wide and circular, with little decor to speak of.

What caught Jasper's attention immediately, which was in fact was the only thing in the chamber, was a statue of an armored figure, standing tall with bowed head in the center of the room. The statue's hands were cupped together in front of it, nestling a large gemstone.

The gemstone glowed, casting everything around in a dim crimson glow. Jasper grinned. Rose was
as good as doomed. She stalked closer, but paused. There was something in the air, a sort of quiet menace. She strained her senses, and almost thought she could hear the sound of faint screaming.

A feeling of unease crept over her. Perhaps… this stone was something better left alone...

Jasper snorted, shaking her head in disbelief of her own melodramatics. What was she? some weak-willed Pearl? If she wanted her justice, then she needed this stone. Before her pathetic doubts could raise their heads again, she reached out and plucked the gemstone from the knight statue's hands.

Jasper tensed, ready to move at the first sign of trouble. But nothing happened. No traps went off, no alarms sounded, and no ancient defenses triggered, the stone just sat quietly in her palm and she relaxed.

She examined the stone. It was roughly hewn—a jagged pyramid of vicious dark pink, with angry, spikey symbols carved into each surface. It also felt... dirty, as though it was covering her hand in slime while remaining perfectly dry. She was struck with an urge to toss it aside. Jasper suppressed it.

Job done, she turned to leave.

A shriek split the air, a harsh sound of metal on metal, and something struck her in the back, sending her careening through the air to slam into the wall. Pain rippled through her form, but was dwarfed by her surge of anger. She pushed off, spinning away from the wall and landing on her feet facing her attacker.

It was the statue! It had moved, its head was still bowed, but one of its hands was held out in a fist. Some kind of golem?

The statue groaned into motion, its armor grinding together filling the air with more harsh screeching as it turned to face her. Then its helmeted head rose and it looked at her, a single silvery eye, like quicksilver, was visible through the eye slit.

Jasper blinked. This was no mechanized golem; no mere machine could ever muster such steely hatred.

No. This was a corrupted gem.

Jasper cracked her neck, irritated that she'd been so easily taken by surprise. Every single corrupted gem she'd encountered had either fought or fled the moment they saw her. But this hadn't even budged until she'd taken the stone.

As the gem's head creaked downward, Jasper realized that she'd dropped the stone as the suit of armor scooped it off the floor. It turned back to her, the gem cradled against its chest with one arm, the other held out toward her. The extended gauntlet glowed and spikes sprouted from it, elongating and twisting together until three thorny whips dangled from its arm. Jasper tensed, but the armored monster made no further move.

Jasper raised a brow at the lack of aggression. Was the creature just a coward? She made to take a step forward, and the whips lashed outward gouging the ground where she had been about to step.

Jasper looked at the line scored in the stone in front of her, then back up at the figure, its whips withdrawn and staring at her, for all the worlds looking like a statue once more. Ah. She understood. The gem's message rung loud and clear.
Cross that line and face the consequences.

Interesting. It appeared this corrupted gem was guarding the stone. Perhaps, before its corruption, this gem had been given that task and it continued its vigil even now. She could respect that dedication to duty.

Unfortunately for them, they were standing in her way.

"I'm not leaving without that rock," Jasper said, the chamber lighting up as she summoned her helmet. Very deliberately, she stepped over the line. She smirked, "Show me what you're made of, freak."

The armored monster charged. Jasper met it halfway.

"Hello?" Steven called, opening his front door and peering inside. "Is anyone around?"

"Steven!" There was a sound of footsteps and brown hair obscured his vision. "You're alright."

"Hey Connie." Steven grinned, hugging her back. "Good to see you." She pushed him back to arm length and scrutinized him.

"Are you alright? You're kind of a mess," her face fell slightly and she looked away.

"I was worried about you."

Hello Steven. My name is Guilt. Nice to see you again.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." Steven insisted, wincing at her expression. "I just, spent the night roughing it," he sighed and looked her in the eye. "I'm sorry for running off like that, it's just…"

She hushed him, smiling softly. "It's alright. No, really." She insisted as he opened his mouth. "You kinda had some heavy stuff dropped on you and you got upset. I know you didn't mean to make us worry running off like that," She shrugged. "I'd be surprised if you were even thought about how we felt about it."

Sup, Stee-man? I'm Shame. I see you've met my brother.

"Thanks, Connie," Steven sighed. Bowing his head as the pair of brothers started partying enthusiastically on his back. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

"Wha- oh." Connie's eyes went wide. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that," she backtracked.

"Nah, it's fine." Steven waved it off. "I...kinda had this coming."

"Well, if you say so…" Connie said doubtfully. "So, how are you feeling? Did you get your stuff all sorted out?"

"Mmmm… sort of." Steven scratched the back of his head. "I think, I know what I'm gonna do. But I'd rather not talk about it for now."

"That's fair," Connie nodded.

"Um, excuse me?" They looked up as Moonstone coughed from her position outside on the porch. "May I come in?" Steven realized that they were blocking the door.
"Oh! Yeah sure. Sorry about that," Steven moved farther in. "We can move onto the couch—" he paused. "Connie?"

"Yeah?"

"Why is Onion on my couch?"

"Muh muh, moh." The smaller boy waved, he was standing on the sofa, tossing and catching a pair of dice.

"Oh, right…" Connie grinned sheepishly. "Well, he came over while you were gone."

"And you let him in?" Steven asked incredulously. "No offense, Onion." He called.

"Muh-muh." Onion waved him off, bouncing his dice off the wall and catching them in his other hand.

"Well, it was more like he was already inside when I woke up," Connie admitted, making Steven slap his hand over his eyes and groan. Why did Onion have to be so creepy?

"I would have made him leave, but... I've told you how I feel really awkward when I'm alone in your house." She shrugged awkwardly. "So instead of making him leave we played some board games… sorry."

"Nah, it's fine." Steven waved it off, keeping his eyes shut. Truth be told, he would have been surprised if she'd been able to make Onion leave if he didn't want to. Better that she kept him busy, otherwise he'd probably steal all the food in the house or fill his bathtub with ketchup or leave him some other horrible surprise…

Onion could be kind of weird.

... "Well, Onion, as much as I'd like to, I really don't have time to play right now. See I'm—" he uncovered his eye and paused. Onion wasn't on the couch anymore, all that remained were the pair of dice, sitting on a side so the ones were facing him like a pair of snake-eyes.

That… that wasn't good.

"Onion?" he called, glancing around as alarm bells went off in mind. His eyes alighted on the kitchen counter, the tiny boy was standing on it, staring back at Steven impassively. Under his arm was an unopened bag of Chaps.

"Now wait a second, Onion." Steven raised his hand, one finger. "I know what you're thinking: should I take Steven's food? and the answer might surprise you..." he got no farther as the Onion waved, opened the kitchen window, and hopped through it.

"Oh my god!" Connie yelped, hurrying to the window sill.

"Don't bother, Connie." Steven sighed, bowing his head in defeat. "There's no point chasing him, he'll be long gone by now. He runs really fast." That had been a special edition bag of Chaps too, he'd been saving them for the right moment.

"That's not it!" Connie answered, pulling herself onto the counter. "There's no balcony under that window, it's gotta be at least a thirty foot drop to the sand!"

"…And?" How had Onion even found that bag anyway? He'd hidden them under the floorboards where even Amethyst hadn't been able to sniff them out.
Connie stared at him incredulously, "What do you mean, and?" she demanded. "He might be hurt!"

Steven blinked. Oh yeah… somehow the thought that Onion might be harmed hadn't even crossed his mind. The words 'Onion' and 'hurt' only seemed to make sense to him in the form of: 'Onion hurt someone'; or 'someone was hurt by Onion.'

He moved to join Connie at the counter, "can you see him?"

"Um… yeah." Connie said, "He's, uh, actually running down the beach. How…?" she stuck her head out the window and looked down. "Oh. Your bag of chips is down there."

"Wait, really?" Steven perked up.

"Yeah, but it looks like it's been squished flat…I… I think he used it to cushion the fall?"

Steven deflated, much like he imagined his lost bag of Chaps had—he couldn't bear to look. "That makes sense." it's not like he'd thought Onion was going to eat them anyway.

Connie stared at him incredulously. "uh, no it doesn't? I know chip companies put more air than necessary into their bags to fool their innocent customers into thinking they’re getting more value out of their purchase, but they don't put that much in."

Steven put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. "Let it go." He sighed, "It's not worth wondering about how Onion does the things he does." He raised his hand and drew it into a fist. "He is a mystery!"

Connie frowned, still glancing back at the window. "If you say so…"

"I do say so," said Steven turning around. He could mourn his lost Chaps later. They belonged to the seagulls now. "Sorry you had to see that, Moonstone."

The scientist was standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. "Would I be right in assuming that wasn't normal behavior?"

"Very much so," Steven nodded. "Normally, people don't steal other people's food and use it to cushion their falls. That's generally considered pretty rude. But Onion…" he shrugged, "is Onion."

"I'll take your word for it. I haven't met enough humans to deny or support that claim. "So… where is the projected interface?" Moonstone asked, putting what had just happened in the past.

"She's over here, just a second." Steven went behind the couch and hauled out Blaire's… computer? Home? Body? He still wasn't entirely sure what to call it. Either way, he put it down on top of the monopoly board. He knocked on it. "Blaire?"

The pyramid lit up in its familiar blue glow and unfolded. Blaire materialized and, as usual, she looked completely different from the time he'd seen her. Her hair was redone in a series of braids with all kinds of beads and feathers woven into them. She was wearing tall leathery boots, thick baggy pants, and an overcoat that went down to her thighs with poofy sleeves, and the look was completed with a tri-corner hat.

"Ahoy there." She tipped her hat to him with a flourish. "How can I be of assistance to ye today?"

"Hey Blaire!" Steven giggled. "Love the outfit, makes me want to sail on a ship."

"Thank ye."
"Well," Moonstone said, her visor blinking. "That confirms it, this is the projected interface I operated in the past. But…er… why does its projection look like that?"

"Er... because Steven?" Connie offered.

Moonstone nodded, as though that explained everything. He felt like the casual acceptance of that explanation should have made him feel embarrassed, but he wasn't sure why. The scientist stepped forward, catching the projections attention. "Greetings, Blaire. Do you recognize me?"

The hologram paused, her bright yellow eyes blinked. Then straightened herself, moving from a provocative slouch to a prim readiness in the blink of an eye.

"Greetings, Head Researcher Moonstone, it is a surprise and a delight to see you again. How may I be of assistance?"

Moonstone glanced at Steven, he gave her a thumbs up. "I have been informed that you are have been given a set of classified files. May I have access to them?"

"I can. But first you're going to need to provide me with your clearance code." Blaire's eyes glowed expectantly.

"Of course,…" Moonstone closed her eyes and recited a string of numbers and letters. Blaire's eyes dimmed and Steven held his breath. Had it worked? Her eyes flashed back to life.

"Password accepted," Blaire chimed happily, bowing towards Moonstone. "I will decrypt the files and transport them to your scanner, please wait." a spinning wheel of four colored diamonds replaced her eyes and Moonstone's visor began to blink, then flashed.

"Download complete," said Blaire

"Alright!" Steven whooped. "That's great!"

"Yes… it seems to have worked," said Moonstone, her eyes moving back and forth behind her visor. "I'm amazed that my authorization was not rescinded. It was not like my commander to be so sloppy…" her lips twisted into an unhappy frown.

"Assuming I understand what just happened," said Connie. "Then it might be better not to look a gift horse in the mouth. You can access all those secret files now, right?"

"Indeed." The scientist nodded, "None of the files seem to be corrupted or damaged. I have been given full access."

"That's awesome," Steven beamed. He looked at Moonstone expectantly. "…So?"

Moonstone looked back. "…What?"

"So what do the files say?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "I do not know. I haven't had a chance to read them yet."

"Read them?" Steven blinked. "Can't you just, like, beam them into your brain?"

Moonstone frowned at him. "I'm not a computer, Steven. It doesn't work like that."

"Bummer," Steven groaned, sticking out his tongue. "how long is it going to take for your to read all that stuff?"
"Hmm… well, there are several hundred files all together. Even assuming one in three are useless, I'd still have to take time to determine which ones are useful. As for the ones that aren't useless…” 

Steven's eyes glazed over as the explanation rolled on and on. He hoped Moonstone didn't seem to notice, but she probably did as she cut herself up and summed it up. "Several hours, at least. Would you like me to get started now?"

"Sure," Steven sighed. "Take a seat, I guess?"

"I shall." Moonstone perched on the end of the couch and went quiet, her visor turning solid silver and hiding her eyes from view.

Steven watched her for a few minutes, but got bored when she didn't do anything else. He turned to Connie, "So, uh, did I miss anything while I was gone? Where are the gems?" he was a little ashamed that hadn't been the first thing he'd asked, but he'd been distracted.

"Um… not much," Connie admitted. "After you left, we sort of came back here. Pearl and Garnet got into an argument. But then Garnet just left, Pearl went back into the temple, and Amethyst sort of peaced-out. Then Pearl came out here this morning, asked if you'd shown up." Connie frowned, her tone shifting to something apologetic. "She, uh, kind of freaked out when I told her no. Then she ran off. I haven't seen any of them since."

Steven winced; that sounded bad—made worse by the fact that he was pretty sure Connie was understating things to spare his feelings. Well… he'd pretty much known the moment he warped away from the memorial that he'd upset the gems. He'd need to apologize for that.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Connie asked. "It might make you feel better."

Steven smiled at her. He couldn't help noticing that she hadn't described how her night had gone. But now that he looked, he could see bags under her eyes. She probably hadn't slept because of him. But she hadn't even said a word about that, and he knew it wasn't because she was pretending not to be upset with him. She genuinely wasn't. It just… what had he done to deserve someone as great as her? He'd need to do something really nice to make up for how terrible he'd acted toward her.

"Thanks. But I'll pass," he shook his head. "I've… did a lot of thinking last night."

"Uh oh. That must of hurt."

"Hey, c'mon! I'm not that bad," he complained, grinning despite himself. "My brain works sometimes. But seriously, I…" he paused, groping for the words. "I do want to feel better about this. I can't ignore it, I won't ignore it." he sighed. "But, I only really want to talk about it once and if I'm gonna do that, I need to do that with the gems. So I'll wait till they get back." He paused.

"Well, Garnet and Pearl anyway, I get the feeling Amethyst doesn't really care about this. But," he looked at Connie, biting his lip. "Does that make sense?"

Connie smiled softly. "Of course it does." She placed her hand on top of his and gave it a squeeze.

Steven felt his smile return to his face almost automatically. Suddenly, the prospect of facing the gems didn't seem so bad.

"Anyway," Connie said, "I don't know when the gems will be back, could be minutes, could be hours." She shrugged. "It's not like they have phones."

"Actually, Amethyst does. Oh…wait, no. She ate that. Nevermind."
"Either way, we’ve got some time. What you want to do?"

"How about… we watch a movie or something? it would pass the times and doesn't involve thinking. I could go for that."

"Sounds good." Connie nodded, "But we've kinda watched all the movies you own."

"Oh yeah…" Steven frowned.

"I believe I may be able to help," said Blaire. "I have access to a number of cinematic works and can project them."

"Really?" Steven grinned. "How many do you have."

"If I had to quantify the number, I would say… literally all of them." Blaire answered. "You could say I have…" she paused and tipped her hat again, "pirated them."

Steven and Connie exchanged a look.

"I'll get the popcorn!" Connie said.

"I'll get blankets and pillows." Steven answered, running up the stairs. This was gonna be great!

Jasper grunted as the whips slammed into her gut, sending her sliding back in the sandy ground. She growled, frustration mounting as she grabbed the ends of the whips and yanked, sending the armored gem flying towards her only to get sent soaring away when she head-butted it.

Jasper rubbed a hand against her belly, mending the scrapes and rips in her uniform with a thought. There was still some pain, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. Of the pain was nothing compared to her frustration with this corrupted abomination.

No matter how many times she hit it, the thing would just not. Stay. Down.

They’d must have been fighting for hours now. The underground chamber long since collapsed, unable to take the fury of their clashes. The bloated suit of armor didn't look any less ugly in the light of the sun, its armor was blackened and tarnished, the only hints of the silvery sheen it must have once carried visible at the joints. But despite its poor upkeep, the blasted that armor still did its job—her helmet just seemed to bounce off it.

Even now, it was already getting back to its feet. The dark pink gemstone still clutched under one of its arms. She eyed the hunk of rock grumpily A voice in her mind whispered that she didn’t actually need to fight this ridiculously sturdy gem to the end, she only needed to get that rock. Jasper repressed it with a snarl.

Snatching that rock and running away would be tantamount to declaring that she was unable to beat this gem. It would be a defeat—regardless of the fact that her goal was accomplished.

She had suffered too many defeats on this planet. She would not tolerate another.

As the monster began to march towards her once again, its whips swinging at its side, Jasper felt her outrage reach fever pitch. Roaring, she launched herself forward, curling into a ball and spinning forward at such speed the sand beneath her melted to glass. She hit the armored thing like a juggernaut. It tried to grab her, but couldn’t hold on. She launched it skyward, and followed it, slamming into it over and over again like a pinball. Sparks flew as her form clashed against the
armor and after a particularly vicious hit she shot above it and came back down in one final blow, knocking it out of the sky and sending it into the ground with a meaty crunch. It slid to a stop in front of a gapping hole—where Jasper had broken out of the collapsed rubble, and fell still.

Jasper landed on her feet, panting out her leftover rage and glaring at the fallen figure. She waited; seconds stretched into minutes, but the creature didn't move. Jasper allowed herself a grin. She threw back and roared with triumph. She'd done it! she'd won! The world made sense again.

A glimmer of sunlight caught her attention and she glanced down. A dark pink gem glittered in the sunlight. Ah, perfect. The creature must of have dropped it during her assault. She leaned down and scooped it up taking a moment to admire the vicious way the stone caught the light, like it was made of countless burnished knives.

She turned to go, ready to be gone from this diamond-forsaken island.

There was a sound of metal grinding on metal and she stopped. She turned back slowly, already knowing what she would find. Nonetheless, she gaped in disbelief as the creature rose to its feet yet again. Its armor was scratched, a tangle of silvery scrapes in a sea of black tarnish, and its breastplate was dented from her final blow. Yet still the gem inside the armor arose; slowly, hampered by the damaged armor, but it rose.

Jasper closed her eyes. Her anger reigniting, but under that angry tide was something else. It took a moment for her to identify what it was. She snorted, pushing away that feeling. She did not have time for it just yet.

There was a burning sensation in her hand, she looked down. The gemstone was pulsing, sending crimson sparks crackling into the air. Acting on instinct, she raised her hand and pointed the stone at the limping figure. She let her anger flow into the stone and it responded. A beam of light shot from the stone, piercing the corrupted gems chest. It stiffened and, for the first time since the fight began, it screamed in what could only be pain.

The beam cut off but the scream did not, the armored gem staggered backward and tumbled into the hole behind it, there was a crunch and the scream fell silent.

Wordlessly, Jasper walked to the edge of the gaping hole and stared into the depths. But there was nothing: no shriek of metal on metal, no whips shooting out of the dark to strike her, nothing.

Now it was over.

Jasper glanced down at the stone in her hand, it had stopped sparking, sitting in her palm like a chunk of lifeless granite. Her anger seemed to have left her, leaving behind only the second feeling which swept over her.

She looked down into the hole and saluted.

"Well fought, soldier. I'll take it from here." She turned away. "Dismissed."

As she marched back towards the sea, the ground behind her began to collapse, filling in the hole.

Whereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgonewhereisshesheisgon
What… What was that? That… burst of energy? Of life? Of raw feeling? It had felt…familiar.

It had felt like…like her.

Blazing eyes shot wider and it surged to its feet, bits of dirt and grit sliding from its body like rain. It had been hiding. It didn't really know where, didn't care, but it was quiet with nothing and no one to disturb it. It had crashed here after…after it had happened. It had been unable to fly against the weight of the empty void in its head. It knew it needed to hide, that it would be hunted, that it would not be able to fight like this, that there was nothing left to fight for.

*Whereisshesheisgone*

It had stretched its senses across this planet, as far as it could reach and felt *nothing*.

She. Was. Gone. *They* had taken her.

And yet. And yet! AND YET!

Somehow, impossibly, wonderfully, it had felt her. Her energy. Tingling against its mind like a beckoning hand. It could not possibly forget the feeling.

She wasn't gone! Merely missing!

But that meant that *they* had her. It could not feel her anymore, the tiny burst of her presence soothing its mind and its thoughts came clearer now. If she was not gone, then they must be holding her… prisoner.

*NONONODONTPLEASEHOWDAREOUTRAGEFURYWRATHBURNINGDARKMAKETHEMPAY*

Like a star bursting into light, its fury ignited. There was a shriek of lightning and it exploded into the sky.

She was gone. But she was out there, and it *would* find her.

Chapter End Notes

Well… that I feel like I certainly moved the plot forward with a baseball bat. It was time. Truth be told, the conclusion of this story is in sight… Kinda. Okay, maybe less 'in sight' and more of a nebulous thing just beyond the horizon. But I'm thinking about it! so there is that.

I enjoyed writing Jasper again. she's going to be a big star in the upcoming bits.

Also, special appearance by Onion. I like Onion. Did any of you remember that silly fan theory that he was Yellow Diamond? You know, before he we met his family and forest friends, and he just appeared to be this mischievous, possibly evil, child who would happily shoot a harpoon gun at you if you asked? I do. I never believed he was. I did, however, find the idea of him being Steven's ultimate enemy hilarious. He nearly took out that gems in Onion Trade after all. Truly a worthy adversary.

Anyways, if you have any thoughts or questions feel free to leave a review!
Till next time!
Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Far from the coast of any continent, isolated among the vast tundra of blue, there was an island. Tiny, uninhabited, and recently devastated by titanic struggle. But the victor had departed and serenity had returned.

A long-legged bird strode across the sandy ground, poking its beak through recently disturbed soil in the hope of making a meal out of a displaced critter. It had been hours since it had eaten and its stomach was starting to growl. Spindly toes spread out across the sand trying to detect any motion and it was rewarded with a rumbling beneath the surface.

Daintily, the bird turned its head and glided towards the source of the disturbance, neck arched and poised to strike if some tiny furry head or scurrying insect showed itself.

Instead of a belly-filling snack, an enormous silvery shape erupted from the ground, writhing and grabbing at the air around it. The bird squawked and took the sky, nearly being clipped by the flailing monster. The bird flew to the safety of a nearby tree and, danger escaped, turned back to see if there was still any chance of food.

A second shiny thing joined the first, they slammed into the ground and pushed. The ground around them began to rise until an even larger mass arose, sand and dirt cascaded off it as hauled itself upright, shuddering and screeching under the light of the sun.

The bird's beady eye blinked. It been to this island many times, and never seen anything as strange as this; it's body shined like the scales of a fish and every time the silver thing moved its produced a horrible screeching.

Then the strange thing fell still and silent, what was probably its head pointing at the ground where there were a series of furrows in the ground leading to the edge of water. The bird couldn't fathom the thing's interest; those holes had no food in them. But still, the screeching started again as the misshapen creature began to move, following the pits until it reached the shore.

The creature didn't stop, unfailingly following the line of imprints even as the sea began to swallow it whole.

The bird watched it until it slipped out of sight. It had recognized the way that creature had carried itself: a predator on the hunt. It wondered what the thing was hunting. Then its belly reminded it of its emptiness and the bird took to wing, putting the silver beast out of its mind.

Pearl could feel her frustration morphing into an aching pressure behind her gem, something like what she imagined a headache would feel like.

Zero.

That was the number of people in Beach City who had seen Steven since last night. Between Greg and herself they had asked literally everyone, and not a single person had seen him. Not only had she not found him, but the asking had led to a great deal of wasted time as everyone had wanted to know what was going on? Was Steven okay? Could they help? And so on.
Not that she didn't appreciate their concern, but she was tired of having to repeat the same story over and over again: don't worry about it; he's fine, just missing; and no thank you. She was pretty sure the town was on the brink of organizing a search party. It would hardly help, but she had decided it was better to just leave the humans to it.

Plopping down on a nearby bench, she groaned and rubbed her knuckles into her eyes, the feeling drawing away her attention from the ache in her head.

She had to face facts. Steven had not spent the night in Beach City. She had been so sure he would have gone running to a friend to help him make sense of what he'd been told last night. But he hadn't.

He wouldn't have gone running off into the wilderness, would he? If he had warped to such a place, surely, he would have left immediately for more familiar surrounds? He wouldn't have just… stayed there.

She ground her knuckles into her eyes even harder. If that was the case. Then he could be basically anywhere on the planet. Her only real hope of finding him now was through Garnet—and she refused to help.

Which meant…there was nothing she could do.

It was like being dropped into the ocean with weights around her legs; sinking and unable to do a thing about it. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees as her hands propped her head up.

She just felt so helpless.

Her world, the happy world she had fought for, was changing again—for better or worse was anyone's guess—and she couldn't do anything about it. She didn't know where Steven was. She didn't know what he was doing. She didn't know what he was thinking about this whole situation. What he was thinking about her.

She looked at her hands. She'd read human poetry about old warriors whose hands were forever stained by blood of the people they had slain. Gems didn't have blood, of course, but it was all too easy to imagine her fingers covered in a rainbow of glowing dust. She found her thoughts turning to the cluster, to those shards of shattered gems trapped underground. Homeworld must have created it by using the pieces of slain soldiers from both sides… how many of those shards had been unknowingly created by these hands?

Probably only a tiny fraction. But had any other single pair of hands created more? She had cut down so many gems over the years—all in the name of Rose, of course… and the Earth—and she'd do it again. She'd wade through countless battlefields to escape the helpless suffocation of life under Homeworld's boot. What things had been like back then… before the war, before Rose… the things she had felt…

Were quite similar to how she was feeling now, actually.

What must Steven think of her? That wonderful boy loved everyone, even those who should be his enemies—the thought of him taking a life… she couldn't even wrap her head around it, it was just plain unthinkable. Almost equally absurd was the thought that he would be okay with others taking lives. Several beads of water trickled down her nose, she sniffed, but did nothing to stem the flow. She had realized something.

She didn't actually want to find Steven.
She needed to find him, to speak with him… But she was terrified of what he would say.

The trickle became a stream.

Then the bench beneath her shifted slightly and she blinked. Greg had joined her and was staring at her. He clearly wanted to say something, but couldn't seem to figure out what it was.

This was exactly what she didn't need right now. "What?"

Greg flinched, but didn't back down. "I'm sorry we didn't find Steven," he started.

"Me too," she muttered, unsure if she was lying or not.

Greg frowned but continued, "But he's probably okay, right? You said it yourself. If he was in any real danger, then Garnet would go and get him, wouldn't she?"

"I suppose," Pearl looked away.

Greg sighed. "Alright, fine. I'm just gonna go ahead and ask." He turned to face her fully and laid a hand on her shoulder, forcing her to look at him sharply. He knew she didn't like to be touched.

"Are you okay, Pearl?"

"Am I okay?" she scoffed, smacking his hand off her shoulder. "Steven is missing!"

Greg frowned. "Pearl," he said seriously. "Can you do me a favor, just for a moment, and take me seriously?"

Pearl blinked, "What?"

"Look," he sighed, scratching the back of his head. "I may not know everything that's going down with the gems, but I do know Steven. There's no way he would have run off and not come back unless something really serious had happened. Whatever this something is, I bet its upset more than just him." He stared at her in a way that was very unlike the happy-go-lucky ball of flesh she had begrudgingly gotten to know over the years.

"And?" she asked, somewhat unnerved. Solemnity was a strange look for him, as though a fish was trying to wear a pair of socks.

Greg leaned forward. "I didn't ask you if Steven was okay, I asked if you were okay. Now I know you're not okay." he added, raising a hand to cut off her automatic protest "It's obvious just by looking at you. What I was actually asking was if you wanted to talk about it." he shrugged. "It's sort of a silly, indirect thing that humans do, sorry about that. So… do you want to talk about it?"

Pearl stared.

Greg stared back.

"Talk about it?" she repeated blankly. "With you?"

Greg raised his hands. "Why not? I'm the last person who's going to judge you."

Pearl just kept staring at him.

"Okay. You don't have to if you don't want to," Greg huffed, "but can you at least actually say no instead of staring at me like I just sprouted wings or something? The idea of taking me seriously can't be that ridiculous."
Pearl snorted, a giggle escaping her before she could stop it. She couldn't help it; the situation was too preposterous. The idea of Greg and her having a heart to heart? If someone had told her twenty years ago that such a thing might ever happen she would have assumed them cracked in the head.

"Wow. Okay." Greg rolled his eyes. "Now you're just being rude."

"I apologize," Pearl said, trying and failing to fight back a smirk. "I didn't realize I was speaking with Serious Greg."

"Hey, I can be serious!" he insisted, the skin around his beard turning pink. "I'm an adult. I have a job!" She snorted again. "Heck, I pay my taxes!" the way he crossed his arms and pouted looked so much like Steven that she couldn't help it. She laughed. It began as a chuckle and grew into full blown laughter. It felt good but it also hurt, like yanking out a large splinter. All the emotional turbulence from the last few days just bubbled up and came out. She could hear her laughter take on an embarrassingly hysterical edge as tears started to pour down her face.

After a few minutes, the tears and laughter began to subside, Greg took it as a cue.

"Feeling any better?" he asked, a lopsided grin on his face.

"...A little," Pearl admitted, surprised to find out that it was true. She was still anxious for what awaited her. But at least she didn't fell so tense anymore. She sniffed, wiping away the grime from her face. "... what just happened stays between us. The others can never know."

"My lips are sealed," Greg nodded. "Don't worry. I'm great at keeping secrets."

"Really? You?" Pearl arched an eyebrow. "What secrets could you possibly have?"

"Doesn't the fact that you don't know prove I'm good at keeping them."

"Hmm... I'll give you that."

He smirked and looked away. they sat in an amiable silence until he said: "Steven will forgive you."

Pearl blinked, blinked; sobering immediately as the peaceful feelings neatly chucked themselves off a cliff.

"Whatever it is you've done," he continued, still not looking at her. "Whatever he's found out, he'll forgive you."

"How can you be so sure?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "C'mon Pearl, do you really need to ask that? I know he'll forgive you, because..." he trailed off.

"Because he's Steven." Pearl sighed, nodding. "But that doesn't change the fact that he was hurt."

Greg shrugged. "Well, it's been said that life is pain. Personally, I think that's a really pessimistic way to put it. I prefer to put it this way: It isn't life without pain. So don't worry about it too much. As long as he's not dead, he'll recover." Greg paused. "He's... not dead, right?"

"Of course not." Pearl snorted.

"Then there you go," Greg smiled. "I know Steven, you, and other gems will work it out. You're all far too amazing not to."
Pearl looked away. "...thank you, Greg." She said quietly. "I am... sorry you had to see me like that."

"It's no problem." Greg grinned. "If every pork chop were perfect..." he looked at her expectantly.

"We wouldn't have... uh..." she hesitated. "Other pig products?"

"...Okay. Reached a little too far on that one." Greg sighed. "Ah well." He stood up, stretching out his limbs and groaning. "It's starting to get late. So I better head back to the car wash. Also see if I can call off that town wide search party; It probably won't find him and Steven will come home when he feels like it." He paused, and glanced back at Pearl. "Although, uh, when he does come back, can you just give me a call and tell me? I mean. I know he'll be fine, but..."

"I shall." Pearl smiled. "Good night, Greg."

"Night."

Pearl sighed, and looked back out over the boardwalk, the sun was just starting to dip beneath the ocean, turning the sky into a brilliant painting of pink and orange.

She stood up and began to walk back to the temple. She... felt better, to a degree. Problems and no doubt emotionally-draining conversations awaited her in the future, but they no longer seemed quite so bad. She could deal with them one at a time, and she would overcome them as she always had. She could deal with everything.

Tomorrow.

She opened the door, stepped into the house, and came to an abrupt halt.

Steven was sitting on the couch, curled up under a blanket next to Connie and watching some kind of projection from Blaire. The boy looked up at the sound of the door opening. He went as still as she was.

"O-oh..." he grinned weakly. "Hey Pearl."

Or... she could deal with them now.

There was a flash of white light and the thunder-filled mountains vanished from Garnet's sight.

She had finished investigating the last of the earth's ongoing thunderstorms and was searching the stream of possibility on where to look next, when an important image, clear and vivid as a photo, had swum into view. She had warped away without a secondssecond's hesitation.

Steven had come home.

"—ank goodness you're alright! I was so worried something had happened! I'm sorry-" Pearl had picked the boy off the ground and was holding him close, babbling apologies and thanks as she squeezed him tighter into her embrace. Steven looked an equal mix of awkward and guilty, patting her on the back and trying to say something.

"Pearl." Garnet called, drawing their attention and cutting off Pearl's talking. "He can't breathe. Put him down."

"Oh!" Pearl winced guiltily and dropped him immediately. He hit the floor with a thump and a gasp. "Oh, Steven. I'm so sorry, I-"
"It's fine," Steven coughed, getting to his feet. "I know you didn't mean to. He looked around and met Garnet's gaze. "…Hey Garnet." He waved.

"Welcome home, Steven," she answered, she glanced around the room and paused. "…what is Moonstone doing here?" the scientist was perched motionless on the couch, her eyes hidden behind her visor, not even reacting to the fact that Pearl was standing practically within arm's reach.

"Oh, it turns out she was able to access those files Blaire had. She's reading through them." Steven frowned, "She's been at it for hours. I'm not sure if she can even hear us, actually…"

Garnet frowned. That was good news; those files could tell them much about what was going on, and given the lack of success in her own search, they could use some new leads. But she wasn't sure she trusted the scientist to reveal everything they held. She'd need to make sure Pearl received a complete copy of them, just in case.

But that could wait. There was something much more important to be dealt with.

"Steven."

"y-yeah?"

"I'm glad to see that you are all right."

"O-oh. Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks."

"And now, tell me: has your time away helped you make sense of things? Or do you need more time?"

Steven shifted uncomfortably, but nodded. "I…yeah. I think it did help." he hesitated, but carried on, "and… I want to talk about it. I have some stuff I wanna say. Is, um, that okay?"

Garnet nodded. "Last night we made you listen to what we had to say, it is only fair that you should get your turn." She settled herself on one of the counter stools. "I give you my word that I shall listen to whatever you have to say."

"I-I promise that as well," Pearl added quickly, her haste betraying her nervousness.

Steven smiled softly, the warm glow of a firefly in an empty night. "Thanks guys." He looked around. "But, um, one sec." he stepped towards the couch and put his hand on Moonstone's knee. "Hey, Moonstone?" he gave it a light shake. "Are you awake?"

The Homeworld gem stirred, her visor turned clear revealing blinking eyes. "…Steven?" Then she noticed Pearl standing behind the boy and flinched back violently. "Oh. The Crystal Gems have returned. How… nice." Her smile was more brittle than polite as she made to stand up. "I, er, have many more files I need to go over. I think I shall return to the barn. I can find my way just fine and I would hate to overstay my welcome…"

"Actually, I was wondering if you could stick around for a bit?" Steven asked, stopping the gem cold. "I have some stuff to say, and I kind of want you to be there for it."

"I…" Moonstone shot another nervous glance at the gems. "Oh very well," she sighed, sitting back down.

"Okay," Steven said. "Pearl? Connie? can you two go sit with Garnet? I want to be able to face all three of you at once while I say this." The two exchanged looks, Connie shrugged and they moved
to join her. Pearl joined more reluctantly, she likely wanted to have this conversation even less than her. But Garnet knew it had to happen. Whatever decision Steven had come to needed to be faced head-on.

He deserved nothing less.

Steven moved in front of them. He took a deep breath, like staring into oncoming traffic and knew he couldn't get off the road it time. "Alright, first things first," he looked each of them in the eye. "I want to say I'm sorry for running off like that last night. That wasn't okay."

"You were upset, Steven." Pearl interrupted, "It's alright. We understand."

"That may be true," Steven agreed, fiddling with his hands unhappily. "But that doesn't really make it okay, does it? It would have taken me two minutes to call and let you guys know I was alright, and I didn't do it. Can you honestly tell me that didn't make any of you worry?" their silence was answer enough and he looked away sadly. "I thought so… I'm sorry I ran off, but I'm more sorry I made you guys worry. I won't do that again."

"Apology accepted." Garnet smiled slightly. Pearl and Connie were quick to voice their agreement and some of the tension slipped out of Steven's shoulders. He'd made it past the first car, now he just needed to survive the eighteen wheelers.

"Now about the reason I ran off, about what you guys did during the war..." Garnet could feel her hands clenching almost against her will. "I forgive you... No, wait," Steven held up a hand to cut off their response. "Actually, I'm not sure forgive is the right word. I've been think about this really hard, and I don't think I have the right to forgive you."

"W-what do you mean?" Pearl asked.

"I mean it's not my place," Steven shifted uncomfortably, like he could feel something with too many legs crawling in his clothes. "You guys did a lot of awful stuff during the war." Something in the boy's eyes seemed to harden. "But I wasn't there. I don't know what it was like. I don't know what Homeworld was doing. Maybe you really didn't have any other choice." He shook his head. "Either way, I have decided that it's not my place to judge you for what you did in the past. I could be mad at you guys for keeping all this hidden from me. But I understand that you guys didn't want me to be upset and..." he smiled weakly, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I can't stand the thought of being mad at either of you. So what you guys did... I want you to know that I'm okay with it."

Garnet felt her insides unclench, ugly thoughts and feelings that she had worked hard to suppress throughout her desperate search washing away under the boy's words.

"Oh Steven." Pearl body sagged as tears began to flow down her face. She moved forward, spreading her arms out to embrace him.

Steven stepped back.

"Hold up just a second!" he said sharply, making Pearl freeze. "I'm not done." He paused and took a deep breath. "If..." he swallowed, "if that's how I'm going to look at this, and it is, then... I can't do it halfway." He turned around. "Moonstone?"

The scientist blinked, nervous at the sudden attention. "...yes?"

"I forgive you too."
"…excuse me?" Moonstone was staring at Steven as though he had grown a second head.

"Everything I just said to the gems, I feel the same way about what you did. Thousands of years ago, there was a war going on and bad things happened. Awful things were done by people who felt like it was the right thing to do." Steven's hands clenched into fists. "But the war is over." The last word seemed to echo around the room. "It ended. It's in the past and I think it should stay there. If I can't forgive the things you did, then I can't forgive the gems either."

Steven turned back to face them. "I get that you did what you had to in the past and I'm okay with it." His eyes narrowed, "but I'm not okay with you doing that now." His gaze moved between Pearl and her. "I'm not going to ask you to forgive Moonstone for what she did, but I want you to promise me that you won't hurt her. Not for what she did ages ago." Steven crossed his arms, making it clear he was done.

Garnet looked past him, to the scientist who was staring at his back with equal parts confusion and wonder.

Could she bring herself to do it? To promise not to hurt this gem who admitted to willingly hurting, to ruining, her friends? Part of her, an echo from long ago, screamed its denial. How could she possibly spit on the memory of her comrades by making that promise?

She looked back to Steven, her mouth opening to tell him that this was one time she could not give him what he wanted.

Then she stopped, the words dying in her throat. He was staring at her with eyes of steel and Garnet felt herself whisked back through time to another who had looked at her that way, to one who had said that she would protect this planet, no matter the cost.

But as she met his gaze, the image of pink curls and a white dress began to fade away, leaving only Steven.

"Please," he said softly, "just… just leave the war in the past."

The part of her that screamed its refusal seemed to shrink, muted by Steven's words. In the past, she would have done anything for Rose. She waded through the tides of war and fought in Roses name. But… she couldn't help but wonder, if Rose had asked this of her, would she have been able to do it?

I don't trust her.

Neither do I. But that is not what we are being asked.

I… want to believe in Steven.

… agreed.

Garnet made her decision.

She reached up and pulled off her shades so that she could look him in the eye. "Steven," she said. The boy was shaking as he met her gaze, but he didn't flinch. "I give you my word that, provided Moonstone continues to pose no threat to the safety of earth, I will never lift a finger to either harm or imprison her."

Steven looked at her, and a small smile built up on his face as some of the tension left his body. But he didn't say anything, instead he turned his head. "Pearl?"
Garnet felt Pearl stiffen and look at her, but refused to look back. Pearl was her own gem. This was a decision that she would have to make on her own.

"I..." Pearl swallowed, full of anguish. "I'm sorry, Steven. But... I can't promise that."

Steven's face fell, but he nodded. "I understand," he said in resignation. "I won't hold that against you. But... can you at least promise to stop hiding things from me? I get that you don't want to upset me, but I'd rather you guys be honest with me."

"...I-I can do that." Pearl sniffed.

Steven gave a watery smile, and spread his arms wide. "Come here, guys. It's hug time."

"Oh, Steven!" Pearl sobbed, rushing forward and sweeping the boy back off his feet.

"It's okay Pearl." Steven answered, tears pouring down his face as he hugged back for all he was worth. Only to laugh in surprise as Garnet stepped up, rapped her arms around both of them and hauled them into the air.

Tears, laughter, and hugs blended together as they left words behind and let feelings run their course.

There were still many problems and dangers ahead. But for now, Garnet was content to let them wait.

Steven wiped his eyes one last time. He was pretty sure he'd cried himself dry this time, it had taken a solid hour of hugs. But he'd managed it.

That... went well.

He felt lighter. A weight had been taken from his shoulders. Garnet had promised not to hurt Moonstone. Pearl... hadn't.

But that was okay!

He didn't have the right to demand her forgiveness. That's not how it worked and he would have to be satisfied with it. It would take time, but he was certain she would come around in time.

Now that they'd all cried themselves out, Pearl had extricated herself from the group hug and moved to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Connie had been quick to join her, as the swordsgem still had trouble preparing edible dishes on her own. Garnet had sort of slunk off to wall and was just standing there, clearly lost in an internal conversation. But that left him free to address Moonstone. The scientist had not moved from her spot on the couch and was looking rather uncomfortable.

"Sorry about that." He said as he climbed onto the couch. "It must have been pretty awkward just sitting her for all that."

"It... was," Moonstone admitted. "But I have had to sit through worse." She smirked slightly. "I hope that you never find yourself in the grasp of Gemkind's bureaucracy?" Steven shook his head. "Because we gems don't die of old age, we tend not to be in much of a hurry. Nothing short of the diamond's direct interference can make us get a move on. It once took me a century to acquire a new set of research equipment."

"Sounds boring."
"You have no idea."

"So…" Steven began, "how are you feeling?"

Moonstone eyed him dubiously. "If I tell you, are we going to have to hug afterwards?"

"I mean, not unless you want to," Steven shrugged. "hugs are encouraged but non-mandatory."

"Then I shall choose to forgo it. Nonetheless, I do have something to say." Moonstone took a breath. "Thank you, Steven."

"For what?"

"For your forgiveness. I cannot say if I deserve it, but it is appreciated."

"What people did in the past doesn't have to define them now," he said, placing his hand on Moonstone's arm. He'd thought about this really hard last night. "Everyone deserves a second chance."

"If you say so, then I find it hard to argue the point." Moonstone shrugged.

"And… maybe you don't have to be as afraid of the gems anymore?" Steven said hopefully. The skepticism was plain on her face, but Steven wasn't about to let himself get discouraged.

"We're never going to be friends, Steven." she said bluntly. "Surely, you understand that."

"That's… probably true," Steven admitted. "But just because you're not friends, doesn't mean you have to be enemies. You could just… you know, exist in the same place and have as little to do with each other as possible. It works for Lapis."

"I suppose… we shall have to see what the future holds."

Steven accepted that. It was probably about as good as he was going to get. "So," he said, changing the subject. "How are those files coming? Learning anything interesting?"

"Ah yes, the files." Moonstone frowned. "I have determined that they are a series of project reports and findings throughout the war. I started at just after the date of my own imprisonment and worked my way up from there. I have made it to roughly the six hundredth year of the war."

"That's cool. Have you learned what you wanted to."

Moonstone grimaced. "Not…exactly. Understand that these are scientific reports, not historic records. There is plenty of information about what these gems were doing with their research, but none about why they are doing it. My lack of context about the war can makes their actions quite confusing."

Steven frowned, he wasn't quite sure he understood what she meant. Moonstone predicted his question and went to explain.

"For example, something happened in the fourth century of the war. I don't know what it was, but it had to have been something dramatic. All of the research reports show a sudden change in focus." Moonstone's eyes grew somber. "Any research in how to rehabilitate the rebel gems was abandoned, in favor of… corrupting them." she shook her head. "I… simply cannot imagine what could have caused such a complete shift in focus. While I was working on the project, the rehabilitation looked promising. I do not understand why the diamonds would have abandoned the
rebels so completely. I… do not suppose you would know?"

"Mmm… nope, sorry." Steven shrugged. "But you know what? I bet the gems would know!" he slid off the couch and grabbed the scientist's arm, "C'mon." he said, dragging her towards the kitchen. "Pearl? Garnet? Can we ask you something?"

"Just a moment, Steven." said Pearl, not looking up from her work. "I've almost got these grilled cheese things down." Behind her, Connie shook her head and held up a charred piece of something that might have once been bread.

"That's… great." Steven said. "I know you'll get it. But, um, actually It's Moonstone who has a question.

"Oh." Pearl glanced up at the scientist neutrally. "Well, I am busy. Why doesn't she ask Garnet?"

Steven frowned at her, but Moonstone pulled him back before he could say anything. "I agree," she said quickly. "It is rude to interrupt someone in the middle of work. I would know, I have experienced it many times." She stopped in front of Garnet. "Er…"

"Yes?" Garnet asked, not lifting her head. Steven waited, but Moonstone made no move to ask. He sighed, oh well, baby steps.

"Is it alright if Moonstone asks you something about the war?"

"I suppose."

Steven nudged the scientist and she nodded. "Er…thank you. I've been going over the files and there's a strange, yet abrupt shift in their tone and content that can be pin downed to a single point in time." She explained.

"And?" Garnet asked, her voice utterly patient.

"It is clear that something dramatic happened at that point in time, but the files don't say what." Moonstone said hurriedly, glancing at the inside of her visor one last time. "Would you be willing to tell me what happened in the four hundred and twenty-eighth year of the war?"

There was a crash behind them, and Steve spun around. Pearl had dropped the pan she was holding and was staring at them with wide eyes.

"…Pearl?" Steven furrowed his brow, looking back and forth between them. Garnet had, if anything, gone even more still. "Guys? What happened?"

Pearl opened her mouth to something. For a moment. Steven was afraid that she was about to tell him that it had been a regular year of war where nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But she caught his look, and shut her mouth. She hesitated and he got the feeling that she was fighting the urge to look at Garnet. After a moment, she seemed to come to a decision, she met his gaze, her eyes were clear and calm as stone.

"Moonstone is quite correct," she said, "That was a very poignant year in the tide of the war. It would not be unthinkable to consider it the tipping point."

"Why?" Steven asked, starting to get freaked out. Pearl sounded like she was about to tell him everyone was gonna die, she sounded that grave.

"Because, Steven, that was the year your mother shattered Pink Diamond."
Okay… I'm not totally sure why that first bit was written from the perspective of a random bird. But I haven't gotten this far in this story by questioning what gets written too much, so whatever.

Anyway, I took more time on this chapter because it is really important. It's the climax of the whole Moonstone/Crystal Gem friction with Steven in the middle thing I've been building up. So action was limited, but it was important.

WARNING: very short rant ahead. #possible headcannon

I'd like to take a moment to talk about that last line. I know that, after Steven's trial, it seems like maybe Rose didn't shatter pink diamond after all. I feel like it was suggested that Yellow Diamond did it.

But as far as this story is concerned: Rose shattered Pink diamond. I want to say that right now. No conspiracies. No misunderstandings. Rose took the fight to Pink Diamond, faced her down, and killed her.

This is because I don't really think that the whole potential twist of Yellow Diamond doing the deed is very good from a story telling standpoint. It just feels sort of wishy-washy from a story telling standpoint, like it was thrown in there to absolve Rose of guilt.

Lame. I'm not sure if that's how Rebecca Sugar is going to spin it, so I'll withhold final judgement. But if that's how it's going down. Then lame.

Also (and I feel like this is important), if in the show it turns out that Rose didn't shatter PD, then why didn't Pearl or Garnet say so? Take a few moments to say: "Oh, Steven, BT-dubs, your mom didn't kill PD. Kay thnx bye." I can't see how Pearl and Garnet could not know one way or the other. If Rose didn't kill PD but chose to tell them that she did… IDK, feels lame.

RANT OVER.

But all right. This drama has played itself out. It's FINALLY time to move on… to the next bit of drama. Like… so much drama.

Anyway, if you've got the time, let me know what you thought of the chapter.

Till next time!
Chapter Notes

What's that? A chapter? It IS!

Couldn't work up the motivation to write for a few weeks, but I was reinvigorated by the return of SU. The fandom has had life breathed into it once more, and so…

Not much else to say, except I feed on feedback. Don't be shy. Seriously. If you like what you read, or don't like it. Tell me why. I'm dying for feedback here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was slipping beneath the horizon, but the full light of the moon held the dark at bay with its gentle glow.

Moonstone didn't notice, her thoughts swirling around far to quickly for her to even begin to register what was going on around her.

She had left the house in daze, wandering back in the direction of the barn.

Rose Quartz had shattered Pink Diamond.

Moonstone could believe that Rose Quartz would attempt such a thing—she started a war, after all. But actually succeeding?

It was like part of the sky had had fallen; and in a certain sense, it had. The Diamonds were the four central pillars of Gem society. The thought that one had died—no, been killed—was unthinkable.

But it explained much. Such as the dark turn in her colleague's research… it was likely guided by Yellow Diamond's hand, but the others had no doubt supported it as well. By the stars, what must have that been like for the Diamonds? To lose one of their number who had stood as their equal since time immemorial? The weight of their sorrow? Their outrage?

Moonstone paused midstride, her brow furrowing at a sudden thought.

Why did the earth still exist?

Why didn't all three of the remaining Diamonds descend on the planet with all of their forces to crush the rebellion under their combined might? The planet itself would have been reduced to dust, let alone the rebels. It would have been a vicious struggle, but it wouldn't have been a very long one.

Well… perhaps the answer lay in the remaining data files, the research could tell her their more of their intentions. She summoned her visor and began to skim through the data, driven by a fervent curiosity. Around her, sandy beaches and wooden boardwalks gave way to grassy hills that slowly flattened to fields.

Then something caught her by the ankle and sent her sprawling forward, hitting the ground with a
wet splat. Moonstone blinked as a cold wetness began to seep into her coat; she'd fallen into that pit of mud from those corrupted gems, she'd completely forgotten about it.

The mud had dried some, but was still soft and difficult to stand on, and she'd only just managed to find her footing when an excited squeaking split the air and a blur of silvery pink came rocketing out of the barn.

"Toad, wait-" she didn't get any farther before the mushroom launched itself at her, clearing the pit of mud entirely and slamming into her. The fungal missile proved too much for her tenuous balance and she went tumbling back with a second splat.

The toadstool bounced up and down on top of her, despite its lack of distinct facial features, it somehow managed to convey a sense of complete unrepentance.

"Ah, so that's what he was so excited about," said Peridot, poking her head out of the barn. "Need some help there, roomie?"

"Assistance would be appreciated, yes," Moonstone sighed, sitting up and holding Toad above the mud. Very little of her wasn't covered in mud by this point, but it was better to keep it off his bodym as much as possible. She doubted he'd be very cooperative with an attempt to clean him.

"Hey Lapis, get out here!" Peridot called. "You're needed."

"Oh boy." Lapis joined them and stared impassively at Moonstone's predicament. "Oh hey, you're still alive. That's nice." She gestured with her hand and a pool of water lifted Moonstone out of the mud and deposited her between the Homeworld gems, then the water streamed around her, scrubbing off the mud.

"Er… thank you." Moonstone coughed, setting down the squirming toadstool.

"Sure," with that, Lapis went back into the barn. Leaving Moonstone feeling rather awkward.

"Meh, don't worry about her," said Peridot, "that's just what she's like. She'll warm up eventually."

"Really?"

"I mean, I assume." Peridot shrugged. "She's stopped trying to get rid of me, anyway. That's progress."

"I see," Moonstone looked back at the pit of mud behind her. "I thought the two of you were planning on doing something about that?"

"We were, but Lapis couldn't agree on an acceptable solution," said Peridot. "In the end, we decided to just ignore it until it went away. We did put a fence around it, though, to keep people from falling in." Moonstone blinked, now that she took a second look, she could see a section of crisscrossing wires encircling the pit, rising only about a foot off the ground.

She looked back at Peridot.

"We, uh, didn't have a lot of material for the fence." Peridot said awkwardly. "It was more for symbolism than function really. We didn't actually think anyone would fall in."

"Do not concern yourself," Moonstone sighed, "I have only myself to blame, my attention was focused elsewhere."
As they entered the barn, Moonstone sat down on a crate with Toad in her lap as she gave Peridot an abridged version of what had transpired.

"So the gems have given you a pass, huh?" Peridot commented. "Well, that's what they do."

"If you say so," Moonstone replied. "While I believe Garnet's promise of clemency was genuine, Pearl quite understandably offered no such thing," Moonstone frowned. "Not to mention Amethyst wasn't there. Despite Steven's hopes for a more amicable relation between us, I think it would be best if I avoid all of them as much as possible."

"Meh, you worry too much." Peridot waved her concerns away. "Amethyst is, to use the earth expression: 'chill'. I doubt she cares about what you did in the past. As for the others," she shrugged. "Both Lapis and myself were their enemies in the past, and they've gotten over that."

"Really?" Moonstone raised an eyebrow. "The two of you were their enemies?"

"Sure. Lapis, I dunno, nearly drowned the earth or something? But the gems got over it, and now they just ignore each other's existence as much as they can. As for me…" Peridot put her hands behind her head and leaned back smugly. "I was by far the most deadly and challenging enemy they've ever faced."

Moonstone stared at the tiny gem, then up at Lapis in her hammock. She looked back at the diminutive technician, mentally comparing what she knew of the two's capabilities. Namely, Lapis' hydromancy and Peridot's… wrench.

"Is that so?" she asked politely.

Peridot deflated slightly. "Okay, maybe not the most deadly," She admitted with a huff. "but I was certainly most elusive!" she rallied. "It took them, like, five tries to capture me, even though it was three against one, four if you count Steven. No matter how much of my stuff they broke, I always got away. They were no match for my superior mind and technology!"

"And why were they chasing you?"

"Oh they thought I was a threat to earth or something, when really I was just trying to get off this rock before it blew up."

"…Blew up?"

"Yeah, cause of the Cluster. The Crystal Gems didn't know squat about it, but I did. After they caught me, Steven let me out. Good thing too, If he hadn't, there'd be a giant cloud of space dust where this planet used to be."

Moonstone frowned, "The Cluster… I've seen the term in several of the files on my journey back here, but none of them elaborated. Can you tell me about it?"

"Of course I can. Checking on the cloddy thing was the reason I was sent to earth. Basically it was an ancient super geowepon the Diamonds left incubating in the earth's surface. Just a million or so gemshards fused together, if it had formed; boom! No more earth. But I stopped it," Peridot finished, puffing out her chest. She paused, "uh, Moony? You alright there? You look like you just swallowed a rock."

Moonstone didn't answer, her mind too busy trying to absorb this new information. She'd spent all
day with Steven, trying to find out more about the war and the boy hadn't thought to mention this? A million gem shards? fusedFused together in such a way that were still conscious enough to take form? Such a thing was a monstrosity, an abomination. There was no way the Diamonds would have ever approved of something so horrific…

Unless…

She felt sick, as though cold clammy hands were tugging at her insides as ana thought started to crystallize.

Unless something had happened that pushed the Diamonds beyond reason.

Like Rose Quartz shattering Pink Diamond.

The pieces began to fall into place with an awful clarity.

The dark turn the PF-01-2 research had taken, how long the war had dragged on, the widespread corruption of all the gem's on the planet, and finally, the earth's continued existence… everything.

The Diamonds' sorrow and rage at the death of one of their own had created a plan. They must have abandoned the idea of colonizing the planet, instead devoting all their efforts to the creation of this cluster. The makeup of the Earth's crust would have been ideal for such a thing. But even so, the incubation period would have been enormous.

They could hardly have left such a thing unattended for so long with Rose Quartz on the planet. She would have found it eventually and put a stop to it one way or another. So they had needed to get rid of her, but she was too skilled an enemy, the amount of military force it would have taken to defeat her would have likely have rendered the planet unusable anyway.

Hence the research into Gem corruption; why bother fighting the enemy if you can reduce them to mindless beasts? Sure, they'd still be all over the planet, but they would hardly be in a condition to sniff out a slumbering superweapon.

To craft a weapon to corrupt the minds of gems on a global scale though… it would have taken centuries. But the Diamonds had the resources to draw out the war that long, and besides, more shattered gems just meant that there was more raw material for the cluster.

The war must have 'ended' when the cluster and corruption weapon were ready. All Homeworld had to do was retreat from the planet, then set off the corruption while the rebels celebrated their victory.

And just like that: the rebels would be broken, the planet would be on the way to its doom, and the Diamonds would eventually have a weapon so overwhelmingly strong, it could have ended any future rebellion of other gems through complete annihilation.

Rose Quartz would lose everything: her rebels, her mind, and, ultimately, the planet she had fought so hard to protect.

An analytic part of Moonstone had to admire the wicked elegance of the plan. The Diamonds' victory would have been absolute.

Except it hadn't.

Rose Quartz had survived the corruption with a handful of her followers. Even so, it wouldn't of have mattered. With only four, five if you counted Garnet twice, gems, there was no way that they
would have found the cluster's hiding spot if it was well hidden. The cluster would have emerged as planned and destroyed her anyway.

But it hadn't.

Because of Peridot.

"Ugh, Moonstone?" the green gem asked. "You alright there, Roomie? You look kind of pale. I mean, you're from the White Court, so obviously you always look pale. But you look, like, noticeable degree paler than normal. What's up?"

Moonstone opened her mouth to explain her newfound insights, but paused. The tiny, loud, and overly excitable gem before her was practically single-handedly responsible for thwarting the Diamond's plan of vengeance for their shattered comrade.

…Maybe she was better off not knowing.

"It is nothing," Peridot didn't look convinced, Moonstone didn't blame her. "I was just… thinking about how frightening such a creature would be. I'm interested to know how you ever managed to stop such a thing. It must have been very difficult."

"Oh." Peridot blinked. "Well, yes. For an ordinary gem, I suppose it would have been. But for me, however…" Moonstone listened with polite attentiveness as Peridot dove into a story of the daring, brilliance, and exquisite leadership of a single gem, plus a few extras who she had to help along the way.

Moonstone wasn't quite sure what to make of this new information. Her theory warranted investigation, it was possible that she was far from the truth. So much of it was guesswork, without an eyewitness account to anything. Hmm…perhaps she should discuss it with Lapis? The blue courtesan had been around during the war, after all. Maybe she had been witness how the war had played out.

Moonstone glanced up at the gem in question, she was hardly the most approachable gem. But considering the only other options were the Crystal Gems…

Moonstone would take her chances.

"… I, of course, had the solution immediately. We needed to acquire a drill head from the kindergarten…"

But that could wait, she'd learned more than enough for one day. Moonstone settled herself down, and allowed Peridot's words to settle over her like a screechy blanket.

Steven yawned as the sun, poked through the windows. He glanced at his Cookie-cat clock and saw it was well on its way to being noon. He should probably get up… but his bed was just so comfortable. Springy mattresses and fluffy blankets were way better than staying up all night with nothing but unhappy thoughts and the remnants of an ancient battlefield for company.

Yeah… the day could wait. Steven snuggled back down into his cocoon of sheets. But then, his sleepy mind registered something else. Something… tantalizing. A scent was infiltrating his fortress of comfort. A scent of sugar, of butter, of cream and togetherness.

His belly rumbled.
No. He needed more sleep.

But... but food! His tummy rumbled in protest.

"Shoosh belly." Steven murmured, patting his stomach in an attempt to placate it. "It is sleepy times."

His belly growled louder, voicing its dissatisfaction with that plan.

"Nope. Sleepyville for Steven." he settled more firmly into his pillow. Then he heard something, the pop-pop-pop of popcorn and the kshshshshsh of a whip cream can.

His stomach tensed so violently, that Steven's body curled up. He opened his eyes. "Well... I guess I have been sleeping for hours now,"

_Uh huh_, squeaked his belly, softer now, more encouragingly.

"And I didn't eat, like, anything yesterday..."

Too true, too true.

"Okay," Steven sighed, pushing his way out of the blanketed nirvana. "I guess, it is food time after all."

His belly gurgled happily as he half stumbled, half fell out of bed and down the stairs.

"Morning Steven?" said Connie, She was standing in the kitchen area and was clearly the source of his awakening. She was just placing a plate on the table, and on the table was...

"Is that a Together Breakfast?" Steven was pretty sure he was drooling.

"Yep. I was just about to put the strawberry on. You wanna do it?" she held up the berry.

"No, you can do it. If I get that close, it'll all end up in my mouth on the spot." He pulled up a stool and sat at the counter, forcing himself to sit still.

_Lunge across the table and shove it in your mouth._

"Are the gems around, its not together breakfast if everyone's not together." Steven asked, maybe polite conversation would drown out the dark whispering of his stomach.

_I bet you could eat all of it in three bites. Two if you really tried._

"Amethyst isn't here, I think she's visiting Vidalia again." Connie answered, holding the strawberry above the cream with appropriate, yet agonizingly slow amount of care.

_You can shapeshift your mouth bigger. One bit. Go for the gold!_

"I think Garnet and Pearl are the temple, though." She continued, placing the strawberry. "To tell the truth, I kinda wanted to share this just between us. But we can go fetch them if you want."

_No. That plan is dumb. Waiting is dumb. Eat food now._

"Why? What's the occasion?" Steven asked, his hands clenching from the effort of holding still while Connie pulled out a knife to cut him his portion.
"Well, it is my last day sleeping over. My mom's coming to pick me up this evening."

"What?" Steven blinked, belly momentarily forgotten. Having Connie around all the time had felt so natural, the thought of her leaving had totally slipped his mind. "Oh no. We'll have to do something really special today!"

"Nah, don't worry about it." Connie waved him off. "It's not like I'm leaving forever, I just won't be sleeping over."

"No really." Steven insisted, "You haven't gotten to do any magic stuff all week! I know how much you love that stuff. I bet Pearl can give us a mission, or… or," Connie shoved a forkful of together breakfast into his open mouth and Steven's mind went blank.

He was floating. Soaring above the clouds upon wings of bliss and syrup.

"No, seriously. It's fine." Connie repeated, grinning at his silly expression. "I don't know if you've looked in a mirror lately, but you don't look too great." She took a bite of her own food. "No offense, but you look exhausted. After yesterday, you need more sleep."

"But… but…" it was hard to make good arguments when so much of his attention was focused on food, but he tried.

"Can you honestly tell me that once you're done eating, you don't wanna go back to bed?"

Steven opened his mouth, then closed it. She had a point. "I guess you're right. Sorry about the whole running off thing. Must have sort of ruined the sleepover."

"Of course it didn't," Connie smiled. "A week of Steven Universe without any crying? The world would end."

"…fair enough." Steven admitted. "So what do you want to do today instead?"

"I'm glad you asked." Connie reached behind the counter and pulled up a bag. "I visited the library before you woke up and…" she pulled out a rectangular box, "Can you say movie day?"

"Dogcopter 3: The Return of Doggo!" Steven's eyes bugged out, he hadn't known the library had that!

"Pupper's Revenge?" Steven gasped. "Connie, you are the best!"

"I know," Connie glanced down. "Wow, you demolished your plate." Steven blinked; she was right. He could have sworn he still had half his portion left a second ago… "Well, that's fine. You can have the rest of mine." she pushed her half-eaten plate over to him and headed for the stairs. "I'll go set up the TV."

"Connie, I love you."

"Hmmm? What?" Connie glanced back.

"Ugh… Nuffing." Steven said, shoving a bite of waffle into his mouth. He turned away, focusing on savoring every bite of his breakfast. The more he thought about it, the more grateful he was for what Connie had done. He really needed, a nice drama-free day.

Nothing but him, his jam bud, and all the robots a flying dog could explode.
Today was gonna be great!

Jasper stomped her way out of the ocean. Finally! It had taken all night, but she’d made it to the mainland. It had been… not difficult, exactly, but it had been unsettling. The ocean, all that water, the feeling of frigid, endless depths… it reminded Jasper of her. She’d been able to keep a tight lid on those strange feelings on the way out there. But on the way back… Jasper glanced at the dark pink crystal, resting in her hand like a loaded gun.

She might need it. But she couldn't wait to be rid of it. The stone was downright creepy. All throughout those long hours of endless swimming, whenever the soldier's thoughts had strayed to her, the stone seemed to resonate, gorging itself on Jasper's feelings; inflaming them and feeding even faster.

Jasper shook her head, forcing her unease out of her mind. She would use the stone, and then she'd get rid of it; never have to see the wretched thing again.

Jasper marched to the warp pad that had brought her to this lonely coast, and vanished. The world spun by in a stream of light, and landed her on a distant hillside, overlooking a different coastline. One she'd only ever been to once.

The sight of it, of that battered old temple overlooking the sea, ancient and falling apart, filled her with a deep frustrated rage. It was just asking to be put out of its misery.

And Jasper happy to oblige, but first thing first.

Jasper turned away from the temple, her gaze landing on the tiny town of wooden buildings and humans that ran along the beach.

Jasper smirked.

"I'm hope you're ready, Rose, because I'm coming to tear your universe apart."

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh...

PS: Since I can pretty safely assume that anyone this story likes cartoons. I have to ask, does anyone here watch Star Vs. the Forces of Evil? I do. I only bring it up because the recent episodes pushed me to write a oneshot for it, it's posted on this site if any of you are interested…
Something is amiss...

Chapter Notes

So I'm afraid this chapter, once again, will be somewhat short and low on action. BUT I have a good reason for cutting it off where I did. There something I really want to do for the next chapter which necessitated which required this chapter ending where it does.

For now, let's just say you're all going to want to read my notes at the end of this chapter…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey Lars, can you take out the trash?" Sadie asked, unboxing several packs of donuts and sliding them into the lower rack of the display case.

"Seriously?" Lars groaned. "Saaaadie, my back is hurt! I shouldn't be walking around so much."

"Uh huh," Sadie replied, unimpressed. "That didn't stop you from running around waiting on Buck hand and foot earlier."

"T-that was different!" Lars huffed, "my social life was on the line."

"No it wasn't." Sadie rolled her eyes, a slight smile on her lips. "Look, either you can take out the trash, or you can load up the upper displays." She pointed up at the dozen empty racks over her head. "That way I won't have to get the stepladder."

Lars looked at her like she'd asked him which arm he wanted chopped off. She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh fine!" Lars rolled his eyes. "Just don't say I never did nuthin' for ya."

"Now why would I ever say anything like that?" Sadie grinned as her lanky friend pulled himself over to the garbage can and halfheartedly tugged on the black plastic bag inside. "If it makes you feel better, Amethyst promised not to cut our dumpster in half again."

"Oh sure, like I'd trust anything those creepy ladies say." Lars grumbled, finally tugging the bag out of the can and nearly spilling the contents over the floor.

"Oh come on, they're nice people, Lars. Amethyst alone is making us the most profitable Big Donut on the coast."

"Sadie, she's purple."

"And you've got giant holes in your ears." Sadie answered breezily. "Isn't it fun how everybody's different?"

"Hey! I chose to do these!" Lars complained, pointing at his ears. "It's fashion!"

"Whatever you say, Lars." Sadie filled the last of the lower racks with donuts as her friend
grumbled his way out the door. Sadie looked up at the racks overhead. If she really tried, getting up on her tiptoes and everything, she could probably fill them without the stepladder... "Nah," she shook her head. Better to take the extra minute and fetch it, rather than risk the extra time it would take if she did drop a tray.

"Alas, the trials and tribulations of the vertically challenged." She sighed, "least I have muscles.

She'd just managed to load the last tray when she heard the sound of the front door being flung open.

"I hate this lousy place!" Lars hollered, stomping loudly on the tiled floor.

"What, why?" Sadie asked, stashing the stepladder. "What happened? Was there a raccoon in the dumpster again?"

"I wish." Lars scoffed, throwing himself onto one of the chairs and glaring at the floor. "As if anything that normal ever happens around here."

"Oh-kay?" Sadie raised an eyebrow. "So what actually happened?"

"There was some kinda Jedi wannabe messing with our garbage."

"...Jedi wannabe?"

Lars rolled his eyes. "Some weirdo in a big cloak was huddled up by our dumpster. I told em to buzz off, then they stood up and the creep was, like, ten feet tall! I nearly wet my—I mean, I wasn't scared!" Lars hastily corrected.

"Of course not." Sadie nodded, "then what happened?"

"I, uh, told the weirdo to clear out," Lars answered. "They didn't want to mess with me, so they ran off pretty quick."

"And... that's it?" Sadie frowned. "They didn't do anything else?"

"I mean, no." Lars said, looking away awkwardly. "But you're missing the point, Sadie, a guy shouldn't have to be on the lookout for giant cloaked freaks every time they go outside! I swear, first chance I get, I'm ditching this town, go somewhere normal." He trailed off, grumbling under his breath.

Sadie opened her mouth to respond, but then there was a tinkling of bells as the front door opened.

"Welcome to the big donut." She said automatically, turning. "Oh. Good morning, Onion."

"And then there's this brat..." Lars muttered, getting to his feet and shuffling into the back room.

Sadie frowned after him, but dismissed it. He'd feel better after a few minutes of griping, he always did. She turned back to her visitor. "Sorry about him, what can I get for you?"

The boy stared at her unblinkingly.

"Oh right, it's Tuesday." Sadie picked up the serving tongs and pulled out a fresh glazed donut. She turned back, not bothering with a bag. Onion had moved closer, she couldn't really see him over the counter, she could just see his hand rising up over the edge and neatly laying out quarters and nickels on the countertop. Once it was done, the hand went still, its fingers splayed.

Sadie placed the donut into the waiting hand, which was still for a moment, then about-faced and
moved away. The rest of the boy came into sight as he moved towards the door, his arm still ramrod straight in the air.

"See you tomorrow," Sadie waved. The boy stopped at the door and turned back to look at her. He clenched his raised hand into a fist, crushing the donut into a ball of dough. He waved the ball at her once, then turned back and ran out the door, circling around towards the back of the building and vanishing from sight.

Sadie stared after him, playing back what had just happened in her mind.

"You know, maybe Lars does have a point." Sadie conceded, scooping up the coins without bothering to count them—it would be the exact right amount, it always was. "This place is pretty weird."

She shrugged, putting it out of her mind, she had work to do.

The floors weren't going to sweep themselves, after all.

"The government is a sham."

"Uh huh," Jenny nodded absentmindedly, most of her focus riveted to her phone. "You sing it, Buck."

"We should just get rid of it and start over. A fresh beginning."

"I dunno man," said Sour Cream interjected. "The problems you keep talking about come from the government's attempts to rein in the chaotic urges of humanity, which pull everybody in different directions. Getting rid of the government would just allow those desires to run even wilder. Anarchy sounds great on paper and all, but in practice it'd probably be a big mess."

"Yeah, you tell him—" Jenny paused, her friend's words trickling past her boredom-induced haze and registering. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, you telling me you like the government?" Buck's tone was as level as ever, but he was frowning pretty hard.

"I wouldn't go that far, dude. I'm just saying maybe we shouldn't tear down the establishment unless we have something substantial to replace it." he shrugged. "Better the devil you know, right?"

Jenny stared at him blankly. "Where's all this coming from?"

"Hey I can't think about raving all the time."

"I…guess not…"

The teens were sitting at a bench outside Fish-Stew Pizza. They usually came here around noon to get food and listen to Buck's quiet rants. It was a nice day out, even if the conservation was taking a weird turn.

"Your words. They are… unenlightened."

"Hey, don't be like that. I'm not trying to start nothing, I'm just saying…"

Jenny rolled her eyes as the back-and-forth rolled on; she could tell neither of them were really
committed to it, so she tuned them out. She turned a lazy eye toward their surroundings, drinking in the familiar sight of beach and boardwalk. It was sooooo boring around here during the day. When the sun went down, at least they could sneak away for parties.

Movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention and blinked. "Hey guys, cool it with the politics for a sec and check this out."

"Check what out?" Sour Cream asked, breaking off his rant about international regulation.

"Tall, dark, and mysterious over there." Jenny pointed.

"Wow, I'm digging the cloak," said Sour Cream. "It's medieval."

"Transcendent," Buck agreed.

Jenny couldn't really make out any of their features under the hood, maybe the person just didn't like sunlight? But if the cloaked person noticed their attention, they gave no indication. Walking quickly and with purpose down the boardwalk, they paused only long enough to drop something in a trashcan before turning down an alleyway and marching out of sight.

"Well that was kinda weird." Sour Cream commented.

"You're telling me," Jenny nodded. "Wearing something like that in this heat? Must be cra-zy."

"Or perhaps they feel the need to hide away from the ever-present surveillance of Big Brother."

Sour Cream rolled his eyes. "You know, Buck, it's amazing how good the government is at spying on us, considering their track record at everything else."

"Hey, SC," Jenny interrupted, not willing to listen to them go off again. "Isn't that your little brother?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah." Sour Cream nodded. They watched as the small boy walked to the middle of the road, spun around once. Then, catching sight of them, came closer.

"Hey, lil' bro, what's up?"

Onion didn't reply, instead handing the teen a ball of crushed sticky dough.

"Oh Yuck! What is that?" Jenny demanded.

"I think it's a donut." Sour Cream sniffed it. "Yep. Thanks bro." Onion stepped back, nodded to his brother, then to Buck, then trotted off, slipping away into an alley.

"No offense, but your brother's kind of weird." Jenny commented, turning to her friend. "Oh, you've gotta be kidding me!" she exclaimed. "You're not actually going to eat that, are you?"

Sour Cream paused, his mouth open to take a bite of the dough ball. "Uh… yeah?"

"That's gross!"

"No, it's a donut, or it was, anyway. Donuts are good."

"Your brother could have found it in the trash for all you know!"

"Nah, food is the one thing he doesn't take out of the trash."
"Then why's it all mushed up."

"He does that to all his food. Donuts, mashed potatoes, ice cream." Sour Cream shrugged. "Dunno why. But it's not like it affects the flavor." He took a bite out of the ball. Jenny pulled a face. Her family might put fish on pizza, but at least they didn't put their hands all over it. She opened her mouth to say so.

"I think it's magnificent," Buck cut her off. "Not allowing oneself to be sold to set shapes of their confectionary consumables." He nodded once more, "Your brother's pretty tight."

Jenny gave up. Her friends were just too weird. She turned away, staring out at the ocean as another boring day wore on around her.

Mr. Smiley rubbed a handkerchief against his brow, trying to keep the sweat at bay.

He was dead tired, currently in his third consecutive shift at Funland, and at least eighty-seven percent sure he was starting to hallucinate. It was difficult to be sure of that last thing though, considering that he lived in a place regularly plagued by giant monsters, magic ladies, giant hands in the sky, or some unholy combination of the three.

He'd just managed to shoo off Ronaldo for the fourth time. No matter how many times he told that Fry boy that, no his roller coasters were not sentient, he kept coming back. At least, he was pretty sure it had been four. That last time may have been a seagull carrying a box of curly fries.

So when he saw a big, blurry shadow skulking between his rides, he wasn't sure what to do. Maybe it was a cloud casting a weird shadow... nah, if there was shade around, he'd already be standing in it.

It was probably one of them teenage trouble-makers, wearing all that weird dark clothing, studded belts, and pretending to be a vampire or whatever it was kids were in to these days. He should probably do something about it, chase the kid off or tell them to get on some rides, but his chair was just so comfortable and his eyes were so heavy. Maybe if he just shut them for a little while.

"Nope." Mr. Smiley shook his head. "Smiley don't sleep on the job!" Besides, it was just three more hours before his shift ended, he could go home, and conk out for a week. Until then, he would be strong. He glanced around, that shadow was nowhere to be seen. There, see? The problem had solved itself. He was right to ignore it.

Then his eyes landed on something he couldn't ignore, something even his exhausted brain wouldn't dare try to trick him with, and he shot to his feet.

"Oh no! No you do not!" he yelled, running forward and snatching the tiny figure off the ground.

"Moe!"

"Don't you 'moe' me, mister." He shoved his finger in the boy's face. "You are banned from my establishments, and you know it! I will not have another lawsuit because of you, do you hear me." He ignored the boys protesting squeaks as he carried the boy out of the amusement park. He didn't feel any guilt from the child's struggling, not after the fire incident and besides, Vidalia—bless her understanding heart—had given him permission to manhandle the boy provided he didn't actually hurt him. An offer that Mr. Smiley was all too happy to accommodate—he didn't need no more lawsuits.

Gently, yet firmly, he placed the boy on the ground just outside the Funland property. "Alright,
The boy shot him a dark look, Mr. Smiley crossed his arms. He would not be bullied by a three-foot-tall child—no matter how terrifying the child in question might be. The kid squeaked again then darted off.

Mr. Smiley smiled, satisfied, and returned to his post.

Funland was safe for another day.

"So Steven's back safe and sound?" Vidalia asked, pouring out a drink for herself, and handing a cup of sludge she'd found under the sink to her guest.

"Yep." Amethyst answered, taking the cup and drowning it in one gulp. "Dude wandered back while I was gone, he was sleeping when I got back, but I think he hashed out that drama with the others first; some of it, anyway."

"That's good. Everything's back to normal then?"

"I guess?" Amethyst shrugged, "Say, you mind if I..." she held up the empty cup."

"Knock yourself out."

"Thanks, babe." The purple gem took a bite out of the cup, crunching the porcelain between her teeth. "Anyway, Garnet and Pearl are still actin' all serious, so I bailed. I figure if its anything super important, they'll let me know."

"Sounds good."

The door opened and there was the patter of tiny footsteps. Vidalia looked up and grinned, "There's my little trouble-maker! You have a fun time out on the town, sweetie?"

Amethyst watched lazily as the tiny boy trotted over to them, and raised an eyebrow when he stopped in front of her.

"Sup little dude?"

The boy held out his fist.

Amethyst stared at it, then shrugged and gave him a fist bump.

Onion narrowed his eyes and shook the fist at her.

"I think he wants to give you something, Ames," Vidalia chimed in helpfully.

"Oh, gotcha," Amethyst nodded, holding out her hand. Onion unclenched his fist and dropped something into it.

"What is it?" Vidalia asked, peering over Amethyst's shoulder. "My little trooper is always bringing back the strangest things."

"It's..." Amethyst stared at it uncertainly. "It's a gem." A finely-cut, purple gemstone stared back.

"Oh dear," Vidalia frowned, "that looks pretty pricey. I hope you didn't steal that, Onion." She said, glancing accusingly at the silent boy. "I know I told you snatching the odd bag of chips or
something is fine. Stores get them by the dozen for a dollar and taking one or two doesn't hurt anyone, but it's wrong to take something actually valuable."

"We got bigger issues here, Val." Amethyst said, an ominous feeling rising in her gut. "This is a Gem."

"I, uh, can see that."

"No," Amethyst rolled her eyes. "I mean it's a Gem. You know, like me."

"Oh. I getcha," Vidalia nodded. "You sure?"

Amethyst nodded. If you knew what to look for, there were quite a few differences between earth's natural, lifeless stones and ones like her. The living kind tended to bigger, the colors more vibrant. She'd gotten pretty good at telling the difference over the years, and this gem, its purple glint just a few shades lighter than her own, was definitely alive.

But more importantly, it had a band of silvery metal wrapped around the middle. It looked eerily familiar, she'd was pretty sure she'd seen a gem with a band on it like that recently, but for the life of her couldn't remember where. She looked back to Onion, "Where did ya get this, squirt?"

Onion went through a series of hand gestures and squeaks that meant absolutely nothing to the purple gem, but Vidalia nodded along. "He says he found it stashed under a dumpster somewhere."

The grown woman said slowly, "Also, something about following a cloak? I dunno," she shrugged.

Amethyst grunted, staring hard at the gem and racking her brain for why it gave her a bad case of déjà vu. It was a pretty creepy ring, just looking at it made her feel oddly trapped.

Trapped…

Amethyst's eyes widened. Trapped gems! That underground place where they'd found Moonie last week. She whipped her eyes back to Onion. "You said you found this in the town?"

The boy nodded.

Amethyst swore.

"Amethyst!" Vidalia exclaimed, "What's wrong."

"No time, Val!" Amethyst yelled, leaping off the couch and running for the door. "I gotta tell Garnet!"

Jasper climbed up the hill overlooking the town, and ducked into the shadow of the tower-like building. She pulled down the hood of her cloak and shook out her hair, enjoying the feeling of wind running through it again.

It galled her, having to hide from these meat bags—like she was weaker than them… But it was necessary. She couldn't defeat Rose Quartz and the remains of her rebels by attacking them head on. She had to stick to the plan.

She glanced to the edge of the cliff. Where, just beneath her, she knew Rose's base awaited. It was somewhat risky to get this close, she didn't want the fusion finding her yet. But she hadn't been attacked yet, so she assumed she was in the clear. It's not like she needed to be here long, after all, just until it was time for phase two.
Speaking of, it was time to draw phase one to a close. She turned back towards the sleepy town of overly loud meat bags. She still couldn't believe that Rose had turned her back on everything, on her Diamond, just for these annoying wads of flesh.

Well… whatever. She didn't need to understand it to take advantage of it. Reaching into her hair, she pulled out a tiny device. A small tube with several buttons on it. Holding out the tube towards the town. She took a pause, just to relish the moment when Rose's final defeat truly began.

And pushed the red button.

She more imagined than heard it; the little beeps now echoing across the town from all the little hidey holes she'd visited. She imagined humans finding what she'd stashed away, picking up the gemstones with their little silver bands on them. She imagined the confusion on their faces as the bands fell off and the gems began to glow.

Alas, she couldn't see or hear any of it, simply too far away.

What she could see, was the quickly-growing figures popping up between the buildings.

And then she heard the screams.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh. Uh oh! UH OH!

YOUR ATTENTION READERS:

The time has come once more, where corrupted gem monsters run rampant en mass (that's…that's what Jasper's doing. Just in case you were confused by those last lines).

AS SUCH, I would like to ask you all for suggestions for corrupted gems, much like I did twenty or so chapters ago. HERE'S YOUR CHANCE! To see your own OC come to literary life as it attempts to murder the sweet citizens of Beach City. HOW BADLY do you want the side humans of Steven Universe dead? Now's the time to let your voice be heard!

But seriously, I'd love any and all suggestions for corrupted gems. I believe I managed to incorporate every idea people gave me last time in one way or another. I can only promise to try…that said, if you also leave some feedback along with your monster suggestion, I'll definitely give it priority over those who just say: "do a T-rex with missiles for hands" or something.

YAY, READER/WRITER INTERACTIVITY!
Amethyst ducked, sliding beneath several stomping legs and lashing out with her whip. The spikes left a few gashes on her foe's chitinous shell, but otherwise did no real damage.

"Oh, come on!" Amethyst yelled, dodging a giant claw that tried to pinch her in half. The violet crustacean gibbered at her, its single stalk of half a dozen eyes swiveling around to glare at her.

Not waiting, she lashed out with a second whip. But the creepy thing skittered away on five mismatched legs, its single claw waving at her tauntingly. Amethyst nearly screamed in frustration. She'd taken down things bigger than this in half the time before. Why was this one gem being such a hassle?

A part of her; a very, very small nugget of calm in the back of her head knew it was because she was panicking.

She'd barely made it out of Vidalia's house before the ring had fallen off the gem Onion had given her. She'd had just enough presence of mind to bubble it and send it to the temple before it could form. Not that she'd had time to pat herself on the back, cause other gem monsters had started popping up all over the place.

She'd thrown herself into a fight immediately, poofing several monsters before they could really get their bearings. But her advantage had disappeared pretty quick and now everywhere she looked there was another gem ready to throw down.

She hadn't even had time to tell the others. Hopefully, Garnet's mind eye or whatever had picked up what was going on and she was busy beating up monsters on the other side of town, but Amethyst couldn't be sure. What if Garnet had gone off on one of her personal missions? What if Pearl was in the temple and couldn't hear what was going down?

For all she knew, her friends might be sitting in the temple without a care in the world! Should she abandon the fight and go make sure they were aware? It was probably the smart thing to do.

But… It'd take her time to get all the way across town and into the temple. Time were there would be nothing standing between the citizens of Beach City and a painfully squishy end.

She didn't want the people to go squish. She liked them. But she couldn't protect them all alone…

What was she supposed to do!?

The misshapen crab gurgled, its legs becoming a blur as it charged.

"Oh, that tears it! Imma' make crab cakes outta you!" Amethyst tossed her whips aside and threw herself forward, screaming with wild abandon, and crashing into its shell headfirst with a satisfying crunch. The gem crab stumbled, perhaps stunned by her fury.

But it hadn't seen nuthin' yet.

Amethyst threw herself on top of it and wrapped her arms around the base of its claw. Its eyes swiveled around to stare, as her muscles rippled outward in time with her anger. Letting out another
furious scream, she ripped the crab giant claw right off its body.

The crab shrieked.

Amethyst shrieked right back. Bending over, she supplexed the jagged claw right into the thing's eye stalk, grinding the bunch of slimy orbs into jelly.

There was a final gurgle, and the thing burst into smoke.

Amethyst roared in triumph and scooped up the leftover gem, her instincts screamed at her to smash the stupid thing. But, with a monumental effort, she forced herself to bubble it instead. Then turned her attention towards finding something else to smash.

She barely made it three steps before the ground beneath her exploded.

Half a dozen tentacles enveloped her, pinning her arms to her side and hoisting her off the ground as a dark furry head poked out of the ground beneath her.

"Oh, hell no!" Amethyst roared, struggling against the stretchy limbs. But it was no good, they stretched out rather than broke as though they were made of taffy. Two liquid brown eyes stared up at her from over a cute button nose. Then the creature's head split in half vertically, parting to reveal an arsenal of jagged teeth.

"Are you...freakin'...kidding me!" Amethyst redoubled her efforts. She shape shifted her legs longer and stomped downward, slamming her boots into the gem's eyes. It recoiled, bashing her against the ground, before she could take advantage, another set of tentacles shot out and trapped her legs, binding her completely.

The thing's mouth opened wider and slowly began to inch towards her.

"I am gonna give you the worst indigestion!" Amethyst swore, struggling futilely. But the furry monster paid her no mind.

Then, just before its teeth bit reached her, a piercing whistle split the air. "Hey, ugly! Over here!" The creature paused, its eyes turning.

There was a deafening bang, and Amethyst felt the creature's body jerk sideways.

"keep your tentacles to yourself!" Vidalia shouted, pumping her shotgun. She shot the creature in the face again and it burst into a puff of smoke. Amethyst dropped to the ground with a grunt.

"You alright there, Ames?"

"I will be in a second," Amethyst snarled. Scrabbling through the dirt until she found a misshapen brown gem. "Soon as I smash this little jerk. I'll be great!" She raised it above her head, preparing to smash it against the ground.

"Woah, hold up." Vidalia plucked the stone from her hand, making Amethyst smack her fingertips against the ground.

"Ouch!" Amethyst yelped, sucking on her finger tips. "What the heck, dude?" she glared at her longtime friend. Vidalia frowned back.

"Amethyst, you're freaking out. You need to calm down."

"I don't have time for that! I got monsters to fight!" Amethyst shouted, reaching out her hand for
the gem. "Now give me that one so I can deal with it for good, then I can get on with taking out the rest."

Vidalia pursed her lips, then backhanded Amethyst across the face.

The purple gem blinked, her outrage stalled by the stinging pain on her cheek.

"Amethyst." Vidalia repeated, "chill."

Amethyst stared at her in disbelief. Did Vidalia really think this was the right time for this. Was she really not aware of what was going on around them?

Vidalia raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm serious, Ames. You need to calm down. Do you want to get tentacle hentai-ed again? We've both seen how those videos end."

Amethyst snorted, her anger and frustration disarmed by the sudden comment. "Seriously, Val?"

"Hey, someone's gotta protect your virtue, might as well be me."

Despite herself, Amethyst laughed.

"Feeling better?"

"...yeah, I'm good now." Amethyst shook her head, "Thanks for the save, by the way."

"Anything for my main girl." Vidalia smiled, tossing her the gem

"Aww, thanks boo." Amethyst bubbled it, and turned her attention back to the matter at hand. "But seriously, enough screwing around." She summoned her whip, and gave it a crack. "These losers aren't going to whip themselves."

"You say that like I'm not gonna be right behind you." Vidalia shot back, loading a pair of slugs into her shotgun.

"Wait, you're fighting too?" Amethyst raised an eyebrow at her "What about your family."

"Eh, they'll be fine. Sour Cream can take care of himself, Yellowtail's out at sea, and Onion..." Vidalia shrugged, "I feel sorry for the monsters who bump into him. 'Sides, someone's gotta babysit you."

Amethyst blew a raspberry at her. "Oh please, I'm thousands of years older than you."

"I know, about time you grow up, don't you think?" Vidalia smirked back.

"As if." Amethyst scoffed. "I'm more worried about you slowing me down with your old lady bones."

"Eh, can it ya whippersnapper." Vidalia, shouldered her gun and took aim at a winged lizard scratching at the ground a down the street.

Amethyst laughed, and readied threw herself at the nearest monster. She grinned when it only took several strikes to take it down. She felt a bit calmer now, and she knew what to do. She wasn't any type of strategist, she was a fighter. So she'd fight the battle in front of her and trust the others to take care of the rest.

More importantly, she couldn't let Vidalia show her up with that fancy bang stick. She'd never live
"But just think of it, my dear. Imagine the glorious world we could build if we could spread your dog’s technology to canines across the world! Join me, child!"

"Nice try, Dr. Doggo, but we both know you just want to make your own personal army of combat Chihuahuas! I'll never let that happen! They're barely even dogs! They're more like overgrown rats than anything else!"

"Foolish child! You dare mock the mighty Chihuahua? You will pay for this!"

"Oh yeah? Sic 'em, boy."

There was an affirmative bark, followed by a generous dose of explosions and other special effects.

"Noooooooooooooo!!"

"Good boy!"

"I love this movie." Steven commented, smiling in satisfaction and snuggling down into his blankets.

"Yeah, it's always fun when Dog-copter wins." Connie agreed, shoving a handful of popcorn in her mouth. "Although watching it now, the plot seems kinda simple."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Steven commented. "Dog-copter never has to go through existential crisis where he has to re-evaluate everything he knows to be true. He just shoots a missile out of his butt, solves the problem, and gets a doggie treat." Steven sighed, looking down. "Wish it could work like that for me…" he murmured.

Connie frowned. "If it makes you feel better, I could go get you a dog biscuit?" she offered.

Steven paused. "I mean, his chicken bones do look pretty tasty…"

"Gross!" Connie shoved him and he laughed.

"So, you wanna put in the next movie?" Steven asked, once the laughter had died down.

"Sure, not like we got anything better to do."

Before Steven could get up, the was a wooshwhoosh as the temple door opened and Garnet came out at a dead run with Pearl hot on her heels.

"Guys?" Steven blinked. "Is something-"

"No time!" Garnet yelled, actually yelled. Connie blinked, but had no time to question it as the fusion leapt up to them and scooped them off the floor. "Beach City is in danger!"

What was left of the happy mood vanished as Garnet rushed for the door. Dashing out onto the porch, she didn't even pause before spinning around and leaping on top of the house. Connie's vision swam at the sudden rush as the fusion continued to jump, carrying them up the temple statue and onto the hill overlooking the town. She gasped as the fusion dropped them onto the soft grass.

"G-Garnet?" Steven coughed, on hands and knees as he nearly threw his popcorn up all over his pajamas. "What's-" he looked up and the question died in his throat.
The sleepy town of Beach City had become a war zone. Connie could see dozens of different corrupted gems scattered amongst the buildings. She'd never seen so many in one place before!

"H-how?" she gaped, "W-when?"

"That doesn't matter," said Pearl, as she landed beside them. Connie looked up her teacher. The white gem's normally friendly face had become tight, focused. The gem was clutching Rose's sword, which she held out to the girl. "What matters is that people are in danger, and we are the ones who can do something about it. We'll worry about the why after everyone is safe. Now get up."

Connie nodded, pushing herself to her feet and taking the blade. Pearl was absolutely right, now wasn't the time for words, it was time for action!

"Protect the people," Garnet's ordered before dashing down the hill and making a beeline for the largest gem monster in sight, some kind of two-legged lizard that towered over the nearby houses and roaring as it waved a pair of overly tiny arms in the air.

"She's right." Pearl said tensely. "We need to move quickly. Can you two handle this?"

"We can." Connie said immediately, gripping her sword tighter. "This is what we've trained for, after all."

Pearl stared at her for half a second, then nodded. "I want you two to stick together, and be careful!"

"You got it," Steven gave a thumbs up and hefted his shield. "Jam buds always stick together."

Without a word, they took off. Pearl pulled ahead, moving towards the more immediate threats. Beyond her, Connie watched as the giant lizard noticed Garnet's approach. It pointed one of its nubby arms at her and there was a flash of light as the arm detached and rocketed towards the fusion.

Garnet barely broke her stride, sidestepping the projectile and snagging it as it went past. She spun once, using its own momentum to launch it back at the corrupt gem, hitting it head on and exploding. The creature roared in anger as it staggered backward, only for Garnet to go launch herself through the smoke, slamming into its chest and turning its roar into a pain yelp.

"I think Garnet's got that handled," Steven commented, his legs pumping as they ran down the hill. "Let's go there," he pointed to the Big Donut. The donut shop had seen better days: several windows were broken, and the donut sign bristled with blue spikes.

"Right!" Connie nodded and they put on a burst of speed, and dashed through the front door.

The inside looked, if anything, worse than the outside; the chairs and tables were overturned and broken, the walls were peppered with more of those blue spikes, and donuts were scattered everywhere. In the middle of the room stood a white gem monster. It looked like a polar bear, but smaller, standing no taller than Connie herself. Its back was to them, focused on an upturned table in the far corner.

The bear jerked its head and several more of those blue spikes shot from its mouth, pelting against the table. Steven leapt into action; quite literally, as he took a running jump and threw himself at the bear. A bubble formed around him as he slammed into it like a wrecking ball.

The gem yelped as it was plucked off its feet and thrown across the room, it crashed to the donut
racks and slid out of sight behind the counter. "Sadie! Lars!" Steven called, dismissing his bubble. "Are you here?"

"Over here." Sadie's head poked out from behind the table.

"Are you guys okay?" Connie asked, keeping her eyes on where the bear had fallen from sight. There hadn't been a poof of smoke, so it couldn't be over yet.

"I am." Sadie nodded, biting her lip. "But that thing did something to Lars! I don't know what!"

"Oh no!" Steven hurried over to the pair, shoving the table aside. The lanky redhead was lying on the ground, twitching and moaning. "Lars! Buddy! Speak to me!"

There was a growl and Connie called out. Steven threw up a bubble on instinct, as several more spikes shot toward them, shattering against the bubble. "Be careful Steven, the fight's not over!" Connie called, leaping over the counter and stabbing down. She misjudged the gem's location, and said a word she'd never dare repeat in front of her mother when the sword stabbed nothing but air. The bear shuffled back in surprise at sword appearing inches from it's face. "I got this one, you get those two out of here."

"Righ—uh oh, we got other problems." Steven answered.

Connie glanced around and immediately saw what Steven meant. Outside the building, there was a dark shapeless head, with a snowflake-patterned gem was peeking through a shattered window. When it realized it had been seen, a slit opened up on its almost featureless face and began to wail. Long dark limbs appeared, stretching out and pulling it through the broken glass.

"That an onyx!" Steven called, "I've seen one before. I got it!" She heard the sound of footsteps as Steven moved. "Sadie, you get Lars into the back room. We'll handle this."

"Okay."

The situation handled, Connie turned her focus back to the gem in front of her.

This was it. Her first official fight as a Crystal Gem! Despite how bad the situation was, she couldn't help the rush of excitement that coursed through her. It was finally time for her to show the world just what Connie Maheswaran was capable of.

The bear gem snorted, and Connie noticed that instead of having a normal face, it only had a single eye in the middle of its face; perfectly round, shining with a silvery light, and honestly kinda creepy.

Connie snorted and raised her sword. "Well, come on then, villain. Show me what you've got." It growled in answer and spat out several spikes for her. Connie's sword flashed; one, two, three times, just like Pearl had taught her, and the spikes shattered in midair. Connie spared them only a brief glance, realizing they were actually icicles. She looked back to the bear, her confidence soaring.

"That all you got?"

The gem huffed, its silvery eye locked on hers. Connie saw a burst of light and the world around her changed.

"W-what?"
Connie glanced around, bewildered. She was standing in a scraggly field of grass and brush. She could see patches of charred ground around her, some of which was still burning. But even stranger were the chunks of ice also clinging to the ground.

She blinked, but the scenery didn't change. Had… had she been teleported? Could a gem do that? Lion could…

"C-connie…" a ragged whisper made her spin around. Steven was on the ground, staring at her through one half-lidded eye, the other too swollen to see. One of his arms was bent at an unnatural angle and what little of his body wasn't covered in blood was blackened and bruised.

"Steven!" Connie shrieked, her sword falling from her nerveless hand as she made to rush to him. But the boy jerked, holding out his unbroken arm to stop her.

"N-no…" He gasped, a bit of blood dribbling out of his mouth. "C-connie… run."

"I-what?" before Connie could make sense of what was happening, a shrouded figure rose up behind Steven.

"R-r-run." Steven repeated, staring at her with pleading eyes.

The towering figure lifted its foot and stomped down, slamming it in the middle of Steven's back with a meaty crunch. Steven jerked, then went limp, his head falling to the ground as his open eye continued to stare at Connie beseechingly.

"Steven!" Connie screamed, reaching out helplessly towards her fallen friend.

This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be REAL!

Then the figure began to move towards her. Connie caught a glimpse of a vicious grin, and a harsh orange glow before the world shattered.

She was back in the Big Donut. That was the first thing her mind registered, the only thing her mind could register. Everything else was numb. It took a few moments, but gradually she became aware of repetitive thumping and growling, the sounds of a struggle. She blinked several times and the world swam back into focus.

The corrupt gem was still here. Connie watched as it turned towards her and opened its mouth, only for something to slam into its jaw with a loud crunch. It yowled, and Connie blinked again as what she was seeing registered.

She watched as Sadie spun and slammed a thick wooden chair into the gem's face, knocking it over as the wood splintered beneath the force. She heard Sadie's ferocious shout as she threw herself on top of it. Connie stared as the blond girl scooped up a broken piece of wood and stabbed down, driving it into the bear's neck.

Connie blinked as she watched the gem burst into smoke, as a shiny round sphere clinked against the floor.

Sadie turned back to her "—nnie? Connie!" The stout girl rushed towards her, clapping her hands against Connie's shoulders and giving her a shake. "Say something, Connie, come on!"

"…Sadie?" Connie murmured. "What… what happened?"

"Oh thank god." Sadie sighed. "After I got Lars to safety I came back to check on you. Whatever
that thing did to Lars it must have done to you too. You'd fallen down and weren't moving. It was about to eat you or something so I, uh… hit it with a chair." Sadie admitted sheepishly. "But what about you? are you alright?"

"I… I'm… fine." Connie said lamely, those last images running through her head again. Her eyes shot wide, "where's Steven!?" she demanded.

Sadie blinked, but jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. "He's over there." Connie looked and glimpsed Steven fighting through the broken windows.

He was rolling around in his bubble, the onyx monster wailing away as it tried to break inside. All four of the creature's stretchy limbs were wrapped around the bubble in a full body hug, and it was whacking its face against the pink barrier.

"Do you think he needs help?" Sadie asked, looking at the shard of broken wood in her hand doubtfully. "I'm not sure this is gonna be much use…"

Whatever Connie was about to say was cut off as Steven pushed his hands outward, and spikes erupted from his bubble, impaling the gem monster all over its body. The wailing cut off as abruptly as it vanished into smoke and Steven scooped up its gem in triumph.

"I did it Connie!" he declared, holing the gem aloft as he turned back. His grin faltered when he saw her sitting on the ground. "Connie?" he hurried back inside. "What happened?" he asked, "Are you alright? Where's the bear?"

"It's…gone." Connie answered, looking at his face and trying to focus on how unhurt it was, how both his eyes were open and there wasn't a speck of blood or bruise to be seen.

"I knew you could handle it." Steven grinned, "Where's the gem? I need to bubble it."

"Over here." Sadie scooped the silvery orb off the floor and handed it over. "What kind of gem is that, anyway?"

"Um…" Steven took it, sticking out his tongue as he concentrated. "It looks like some kind of sapphire, I think."

"… A sapphire." Connie echoed quietly. She could hear her heartbeat pounding away like a drum in her ears as she stared at the gem in his hand. "You mean… the ones that can see the future?"

"More or less, yeah." Steven answered, "Connie? What's wrong? You've gone all pale."

"It's nothing." She answered sharply, turning away. She felt sick. She could feel herself starting to hyperventilate, the images she had seen playing over and over in her mind. Faintly, she could hear Steven saying her name in the background, but his words were overlaid by others.

'"C-connie… run."

She nearly threw up her breakfast right then and there, but before she could her eyes fell on Rose's sword, abandoned on the ground. She froze, another memory running through her mind.

'A warrior must remain calm, Connie.' she could hear Pearl's words from a lifetime ago echoing in her mind. 'Your enemies will be stronger than you, they will outnumber you, but you must not let fear overcome you. For as long as you remain calm, they will break upon the blade of your focus.'
Connie took a deep, meditative breath, just like Pearl had taught her. She took another, focus with everything she had on breathing in, and out. In. and out. Slowly her breath became normal, her heartbeat ceased to thunder, and she forced serenity on herself.

"-onnie? Connie!"

"It's fine Steven." she bent low and scooped the pink saber off the floor, it's familiar weight sending another wave of calm through her. She turned back to her friend, forcing a grin on her face. "I just let my guard down and that gem nearly got me," She turned her grin on Sadie. "Good thing you came back," she tried to force her smile to become more natural as she turned the grin back to Steven. "Seriously, you should have seen her beat that thing into submission."

"She did?" Steven turned to the blond girl. "Sadie, that's awesome!"

"Oh… it wasn't anything too special…" Sadie grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of her neck.

Connie took another breath as Steven went off about how cool it was. She felt those horrible images trying to rise in the back of her mind, but she grabbed them and forced them down. Now that she'd had a moment to think, she could remember Steven telling her that Sapphire didn't actually see the future, just possibilities.

Which meant that all she had to do was make sure that one never came true.

"Not that what happened wasn't cool." She said loudly. "But shouldn't we be getting a move on? There are other people to save."

"Oh yeah." Steven nodded. "Are you going to be alright on your own, Sadie?"

"I think so." The girl nodded. "Someone needs to look after Lars, and I can lock us in the backroom." She waved them off. "Go on, you've got work to do."

"Right. Come on Connie, let's go."

Connie nodded and followed Steven out the broken door. She clenched her hand around the pommel of the pink blade.

She'd failed her first real fight.

But she was alive. That fact filled her with steely determination.

She wouldn't mess up again.

The giant lizard roared as Garnet dashed towards it again. It had already tried shooting its other arm at her. But she'd caught that one too and thrown it at another nearby gem, some kind of mishmash of scales and wings, blowing it away. Her oversized opponent bent low to meet her, tooth-filled maw gaping to swallow her whole.

Garnet spun, slamming one gauntlet into the side of its face so hard, its whole head bent sideways. She caught sight of its gem, a mottled green stone resting just beneath the jawline, and followed through, slamming her fingers into the scaly hide around it and yanking the stone free.

The monster vanished, releasing a puff of smoke. As Garnet dealt with it, she heard voices nearby.

"This situation is not excellent."
"Buck, for once will you stop complaining and just run!"

Garnet looked to the voices, two humans—she wasn't entirely sure which ones—were fleeing from an oversized, bright-blue caterpillar, its dozens of tiny legs undulating wildly as it tried to catch the running humans. Garnet moved automatically, flipping herself into the air and slamming down feet-first onto the caterpillar's head, its segmented body jerked, writhed, and popped. The humans stopped running as she dealt with the gem.

"Dang, girl," One whistled—one of the pizza sisters, if Garnet recalled correctly—"that was hardcore."

"Definitively done." The other, some boy in a nice pair of shades, nodded.

"It is dangerous here," Garnet said, turning away. "The Crystal Gems shall deal with this, but you must get yourself to safety." She didn't wait to hear their response as she leapt to the top of a nearby building.

She cast her eyes over the vista of Beach City, she could see Pearl twirling away from the jagged spikes of a gem monster just down the street, but made no move to help. Pearl could handle herself.

Besides, there were greater concerns: there were at least a dozen other corrupted gems in sight; snuffling through garbage, poking their noses into buildings, and just generally wreaking havoc…

But they weren't fighting each other.

Garnet narrowed her eye but realized it was true. While there were plenty of them, they were spread out rather evenly across the town… so much so that the gems would have no choice but to split up to deal with them quickly. She didn't fail to realize the implications:

Jasper was nearby.

Garnet clenched her fists tight, cursing her own carelessness. She'd let herself be too distracted; dealing with Moonstone and Steven, her search for the corrupted amber—she'd let her emotions pull her away from focusing on the actual threat. She should have tried harder to find and deal with the soldier… But hindsight was twenty twentys, or whatever humans said. There was no point focusing on that now.

She needed to figure out what Jasper was up to. The soldier couldn't take the Crystal Gems head-on, and she knew it. These corrupted gems were just a distraction, a way to split their focus.

But the reason was obvious: Jasper was after Steven.

Garnet whipped her head around, she could see the boy grappling with a shadowy gem monster outside the Big Donut, but there was no hint of the soldier. She must be waiting for them to split up further.

While the corrupt gems had to be dealt with, Jasper would be sorely disappointed if she thought that meant Garnet would have to leave the boy undefended.

Garnet split her focus, zeroing her third eye on Steven, anchoring its sight on the boy's immediate future. His fate showed danger, but no hint of the soldier making her move so he was safe enough for now. But should that change… Garnet would know minutes in advance, and she would be ready to teach the Homeworld Gem just what it meant to threaten the Crystal Gems.
Amethyst spin-balled down the street, gunning straight for a giant, six-legged cat.

She felt momentum stutter as the gem tried to hold her back, the sturdy crystals on its paw pads chipping as it pushed against the spinning quartz. Amethyst snorted and doubled down, pouring more energy into her spin. She felt herself speed up more and more until…

Amethyst exploded; purple fire shooting out of her form in every direction.

She uncurled, orientating herself in midair and saw the cat rolling on the ground, yowling as it tried to put out the fires in its mane. Not bothering to land, Amethyst pulled out her whip and slashed down at the feline's exposed belly. The gem's form popping, and a flick of her wrist sent her whip wrap around the gem and pull it back to her.

Amethyst landed lightly, snagging the gem out of the air and bubbling it in one smooth motion. Amethyst laughed. She was on fire! That had to be the sixth gem she'd taken down in as many minutes. She was on a winning streak and lovin' it baby!

She took a moment to bask in the feeling of victory before seeking out her next opponent.

A brief tingle in the back of her neck sent alarm bells ringing in her head. Acting on pure instinct, she threw herself sideways as an orange blur cut a swathe through the air she'd been standing in a moment ago. Before she could react, the blur reversed direction and shot straight towards her, cutting a path in the pavement. It slammed into her gut, launching her across the street and into a tree.

Amethyst gasped as her form crunched into the wood, her eyes watering at the pain, but forced herself to fight through the pain as her form wavered. Pushing away from the tree she held up her whip in an attempt to ward off another assault, but none came.

Through teary eyes she saw an orange blob standing before her, Amethyst shook her head, forcing her vision to clear, took another look and froze.

"Hello runt." Jasper smirked.

Chapter End Notes

'Uh oh'-ing intensifies.

So I realized something. I'm thirty-eight chapters into an SU Story, and I have yet to traumatize Connie. That kind of negligence is frankly embarrassing, and I hope you'll all forgive me.

But seriously though, that got kinda… dark. Fair warning to you all, that's probably not gonna change any time soon. There will be more than tears shed when all this is over.

If you didn't see your suggested monster, don't worry. There are more to come, so feel free to suggest some. It really is kind of a drag to come up with a bunch of unique ones on my own. I also probably shouldn't, because the main gem I came up with on my own that featured in this chapter in any real capacity nearly tentacle hentai-ed
Amethyst… a fact I'm okay with, but also kind of disappointed that I am okay with it. But it was only trying to eat her; so it's fine, right?

ANYWAY! there's still plenty of monsters to fight, with plenty of open slots (even I don't know how many) for more corrupted gems, feel free to leave a review suggesting one.

Till next time!
Writer's block, yaaaaaay…

So while in that block of the writer's variety, I read over my story. Naturally, I discovered grammatical errors, facepalm-worthy word omissions, etc. But there is one thing in particular I'd like to bring up.

Over the last five or so chapters there have been instances where a word or phrase is repeated. Like: itIt was a great time. Or: theirTheir best effort. These are errors that happened during editing between me and my Beta, not sure why.

Kind of embarrassing, but there's something more important I'd like to address:

Why did nobody point this out to me?

Did… did you all think I was doing it on purpose?

You'd think someone would have pointed it out. I thought the internet was supposed to be hyper-critical of grammatical errors like this. … Ah well. No big deal. I'll just pay attention to that more closely in future.

… Imma just keep going now.

Tally-Ho! Tears and trauma await!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dr. Maheswaran suppressed the urge to yawn, refusing to take her eyes off the road. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night—or any night this week, really—but that wasn't going to stop her. Her weeklong on-call duty at the hospital was finally over and she had the next few days off.

Now she just needed to pick up Connie and bring her home, then she could collapse into bed. She pressed down a little harder on the accelerator, turning onto a winding coastal road that would take her to Beach City.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Mr. Universe to take good care of her daughter. But she wasn't naïve—if Connie had actually spent the whole week with the man and not those multicolored magic ladies, then she'd go back to med school.

Dr. Maheswaran frowned as she once again mulled over those… magical ladies. Who knew what trouble Connie had been getting into with them and the Universe boy? Fighting monsters, using swords, putting herself in danger… part of her still couldn't believe she'd actually allowed Connie anywhere near them after she'd learned the truth.

The doctor shook her head. Nothing bad had happened… not yet, at least. And she had told Greg in no uncertain terms that if anything should occur, she was to be informed immediately. Her worries were the end result of paranoia, nothing more.
Then she pulled around a bend in the road and saw the smoke.

She could just make out the boardwalk of Beach City in the distance. Above it, several trails of smoke wafted sluggishly into the sky.

She tore her eyes away, even as something cold slipped into her gut, and forced herself to remain focused on the road. The situation may not be as bad as it looked. She had done plenty of first response work and seen what a bad building fire looked like. The smoke was nowhere near dense enough to suggest the whole boardwalk was on fire, just a few buildings—or maybe even just a town-wide barbecue. There was no reason particular reason to believe her daughter was involved…

Nonetheless, she drove faster, pulling into the outskirts of the town in a matter of minutes. What she saw did little to assuage her worries. There were signs of damage everywhere: downed trees, wrecked cars, and torn up streets.

There was no more denying it, this was no overly large barbecue. Something had happened.

She needed to find her daughter.

She spent five minutes trying to navigate the streets towards the shore, but with little luck. After the fourth road ended in a barricade of overturned cars and broken trees, she put on the brakes, pursed her lips as she ran through a mental checklist of her options.

First, she snatched her phone off the seat next to her and punched in her daughter's number, berating herself for not thinking of it sooner. She waited with baited breath as the phone rung once, twice, three times… four… five…

"Hi there! you've reached Connie Maheswaran. I'm not able to—"

Letting out a few choice profanities. She left a brief message instructing her daughter to call her back as soon as possible. Then, she closed the phone and shoved it into her purse as she began to brainstorm once more.

The shoreline wasn't that far away— it couldn't be much more than a mile—and this backtracking with the car was only costing her time. She'd done track back in college, and while she might not be as spry as she used to be, she could still run a mile or two if she had to. Not to mention that every minute she delayed was another minute Connie was no doubt spending charging headfirst into danger.

Decision made, she got out of the of the car, taking a moment to snatch her purse—she might need the phone and medical supplies inside—and began to run. Squeezing through the blockade and making a note of which street she'd left the car on. As she ran, she couldn't help but notice how quiet it was. Despite the obvious destruction, there were no screams of panic or the familiar wail of ambulance sirens. There was nothing to hear save the slap, slap, slap of her slip-ons hitting the pavement.

Well, that wasn't completely true, if she strained her ears she could hear a commotion in the distance; some crashes and bangs, but they were muffled, distant—several blocks away at least.

But as far as her immediate surroundings were concerned, she might as well be running through a ghost town. She came to the stop at the edge of a park, and glanced back in the direction of the sounds. It wouldn't take her closer to the plumes of smoke she knew were coming from the boardwalk, to where Connie most likely was.

But where there was commotion, there was probably people, someone who could tell her what was
going on. Perhaps it would be wiser to seek more information first. What if the town had been evacuated? How would she find Connie then? Going there would end up wasting more time later than a small informational detour would now. Perhaps—

*Click. Click. Click.*

The doctor paused as a slow, rhythmic clicking filled the air. She frowned, glancing around for the source, but spotting no immediate culprit.

*Click. Click. Click-click.*

She tilted her head to the side, trying to get a better sense of the noise. It sounded like something with tiny metal shoes walking deliberately across wooden floors. It also sounded like it was coming from behind… her.

She spun around and the clicking cut off, but she still couldn't see anything. There was nothing but trees overhead and a thick tangle of brush at ground level. She took a single, nervous step backwards. Whatever this was, it would probably be best to get out of here.

…*Click.*

A final furtive click came from somewhere overhead, her head snapped upwards just in time to catch a glimpse of orange and blue before something struck her face, covering her eyes and blocking out her sight.

The predator crouched low, its steps silent as shadows it padded towards its prey. The unsuspecting victim had its back turned, fully focus on another corrupted gem in front of it. The predator stilled, its chitinous black tail waving slowly as it made ready to pounce.

It saw the prey bring both hands down on the head of its enemy, dispersing them to smoke—an *opening!* Its instincts screamed in victory as it leapt, jaws wide to rip the head from its quarry.

Then its foe crouched to grab the defeated gem, and the predator hit them a little bit higher.

Garnet blinked as she felt something burrowing at her hair, reaching around her head she made a grab for whatever it was. It resisted, but she gave it a solid yank and her hand came back wrapped around the neck of a corrupted gem.

She stared as the creature struggled to spit out the wad of black hair. It looked much like a dog, if a dog was covered in shiny red plates, a long sinuous tail lashed at her smacking uselessly against her gauntlets as four legs ending in large puffs of curly black fur attempted to claw her. A pair of glowing red eyes glared at her banefully as the gem choked.

"Cute."

The creature snarled, finally hacking out the hair ball, its jaws went wide and something shot out—or tried to. Garnet's other hand clamped around it before it could hit her. Instead of a tongue, the corrupt gem appeared to have a second, extendable mouth bristling with fangs that was doing its utmost to bite her.

"… less cute." Garnet clenched her fists, poofing the creature.

Garnet turned away, taking a moment to take stock of the situation. It was going well—or at least, as well as it could. She'd focused on dealing with the largest, most immediately dangerous gems
she could find. A tactic that had taken her far from the boardwalk, but had at least kept the civilians from harm. Pearl was there and she was more than enough to deal with the smaller, less destructive monsters—ones that the citizens of beach city could probably escape on their own.

More importantly, her vision still showed her that Steven was fine. She could sense he was with Connie just a few blocks over, fighting what appeared to be a large goat with pink, glossy horns—nothing the two of them couldn't handle.

Jasper must not be ready to make her move yet, if she was even planning to.

Either way, she'd be ready. Nothing was going to turn her third eye away from Steven.

Garnet turned to find her next opponent. There was a giant green gorilla down the street stacking several cars on top of each other that looked like it needed her attention.

Pearl held still as a crystalline boar pawed the ground, its pair of mean little eyes glaring at her from behind a mishmash of malformed tusks. Pearl beckoned to it, daring it onward. The corrupted gem obliged, snorting out a cloud of green smoke before rushing at her with a furious roar.

Pearl regarded the charging gem coolly, her spear clutched lightly in one hand. She waited until it was almost upon her before acting. In one smooth motion she dropped to her knees, braced the butt of her spear against the ground, and willed it to grow. Her spear responded, becoming thicker and longer as a crossbar sprouted a meter down the blade.

Tiny eyes went wide with panic a second before it impaled itself, its roar becoming squeals as the blade penetrated its body. Pearl felt the spear buckling under the force and gripped it tighter.

The boar gem came to a stop, the crossbar keeping it from running the spear through it completely. Its legs jerked, in a vain effort to gore the speargem. With a final groan the creature fell still, glaring at her for few moments longer, as though refusing to acknowledge its defeat. After a long moment, the fight left its eyes and it burst into smoke.

Pearl sighed, scooping the gem of the ground and bubbling it. She allowed herself a moment's respite.

That was the twelfth gem she'd had to take down and it was starting to wear on her. Nonetheless, progress was being made, she could no longer immediately spot her next target. She couldn't hear any screams of panic at least, which hopefully meant all the humans had made it to safety.

Still, that didn't mean that her job was done. Pearl pushed herself back to her feet.

"Skillfully done."

Pearl stiffened at the voice. She spun, her body going cold as her eyes confirmed what her ears had told her.

"Jasper…" Pearl hissed.

"indeed," the soldier agreed, staring back at her with a keen interest, like Pearl was a dog that had done an honestly impressive trick.

Pearl's eyes narrowed as things clicked into place. "You're responsible for all of this, aren't you?" she demanded, gesturing at the destruction around them.
Jasper glanced around mildly, a slight smile on her lips. "Perhaps I am. What of it?"

"Endangering the lives of innocents for your own ends," Pearl scoffed. "I should have known, it's exactly the sort of cowardly thing a Homeworld soldier would do." That wiped the smile off the soldier's face.

"I've heard of you, you know," said the soldier, "I didn't realize who you were the first time we met. But you're her, aren't you? The Gem Cracker. The Pearl Who Fights." Jasper's lips stretched wide again "Rose Quartz's Pearl."

"What of it?" Pearl asked calmly, echoing Jasper's tone while her mind frantically shuffled through her options. Could she take Jasper? That was a hard maybe; if she were careful, focused, and lucky. But a far better choice would be to find Garnet—quickly. If only she had any idea where the fusion was. Pearl shot a quick glance around, but the comforting sight of a square refused to materialize.

She was on her own.

"Looking for someone?" Jasper asked, "the fusion, maybe?" a smirk crossed the soldiers face. "She's not here. She's… busy." her smirk widened "it's just you and me. I hope you put up a better fight than the runt."

"The runt?" Pearl echoed, tensing up. Was she talking about Steven?

Jasper held up her hand and opened it, revealing a purple gem. "The runt."

"Amethyst…" Pearl swallowed. That… that was not any better. "How did you…"

"How do you think?" Jasper scoffed. "We fought. She lost. Although calling that a fight would be generous, I didn't even need my helm—" Jasper paused as the purple gem began to glow. The soldier gave a bored sigh as the gem floated out of her hand and did nothing to stop it. Pearl felt her hope soar. No doubt Jasper thought she could take on Amethyst and herself easily, and perhaps she could.

But just wait until they introduced the Homeworlder to Opal.

As Amethyst's body began to emerge, Jasper's hand shot out; wrapping around the glowing head and crushing it into smoke. The violet gem dropped soundlessly back into the soldier's palm.

For a moment, Pearl heard nothing but the distant sound of the sea.

"You know," Jasper commented, almost conversationally, "that's the fourth time I've had to do that. For a gem who went down so easily, that runt sure doesn't know when to take a hint." Her golden eyes turned to consider Pearl. "But I suppose that's just how Crystal Gems are: weak, but determined."

Pearl stared back into the contempt in the soldier's eyes, the derision which she had fought a war to break free from so long ago, and felt something fiery run through her mind.

She charged, clutching her spear out in front of her with both hands. Jasper gave a disappointed sigh, not even falling into a combat stance as approached.

At half a dozen paces, Pearl changed tactics. Putting on a burst of speed she threw herself to her knees and came in low, her spear sweeping out to cut off Jasper at the knees. The soldier's eyes widened and she leapt into the air, Pearl's blade passed missed by inches as the soldier summersaulted over it. Pearl spun back to her feet and glared at the soldier.
"Much better," Jasper laughed. There was a flash of light and her helmet materialized. She held up her fist and an orange bubble materialized around Amethyst's gem, suspending it in the air. The soldier cracked her knuckles, her eyes glittering. "Come on then, show me the warrior who struck fear in the hearts of Homeworld."

Pearl reversed her grip on her spear and slung it like a javelin at the grinning gem's face. Jasper tipped her head forward, her nose ablaze. Sparks flew as the spear glanced off the soldier's helmet. Jasper tilted her head back up, no doubt about to say some demeaning taunt. But Pearl had already covered half the distance between them, her hands pressed against her gem. She leapt into the air, materializing a blade in each of her hands as she came down on the warrior with a deadly cross slash.

Jasper dove forward, her hair growing into spikes that spat sparks as they scraped against Pearl's blades. She landed, with a twirl her eyes narrowed as she watched the soldier right herself. The swordgem took a breath, forcing herself to become calm. She needed to focus. Jasper might be an exceptionally well-crafted gem, but she was still much like a typical quartz—her strength only matched by her arrogance.

Pearl had cut down hundreds of such warriors and she hadn't done it by hacking at them like a berserker.

Pearl's gem lit up and two holo-pearl's materialized on either side, she tossed them each a sword and drew a third from her gem. As one, they stepped away from her, circling around the orange gem. Jasper ignored them, her gaze focused solely on Pearl.

Pearl attacked, her holo-clones moving in with her. Jasper waited until they were almost upon her before spinning on her heel and throwing herself headfirst at one of the clones, her helmet bashing it into dust. As she spun, her hair whipped out, slashing through the clone behind her and forcing Pearl to stop short lest she meet the same fate. Off balance, she threw herself forward as the hair passed in a clumsy attempt to catch the warrior through the spine.

Jasper turned back, hefting one of the holo-Pearl's sword, her hand only barely fitting the grip and parried the blow. Pearl narrowed her eyes and launched into a series of thrusts, slashes, and feints that had taken down countless clumsy soldiers. But still, Jasper kept pace, blocking every attack, yet offering no counters.

"Well, I think I've seen enough." Jasper commented, flicking her blade down to deflect a low slash from Pearl. Pearl ignored her, devoting her attention to the fight. If she could just find one opening…

"I can certainly see how you bested the others." Jasper continued, locking blades with her and pushing her back with a brutal shove. She shook her head as Pearl recovered her footing, she knew she needed to finish this quickly, while Jasper was too absorbed in toying with her. The swordgem poured energy into her legs and released it in a sudden burst, sending her rocketing back at the soldier with her sword held out to pierce through the lowered guard.

"But…" Jasper's form blurred. There was a flash of light, like sunlight on rippling water.

Pearl crashed to the ground, staring in disbelief at the severed stump of her hand. She looked up wordlessly as a shadow loomed over her head. Jasper held her sword upraised, looking down with cold eyes.

"You never met me."

And brought the blade down with all the finality of a guillotine.
"Uh-oh"-ing level goes through the roof.

I was never planning on showing the fight between Amethyst and Jasper. What would have been the point? Much as I adore that purple lady, it has been canonically proven that she can't beat Jasper alone, she's just not strong enough.

So I thought: Hey? What if I had Jasper beat the stuffing out of Pearl? that hasn't happened on screen. In all honesty, Pearl probably stands a better chance at beat the soldier than Amethyst, as beating opponents who are physically superior to her is basically what Pearl does.

But I believe Jasper must have more than just raw strength. If she really is a super soldier, she's got to have the skill to back up that claim. She has to have been doing something these past five thousand years and working out wouldn't do anything for her. I could see her mastering every weapon she can get her hands on.

That's basically the only part of this chapter that looked anything like I had planned. The scene with Garnet was included solely so I could include one gem a person recommended: they wanted a corrupted ruby that could breathe fire, that looked like a cross between a dog and a xenomorph (You know, the monster from Alien?). Since they didn't specify what breed of dog, I assumed they meant poodle. So that gem was supposed to be an xenomorph poodle. What fun! Originally, I wanted Onion to tame this creature and ride it into battle, but that just didn't end up happening. Oh well.

I also decided to bring Connie's mom into it. Because writer's block and I needed a new character to traumatize. Did you know her first name is Priyanka? I didn't until I looked it up. But couldn't bring myself to use it here, because I thought nobody would know who was talking about.
"Faster, Steven! it's getting away!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" the boy huffed, his legs pumping like pistons as he tried to keep up.

Connie refocused on moving faster, glaring down the street where their quarry stood, nibbling on a telephone pole without a care in the world. Its Pink curly horns bobbed thoughtfully as it chewed a piece of solid wood.

They managed to get about a within a dozen meters before the gem noticed them. It took one final bite out of the telephone pole, then its cloven hooves began to shine. Connie put on another burst of speed and lunged, her sword raised to take off the gems head. The gem locked eyes with Connie, its rectangular pupils soulless and smug.

Then it vanished, leaving nothing save for a shimmering rainbow and the staccato beat of hooves on pavement.

Connie slashed her blade through the light anyway, scattering it and raising sparks as her sword struck the pavement.

Her eyebrow twitched.

She was really starting to hate that goat.

"Aw nuts," Steven groaned, coming to a stop and taking big gulps of airbending double in an attempt to catch the breath he'd left behind a few blocks back. Connie didn't say anything. Steven sighed "...at least it's easy to track?" he tried, gesturing at the trial of iridescent color weaving through the air away from them.

"...yeah, I guess that's true." Connie grunted, hoisting her saber over her shoulder. "Come on. Let's find the stupid thing before the trail goes cold."
"I mean, do we have to?" Steven asked. "That's, like, the fourth time it's gotten away."

"What do you mean do we have to? It's a corrupt gem," Connie answered. "and that's the fifth time," she corrected, keeping her eyebrow from twitching through sheer force of will.

"That's kind of my point. It may be a gem monster, but I haven't really seen it try to hurt anybody. It just runs away when anybody gets close," Steven shrugged. "I just think it might be better to see if there is something else we could be doing to help people, I think I saw Onion riding a gem earlier, we should probably deal with that."

There was a drawn-out groan of straining wood. Both of them watched as the telephone pole the goat had been eating began to slowly tip over, the powerlines over their heads pulling taught. Connie grabbed Steven's hand and yanked him away as the lines snapped, sending the wooden pillar crashing to the ground in a cascade of flailing power cables.

Once the commotion died away, Connie looked at Steven, eyebrow raised.

"Oh right." Steven sighed. "Property damage."

Connie didn't bother with a reply, instead moving to follow the shimmering trail of light down the sidewalk. Steven feel in step behind her. "Don't worry, Connie. this time we'll get it for sure!" Steven declared. Connie grunted, not really feeling up to talking. She could feel him frowning at her back as he switched topics. "I haven't heard much fighting in a while. I think this might be one of the last ones."

"Could be." Connie turned off the paved road as the rainbow trail made a hard turn over a clump of brambles. Steven gave up and followed her in silence. The trail led them a little farther, swerving through trees and doubling back on itself once or twice. She got the feeling this gem was taunting them. They'd first found it on the boardwalk, taking bites out of the Fry Shack as Peedee tried to drive it off with a broom. When they had moved in to help, it had eaten the broom and vanished just like it had minutes ago.

Their following attempts had been equally fruitless: they'd find it eating whatever happened to be around, it saw them coming, waited for them to get close, and then it was gone.

It was like the stupid thing could teleport! But…considering it left a trail, it was more likely that it was just running ridiculously fast—not that that information really helped. They had no hope of keeping up with it either way.

They needed to sneak up on it somehow, or maybe trick it? Maybe if she approached from the front and Steven went from behind? If she could chase it towards him, he could throw up a big barrier and have it run right into it. That might work, or at least give her a chance to stab it.

"… Connie?"

"Yeah?" Or maybe Steven could jump down on it from above with that spike ball thing he did. That might work…

"Are you alright?"

Connie blinked, and shot a glance back at him, Steven was frowning back at her. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"It's just, you seem kind of… upset." He answered, somewhat apologetically.
Connie turned back towards the trail "I don't know what you mean."

She could practically feel Steven's discomfort radiating off him. "Well… you seem… tense."

"I'm not tense," Connie said tensely. "I'm focused. Focused on taking out this goat. You should focus on that too. It's gonna take both of us to catch it. We can talk about it later," she added, sensing Steven's intent to keep asking. "Now's not the time."

"…Okay." silence fell between them as they followed the slowly fading trail of light. Connie turned her mind back to tactics. There were a lot of trees around now, maybe Steven could bring one or two of them to life or something. It wasn't a bad plan but… surely there was something she could do. How could she call herself a Crystal Gem if she just depended on Steven's powers to solve everything? There had to be something she could do, some way she could make a difference —Otherwise, what had all that training been for?

Steven needed her to step it up.

"You know," Steven said after a few minutes. "if you don't talk about whatever's wrong, it's not gonna go away. so maybe you should-" Connie cut him off.

"Steven! I said we'll talk about it later! right now we need to-"

"MeeeeeeeEEEH-EH-EH-EH-EH!" it was Connie's turn to be interrupted as a frantic bleat echoed through the trees. The gem goat! She clutched her sword tighter, glancing around in an attempt to determine where the noise was coming from. Then several things happened in quick succession.

The bleating rose to fever pitch and a nearby bunch of underbrush was torn apart as a rainbow blur came barreling through it. There was a whoosh as Steven reflexively materialized a bubble around them. The bubble only just managing to form as the rainbow slammed into it, sending them rolling backward and making pain blossoms in her head as it smacked against the inside of the pink barrier.

She lost track of what happened next; her head hurt, Steven was shouting her name, his voice mingling with the panicked bleating, and a rainbow was still running tight circles around the bubble making her vision swim. Then something wet hit her face. Connie blinked, the pain clearing as water dripped down her nose.

"Connie!" Her vision cleared and she saw Steven contorting his lips, another wad of spit gathering in his mouth. Her hand shot out on instinct and covered his mouth. "I'm good!" she said hurriedly, trying to figure out what was happening. The rainbow was still running tight circles around the bubble and an idea struck Connie with the speed of inspiration.

"Steven, Expand the bubble!" She ordered.

"I, what? Connie-"

"NOW!"

Steven flinched back and shoved his arms outward, the pink barrier mimicked his movements, expanding like an airbag. There was a crunch and a startled bleat as it slammed into something. The rainbow flew through the air and hit a tree. The swirl of color died down, materializing into the familiar shape of the giant goat gem. It moaned weakly as it slid down the tree, its legs twitching feebly as their glow dimmed. It was covered by a foamy, neon blue gunk that covered its eyes and was tangling up its legs.
"Uh, what is that stuff?" Steven asked.

"Drop the bubble," Connie answered, hefting her sword. The gem was stunned, distracted, and its belly was exposed—they'd never get a better chance to take the thing down.

"But-

"I said, drop it." once more, the hard insistence in her tone snapped Steven into action and the pink sheen covering the world popped like a soap bubble. Connie launched herself at the prone gem. It couldn't even see her coming as she brought the pink saber down in a two-handed stab, the blade slid into the gem's form like warm butter and it jerked, giving off one final, pained bleat before bursting into smoke.

"Gotcha!" Connie grinned, basking in the satisfying feeling of an opponent well stabbed.

"Nice one!" Steven clapped.

Connie looked down and frowned, the goat had vanished but the blue gunk had remained. She pulled her blade back and the goo stretched refusing to release the sword. She gave it another yank and the blade pulled free, little globules of blue sticking to the blade.

"Gross." Steven commented.

"Yeah…" Connie attempted to scrape the blade free on the bark of the tree with limited success. "Can you see the goat's gem?"

"Hmm…" Steven examined the pile of goo. "Nope. What color was it?"

"Not sure, I never got a good look at it." Connie frowned, she'd gotten most of the junk off her blade, but the tip was still stained blue—she'd need to make sure to clean that before Pearl saw it or she was in for a lecture. She crouched, roving her eyes over the mess of sticky blueness, now that she was taking a closer look, it wasn't just goo: leaves, sticks, clumps of dirt, and other bits of junk were caught in it. But there wasn't any sign of a gemstone.

"What even is this stuff?" Steven poked it with his finger, then wiping it on the ground.

"Not sure, but I'm betting it came from another corrupted gem."

"…Yeah, that sounds right," Steven nodded. "I guess it attacked Mr. Goat, and blinded it with this stuff."

"Must have," Connie glanced around, trying to find a suitable stick. "We're gonna have track this other gem down." Spotting a thick branch Connie grabbed it and starting poking through the blue mess. "Gotta find the goat's gem first."

"Right." Steven left for a moment, returning with his own stick and joining her in her own search. It was slow going, the blue gunk was like half-liquid taffy, stretching and hardening as they sifted through it. Twice Connie's stick got too slathered in goop to be useful, forcing her to fetch another. As they searched, all kinds of stuff turned up: plastic bottles, an empty bag of chips, a discarded glow stick—all kinds of junk. But no sign of a gemstone.

"Oh that's too bad," said Steven, hoisting a particularly large blob up with his stick and examining it. I think somebody lost their purse."

"Bummer," Connie answered distractedly. How long would it take the gem to reform? Maybe they
could wait and stab it before it regenerated all the way? Nah, there was no way to know how long
it would take. Better to just keep looking until they found it.

"Think we should try to return it?" Steven asked, sticking his tongue out in concentration as he
tried to scrape the bag off against the tree without touching it.

"With how it is now?" Connie shot it a dismissive glance. "I wouldn't bother. It'd be a pain to carry
around and we don't even know who it belongs to."

"…I still think we should try to return it." Steven huffed, "It's the right thing to do."

"Why don't you open it and see if you can find an ID?" Connie frowned as her stick got all gummed
up again. She discarded it, and began rooting around for another. "If there's a wallet, we can just
return that instead of carrying around that sticky mess."

"Good idea."

"No problem." Connie redoubled her effort to sift through the goop as Steven fumbled with the
clasp. After a particularly hard stroke, she caught a glimpse of reddish shine. Pouncing, she
reached out and carefully wrapped her fingers around the glistening thing. She grinned.

Jackpot.

With a hard yank, she pulled the gem free. It sat in her palm innocently, for all the world like
wasn't responsible for lead her on a wild goose chase across the town. "Steven, I found the gem.
You wanna-" Connie trailed off. Steven was clutching a lanyard and staring at the ID card attached
to it, an unpleasant look on his face. "Steven? Something wrong?" The boy bit his lip and looked at
her.

"Connie," he said nervously, "I think we have a problem." He turned the bit of plastic around so
she could look and staring out at Connie from behind the clear plastic coating was her mother's
face.

"Connie, hold on!" Steven called, "slow down!"

"There's no time!" the girl snapped back at him, leaping over a fallen log and charging through the
woods as fast as the brush would let her. "My mom's out here and she's been attacked by a
corrupted gem. We need to save her!"

"We don't know that for sure," Steven called back, "Maybe your mom got away? what was she
even doing out here in the first place?"

"I'm not willing to take that chance!"

Steven sighed and, dredging up a feeling of happiness, leapt into the air, soaring weightlessly over
Connie's head and landing in front of her with his arms out stretched. Not expecting him to drop out
of the sky, she ran into him and they both went sprawling in the litter of leaves coating the forest
floor.

"Steven! What the heck?" Connie yelled, pushing herself of him and trying to push on.

Steven summoned a bubble around himself, trapping her inside with him. "Connie! you need to
calm down!"
"What do you mean, calm down?" she shouted back, wincing as her voice echoed around within the bubble. "People are in danger!"

"And if we charge off into the middle of it, so will we!" Steven shouted back. "We're both tired, if we go charging off into the woods without a plan we'll be in bigger trouble. We don't even know where this gem is or what it looks like."

"And what do suggest instead? Just leave?" Connie threw her hands into the air. "How will that help anyone?"

"I was actually thinking we could find Garnet," Steven answered, trying to put as much space between them as he could, which wasn't much considering he'd trapped them both in a bubble. "She doesn't get tired, and with her future vision she'd be able to find your mom right away. Charging off in a random direction won't help anything."

"I'm not charging off in a random direction." Connie put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I'm following the trail."

"Uh…what trail?"

Connie rolled her eyes and pointed, Steven squinted. Now that he looked he could see a trail of broken brush and scattered leaves weaving between the trees. He looked back at her, his brow furrowing.

She rolled her eyes. "Did you see how that goat was charging around at the end? All we need to do is follow the mess it made. Wherever it picked up my mom's purse, it either found it along the way or at the end." She crossed her arms. "Is that good enough? Can you get rid of the bubble now? Some of us don't exactly have moms to spare, you know?"

The bubble popped, dropping them onto the forest floor. Steven stared at her. Connie's eyes widened as what she'd said seemed to register and she flinched. "Wait, Steven, I'm sorry—I didn't mean—it's just…" Connie sighed, looking away and rubbing her shoulder, "what's the point of all that training if we can't do anything when it actually matters."

Steven frowned, a suspicion forming in his mind, "does this have something to do with happened back in the Big Donut? You've been acting weird since then."

"What? No!" Connie started. Steven crossed his arms and stared at her harder. "…Okay, yes." She admitted. "But exactly what happened isn't important right now."

"Yeah, that's true," Steven nodded, somewhat reluctantly. "We don't really have time to fetch Garnet or the others. Your mom needs help and we're the only ones available." He hefted his shield, "But that's why we need to stick together! Pearl always tells us that staying calm in an emergency is the most important thing, so you can't go rushing off ahead like that!"

Connie looked at him, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Okay. You're right."

"Had to happen one day!" Steven grinned. "Now come on, let's go save the day!" they set off shoulder to shoulder at a brisk, yet cautious pace. They didn't speak, but Steven kept a close eye on his friend. He could tell she was still upset, but at least she wasn't panicking anymore. Steven put it out of his mind, Connie was right, they could talk everything out once everyone was safe.

It was only a matter of minutes before the trail began to change; the trees and plants littered with more globs of that blue goo, until they came into a tiny clearing coated in the stuff. Globby strings of blue dripped from the branches overhead and suspended among the strands were giant balls of
the goo, they looked sort of like liquid-y cocoons.

That…wasn't creepy at all.

"Stay on guard, Steven." Connie ordered, "the gem is somewhere around here." Personally, he thought the warning was kind of unnecessary. But he nodded anyway, following her lead with his shield at the ready. A sharp grunt split the air, making them both spin around.

One of the balls of goo had a deer stuck in it, its antlered heard the only thing visible. It lowed sadly at them, making a halfhearted struggle against its sticky prison. Beside it, two slightly smaller cocoons swayed, a second, antler-less deer head stuck out of one, and a set of four tiny legs jutting from the other, pumping feebly against the air.

"We should get them down," Steven said immediately, swallowing the sick feeling in the back of his throat.

"Stay focused, Steven" Connie replied, forcing herself to look away. "We're here for my mom, anything else comes after." She looked around. "It looks like this gem is snatching up whatever it can get its hands on." She nodded to a tiny sphere of gunk that had a squirrel in it. The tiny tree rodent chittered at them her angrily, as though demanding what they thought they were looking at. Connie ignored it. "Can… can you see my mom in any of these?"

Steven glanced around, there were at least a dozen different blobs suspended among of varying sizes. "What about that one?" he asked, pointing.

Connie followed his finger. The blob in question wasn't very wide, but it was long. Just the right size for an adult human. It was stuck flat against a tree trunk, and wasn't moving. Steven couldn't spot any body parts sticking out, which… wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Connie didn't answer, moving closer to the ball.

"Mom?" she called softly, once she was within arm's reach. At the sound of her voice, the blob started wriggling. "Mom!" Connie closed the distance and drew her sword. "Mom! I'm here. I'm going to try to get you down, but I need you to hold still." Slowly, the wriggling stopped, one end bobbing up and down a few times.

Very carefully, Connie pressed her blade flat against the trunk and slid it into the goo. Connie stopped, but there were no grunts, so she began to move the blade back and forth, trying to slice the goo inside without hurting what was hopefully her mom. It was slow going, the goop didn't really cut, it just flowed around the blade. After a minute or two with nothing to show for it, pulled the blade out and turned to Steven. "You got any ideas?"

"Um…" Steven thought hard. They couldn't touch the goo, lest they got stuck themselves. What if…

He held out his hand and summoned a large shield, as flat as he could make it and wider than he was tall. Slowly, he slid the shield behind the ball of goo, gently forcing it into the furrow Connie had cut. Once he was done, the blob was stuck, not to the tree, but his shield. He tipped the shield over slowly, then dismissed it, dropping the blob to the ground.

Connie pounced, grabbing a handful of fallen leaves, scrapping them against one end of the cocoon and pulling away the thick handful of goo.

A brown face and pair of frightened eyes stared up at her.
"Mom!" Connie gasped, nearly sobbing in relief. Dr. Maheswaran grunted, wriggling against the goo once more. "Don't worry mom, I'm here! Let's get you out of there."

Click. Click... Click.

Steven saw Dr. Maheswaran's eyes go wide and her struggles grew more frantic. "Mom, calm down!" Connie shouted, "I'm getting you out as fast as I can!"

The older woman grunted, shaking her head and jerking against her daughter's efforts.

Click. Click. Click-click.

And all at once, Steven understood.

"Connie, look out!" He yelled, snapping his hands up and conjuring a wide shield over head to shelter them. It was only half formed when a mass of blue liquid splatter against the barrier.

"It's the gem!" Connie yelled, sort of unnecessarily. Steven attempted to peer through his shield, but couldn't see anything through the blue goo sticking to it. The liquid wasn't falling anymore so the gem must have stopped attacking for now. Moving quickly, Steven threw the used shield aside and conjured a second, cleaner one.

Click. Click. Click.

Whatever it was, the gem was moving around. But... "Can you see where it is, Connie?"

"No, you?" Connie had put her back to his and was scanning the branches overhead.

"Nope," try as he might, he couldn't spot anything moving around through the thick canopy of leaves overhead.

Click-Click.

"Got any ideas?" Steven asked, biting his lips.

"Any chance you can bring the trees to life and make them clobber it like a whomping willow?"

"Uh... probably not. I don't think I'll have the time." Mr. Funguy had been way smaller than these trees when Steven had brought them him to life, and that had still taken a few minutes. He couldn't see this gem leaving him alone that long.

"Darn, plan B it is." she half turned her head and whispered in his ear for a moment.

"Got it." Steven nodded lowering himself into a crouch.

...Click.
"Get ready, Steven…" Connie murmured.

For a moment, even the wind stopped and everything was still, then there was a gushing noise and more of the blue gunk came shooting at them, angled differently so it would fly beneath the shield. Steven snapped his arm down and willed his shield even wider to block the shot. Then, filling his head with thoughts of kittens playing tag with puppies and leapt into the stream.

The blue gunk splattering off his shield like rain off a windshield as he torpedoed into the canopy. He felt several jerks as branches whipped against his shield, followed by a meatier thunk as he hit something heavy sending a harder shock tingling down his arm.

A mix of green, blue and pink swirled across his vision as everything fell, but he thought about warm summer rains and slowed his fall, landing lightly on his feet away.

What he'd hit wasn't so graceful, between the frantic scrabbling and shower of falling leaves and branches it took Steven a moment to figure out what he was looking at.

The gem looked like a massive spider, its abdomen and head were a rusted orange dappled with sky blue spots. Eight slender, gray legs extended from a body the size of a horse, ending in thick, crystalline spikes. It had landed on its back and as it scrabbled its way upright, Steven couldn't help but let out a laugh. His shield was stuck to the spider's head, the blue junk it had shot at him gluing it on like some kind of colorful sombrero.

At the sound of his laugh, the spider went still. Then its front legs blurred into motion, scrapping across its head, the crystalline spikes cutting the goo sticking the shield to it. The spider reared back and somehow managed to sling the shield like a discus straight at Steven's face.

He yelped, throwing out his hands and making the shield vanish. But the goo that had been stuck to it kept coming, splattering across his body and startling him so badly he tumbled out of the air. The breath whooshed out of his lungs as he hit the ground, and he heard a rushed clicking noise bearing down on him.

"Get away from him!" there was a flash of pink and several furious clicks. Steven forced himself back upright, struggling to draw breath back into his uncooperative lungs. Connie had forced herself between him and the spider, but was stuck on the defensive. The arachnid was using its front four legs to jab at her from every angle, whipping its legs back out of reach whenever she tried to slash at it.

Steven stumbled forward, smacking his chest in an attempt to get his lungs working again, he summoned another shield and ran forward, reaching them just in time to block a fast jab from the spikey legs that threatened to slip past his friend's guard.

The spider disengaged, shuffling backwards as the spikes on its legs clicked each time they touched the ground.

"Thanks," Connie nodded, not taking her eyes off the gem.

"N…no…" Steven wheezed. At last, his lungs decided to stop slacking off and he drew in a great lungful of air. "No problem," he gulped, sighing in relief.

"You alright?"

"Better now," Steven nodded. "Got any ideas on how to deal with our new friend?" the spider had gone motionless, its solid orange eyes giving nothing away as it stared at them.
Connie glared at it. "Let's fuse."

"Wait, really?" Steven blinked.

"It attacked my mom." Connie answered simply, glaring back at the overgrown arachnid.

"…fair enough."

Steven reached out and took her hand in his. Together, they raised their weapons toward the gem. There was a feeling of warmth and unity of purpose and Steven felt himself melt away.

Stevonnie cracked their neck, effortlessly twirling the sword in a smooth arc while staring down their opponent.

"Well? You ready to get squashed?" The spider just stared at them, then raised its head and spewed more of that blue junk at them. Stevonnie raised their shield, blocking the spray of gunk and advancing on the spider.

The spider held its ground, lifting itself higher off the ground and raising its front legs in preparation for a strike. Stevonnie foot dug into the soft soil and sent it spraying into the air as she herself launched forward. The spider's form blurred as it exploded into motion, it dropped itself to the ground, dodging under the blade and spun around, slamming its abdomen into them like club.

Stevonnie shifted their shield to block the blow, but the sheer force of it sent them flying. They spun themselves in midair, landing in a crouch against a tree trunk as the arachnid zipped away from them.

Straight for Connie's helpless mother.

Stevonnie eyes narrowed. They launched themselves off the tree like a missile. The spider stopped and raised its hindquarters at them, there was a bang, followed by a flash of light and Stevonnie's eyes widened as a giant net of orange goop came flying up to meet them. They tried to slash at it, but the goop flowed around the blade and hit them head on, the force of it slamming them back into a tree. The gooey net wrapped around the trunk like a bola, entrapping them against the bark.

Stevonnie cursed, struggling against the orange strands. Whatever this orange stuff was, it was different from the blue junk. They could feel its threads hardening, trapping them further.

The spider chittered at the fusion, its legs clicking as it slowly advanced on them. Its mouth opened wider, revealing a pair of foot long fangs dripping with an electric blue liquid. Stevonnie stopped struggling, they couldn't move the hand on their sword. As the approaching arachnid reached the base of their tree, Stevonnie let go of their shield and press the hand flat against the tree trunk. They met the spider's many eyes and smirked.

"Gotcha."

The spider paused as the tree beneath them lit up with a pink glow. All at once, it turned tail and fled, or rather, it tried to. The ground beneath them exploded, roots shooting up from the soil and tangling around several of the crystalline legs. The gem tripped, several legs scrabbling against the ground as more roots wrapped themselves around its body and hoisting it off the ground until it was eye level with Stevonnie. It stared at them with unblinking eyes, straining against its woody bindings. Stevonnie stared back, their smirk stretching wider.

"Get whomped on."
The clearing filled with creaks and groans as a pair of huge branches whipped around, sandwiching the trapped gem between them. It let out a pained shriek and exploded into smoke.

Stevonnie grinned as a fist-sized gem thumped into the churned earth.

"Got em." Stevonnie turned their attention to the crusty orange strands trapping holding them to the trunk. "Now how do I get out of this…" the question answered itself as the material disintegrated into orange dust before their eyes, dropping them abruptly to the forest floor before they could catch themselves. They didn't hit the ground, however, as the tree roots twisted through the air, forming a springy net and catching them.

"Okay, that's awesome." Stevonnie beamed up at the tree. It didn't have eyes like Toad did, but somehow, there was an impression that it was staring at them. There was more creaking a single root rose up, presenting them with spider's dappled gem. "Wow," Stevonnie whistled, taking the gem and bubbling it. "I should work with trees more often, you guys do it all!"

They got the impression the tree was looking at the fusion once again; one of the branches reached down and gently patted their head. The ground beneath churned as the roots borrowed back into the ground, raking the soil back into place over them. The branches overhead creaked as they reached for the sky once more. The pink glow faded and the tree became inert once more.

Stevonnie nodded. That just about wrapped things up here.

"C-Connie?"

Stevonnie's eyes shot wide and they spun around. "Mom! I mean, Connie's mom! I mean, uh, Mrs. Maheswaran. You're alright!" She looked kinda ragged, actually, and was coated with a blue powder. Stevonnie could see remains of the goo disintegrating all around them. Across the clearing, a family of deer were kicking up a cloud of blue dust as they shook themselves before bounding out of sight.

"It's doctor," the woman corrected automatically. "But… yes, I believe I am fine." She stared back at them uncertainly. "Er… what. What am I looking at?"

Stevonnie froze as the doctor scrutinized them. It occurred to them that they had never actually met.

"I, uh, I can explain?"

Garnet waved her hand, sending a wave of frost that enveloped the smoldering building and extinguished the flames clawing at the wood. The fusion stepped back and turned her gaze away. She could sense no more gems rampaging around Beach City, no more people were in peril.

And Steven… was fine. She could see him with Connie on the edge of a woodland and in route to return to the boardwalk. There was no sign of Jasper anywhere. Neither in her surroundings, nor Steven's immediate future.

Garnet frowned.

Had she been mistaken? Had this attack not been the soldier's doing? No. It had to be her, there was no other explanation. But the soldier had made no movement against Steven… an unpleasant thought crept over the fusion. Had… Had Jasper found a way to fool her future vision?

The thought spurred her into motion, she leapt to the roof of a nearby building and bounded across
the town. It was less than a minute before she jumped down where her second sight had shown him to be a moment ago.

"Garnet!" The boy waved, leaving Connie with her mother as he ran to greet. "What's up? Have we won?"

Garnet's frown deepened as she looked over the boy. He was completely unharmed. Jasper had not touched him, just as her sight had told her.

"Uh, Garnet?" the boy came to a halt, staring up at her uncertainly.

"...yes, Steven?"

"Are you alright?" he asked. "You're looking at me kind of funny."

"I am fine." She answered, shaking off the feeling. The people of Beach City were safe. Steven was safe. Everything was fine. "I just came to tell you that it's over."

"You mean..." a smile spread across the boy's face. "We won?"

Garnet nodded.

"Alright!" he whooped. "The Crystal Gems save the day again!" he looked up at her, his smile nearly splitting his face in two and Garnet felt her worries slip away completely. "Do you know where Pearl and Amethyst are? We're gonna need to throw a party!"

Good question. For the first time in hours, Garnet turned her third eye away from Steven and back towards the wider river of fate. Searching for the ripples of her friends.

After a moment, she tilted her head back to get a better angle.

"...Garnet?" Steven's voice sounded distant, she ignored it.

The fusion spun, sweeping her gaze across the landscape. That sense of foreboding creeping back into her mind.

She couldn't see them.

Amethyst. Pearl. No matter when or where she turned her third eye, her age-old companions were nowhere to be seen. The possibility of her finding them simply did not exist.

How could that be? What had happened to her friends?

"Garnet?" Steven repeated, he reached out and put a hand on her leg, snapping her attention back to him. "What's wrong?" The boy's face was uncertain. Garnet opened her mouth to answer, but found she had no answers to give.

No, that wasn't completely true. there was one possibility that made sense. She merely hoped she was mistaken.

"Come along, Steven. We are returning to the temple."

"And that's were Amethyst and Pearl are?" Steven asked, looking to her for clarification.

"...it could be." she answered lamely, turning on her heel and marching off before Steven could question it.
"…Alright?" she heard Steven stay behind her. "Hey Connie, you wanna come back to the house with us?"

"You go on ahead, Steven. I'm going to stay with my mom."

"Oh. Okay, I'll catch up with you later than. Bye."

Garnet heard girl return his goodbye, and then the hurried footsteps as Steven moved to catch up. The fusion didn't slow down, she needed to get Steven to a safe area before trying to figure out what was going on. His safety took priority over everything.

In a matter of minutes, they were marching down the boardwalk. All things considered, the damage to the town didn't seem too bad. Some of the buildings were a little charred or battered, but nothing that couldn't be fixed. The people seemed to be fine as well, creeping back into the open now that the danger had been dealt with. There had been a few near misses, but Garnet had managed to intervene before the worst could happen. The humans of Beach City might be foolishly blasé about the threat corrupted gems posed to their daily lives, but at least they had a hardiness to match. Some of them were already working to clear away the damage of the attack and waved to Steven as he passed.

Then they left the town behind, striding across the sandy beach and rounding the cliff to the temple. As the house came in sight, Garnet paused.

The screen door had been torn from it hinges. She could see what was left of the door laying in the sand some distance away, she considered it for a moment, the sense of foreboding intensifying. She redoubled her pace even as Steven called for her to slow down.

Garnet ducked inside the cracked doorframe, and came to an abrupt halt. Steven's footsteps thumped against the steps as he hurried to catch up, only to bump into the back of her legs as he dashed through the entryway. His breathless apologies dying in his throat as he saw what she was looking at.

The wooden floor was covered in a series of deep, jagged gouges. The instrument of the damage was obvious: a simple sword, one the fusion immediately recognized as Pearl's, was driven into the boards halfway to the hilt at the tail end of the last line of cuts.

"Garnet?" The uncertainty in Steven's tone quickly giving way to panic. "Garnet, what is this?"

Garnet said nothing, her eyes slowly tracing over the scribbles.

"That's gem script, isn't it?" He asked. "Like from the memorial?" The boy was staring at Pearl's sword. "Garnet, what does it say?" Garnet glanced at him, then back at the words.

"Rose. I have your traitorous rebels. I'll be waiting at the place where you betrayed everything. If you aren't standing in front of me before the sun sets. I'll crush them to dust."

The words were followed by a symbol of four diamonds, the bottommost one cut larger than the rest. She read the words over again, desperately hoping she could make their meaning change through sheer force of will.

But the words remained written.

Garnet bowed her head and, just for a moment, despair threatened to swallow her.

Amethyst... Pearl...
We were careless. Jasper was never after Steven. She must have known we would be watching him.

Fat lot of good that does us now! What are we gonna do?

I… I don't…

Something grabbed her hand and squeezed. Garnet started, her internal dialogue breaking apart as her hand was gripped tighter. "Garnet…please. You promised you wouldn't keep things from me anymore. What does it say?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. She closed her eyes.

"Jasper has captured Amethyst and Pearl." She said simply, "If we don't face her by sunset, she'll shatter them."

She couldn't see it, but she could feel Steven's eyes boring into her. Begging her to tell him that she was kidding.

"W-what? How?" he swallowed, "Garnet, what are we going to do?"

I don't… what should we? Ice began to encase her mind, creeping around the edges of her consciousness and paralyzing her. The fusion squeezed her eyes tighter.

I'll tell yah what we are gonna do.

Like the rising sun, a wave of fire swept through her mind, melting away the indecision. Garnet opened her eyes, and looked down at Steven.

"We are going to go and get them back," she declared steeling her tone to make it clear that her proclamation was not a guess, not a hopeful wish, but a simple declaration of fact.

It was time to deal with Jasper.

Permanently.

Chapter End Notes

'Uh-oh' level reaches critical levels.

So the thing that attacked Connie's mom was a spider. A shout out to Agent66 (one of my two best reviewers) who said they wanted a spider gem for Stevonnie to fight. The spider's gem was a Spiderweb Turquoise, which Agent66 suggested. I thought it worked.

I hope I did your vision justice.

Silly side note that stuck in my brain because it happened to Steven here: Have any of you ever genuinely had the wind knocked out of you? It happened to me once in the second grade when I fell off the monkey bars and landed on my back. I found myself barely able to breathe and wandered around the playground wheezing for a minute or two. I got my breath back just after the teacher started to think something was wrong. In hind sight, it was funny. But I didn't know what had happened at the time and
seven-year-old me was terrified.

Ah, youth.

Point is, it took me ages to figure out what had happened to me, because in any book I read that had a character get winded like Steven did here, it just said they were winded, then they more-or-less got over it next sentence.

Always thought that was kind of weird. It's such an off-putting experience.

Anyway, until next time. Hopefully it won't take a month again, but we'll just have to see.
Steven gaped at Garnet in disbelief. But she had already turned her back on him, marching for warp pad.
"Garnet!" he yelped, scrambling after her. "What do you mean you're going alone?"
"I mean you are going to stay at the temple, where it is safe." Garnet answered brusquely, leaving no room for argument. But Steven felt like she should definitely make room.
"Wait!" He moved faster and wrapped his arms around her leg. "You can't expect me to just stay here! Amethyst and Pearl are in danger!"
"And I am going to rescue them. Therefore, you do not need to go." The fusion replied, stepping up onto the warp pad and reaching down to pry him off. Steven clung tighter.
"But. But…" Steven's mind whirled as he felt his fingers being gently, yet unstoppably uncurled under Garnet's efforts. "You still shouldn't go rushing off! That's what Jasper wants!"
"No, it isn't." with a final twist, she pried him off of her and held him off the ground at arm's length. He opened his mouth to protest, but the words died in his throat as Garnet pulled off her shades and looked him in the eye.
"What she wants," Garnet said darkly, "Is you." She shook her head. "But she isn't going anywhere near you. I won't allow it. We won't allow it." she declared, his protests cutting off as his world tinted red.

She…she'd bubbled him.

Garnet pushed the bubble, sending him drifting away from her. "Don't worry Steven. I'm going to get Amethyst and Pearl back. I'm going to stop Jasper. It's my fault that she captured them in the first place, my lapse of judgement." She put her shades back on. "And I am going to fix it." The warp pad began to glow with energy and Garnet smiled.
"I'll be back soon."
"Garn-" there was a whoosh and a flash of light, and Steven was left floating in his house. ":et." He finished weakly, his hands sliding down the inner surface of his bubble. She'd… actually left him behind. He couldn't believe…
"No!" Now was not the time for that! Something was wrong with Garnet, he'd seen it in her face.
Her third eye had been squeezed shut and her other two had been red, their pupils smoldering like cinders.

She needed his help.

Which he couldn't give if he was stuck in this bubble. He hauled back his fist and punched it. It popped immediately, dropping him to the ground and he scrambled back to the warp pad. Only to freeze as a thought stole over him.

He didn't know where she'd gone. Garnet hadn't told him where Jasper was! He ran back over to the words carved in the floor, his eyes scrapping across the words in a desperate attempt to glean some kind of meaning…

"I can't read gem!" Steven groaned, running his hands through his hair and hopping from one foot to the other.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" Steven froze, balancing on one foot as he stared down at his pocket, he pulled out his phone.

"Blaire?"

"Hello Steven," the computer gem's head nodded politely at him from behind the screen. She'd changed her look again, her hair slicked back over her head and a pair of aviators hiding her glowing eyes. "I could not help but notice that you seem quite distressed. Is there any way I may be able to assist?" Steven blinked at the screen, the computer's current fashion choice totally at odds with her tone. But he shook it off quickly, and turned the screen towards the gouges in the floor.

"What does it say!" he said desperately. "Where is Garnet going?"

"It says that she will be waiting for Rose at the place of her greatest betrayal."

"…and?" he asked, "where is that supposed to be?"

"I do not know."

Steven groaned, his shoulders slumping as despair began to creep through his body.

"But I may still be able to help," Blaire went on, "I gained access to humanity's monitoring satellites some time ago and can use them to locate where Garnet has departed to."

"Really?" Steven grinned, hope rekindling. "That amazing!"

Blaire bobbed her head at the compliment, but her next words put a damper on his hope. "Nonetheless, it will take time for me to scan the planet's surface in its entirety. Additionally, it is possible the location denoted as the site of Rose's greatest betrayal may be underground or otherwise invisible from the air."

"…Oh." And suddenly, Steven felt the day catching up with him. It had been a long one; Beach City half burning down, fighting monsters, and now this. He wanted nothing more to stagger up the stairs and collapse onto his fluffy bed. Alas, the realm of sleep had to wait. "You should do that satellite thing, but in the meantime, do you have any other suggestions on what to do? We're… kind of on a time crunch."

The face on his phone tilted her head and hummed. "Are there any other gems available who may have been witness to the Rose Rebellion?"
Steven thought about it. He was pretty sure Peridot was younger than the war so he doubted she would know. But... "Lapis might know," he said slowly, turning the thought over in is mind. "She was on earth for some of the war... At least, I think she was."

"Then I suggest you ask her." Blaire said primly. "I shall leave you to it. If you will excuse me, I have satellites to commandeer." His screen went dark, leaving just the reflection of his exhausted face staring back at him.

Steven took a deep breath, and forced as much of his exhaustion as he could into a tiny mental box where it couldn't distract him. Swiping through his phone he hit a familiar name on his contact list and put the device to his ear. He made himself breathe slowly, just like Pearl had taught him as he listened to it ring once, twice, and cut off.

"Growwul?"

"Lion!" Steven said quickly. "I need you at the house right now!" he waited a few seconds, but there were no further sounds and distinct lack of giant pink cats materializing. "Lion, I'm serious!" he shouted, hysteria bleeding into his voice. "Amethyst and Pearl are in danger, Garnet's gone off alone and I don't know where she is! I-"

"Garoo," this time the rumble came from behind him, Steven turned and came face to face with the giant cat.

Lion leaned forward and dragged his tongue across Steven's face, leaving the boy blinking. "Thanks Lion," he sighed, "I needed that." Lion turned and crouched, presenting his back. Steven wasted no time clambering on. "Alright. I need you to take me to the barn." The cat's head bobbed and roared, tearing open a portal through space in his living room. Lion leapt, carrying them into the portal. Rings of blue and white rushed across Steven's eyes as they zoomed towards a distant light and then shot through it.

"Gahhh!" someone yelled amid a clattering noise, like someone had thrown a bunch of metal plates over a wooden floor.

"Lapis!" Steven shouted as he tried to blink the blurry spots in his vision away. "I need to talk to you!"

"And you had to teleport into the middle of our living space to do that?" A green and yellow blob near the floor scrambled upright. "You couldn't teleport outside could you, you overly fluffy roarbeast? No. You had to pop out right in the middle of the barn and scare the minerals out of me, didn't you?"

Steven stared for a second, before sweeping his gaze around the barn. His vision was clearing up, but he there was no hint of blue around. "Peridot I'm sorry about scaring you, but where is Lapis? I need to talk to her." Peridot crossed her arms and opened her mouth, but Steven beat her to it. "Peridot, please! Its super important."

"Steven?" a voice had him looking to the doors.

"Lapis!" the gem was standing in the doorway, behind her he could see Moonstone looking over her shoulder. "There you are!"

Lapis nodded. "We heard yelling that wasn't Peridot and had to investigate." She frowned, walking forward and looking him up and down. "Steven? are you alright? You look kind of upset."

"He's upset?" Peridot scoffed. "I'm the one who nearly got run over by a giant feline."
"I'm sorry to hear that," Moonstone said, bending down to help the technician gather some scraps of metal scattered across the floor. "Are you unharmed?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." Nice to see someone can be bothered to ask." Peridot grumbled.

"Look, I'm sorry Peridot. But I'm kind of in a hurry," Steven looked back to Lapis "I need to know where my mom's greatest betrayal was. Do you know?" He looked at her hopefully.

Lapis blinked. "Rose Quartz's greatest betrayal?" she frowned, glancing at Peridot, who shrugged back. "Why do you need to know? has something happened?"

Steven fought back a groan. "The others are in danger and they need my help. But I don't know where they are. The only thing I know is that they're at the place of my mom's biggest betrayal." His shoulders sagged, exhaustion threatening to swallow him. "Lapis, you were on earth for most of the war. You have to have **some** idea of where that could be. I'll take anything!"

"Okay, okay. Just let me think for a second." Lapis crossed her arms and tilting her head back. "Rose did a lot of stuff in the war. Pretty much all of it was a betrayal from Homeworld's perspective. I can think of a couple which were pretty bad, but the greatest?" she shrugged. "That depends on who you ask."

"What about Jasper? What would she think it was?" Steven asked desperately. Lapis stiffened.

"...Jasper?" The blue gem's eyes had a weird glint to them, like the sickening gleam of a pearl made of oil. "What does she have to do with this?"

Moonstone bent close to Peridot. "Jasper?"

"**Soldier from Homeworld,**" Peridot muttered back. "**Big, loud, and a huge pain in the rock.**" Peridot raised her voice. "Has she finally popped up again? You people should really have dealt with her when you had the chance."

"Yeah, she's back, and she's captured Amethyst and Pearl and is going to smash them if I don't face her!" Steven wailed, trying to get across the sense of urgency. Now wasn't the time for chit chat.

Lapis looked at him, and sighed. "...Yeah. I know where she is."

"Really?" Peridot asked, "Just like that?"

"If there's anyone who knows how Jasper would think... it would be me." She rubbed her arm, as though trying to ward off some chills.

Steven waited, but the water gem just looked away. "Well, are you going to tell me or not?" he demanded, "Where is she?" She didn't look at him. "**Lapis.**"

"Steven," Lapis answered, sighing. "Do you... have **any** idea just how much she wants you dead?" she asked seriously, "Because I do. And believe me when I say that if she wants you somewhere, that's the absolute last place you want to be."

"That doesn't matter!" Steven shook his head. Why did people keep telling him that? He knew Jasper was dangerous. But so were corrupted gems and he'd fought plenty of those. His friends were in danger and they needed his help. That was literally the only thing that mattered. "Just tell me where she is!"

'You're going to fight her?"
"If I have to!"

"What happened to Garnet?" Peridot asked, pulling a backpack off a low shelf and shoving a few things inside it.

"She ran off alone," Steven answered. "She... wouldn't let me come with her."

"Then what's the problem?" the engineer asked. "She didn't she beat the mica out of Jasper once? Why not let her deal with it?"

"Because I'm worried!" Steven shouted, throwing up his hands. "My family is in danger and I need to help them."

"Yeah, but Garnet's a one, or rather two, gem army." Peridot pointed out.

"Jasper is a lot of things," Lapis said slowly, frowning hard. "But one thing she isn't, is stupid. She may be proud, but she's not going to fight Garnet head on if she already lost once."

"So you agree she needs my help?" Steven asked.

"I think she needs more than just your help," Lapis sighed, closing her eyes in resignation. "I guess I'm going to have to come with you."

"Lapis, are you sure?" Peridot said uncertainly. "Are you sure you want to see... you know."

"Of course I don't want to see her," Lapis snorted. "I'd be perfectly happy if I never saw her again. But..." she shook her head. "Whatever."

"Then I'm coming too!" Peridot declared. Both Lapis and Steven looked at her. "...What?"

"Are you sure you want to come?" Lapis asked. "You're kind of..."

"I'm what?" Peridot crossed her arms. "Weak and helpless?"

"Yes." Lapis nodded.

"... okay, you didn't need to agree that quickly." Peridot huffed. "But I'll have you know that Moonstone and I have been working on some things." She jerked her head at the scientist as she zipped up the cheeseburger backpack and pulled it on. "I assure you, if the need arises, I have the methods to meet it."

"Am... am I required to go to?" Moonstone asked, looking at them all uncertainly.

"No." Lapis answered. "You'll just be in the way."

"Er... that does sound likely."

"Great, it's a proper field trip now." Steven groaned. Why was everyone but him unable to focus? "But can we get back to the main point? Where is Jasper."

"She'll be at Pink Diamond's palanquin." Lapis answered, snapping her finger and summoning a ball of water. "Back during our... time together, I..." Lapis trailed off. "Just trust me, that's where she'll be." She floated the ball in front of Lion's face and it shimmered. Steven could see a large valley full of open space and wispy trees, the scenery was dotted with great gouges, like a giant had taken a shovel to it. In the center of it all, there was a pink structure. "You know where this is?" Lapis asked, looking at Lion.
"Garooroo."

"That means yes!" Steven said quickly. At least, he was pretty sure it did. "Everyone who's going, get on!" Peridot stuck her hands into Lion's mane and hauled herself out of sight, while Lapis climbed up behind Steven.

"I guess I'll… stay here then." said Moonstone.

"Sure," Lapis nodded. "Don't burn the place down while we're gone."

"I shall endeavor not to."

"Great." Steven said, "Now Lion! Let's go!"

Greg crossed his arms, frowning as he stared out at the damage to Beach City. All in all, it wasn't that bad. At least, it wasn't the worst the beach town had ever looked. The damage wouldn't have even registered on the scale compared to those old Japanese monster movies. But still… it was gonna take some substantial cleanup. At least nobody seemed to be seriously hurt and they had a doctor on hand to take care of things.

"Mom, I really think you should rest."

"Excuse me?" he could practically hear the raised eyebrow as the Maheswaran matriarch ignored her daughter in favor of shining a flashlight in eyes of Vidalia's older son. "I believe you'll find that I am the licensed physician here. I am fully capable of keeping track of my health. You," she said, address the boy before her. "Sour Cream, was it?" Greg could hear the doubt in her voice and didn't blame her; having a favorite flavor of snack was one thing, but naming his kids after them? well, it'd be a weird world if everyone was the same.

"Yeah?" the teen looked alright, although he was nursing a rather sizable goose egg on the back of his head.

"What is the square root of two-hundred and twenty-five?"

"Uh…" there was a pause filled with some quick arithmetic. "Fifteen?"

The doctor pursed her lips, muttering to herself. "Well, Mr… Sour Cream, your eyes are focused and you seem to have your wits about you. I have concluded that, despite the bump on your cranium, you have not suffered a concussion."

"Well, that's a relief." the boy answered, touching his head and wincing as his fingers touched bump.

"Yes, it is." The doctor nodded. "Nonetheless, I suggest you go lie down and find an Ice pack to keep the swelling down. But apart from that, you're free to go." As the teen got up and wandered away as the doctor looked up. "Next!" she called.

Greg watched as Connie threw her hands up and walk away, heading in his direction. "Heya, Connie," he greeted, nodded easily to her.

"Hello Mr. Universe." She huffed, plopping down on a spare tire on the ground next to him.
"You know, it's kind of nice to have a doctor available after all this," Greg waved his hand at the town around him, "I mean, sure I know how to patch people up with duct tape and all, but it's no fix on the real thing."

"Sure. I guess." Connie huffed, "But she should really relax. I can tell she's exhausted, what kind of doctor doesn't take care of themselves?" Greg didn't say anything. He wasn't quite sure what Connie was so wound up about, but he knew venting worked a lot better when the person listening didn't try to rationalize things. He could remember Rose had always struggled with that concept, whenever he'd griped about this, that, or some other third thing she'd always have some input that never helped.

"Ugh… no matter what I do, I can't get this song right!"

"Then maybe it's impossible?"

"…No, Rose, it's not impossible."

"Then maybe you just can't do it?"

Greg chuckled at the memory, Rose had actually thought she was being helpful. It was amazing how even after thousands of years of getting to know them, Rose still could never quite get a full handle of how humans worked.

"Don't you think?" Connie said, turning to look at him.

"I agree completely," he answered, nodding on autopilot.

"That's what I'm saying!" Connie groaned. "She got kidnapped by a giant spider and I can tell she's all shook up about it! She should rest." Greg frowned, and looked back at the doctor as she carefully wrapped a bandage around Mr. Smiley's head. She was going about her work in a certain single-mindedness that the musician found vaguely familiar.

Rose's world—the one full of weapons and monsters—could be terrifying. He could still remember the first time he'd had a run in with a corrupted gem that wanted to eat him, some kind of three-legged giraffe with a mouth that hinged open somewhere halfway down its neck.

He hadn't slept for a week. In fact, he'd only slept fitfully again after he'd channeled the feelings into writing a song. It had to have been the darkest piece of music he'd ever written and he'd never shared it with Steven—Or Rose, for that matter. But ugly as the song had been, it had served as a good coping mechanism; channeling his fear into music. It made sense that a doctor might do the same by treating others.

"She's just so unreasonable!" Connie huffed.

"Yeah, why can't she be understanding as you are?"

"Exactly!" Connie nodded. Then paused, shooting him a suspicious look.

"Oh, lighten up kiddo." He said, grinning. "I bet your mom can take care of herself just fine. After all, you can. And you had to get that from somewhere."

"I… guess." Connie muttered, uncertainty in her voice. Greg eyed her.

"You know," he said conversationally, "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're more upset about it than she is." Connie flinched at his words and spluttered out denials, he raised an eyebrow at her,
"You know, it's okay to be worried about your parents. You wanna talk about it?"

"...I..." Connie whispered, resolutely not looking at him. "When I found her purse, in that spider goo." She swallowed hard. "I really thought... I was going to lose her."

Ah.

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

Connie head snapped towards him, startled by the matter-of-factness in his tone.

He shot her a flat look. "How do you think I felt when I found out that giant hand ship had taken Steven away? Or when I found out that Steven was planning on riding a drill into the ground to confront a monster that might destroy the planet? Or," he narrowed his eyes slightly. "How do you think your mother felt when she found out you were using a sword to fight monsters?"

Connie gapped, her mouth opening and shutting wordlessly and he felt a bit ashamed.

"I'm... sorry, Connie," he scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "That was kind of harsh." He forced a self-deprecating chuckle. "Man, I tell you to lighten up, then I go and say something like that. Practice what you preach, am I right?"

"No, it's fine." Connie insisted, her expression morphing from hurt to something more thoughtful. "I... think I understand why you said that." She looked back to her mother, who had moved on to examining Lars, the boy looked rather shaken up, but there were no serious injuries that Greg could see. "I've... kind of been a jerk to my mom, haven't I?"

"Welcome to wonderful world of maturity," Greg smiled. "Personally, I think at least ninety percent of maturing as a person is looking back at how you acted in the past and saying: wow, I was a jerk." Greg leaned back. "What matters is that you use that realization to change your behavior."

"But... I don't want to leave Steven's universe." Connie whispered.

"I get that," Greg nodded. "How could he not? even after that giraffe gem had nearly killed him, the thought about leaving Rose and her world behind hadn't even crossed his mind. "But that's something you should probably talk out with your mom."

"I guess." Connie glanced at him sidelong. "But, uh... is there any chance you'd be willing to talk to her first?"

Greg furrowed his brow. "About what?"

Connie shifted uncomfortably, "...fusion."

Greg's eyes widened. "What?"

"She met Stevonnie," Connie admitted. "we fused right in front of her. When she asked, I sort of changed the subject and she let it drop. But I know my mom, she's going not going to leave it that way."

Connie's eyes were so full of hope. But this sounded like something he absolutely did not want to do. For a moment, he entertained the idea of letting any of the gems explain it.
"Fusion is just when two peeps mash their bodies together..."

"It is an elegant and intimate union..."

"When two gems love each other very much..."

Yeah, no. That would be a disaster.

Greg groaned. "Sure, I can try to explain that to her in a way to make that won't make her freak out. But!" he added, when Connie's face lit up. "You're gonna owe me one. No debts between friends is one thing, but this? Explaining the gem version of the birds and the bees while trying to make it sound nothing like that?" Greg shook his head. "I'm talking, like, at least a dozen donuts. Possibly two." He finished gravely.

"That's fair," Connie giggled. She held up her fist. "Team human,"

"... yeah, team human." Greg met her halfway.

Then a glowing portal opened up in the air in front of them, spitting out a pink blur before closing.

"Lion! This isn't where we need to go!"

"Grawl."

"Steven?" Connie asked.

"Connie?" the boy blinked, looking up at them. "Dad?"

"Hey Shtew-ball." Greg waved, looking at his son astride the pink cat. There was that blue gem too, the one who'd broken his leg, sitting behind him. There was a glow and a yellow triangle shoved its way out of the lion's mane.

"Have we arrived?" Peridot asked, her face upside-down as she looked around from underneath Lion's chin. "This does not look like our desired destination."

"Is something wrong?" Greg asked, furrowing his brow at his son's frantic face.

"No!" Steven answered, way too quickly. "I mean, yes. But there is no time to explain! We need to get going now!" he bounced his heels against Lion's sides. "Come on, Lion! I know you know where we need to go. So take us there!"

"Gro." The lion shook his head, making Peridot yelp, and padded over towards Connie. He butted his nose against the girl and growled lightly.

"You want Connie to come to?" Steven asked.

"Garooroo."

"Fine. Connie, get on. I'll fill you in on the way."

"What," Connie blinked. "But-"

"Connie! Please." Steven begged. "We're in a hurry! The others are in danger!"

"Oh, um, right." Connie nodded, getting up and climbing on behind Lapis. She waved back to him. "See you later, Mr. Universe."
Greg's hand was only half raised to return the goodbye before Lion roared and they were all gone. He let his hand fall uselessly to his side.

There Steven went again. Off to save the day and, Greg had unfortunately little doubt, put his life at risk along the way. He sighed, feeling the aggravating tendrils of worry gnawing at his chest and ignoring them with a practiced ease.

It was far too late to pull out of Rose's universe—Not that he would, if he could—But still…

"Excuse me?" Greg looked up, Dr. Maheswaran was eyeing him warily. "I have had a long week and an even longer day, so I hope you will forgive me for having to double check. But did I just see my daughter climb on a fully grown, pink lion and disappear into a glowing portal?"

"I'm afraid so," Greg nodded sympathetically. "If it's any consolation, I'm sure she'll be fine." He scooted over and patted his hand against railing he was sitting on. "Here, have a seat. I think you and I should have a talk."

The world came back into focus in a stream of light, scraggly trees and sweeping mountain peaks scraped against the sky in the distance. But Garnet didn't notice them, couldn't notice them, not over the roaring fire inside her mind.

She had lost so much. So many. Pearl was the only one left from the old days, from the original Crystal Gems. Amethyst, though she had joined later, was no less dear—an age-old friend unburdened by the pain of comrades lost.

She would not allow Homeworld to take them from her too. She'd shatter them all, grind her own gems to dust against their armies, before she let that happen.

Ruby...

The torch inside her mind burned brighter, blocking everything else out and Garnet began to move. Her long strides eating up rocky landscape as she headed straight for where she knew Jasper would be. It wasn't long before she caught sight of it in the distance, resting quietly atop a grassy knoll, it's polished surface scattering the light of the setting sun in a shimmering cascade of pink.

Pink Diamond's palanquin.

The fusion had't been here since that day long ago, when Rose had shaken the foundations of the Diamond Dominion to its core… but the ancient past didn't matter now. Not when the fusion could see an orange figure standing before the palanquin.

Waiting.

Ruby...

Don't worry Saph. Just leave this to me.

Garnet quickened her pace. The soldier's back was to her, though she held no thoughts of attempting to take her by surprise—she was expected after all. Indeed, she was more than thirty paces away when the soldier turned.
She came to a stop as Jasper considered her, glancing left and right in mild curiosity—no doubt looking for Steven. Not finding anyone, those eyes pupils came back to rest on her.

"Garnet." Jasper acknowledged, her hands clasped easily behind her back.

"Where are they?" Garnet demanded.

"Where's Rose?" The soldier countered.

"Not here. Where are they?"

The soldier cocked her head to the side, like a tiger considering how edible the hunter brandishing a spear at it was likely to be. "I believe I said Rose was supposed to face me. Not you."

"The sun hasn't set yet. Where are they?"

Jasper snorted, "Oh very well." she brought one of her arms out from behind her back and raised the fist, relaxing her fingers and letting the fusion get a glimpse of familiar purple and white. "Your fellow traitors are right here, and as you say; the sun hasn't set yet. They are unhurt," a smirk spread across her face. "So... what do you do now?"

"I am going to give you one chance." Garnet's gauntlets materialized in a burst of fiery light. "You give them to me right now, and I won't destroy you."

"Hmmm..." the soldier scratched her chin, clacking the gems together lightly as she weighed the fusion's words. She shrugged. "Alright."

And in a single, swift motion, the soldier whipped the gemstones at her.

Garnet's eyes widened and she snapped her head forward, feeling a pair of soft whumps as the stones sunk into her hair, cushioning the impact. Garnet whipped her head back up, her gauntlets raised to ward off any blows. But Jasper hadn't moved, she was merely staring at her with a lazy grin.

Suspiciously, not taking her eyes off the soldier, Garnet reached upwards, sticking one hand into her afro and rooting around for the pair of stones. Drawing them forth, she let her gaze drop to them for a quick moment, searching for any cracks or damage and ready for any sudden attack.

Garnet went still.

The gemstones—without a doubt her friends—were without damage. But wrapped around each was a tiny silver band of metal.

Jasper had put prison rings on them.

_Ru... no! St.. alm!_

_I'm... perfectly ... calm._

Through monumental effort Garnet held back her mounting rage behind a dam of resolve.

Jasper's grin glinted in the fading light. "Is there a problem?" she asked lightly.

"Where is the release?" Garnet asked quietly, in a tone you could have bent iron around.

Jasper looked puzzled. "The release?" her eyes widened. "Oh! You mean this thing?" she brought
her other hand forward, revealing a tiny box clutched between her thumb and forefinger. Jasper wrapped her fingers around it, making a fist.

The crunch echoed across the landscape, echoing doubly in her ears. Garnet watched, hypnotized, as the soldier slowly uncurled her fingers, allowing the broken pieces to trickle out.

"Oops." Jasper's eyes glittered, the tiger deciding that it would eat the hunter after all.

The dam broke, fiery red fury filled Garnet's vision as she charged.

Jasper watched the fusion approached, all caution thrown to the stars, and felt dark satisfaction fill her. She lowered her body, preparing to meet her enemies assault. She reached behind her back and clasped the stone.

She could feel the crystalline pyramid drinking in her hatred, growing hot beneath her touch. Jasper waited, waited until the fusion was almost upon her, before whipping the stone around and willed it to activate.

A sickening beam of angry pink shot from the tip, piercing through Garnet's chest, her scream cutting off like a switch had been flicked. The fusion fell, stumbling in her charge, and Jasper stepped to the side, allowing the Rebel to rush past her.

Garnet hit the ground, coming to a stop at the base of Pink Diamond's Palanquin.

Jasper eyed her, ready to strike if her enemy should attempt to rise.

But Garnet did not.

Instead, her body began to convulse, shaking and jerking as though it was trying to tear itself apart. Garnet arched her back, gasping and wailing as her body began to contort. Growing and twisting into something… *else.*

Jasper grinned.

*Victory.*

Its eyes snapped open, its senses screaming as a familiar feeling danced across them.

Her! That was HER! it would know the feeling anywhere!

*She lived!*

It wanted to weep, to scream its relief to the heavens, but *no.* That could wait, must wait, until they were reunited and those who had separated them were gone, broken, left behind.

Its head whipped around, causing lightning to crackle from its body as it stared in the direction it had felt her. It spread its wings and took to the sky, screeching its fury to the heavens to the sound of rumbling thunder.

*Wait for me, my love.*
I come.

Chapter End Notes

Haven't you noticed I made it this far?
I'm coming into view as the world is turning.
Haven't you noticed I made it this far?
Now everyone can see me burning…
Now everyone can see me burning…
Now. Everyone. Can see…me… burning…
Merciless Waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lion slid to a stop, his paws sliding in the rocky gravel.

"Jasper!" Steven shouted, the soldier was sitting on the bottom step of the giant pink palanquin. She looked up, looking somewhat surprised.

"Rose Quartz," Jasper answered slowly, her eyes gleaming. "You actually came." She gave him a smirk filled with predatory delight. "I suppose you're not a complete disappointment after all."

Steven glared back, ignoring the taunt. He didn't care what she thought of him! "Where are Amethyst and Pearl?"

Jasper pursed her lips, making a show of mulling the question over. "They're around here somewhere," she answered easily. "I gave them back to your pet fusion, but she must have dropped them." she shrugged. "Makes no difference to me either way."

"Garnet!" Steven whipped his head around, but there was no familiar black square in sight. Just a few trees, rocks, a few chunks of ice, and a large, lumpy boulder. He could practically feel his uncertainty sharpening into fear. "Where is she?"

"Gone." Jasper answered simply. "I got rid of her."

"You're lying!" Steven yelled back, "As if you could ever beat her!"

"Oh?" Jasper smiled a smile that wouldn't have looked out of place on an emperor about to give a gladiator the thumbs down. She reached toward the ground and scooped up a jagged pebble. Steven tensed when Jasper flicked it, not at him, but at the purple boulder nearby.

The stone struck it and the boulder recoiled as though it were alive. Its surface began to bubble, bumps forming on its surface and growing into something that might have been hands, but were shaped wrong, as though a child had drawn them.

Steven stared, bile rising in his throat as more of the hands formed, the ones near its base dragging it across the ground like an amoeba trying to walk. The hands on top flailed wildly, clutching at nothing and shooting clouds of frost and fire alike into the air.

"...Garnet?" Steven whispered, as the... the thing dragged itself farther and farther away.

"What's the matter, Rose?" Jasper said, letting out a laugh, a hyena's bark without warmth or mercy. "Your soldier has been waiting patiently for you to arrive, aren't you going to greet her?"

Steven looked at her, he felt numb. "W-what did you d-do?"

"Justice," Jasper answered. "The Diamonds sentenced you and your rebels to this long ago. I am simply finishing the job."

"You corrupted Garnet." The words were wrong. They had to be wrong. He could feel Connie's grip tightening on his waist, almost painfully, and welcomed it. It meant he could still feel something besides horror.
"Yes."

"You corrupted Garnet." Steven repeated, he looked once more at the fleeing ball of wrongness then back to the soldier, barely able to make her out through the veil of tears in his eyes. "You monster."

Jasper's smirk slipped away, leaving her looking more disappointed than angry. "That's it?" she asked, incredulous. "I attack your home, ruin your soldiers, and all you can do is sit there and call me names?" she shook her head, pushing herself to her feet. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Time has made you weak, Rose. And now you have no more sacrificial soldiers to protect you." she made to step forward, but stopped short as an icicle pierced the ground before her. For the first time, Jasper took her eyes off Steven and the hardness in her eyes faded slightly, morphing into something softer, less certain.

Steven felt movement behind him as someone slipped off Lion's back and saw Lapis step past him, her eyes dark and her wings out, the tips dotted with icy spikes. "Steven," she said in a voice like permafrost, "go see what you can do for Garnet. She can't have been corrupted long, you may be able to help her."

"But…" Steven hesitated, looking from her, to the silent soldier, to the fleeing monst-Garnet.

"What about her?" Connie answered for him, gesturing to the silent orange figure.

Lapis scoffed. "I believe we all know that I'm more than capable of keeping her… busy. You focus on the important things." she flexed her wings, the ice cracking like knuckles. "Leave her to me."

"But Lap-" a wave of cold water slapped Steven in the face, leaving him gasping.

"Garnet is getting away. I can handle things here for a while, trust me." Lapis glanced back, meeting his eye and smiling slightly. "I won't end up trapped at the bottom of the ocean this time, I promise."

Still Steven hesitated. What should he— "Steven!" Connie's voice was urgent. "We need to save Garnet, Lapis can handle this." Not waiting for his response, she reached past him and tugged on Lion's mane. "Lion!" she ordered, let's go.

"Groof," The cat spun and began to run. Steven said nothing, he felt paralyzed by indecision. But he turned back, looking past Connie to Lapis.

"Lapis!" he called. "Stay safe!"

"No prob... Bob."

Lapis listened to the beat of Lion's paws on the ground, carrying Steven farther away and tried to ignore the feeling that she was being left to the sharks. She had asked him to leave, after all.

Still, she could think of at least a hundred places she'd rather be than here.

Jasper wasn't looking at her, she was staring after Lion, looking like she wanted to follow. Lapis launched another Icicle at her face. The soldier's hand snapped up, snagging it out of the air and turned those amber eyes back towards her. "Keep your eyes on me," Lapis ordered, the reflexive wave of anger from seeing the quartz helping push back her trepidation.

Jasper regarded her for a long moment, several emotions flicking across her face in quick
succession before settling on a neutral regard.

"Lapis."

"Jasper."

"You're…" Jasper shifted uncomfortably, "looking well."

Lapis raised an eyebrow. "I just got out of a bad relationship, it's been good for me."

Jasper winced. "You don't have to do this, Lapis," and didn't that soft tone sound wrong coming from the hulking frame?

"No, I don't" Lapis agreed. "Nobody is ever going to make me do anything again." She rolled her shoulders, "This is my choice."

Jasper shook her head, her wild tangle of hair waving in the wind. "You don't owe her anything, Lapis. Rose is a traitor."

"True," Lapis agreed once more. "But I'm not doing this for Rose Quartz."

"Let me guess, you're doing it for Steven," contempt dripped from words and Lapis' eyes narrowed.

"No." she answered. "I'm doing this for me." She fluttered her wings meaningfully, the jagged shards of ice winking as they clinked together. "You and I need to have a chat."

"…I agree." Jasper settled down, all thoughts of pursuing Steven abandoned and adopting a strange look, something caught halfway between resignation and anticipation. "I've been thinking about you. About… us."

Lapis said nothing. The thought of it made her feel sick…and something else she wasn't sure she wanted to identify. This was definitely not a discussion she was eager to have—she'd sooner give Peridot a megaphone and listen to her for days on end—but the longer she stalled, the more time Steven had to bring Garnet back.

If he even could… stars, how had everything gone so wrong, so quickly?

"I…" Jasper swallowed, looking almost sheepish. She scowled, frustrated by her own hesitance and took a deep breath. "I want to be Malachite again." She declared, staring at the water gem in defiance, as though daring Lapis to point out the shame on her face.

Lapis blinked. That was… what?

Jasper took advantage of her silence and pushed ahead. "I know you've been thinking about it too, Lapis," there was a quiet urgency in her tone. "About how it felt."

"Yeah," Lapis snorted. "Sometimes I can still hear myself screaming."

"You know that's not what I meant." Jasper made to draw closer, but stopped when Lapis brought her wings out in front of her, the flecks of ice glinting warningly. The soldier took a step back, her hands held up placating. "I'm talking about the strength. The power we held in our hands together."

"I have plenty of power," Lapis hissed.

"And don't I know it!" Jasper laughed, shaking her head. Then sobered, her gaze zeroing in on Lapis again. "And yet you're still so scared. Scared of being imprisoned. That's why you lashed out
at me. You wanted to be master for once, to show someone just what your fear felt like."

"And I succeeded." She hissed, lashing back.

"You did." Jasper agreed. "You *scare* me Lazuli." Lapis blinked, taken off guard by the admission. "In all the time I spent on Homeworld, there were no other gems short of the diamonds themselves that could hope to equal me. But you… this scrappy little slip of a blue courter, you *scare* me."

Lapis stared. There was something… hypnotic about the frankness of Jasper's words, like the rush of a whitewater rapids; powerful, straightforward, and full of dark undercurrents that threatened to pull her under. She wasn't sure she liked it.

And worse. She wasn't sure she didn't.

Jasper pressed on, as inexorable as the tides. "You challenged me. Pushed me to the edge like nobody ever has." Jasper's teeth glittered in the slowly setting sun. "And it was exhilarating. The struggle, the pain, the sheer power of the turmoil our fighting created. I've never known anything like it. I want to feel that again." Her eyes narrowed, sharp and predatory as she took a step forward. "And I know you felt the same."

Lapis took a step back, spluttering her denials that sounded weak even to her own ears and cursing herself for it.

Jasper smirked, "Don't lie to me. I know we *both* felt it. You're a time bomb, Lazuli. All that hatred bottled up inside. You want to let it out but you *can't*, because the world isn't strong enough to handle you." Jasper took another step forward, cutting the distance between them in half. "But I can," she said softly. "I'm tough enough to take what you dish out and hit back." She held out her hand. "I can give you the release you crave, Lapis."

Lapis felt frozen, the soldier's words burning in her mind like a candle to her moth. A part of her wanted to reach out and take the hand. Just fly into the fire and damn the rest. She glared at the soldier, hating the fact that her anger was what the quartz wanted. "And then what?" she scoffed. "We fly off back to Homeworld, hatefully ever after?" Her eyes narrowed, remembering what they had done to her. "They abandoned me; labeled me a traitor and cast me away."

"And that was a mistake," Jasper answered. "When I return in victory, the Diamonds will be more than willing to grant me a boon. Anything I desire, and I will have them return to you what was wrongly taken from you. No," Jasper shook her head. "No, not just that, you deserve so much more. And I will give it to you. Whatever you want."

Lapis stared, remembering her life before the mirror. "The Diamonds wouldn't approve. Not of Malachite."

Jasper flinched. "They wouldn't need to know," she declared, shame warring with defiance on her face. She stretched out her hand a little farther.

Lapis broke her gaze away from the soldier's and, to her horror, found herself considering it.

It would be so easy. Just like last time. A path stretched out in two directions in her mind, and she knew whichever one she took, the other would be forever barred from her forever this time.

She saw herself, returning to Blue Diamond's court with her head held high and regal, second only to the great Diamond herself.

She saw Jasper, staring at her with that wild longing that filled her with a tantalizing rage.
She saw the stars, stretching out into the endless space as an invitation of endless freedom.

She saw Malachite. Her fangs glinting in the depths of the ocean with a dark and seductive promise.

She saw Steven, his face frantic as he stared into the mirror, begging to know what he could do to help her.

She saw the farm, the grass swaying in a quiet wind as the world moved on around it, demanding nothing from her.

She saw Peridot, running around in a circle screaming bloody murder after Lady Featherface coughed up an owl pellet into her hair, while Lapis let out something that might almost have been a laugh.

She saw Steven again, his world crumbling before his eyes as he stared at what Garnet had become.

Lapis squeezed her eyes shut, driving away the images.

She chose a path.

"No."

Her wings slashed forward, forcing Jasper to leap out of their icy reach. The quartz's hand dropped to her side as she stared at Lapis, no anger in her eyes, merely a blank longing.

"You can't defeat me, Lapis." Jasper said heavily, like a mausoleum door threatening to swing shut. "The ocean is far away."

"Is that so?" Lapis asked, loosening her body for what was about to come. She had been on the earth for a long time and had seen many things. There'd been literally nothing else to do but watch. So she'd learned a thing or two about the earth.

Like, for example, the fact that there was water everywhere.

Lapis made a sharp, sweeping jab with her hand and the ground roiled as something beneath it began to move. The earth split, water rushing up to fill the void, turning the ground on which they stood into an island. Jasper glanced at the water, then back to Lapis. She spread her legs, and sunk into a battle stance as her helmet materialized.

"Fine," she spat, a vicious grin spreading across her face. "Have it your way, Lazuli."

The soldier moved and water roared.

Steven held tight to Lion's mane, staring at the pale pink locks and trusting the savannah cat to take them where they needed to be. He wanted time to slow down.

"Hey, are we there?" He blinked as a yellow mass of hair shoved its way out of Lion's mane and poked him in the eye. "Oops, sorry Steven." Peridot frowned, you should really put up signs in here, where we pop out of this fleabag's mane makes no sense." she looked past him and her frown deepened. "Where's Lapis."

"Fighting Jasper," Connie answered grimly.
"Fighting Jas—What?" Peridot's eyes bugged out. "You mean alone?" they didn't answer. "That's stupid!" Steven winced at the shrill screech. "Have you forgotten what happened the last time Lapis was alone with Jasper? How could you do something so dumb!"

"Because we need to deal with that." Connie pointed.

Peridot managed to spin herself around in the lion's mane and squinted, "Oh gross" the wrinkle of her nose was audible. "And what, exactly, is that thing? A mini cluster?"

"That's Garnet."

"…Oh. Oh, clod me." Peridot turned back to Steven, her face serious. "What's the plan?"

"I don't know."

"Well that's just not good enough!" Peridot yelled, making Steven flinch. "You just said Lapis is fighting Jasper alone! I give it five minutes before that ends in disaster, for everyone, if that! We need to act!"

"Peridot," Connie said quietly.

"Shut up!" Peridot shouted. "We're on a time crunch. Do you know what that means? It means we don't have time for Steven's moping. Are we taking her down and bubbling her, or are we trying to cure her?"

"We…" Steven looked away from Peridot's stare. To the fleeing tangle of limbs. Garnet was moving at quite a clip, but Lion was catching up quickly. Peridot was right; they didn't have time to be moping. His family needed him now.

"We… take her down." He said wretchedly.

"Steven…" Connie murmured.

"My spit has never healed a gem that's already been corrupted like this." he said, resolutely. "We don't have time to experiment and hope. Lapis can keep Jasper busy, but I don't know for how long." He steeled himself against the hurt, and tried not to feel like he was turning his back on the fusion. "We'll try to fix her after this is over."

"Alright," Peridot said, pulling herself back into the mass of pink hair until only her face was visible. "I'm staying in here, I've got a thing that could help, but I need to set it up. Keep Garnet busy until I'm ready." She sunk out of sight.

Steven looked up as he felt Lion slow to a trot. The monst—no, Garnet, it was Garnet—had stopped fleeing and had turned to face them, or at least, Steven thought she had. There were no eyes or face to speak of. Just a tangle of limbs pulling in every direction.

"Connie, we need Stevonnie," Steven said. He couldn't do this alone, he couldn't even face this with Connie by his side. He needed her with him. He felt Connie nod behind him and she squeezed him tighter.

And two became one.

Stevonnie slid from Lion's back and approached the purple mass.

Steven… the word came from within as a gentle warning.
She won't hurt me. It's Garnet.

…I hope you're right.

"Garnet," they spoke softly, drawing closer. "Are you there?"

The ball lunged, several hands coating themselves in ice and fire as they swung down at them. Stevonnie raised their arm and conjured a shield. It rang out as the limbs battered upon it, and Stevonnie grunted at the force.

"I guess not." they said sadly. They shoved back against the limbs, making spike bloom from the shield. The hands recoiled in pain, and they leapt into the air, sword held out to slash the ball through the middle.

It would be for the best if they ended this fight quickly.

Two mismatched hands formed and slapped together, catching the blade. Stevonnie hung there, staring at the sword. "Uh…" the ball spun, tossing them away and sending them rolling across the rocky gravel.

**Right. This is still Garnet. It won't be that easy.**

*Steven! Connie's voice was urgent. Look!*

Stevonnie looked back at the warped fusion. They could see, almost hidden behind the tangle of limbs, a tiny splotch of non-purple color. It was shaped like a heart, half blue, half red, with a pair of normal arms folded against the heart, clutching something. Stevonnie narrowed their eyes, trying to see what Connie had noticed, then went wide as she caught a glimpse of silver and violet.

Jasper had been wrong. Garnet *hadn't* dropped Amethyst and Pearl.

She was still holding them, clutching them tightly against her body as though the world would snatch them away at any moment. Keeping them safe from everything, even the flailing of her own misshapen limbs.

Stevonnie's eyes prickled with tears and she forced back a sob. Holding up their sword and shield as the misshapen mass rolled in once more.

"Clod it all. Clod it all! Cloddy clodding CLODS!" Peridot swore, yanking out another piece of machinery and hooking it up to her main device.

She was standing on a tiny island of green in a sea of pink swaying grass. Lion's hair dimension gave her the creeps, but at least it would give her a safe place to set up her secret weapon, for all the use it might be.

Everything had gone to coprolite! Garnet corrupted, Amethyst and Pearl captured, Lapis fighting Jasper alone. Even in the shelter of Lion's mane, she could hear the sound of ice and fire crackling around outside. It didn't sound like Steven was having much luck.

She should have stuck her head out sooner, checked what was going on, maybe she could have talked them out of leaving Lapis alone with Jasper. What had made them think that was a good idea? Why was everyone but her so stupid!?

Okay, Garnet had been corrupted. That was an objectively bad situation. But come on! That didn't
mean they should abandon all reason. If she was already corrupted, it's not like that situation was going to get worse. If they'd stuck around and dealt with Jasper together, Garnet would still have been equally corrupted. But once again, emotion had triumphed over logic and Steven had gone running off after his family rather than dealing with the enemy! It was enough to drive a gem mad, it really was.

And she was stuck trying to piece together equipment that refused point blank to cooperate. She tried again to slot the energy cell into the distributor matrix—something that had worked *half a dozen times* back in the barn—to no avail. She tried to shove it in and it slipped, forcing her to lunge to catch it before it could be lost in the pink grass. Growling, Peridot pulled out her wrench and gave the cell a vicious whack. There was a click, and the glowing hunk of metal slotted into place at last.

She flipped the switch and the device began to hum, Peridot stared at it suspiciously for a moment, but after it didn't burst into flame or something equally stupid, she concluded that it was most likely operational.

There was no time to waste, she hauled the device off the island and bent down to stick her head into the grass. Her head came out on the left side of Lion's face—honestly, the spatial connection in this place was stupid—and saw Stevonnie slashing at several grabbing hands.

Lion was pawing the ground anxiously, uncertain how to help. His sonic roars weren't exactly the pinnacle of pinpoint precision, he'd probably hit Stevonnie too. Luckily Peridot had a better option.

"Hey, roar beast." Lion glanced at her. "I require your assistance, so hold still and keep your eyes on Garnet." He blinked at her slowly, which she chose to take as agreement and drew herself back into the mane. Okay, she needed to find the patch of grass the coincided with the top of Lion's head. It took a couple of tries, jogging around the edge of the solid ground and shoving her head into the grass at various intervals but eventually she found the sweet spot, maddeningly located right next to where she had first stuck her head out.

Stupid cats and their extra dimensional nonsense.

She turned back to her contraption, giving it a once over and going over a mental checklist to ensure she hadn't missed anything. Over the past few weeks, she'd been collecting bits and pieces of gem tech from whatever ancient facility she had found herself in. The tech might be outdated, but to a technician of her outstanding caliber, that was no issue.

The old gems *had* left some interesting stuff lying around; crystal capacitors from that dead sea facility, a few energy cells from that mushroom lab, even a micro fusion engine—those things hadn't been used in *eons*.

She'd had just enough parts to make a makeshift ion-canon, strong enough to deliver a potent laser blast at a reasonable range. It looked a little makeshift, it was true. The piecemeal coloration of the various parts did not make for a neat machine, and earth paints just didn't give the right colors. It also had next to no safety features and there was an admittedly non-zero chance it might explode when used. But again, they were on a tine crunch and it would have to suffice.

She shoved the barrel of the canon into the grass and stuck her head out to make sure it was pointed correctly. To her delight, she found the barrel resting neatly on top of Lion's head. The cat was staring up at the metal tube with a nervous look—or it would be if cats *could* look nervous. He growled at her lightly.

"Oh calm down you big baby, it's perfectly safe." Peridot only *slightly* lied. She looked back to the
fight. Stevonnie was struggling. Whenever the fusion managed to get close enough to stab at the corrupted gems, ice would crackle into being right before the blade impacted. Peridot got the impression that Stevonnie couldn't bring themselves to strike with everything they had, which was understandable, but unhelpful.

Naturally, it came down to her to save the day. Peridot narrowed her eyes, mentally comparing the relative size of the corrupted fusion and the likely precision of her canon. She wanted to hit Garnet, not Stevonnie, after all. She didn't really want to get close to the thing, but… she sighed.

"Roar beast," she ordered. "Take us closer to Garnet, and keep our canon pointed on her." The Lion blinked at her again and Peridot groaned. "Please?"

Lion whuffed, and began to move, cautiously picking his way closer to the fighting pair. Peridot ran her hands over the firing mechanism of her canon, she couldn't see it, but she knew where it was.

She knew what she was doing. She wouldn't be sticking her head out of magical Lion's mane, her head next to makeshift, could-possibly-explode, canon intent on firing it at a horribly twisted pair of gems if she didn't… okay, when she put it like that, perhaps this wasn't the best idea. But…

Jasper would kill Steven. Or bring him back to the Diamonds, which would likely amount to the same thing. And stars only knew what she'd do to Lapis.

Peridot… didn't want her friends to be hurt. She liked her new life, she liked the earth—although anyone who tried to get her to admit it was asking to get whacked with a wrench—it had grown on her like fungus and she didn't want to leave it.

And so, there was no time to lose. Peridot held the barrel of the canon straight, "Stevonnie!" she yelled. "Get clear! I'm about to do a thing!" Stevonnie glanced back, saw the glowing barrel sticking out of Lion's mane and didn't need to be twice. They leapt away as a cloud of fire burned the grass where they had been standing.

"Aim high!" Stevonnie shouted, She's holding Amethyst and Pearl!"

"Noted." Peridot nodded grimly, spotting the heart-shaped spot of blue and red. "Lion." The cat raised his head, adjusting the aim and Peridot pulled the trigger.

For a moment, the world held its breath. Everyone, Garnet included, held still, mesmerized by the light of the glowing barrel. After another moment, nothing happened.

"Oh, Come o-"

There was a noise like fracturing light, and a brilliant beam seared itself on Peridot's vision spheres. She blinked furiously, forcing away the spots in her vision through force of will and looked at Garnet.

The fusion held still, a hole large enough for Peridot to stick her head in had appeared on the top of the purple mass. Peridot could see the sky through the other side.

The corrupted fusion shuddered, and burst into smoke.

Stevonnie dove, sliding on her belly to catch four stones before they could hit the ground.

"I did it," Peridot blinked. "I did it!" She whooped, hoping out of the mane and running over to Stevonnie.
"Great job, Peridot!" Stevonnie grinned, or tried to—they clearly couldn't work up the much excitement over defeating friend. Peridot didn't blame them; it wasn't a happy victory, merely a necessary one. "Now we can-" Stevonnie cut herself off, staring at the two of the gems in her hands.

"What's wrong?" Peridot demanded.

"Amethyst and Pearl." Stevonnie held out the gems. Peridot's heart sank, the elation of victory vanishing as she stared at the silvery band wrapping around Amethyst's gem.

They would be getting no further reinforcements. Jasper had made sure of it.

Jasper!

Peridot whipped her head around in the direction they had come from. She could just make out the pink palanquin and, more noticeably, the giant waves of water flying through the air. "We need to help Lapis!" She declared, "Lion," she paused. The cat was lying on his belly, pawing at his eyes. Her canon was on the ground next to him, the barrel twisted beyond usability. Peridot cursed, she knew she should have found better material for that.

"Peridot, take these." The technician blinked as four gems were shoved into her hands.

Stevonnie marched over to the pink cat. With a gentle firmness, the remaining fusion pulled the paws away from the cat's eyes and spat in them. The feline whined, but got to its feet as the red puffiness faded from its eyes. "I want you to take Lion and the others and go back to the temple." Stevonnie ordered, her gaze locked on the swirling water in the distance.

"What?" Peridot yelped, "And what about you?"

"I'm going to deal with Jasper." Their voice was tense, like Lapis' that one time she'd talked to Peridot about mirrors.

"Alone?" Peridot yelped. "People going off alone is what got us into this mess!"

"I'm not alone," Stevonnie answered. "Someone needs to help Lapis, and someone needs to take care of them." they gestured at the gems in Peridot's hands.

Peridot wanted to protest, but Stevonnie was already moving, their feet pounding the ground as they carried them back towards the final fight, leaving Peridot all alone.

The wall of water broke upon her, halting her momentum yet again and leaving her open to a second wave that slammed her to the ground. Jasper grunted, forcing her legs beneath her and leaping upwards before Lapis could beckon the water back for another blow.

Jasper burst through the half-formed wall and caught a glimpse of the water gem, her wings already to starting to flap as she tried to distance herself. Jasper wasn't about to give her the chance. She threw herself headfirst after the gem, closing the distance in an instant. But then something grabbed her, jerking her to a sudden stop and throwing her back. Jasper raised her head and saw… herself?

A watery figure, its huge form bulging with liquid muscles and a helmet of ice upon its head glared back.

Jasper blinked, glancing at the blue gem beyond her water doppelganger. Lapis smirked and
flicked her fingers forward. The liquid clone lunged, grabbing at Jasper with hands that crackled into ice. Jasper met it halfway, grappling with it for a moment before slamming her helmet down, intent on scattering the petty trick into a puddle. It responded in kind, its helmet meeting hers with equal force, and not breaking.

…what?

The aqua jasper took advantage of her surprise, hoisting her off her feet and spinning her around once before tossing her away, like a piece of trash. Jasper slid through the mud, righting herself before it could take advantage of her weakness. But no such attack came.

The clone hadn't moved from its spot, its arms were crossed and it was staring at her in the disappointed way a glacier might look at an ice cube.

"Do you like her?" Lapis asked, strolling lightly up behind the clone, her hands clasped behind her back and smiling at Jasper innocently. "She's just like you. Except, you know, she doesn't talk."

Lapis' expression turned thoughtful as she tapped a finger against her chin. "Which makes her kind of more tolerable, don't you think?" She looked the clone up and down and gave it an intentionally appreciative grin.

Jasper felt rage rushing through her at the dismissal, white-hot and heavy with hate. She exploded into motion, roaring with fury. Lapis skipped back and sent the clone rushing to meet her. Again, it checked her charge, stopping her as its helmet crashed against hers. She could hear its ice cracking and reforming, giving no ground before her might. Jasper redoubled her efforts, lashing out at the water clone. It responded in kind.

Jasper wasn't sure how long it went on like that, slugging blows with the misshapen ball of water that was somehow, impossibly, her equal. But somewhere along the way, her rage began to fade, morphing into something that felt almost like joy.

All the world around her faded, memories of the past and thoughts of the future disappeared as Jasper lost herself in the wild rush of fighting against one who stood as her equal. The only things that mattered in all the universe was Lapis and her.

And the question of who would win.

The clone's body flowed around her fist and got into her guard. Jasper leapt back, taking a hard blow to the chest that nearly sent her sprawling. Her legs splashed in down into a pool of water and Jasper tensed, but the water did not rise to bind her as her watery double made chase. Jasper narrowed her eyes, glancing past the clone to its master. Lapis as picture of focus, her arms held out as she controlled the clone. But above all, one fact registered in Jasper's eyes: Lapis didn't have her wings out.

In fact, the only water moving in any way that could be called unnatural was her assailant. Even the pool they were fighting in was steady sinking back into the ground. Realization dawned.

Lapis was pouring all of her power into this water soldier, that hateful will that could move oceans constrained to the relatively tiny figure. No wonder it could match her strength, more than match, in fact. Jasper realized she had no hope of beating it. It was just water, there wasn't anything to defeat.

But Jasper hadn't come this far just to let an unbeatable opponent get the best of her.

Jasper ducked as the clone came in for a blow, taking the strike on her helmet and willing it to
break. Her helm broke free of her head and Jasper went sprawling, grabbing the headpiece as she fell into a crouch. Her double came in low, sensing weakness. Jasper snapped to her feet and whipped the broken helmet straight over its head towards the gem controlling it. Lapis gasped and her hands shot up, palms held out as though she meant to catch it.

Jasper's twin reacted with a speed that would have put a striking snake to shame, flowing through the air after the projectile with no thought save protecting its master. Its arms shot out, wrapping around the helmet and freezing solid, stopping the helmet inches from Lapis' face.

But the water gem's focus was broken, and Jasper slammed into the clone from behind and broke through, scattering it like rain drops. She had just enough time to see Lapis' eyes widen in fear and hear the song of triumph roaring in her ears before slamming into her opponent, sending them both to the ground. They rolled through the thick mud, Lapis struggling all the while, but there was only one way it was ever going to end.

They came to a stop, Jasper on top and pinning the smaller gem's arms and legs beneath her weight.

Jasper smirked downward, smugger than any cat regarding its captured prey.

The look Lapis shot back, a heady mix of fear and hatred, was enough to push her over the edge. Jasper closed the distance between them and crushed her mouth against the pair of snarling blue lips. She felt Lapis go rigid; whether it was from shock or horror, Jasper didn't particularly care, lost in the sweet taste of victory.

But not quite so lost she didn't hear the rush of water or the crackle of ice behind her.

'Stubborn to the last' jasper thought affectionately. No time for her helmet, she reluctantly pulled away from Lapis' face and moved her head a little lower, sinking her fangs into the soft blue throat and tearing it out.

There was a pop as the water gem exploded into smoke, and Jasper felt water slosh across her back, but weakly, with the force of mere gravity rather than steely will.

Jasper held still, staring down at the dark blue, tear-shaped stone resting in mud.

Jasper began to laugh as she got to her feet, scooping the gem from the muck and caressing it, brushing the dirt from it and polishing it as gently as a cat washing her kitten.

That had been everything she hoped for. The struggle, the intensity, and the utter euphoria of victory that now filled her with a warm glow. It had almost been as good as malachite.

Jasper smiled at the gem resting in her palm.

"Don't worry, Lazuli," she murmured softly, knowing the gem couldn't hear her. She would take Lapis back to Homeworld with her—not as a prisoner, never that—but as her equal. Lapis would come around, Jasper was sure of it. It might take a while for the message to sink in, but Jasper wasn't going to say no to more fights like that one.

All she needed to do was sever the water gem's final tie to this stinking rock, and everything would be perfect.

"L-Lapis?"

The voice was soft, Jasper recognized it as the voice of one who knew they had arrived too late,
but still thought they could change things, if they believed hard enough.

Jasper smiled.

*My Diamond, your vengeance is at hand.*

SECRET DELETED SCENE (BECAUSE I CAN)

Jasper blinked as the barrage of waves and frost came to a cease, ebbing away like the tides. She spun, ready to mount a counterattack. But stopped, Lapis had a... a look on her face. A mix of uncertainty and longing that made Jasper's breath catch.

"You know," Lapis said, looking away demurely, "the truth is... I *have* actually been missing you." she peered up through her lashes at Jasper.

"Y-you..." Jasper swallowed, her face taking on a dark orange tinge. "You have?"

"Yes," Lapis nodded, crossing her arms and clutching her forearms shyly. She raised her wings and they froze solid, forming countless icicles. "That's why I've been working on my aim."

CHAPTER END NOTES

That... got at least 30% creepier towards the end than I was expecting.

You'd think that a corrupted Garnet would be the most deliciously angst-y thing ever, but no. Somehow it wasn't nearly as interesting to me I thought it would be. There's just something about Garnet being corrupted... I just don't feel like you need to wax poetic about that. There's only so many ways you can say Steven is really upset until it becomes bland.

Also, that was competing with the much more delicious confrontation between the stars of this chapter: Jasper and Lapis.

Okay, I feel like I should start off this rant by officially declaring that I do NOT ship them, no matter what that may have looked like towards the end. Their canonical relationship is, to put it delicately, toxic as fuck. Which is probably what makes it so interesting to me.

I find Jasper's fascination with Lapis adds a tantalizing depth to her character, as there's a lot of gritty emotion wrapped up in that snarly package. Garnet says being a fusion is an experience, Malachite seems to be quite a masochistic one. But to a degree, both Lapis and Jasper are into that. Jasper, perhaps feeling guilt over her failure to protect her diamond or win the war in her name, may feel that she deserves punishment as a form of penance...

Lapis has a lot of issues to work out. A soldier who represents the war that got her
imprisoned in the first place? Sounds like a reasonable target to vent some rage on. We've all wanted to hit things when we are mad.

But alas, Lapis has been removed from the fight and, in doing so, Steven has finally run out of moms.

Who would have thought we'd see the day?

Until next time!

Chapter 43: It's over, isn't it?
Isn't it over?

Chapter Summary

Day is done, war is won.

Chapter Notes

This chapter got annoying towards the end. I just couldn't get a certain part right.

Also, Stevonnie is in this chapter a lot. I did my best with the personal pronouns. If I missed a few, please don't SJW me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Lapis..." Stevonnie repeated, though without much hope. They could see the water around them draining away, swallowed hungrily by the cracks in the earth. They didn't have to see the blue teardrop in Jasper's hands to know their friend had lost.

Stevonnie's grip on the sword tightened until their knuckles went white. Was there anyone they weren't going to fail today? There was a chunk of ice at their feet, shaped into a blocky helmet. As they watched, a crack split it neatly down the middle.

"Rose Quartz," the words were laden with a smug satisfaction.

Their eyes snapped up, locking onto the source of all this... all this... this.

And to think, they had thought they'd hated Kevin. That mild repugnance, that slight need to wrinkle their nose at the teenager's presence a lifetime ago was nothing compared to the frustration bubbling in their gut, it was like they'd swallowed a bucket of boiling lead; hot, heavy, and screaming for release.

"Let her go."

"No." Jasper snorted, her fingers clenching almost protectively around the gemstone. "Don't expect me to abandon her just because you did. Some of us understand the concept of loyalty."

The molten lead sloshed up their throat, trying to escape. They raised the pink sword, unwilling to open their mouth lest it slip out in a violent scream. Jasper stared at the blade, anger of her own building behind yellow eyes, then looked back to them.

"You fused with the human." She said in disbelief. "I knew you had grown weak, but this? You can't face your enemies without cowering behind a shield of meat?" she scoffed, raising one hand towards them in disgust. "Every time I think you can't disappoint me more..."

"Shut. Up."

Jasper stilled. "...fine." She held up Lapis' gem and bubbled it. She tossed the shimmering sphere
gently over her shoulder and it came to rest above the top step of the palanquin. Jasper formed her helmet, a flash of light that carried with it a sense of finality. Her gem shined again, and she pulled out a battle-ax.

It looked an awful lot like the one of the weapons they had seen littered around the strawberry field. Except this one was no relic of a battle long passed, there was no moss clinging to pitted metal; both of its edges gleamed as though splitting the fading light of dusk. Jasper gave the weapon a twirl, handling its enormous bulk as though it was no heavier than a pencil.

Stevonnie raised their shield, any fear burned away by the hate bubbling in their gut. This fight was going to end with beating Jasper into the ground and locking her in a bubble forever. That way she'd never be able to hurt anyone ever again.

Jasper moved, leaping into the air and bringing the axe down in a vicious overhead chop. Stevonnie didn't bother trying to block, leaping away from the falling ax. The blade crunched into the dirt, sending out a shockwave that shook the ground. They lunged, sword extended to stab the soldier through the chest. Jasper whipped her hair forward, but they got their shield up just in time and winced as they saw the hair strike up sparks as the white strands ground against the shimmering barrier.

Jasper used her momentum to flip forward, planting both feet on the ground and wrenching her weapon free. She came on again, ax swinging in to split them in two and Stevonnie leapt back, scrabbling for a happy thought to propel them away through the air. They managed to dodge the blade, but Jasper's hand shot out like a viper, snagging them by the ankle.

They gasped at the shock and, focus now broken, their floating vanished. The soldier spun and flung them away. They hit the ground hard, rolling painfully across rocks and hard, dagger-like stumps of plants until they came to a bumpy stop against a scraggly tree.

"is that... it?" Jasper was strolling toward them sedately, her axe propped up over one shoulder. "As a soldier, I recommend you come up with a tactic that doesn't involve trying to run away," her eyes narrowed. "Or I'm afraid this...fight," Jasper snorted at the word, "isn't going to last very long."

Stevonnie looked up, their heart beating furiously in their ears. This wasn't anything like fighting a corrupted gem; those were wild and unfocused, half their energy diverted into flailing around angrily. Facing someone whose only objective was to make them as dead as possible was unnerving to say the least. They needed a plan. They needed help, but there was nobody left... unless...

Stevonnie pushed themselves to their feet, grabbing a low branch of the tree behind them for support. They glared at the approaching warrior. "It's not going to be very long anyway," they spat. "I'll be done with you in no time flat."

"Just words," Jasper sighed, hefting her axe once more. Stevonnie let go of the tree and moved forward, circling to the right and away from the side with the axe blade. Jasper charged them, but they threw up a wide bubble, stopping the soldier short. They stuck out their tongue, making the soldier's eyes narrow in fury. Jasper came in again, snarling. Stevonnie waited until the last moment before throwing out a hand. Spikes erupted from the bubble, nearly impaling the orange gem then and there. But Jasper saw the danger and brought the haft of her ax to bear, blocking the spike.

The force of the spike pushed the soldier back, her feet leaving deep furrows in the ground. Locking eyes with the soldier, Stevonnie grinned and thrust the other hand out. The bubble expanded, and the spike along with it, the sudden wall of force overbalancing Jasper and sending
her stumbling.

Right into the trunk of the tree.

"Now!" they called, snapping their fingers. The tree came to life, its many limbs whipping around to grab at the soldier, curling around her form like an octopus. Jasper snarled, struggling ferociously as the trunk coiled around her. "Gotcha!" Stevonnie smirked, lunging forward.

Jasper grit her teeth and Stevonnie saw the gem's nose light up, shining like an angry sun.

Jasper exploded.

A solid wave of heat and light slammed into Stevonnie's face, tossing them back like a leaf in the wind and searing itself across their eyes. Sending the fusion rolling back across the ground until they slid to a painful stop. Stevonnie stared in disbelief at the figure standing in the crater. Jasper was glaring at her with eyes like tiny supernovas.

The soldier snarled, stomping forward as she shook burned bits of wood from her wild hair. "All you do is perform little tricks and hide behind others." She hauled back her hand and hurled the axe it them, chopping through the air with a whoop-whoop sound. Stevonnie threw up the shield and the axe head struck it directly. The shield rung under the force, making their arm go numb as the weapon thumped into the ground.

"What are you even fighting for anymore?" Jasper yelled, barreling in close behind, slamming into the raised shield and threatening to blow them off their feet. "Your fusion is gone," she declared, snatching her weapon from the dirt. "Your soldiers are trapped and unable to return. Garnet is broken. Lapis is mine. You have nothing left. What can you hope to accomplish?"

"Defending the earth!" Stevonnie screamed back, hacking wildly at the soldier. "That's what we've always done!"

"And where has that gotten you?" Jasper, raised her axe and caught the sword between the heads. Twisting the ax, she wrenched the weapon out of their grasp and flung both weapons away. "A horde of ruined gems waiting for their wretched little rock to be reduced to space debris." She slammed her fists into the shield, striking it like a sledgehammer. "Do you have any idea how many gems you've ruined in your little crusade?" she snarled, throwing her head forward in a vicious head-butt. "How much your petty rebellion cost?"

Stevonnie leapt, making their body lighter, they somersaulted over the soldier. Planting their feet on the back of Jasper's helmet, they thought of this all turning out to be a dream, of waking up and seeing Garnet smiling down at them.

"'ello Steven, did you sleep well?"

Channeling all of that feeling downward, they jumped. There was a thud behind them as Jasper's head slammed into the ground, burying her all the way to her shoulders. But Stevonnie didn't see that, touching down lightly where Jasper had tossed the weapons and scooped up their blade, sending the ax away with a hard kick.

"My mom saved this planet and everything on it!" Jasper began to spin, churning up clouds of dirt as she ripped herself out of the hole and zipped away from the stabbing sword, only to swerve about and come back in for an attack. Stevonnie crouched low, planting the rim of the shield in the ground and tilting it back to create a ramp. Jasper slammed into and up it, flying up and over their head. They stabbed upward and sparks flew as the sword ground against the spinning gem, but the
awkward angle limited their force and Jasper spun away unharmed, ramming into the ground and digging a deep channel before spinning to a stop.

"My mom cared about the Earth and the people who lived here! Homeworld could have gone anywhere, there are eight other planets in this solar system alone! But Homeworld decided to destroy the one with life on it!" They stomped forward, blade at the ready. "And why was that? Because it had some nice rocks?" they glared at the soldier, all the anger, all the hatred rushing out in a rush of words.

"The Diamonds wanted to kill the planet, turn it into a gem factory so they could make more soldiers. But my mom said no. She stepped up and stopped them, she beat them. Just like I'm going to beat you!"

Jasper snorted, rolling her eyes dismissively as she stepped out of her furrow, and Stevonnie felt the blood within boil.

"You think Yellow Diamond cares that you're doing any of this for her?" Stevonnie spat. "She doesn't! The only thing she cares about is the cluster, about her stupid weapon, and you're too late. We already stopped that. You've failed her."

Jasper froze mid-step, gaping at them as though they'd thrown a bucket of cold water over her. Stevonnie smirked back, reveling in the feeling of the soldier's obvious dismay.

"You think…" Jasper whispered in something that sounded almost like horror. "I'm doing this for Yellow Diamond?"

Stevonnie blinked. There was a feeling in the air, as though they'd been walking down an innocent looking, torch-lit corridor and a tile beneath their foot had just gone click.

"Uh…" they hesitated, furrowing their brow. "Yeah? She's, you know, your Diamond? Tall, yellow, tried to take over the earth ages ago until my mom sent her packing?"

Jasper's face went blank.

She moved, jerking like a machine as she marched towards them. Her face was… calm, as though the soldier's rage had climbed so heights it had looped back around to a special kind of tranquility.

Unnerved, Stevonnie clutched the pink saber with both hands, pointing the tip at the advancing figure. Jasper didn't slow, didn't speed up, she gave no indication that she had even seen it.

Connie?

I know. I'm not sure what she's planning, but I don't like it. We need to stop her now!

Their feet dug into the churned earth and Stevonnie lunged, the tip of the saber perfectly lined up to pierce the soldier's chest.

Jasper's hand blurred, rising up and smacking the flat of the blade mid-strike, sending it askew. They stumbled, thumping into the soldier shoulder-first, the blade stabbing harmlessly into the air. Jasper's hands clamped down on their shoulders and shoved them to the ground, falling falling on top of them.

They tried to bring the blade to bear, but Jasper placed a hand like a vice wrapped around their wrist and squeezed. Stevonnie felt the bones grinding together and barely heard the crack over the
sound of their own scream. The orange gem knocked away the blade and wrapped her fingers around something else.

Stevonnie's scream cut off with a gasp, they scrambled one-handed at the fingers clenched around their throat. Jasper stared down at them, her face still holding that cold serenity, with neither a hint of anger, nor triumph as she waited for them to die.

'Got… gotta unfuse,' the thoughts trickled through their head sluggishly as black spots began to swim across their vision. 'S-shape shift. Summon plants… some...thing.'

They tried to fall apart, to split themselves free. But the hands tightened inexorably, holding them together. Jasper's expression flickered not a bit, as if carved from stone.

Carved from stone… heh. They'd need to… tell Amethyst that one. When they saw her again.

Did they even need to breathe? Their thoughts were turning dreamy, disconnected from everything. Connie did… Steven… didn't… he'd been in space. The dark spots began to link together, switching places with the world as everything went dark.

Then, as the world had almost gone completely dark, they saw jagged white cracks split the sky.

Here!

She was here! Somewhere. It could sense her. Faintly, but without question. it had to be her!

Its eyes strafed the ground, trying to find her. It saw a structure, a pink tower with spikey legs that plucked a chord of memory. It knew that tower; it had seen it long ago, in another lifetime. But it did not sense the towering figure of light that accompanied the memory. The Lady of the Stars was not here.

But her servant was. Its eyes locked onto the orange figure, crouched upon the ground over another. It recognized her, they had fought her before they had been separated. It could feel a tingle of her upon the servant.

The servant had her. Had laid hands upon her!

Shining wings folded behind its back and it dove with a scream of shattering thunder.

Noise pierced the oxygen-deprived daze as the weight upon them vanished. It took a moment for that to register, their mouth opening before their brain could catch up and taking in a huge gulp of precious oxygen. Their chest seized up and they choked. Pain wracked every part of their body like a shower of meteorites, with two particularly exquisite clusters of pain around the neck and right hand.

Their vision swam as they sat bolt upright, threatening to send them tumbling back to the realm of unconsciousness. But they rallied, sitting still and taking in steady breathes of air. There was nothing else that could be done at the moment, their mind, overloaded by the cocktail of pain, fear, and adrenaline, was blocking everything else out in order to deal with it all. But then something stuck them, zapping them like the sting of a shock collar and the situation reasserted itself upon them.

Their eyes focus on a stripe of pink—their sword!—and dove for it. They tried grabbing it with their right hand, but a pain shot up their wrist as though someone hammered a nail into it and they
were forced to grab it with their left. They rolled to their feet, the blade feeling awkward in their off hand, and looked around.

Their vision was still a little fuzzy, but… it looked like Jasper was busy fighting some kind of giant bird.

A pair of long, slender legs pranced across the ground, gracefully stepping out of the path of the wild lunge. As the soldier went passed, one leg shot out, snagging the soldier's mane of hair with a set of dainty toes. The bird spread its wings, catching the air and halting Jasper's momentum with a painful-looking jerk, it flapped again, hauling the soldier back and performing a back flip in midair, swinging the soldier around and flicking her away almost contemptuously. It clacked its beak, and there was a crashing boom as a bolt of lightning shot down from the sky, striking the soldier and making her angry roar morph into one of pain.

Stevonnie stared, unsure that their eyes weren't conspiring with the wooziness in their head to play tricks on them. They'd never met a giant yellow lightning bird before, had they? Where had it come from? Was it another one of Mom's creatures come to save them? Did Lion have a bunch of animal friends hiding everywhere and refused to talk about them? A sort of "Mysterious Monster Monthly" kind of thing? "Uh…"

The bird's head whipped around and locked on them, dismissing the fuzziness with a wave of sobriety as realization dawned.

They had seen this gem before.

The pair of beady eyes were glaring at them with a lack of mercy that would put a cat to shame. But what caught Stevonnie's attention was the gemstone resting on the creature's brow, just below the jagged crest topping its head, glowing golden yellow and shaped like a blunted diamond.

"Amber?" They gaped.

The furious eyes blinked, its head cocking to one side on the sinuous neck.

Who?

The other gem from the corrupt fusion. The one Garnet's been looking for. I… don't know what it's doing here.

Any chance it's friendly?

The remaining half of what had been PF-01-2 resembled nothing so much as a heron, a portrait of grace and carefully controlled viciousness. Its eyes scraped across their form and focused on the gem on their stomach. A faint hiss escaped its beak as its eyes crackled with faint wisps of energy. The gem ruffled its wings, the feathers clinking together like a bandoleer of daggers.

I'm going to go with no. I think it, uh, recognizes my gem. You know, from when I fought it and… separated… it.

…Uh oh.

Amber's head lowered, and a single beat of its wings had it shooting at them like a rocket. Stevonnie already had their left hand up, summoning a bubble, as thick and wide as they could make it. The furious gem slammed into it beak-first, making the shield flex with force. There was a smell of ozone and lightning began to race along its wings. The gem began to spin like a drill as it
pressed its beak harder against the barrier. To Stevonnie's disbelief, cracks began to spread through the wall of pink.

"Wha-?" the cone of lightning broke through, nearly drilling through them as it spun past, making their nostrils burn with the smell of ozone. Stevonnie spun to face it, shaking the fractured shield and willing the cracks to mend. They were very much aware that Jasper was somewhere behind them, but glancing back meant they would have to look away from this new danger. The bird gem stopped spinning and swung around for another pass.

They tried to deflect it, crouching low and holding the shield at an angle to prevent the gem from hitting it head on. They braced for impact, but it never came. The gem tilted its wings and rose a little higher and shot overhead. But not so high it could snag the rim of their shield with its talons.

Stevonnie was yanked off their feet, swung through the air and slammed into the ground faster than they could blink.

They hit the ground hard, and felt electricity running painful laps through their body as the heron loomed over them. Everything was now spinning but they could just make out the long, spear-like beak raised to run them through. Before it could finish the job, the bird paused, its eyes locking on something just beyond them.

Then it stepped over them, as though their presence was now beneath its notice. Stevonnie craned their neck back, nonplussed as they watched that feathered neck dip down and plucked something off the ground. Stevonnie squinted, whatever the gem had in its beak, it was a dark pink and sort of blocky.

The bird threw back its head and crowed in triumph, somewhat muffled by the stone. It spread its wings and took off. In a matter of moments, the gem was a shrinking cone of light on the horizon, and then it was gone.

Stevonnie watched it go, blinking as a wave of exhaustion rolled over every limb. They hurt all over, and wanted nothing more than to stay on the ground and sleep it off.

*Do you have… any idea what that was about?*

**No, but—LOOK OUT!**

They lurched to the side as a heavy foot crunched into the ground where their head had been. Jasper was back on her feet, her mane of hair was wilder than ever, half of it standing on end from her unexpected electrocution. Her eyes were wild, like they were unraveling at the edges. But she didn't say anything, didn't acknowledge that the fight had been interrupted as she stepped towards them again with that single-minded focus.

Stevonnie threw up a bubble, and Jasper's helmet struck it head on, sending the barrier rolling backward with them inside.

The gem hybrid stared at the Homeworld gem, heart sinking even as their mind scrabbled for some idea of what kind of tactic or attack should be employed. Jasper was already running for them, her helmet at the ready.

She just wouldn't *stop*.

And they couldn't beat her. That fact sunk into their mind with a dread certainty. Jasper seemed possessed by strength beyond caring, driven berserk by…whatever it was they'd said. Their hand was still sending throbs through their arm like the blink of a warning light, there was no way their
right hand would be able to hold the sword in it, leaving only their left hand to attack or defend. Defending wouldn't be enough; Jasper would just beat through it eventually. They needed to attack.

Stevonnie clutched the sword tighter. It felt awkward in their hand, unnaturally heavy. But it was all they had… just one hand.

*Steven,* Connie's voice was suddenly urgent. *Throw up a shield.*

**What? But I-**

*Just do it!*

Jolted by the command in her voice, Stevonnie held up the hand with the sword and conjured their shield as Jasper was almost on top of them. The soldier leapt, head held high and bringing it down like a meteor. The helmet slammed into the shield and the force buckled them at the knees. Stevonnie fell. Then, in a flash of light, fell even lower.

Steven blinked, staring at Connie. Jasper was staring too, the girl was crouched, clutching the pink saber with both hands. Time seemed to slow as Connie leapt, the tip of the sword stabbing upward and sinking into the center of Jasper's chest.

Time seemed to resume as the soldier gasped, twisting as the momentum wrenched the blade out of Connie's grip. The soldier tumbled, falling to the ground beyond them and sliding to a stop. Jasper's head moved, turning to glare at them, before falling to the sword sticking out of her. Slowly, her form starting to waver, her hand reached for the hilt, trembled. Then fell.

There was a burst of smoke and a tiny orange tetrahedron plopped into the dirt.

The pair stared at it, as though expecting a trick, a few seconds trickled by and they dared to hope. A few more passed. Nothing happened.

*It was over.*

They'd won.

The adrenaline, which had been working overtime to keep up, finally clocked out and both collapsed to their knees, taking in big gulps of air and looking at each other. Connie smiled wearily and Steven grinned back, it was easier than crying. He noticed she was clutching her right hand, which was bright red and quickly swelling, it looked like his felt, although he couldn't bring himself to look at his own wrist. Tiredly, he held out his left hand, licking his lips to work up some spit.

"*Your hand,*" he said, exhaustion soaking him to the bone. Connie didn't argue, she held the wrist out, wincing as she cradled it in her other hand. Steven didn't hesitate, spitting on swollen flesh. Connie gasped, the air hissing between clenched teeth, then exhaled slowly as the arm glowed pink and shrunk back to a beautiful shade of brown. She smiled.

"*You should do yours.*"

Steven shook his head. "*My spit doesn't work on me,*" he flashed another grin as he made the long climb back to his feet. "*Bummer, right?*

"*…Yeah.*" Connie looked past him and froze, horror filling her face. Steven spun around and ice filled his veins.
Jasper's gem was glowing.

Steven's legs were moving before his mind told them too, running for all they were worth as the orange gemstone began to float off the ground.

Angry solid light began to pour from the Jasper's stone and Steven leapt, shield reforming on their uninjured arm. A pair of amber eyes opened just in time to see the rim of the shield coming.

There was a crack of splitting stone.

Jasper took a step back and Steven thumped onto his belly, going cross-eyed as she stared at her gem, at the large crack spreading through it. Disbelieving eyes swiveled back to meet his. He met her their gaze, shield outstretched, numbness filling him as he watched a tiny chip fall from the stone.

Jasper's form shuddered, a ripple spreading through it, Jasper grit her teeth against it, staggering back another step. She tore her gaze from his and forced her body to turn away until she faced the pink palanquin. Jasper took a step forward, then another, lurching all the way.

"M-my… Dia-no-Nd." The sound was more emotion than words, something brittle and sharp. Her feet disappeared, sending her crashing to the ground, but she tried to crawl on her legs began to dissipate from the stumps.

An orange hand stretched out, reaching for the bottom step as the fingers began to dissolve.

Jasper let out one last shuddering sigh and was gone.

Steven stared at the pile of broken orange shards, glinting accusingly at them as the sun slipped beneath the horizon.

The world tilted sideways as the day caught up to him and he was unconscious before he hit the ground.

It had left their enemies far behind them, and were soaring through the clouds on the winds of victory.

It had her!

It had her!

She had been lost, but they had found her and they would be one once more!

It wanted to set alight upon the ground and hold her close, but not yet. Not yet. It was not far enough away yet, enemies abounded on this planet and it needed to make sure they wouldn't be disturbed.

So it flew on, soaring above the sea of clouds as the blanket of stars lay upon its back. Eventually, as the world began to brighten with the turning of the planet, it decided it had gone far enough. It could wait no longer.

It dove, careful to keep its grip on her, alighting upon the edge of a vast mass of rippling water. Its toes dug into the gritty sand as it carefully, reverently, placed her upon the ground.

It cooed happily, rubbing its head against one of the flat facets, wondering if she could sense its
presence. It hoped she could, knowing that she would push herself to return all the faster. It felt like it had back when they had first become one, countless eons ago when they had served the ladies of stone. Giddy with loyalty and love that had gone on for centuries before they had been… discovered.

But what had happened after that didn't matter. What mattered was the now.

Delicately, it held itself over the stone and lowered its body, enveloping her core in its body, sheltering it. It would wait as long as it had to and woe to anyone who tried to stop the process. It relished the closeness of her, the promise of return, rumble of her energy, the feel of her pointed edge digging lightly into its body.

… Pointed edge?

The bird shifted slightly, the incongruence encroaching on its euphoria like a stormy cloud upon the horizon.

This…was her, wasn't it?

Of course it was! It felt like her. Her feelings had always flowed from her to others with the greatest of ease, especially to it. It knew her, better than any other and it would recognize the weight of her presence anywhere. This was her. It felt exactly like her.

But… her core wasn't pointed. It was hard, a sturdy bastion of rough warmth. But it wasn't pointed.

The feathered head shook wildly, it was being ridiculous. Of course this was her. It could feel the stone beneath it drinking in its feelings and vibrating with emotion.

But perhaps it should check, just to chase away the doubt.

Reluctantly, seconds stretching to minutes as it hesitated, it lifted itself to its feet, and turned to check the stone.

The color was correct; a dark, heady pink.

The feel of the gem was right…well…no, it had to be her. What else could it be? She had been unique, the ladies of stone had made no other like her.

There was no reason to doubt.

But the shape was wrong.

It stood there motionless, minutes slipping into hours, as its mind ran in loops of denial and reassurance, but always coming back to that single, persistent doubt. And as it stared, it began to notice other things: a swirl of yellow, near the tip of that standing point—that was certainly just a trick of the light—and… the feel of the gem, of its presence was just the slightest bit off, like a single note out of place in a symphony—barely noticeable, but, once noticed, undeniable.

It reached out with its beak, trembling, and tapped it against the stone, as though that might change everything. It didn't. It began to shake, the ground falling out from beneath its feet as the hideous conclusion breached the sea of its denial like a triangular fin.

This wasn't her.

To its surprise, it didn't scream. It didn't lose itself in the familiar sea of rage. It didn't feel
anything. A pair of golden wings spread out and took off with a quiet puff of air. It made no sound as it left the quiet slosh of water behind.

The only sign that it felt anything was the glittering drops of gold that fell from its eyes as it flew off over the rippling water and out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Isn't it over?
So last chapter happened. In a lot of ways, that was the climax of this story: Garnet corrupted? Jasper pushing up daisies? And Steven did it? How do I top that?

I can't.

Actually, that's a lie; I could totally top that. Easily.

First, I'd bring the other three diamonds back to earth, with armadas. Then it turns out the temple is actually a gundam that Steven and Connie pilot into battle while the CG form alexandrite. Lapis takes the whole ocean and makes a giant water dragon while Peridot and Moonstone jury-rig some kind of gem technology ironman suit. Then the Watermelon Stevens come, led by Onion atop a tamed gem beast.

However, unbeknownst to both sides, Amber breaks into the temple mecha and finds Almandine. Fusing with her, they release all the corrupted gems the CG have ever captured and seize control of them with their empathic powers. Then they lead their newfound army against both sides.

Then, through a complex yet well thought out series of shenanigans that will probably be Amethyst's fault, the shards of Jasper's gem gets mixed with the lost shards of Pink Diamond, and a thrown ball of lava melts them together and reignites a new consciousness, forming the legendary Big Buff Pink Floofy Fluff, which throws itself into the fray attacking the other three sides, to the great emotional trauma of everyone.

After weeks of battle, it comes down to Diamonds, PF-01-2, Alexandrite, the Big Buff Pink Floofy Fluff, Lapis, and Steven; battered and wounded, they stand across from each other unable to fight on, but unwilling to back down.

But something has changed within them, something is not the same.

PF-01-2's empathic powers accidently create a mind link between them all, they understand each other in a way only conflict can create and, in one moment of perfect union, all of them fuse into a supermassive gay singularity—it's a bit like a black hole, except rainbow.

The sheer weight of absolute gay breaks the universe and everyone dies… or breaks out into a universe wide homosexual orgy of love and understanding—whichever comes first.

And thus, I have completely spoiled the way my story is going to end and I might as well not bother…

Except I haven't and it won't. But it could have. I almost wish it would because now nothing I come up with will be able to compare to that word vomit I just spewed all over my keyboard.

Bummer.

Well, let's get this totally-not-as-awesome-as-what-I-just-thought-up thing started
anyway:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dr. Maheswaran felt their eyes burning holes in her back as she worked. Nothing unfamiliar there—worried family were a constant at any hospital—although she had to admit the lion was a bit of an oddity. Still, she ignored them with all the resolution of a person with a job to do.

She was not a happy woman.

She'd had what could be generously described as a day—giant spiders, pink lions whisking her daughter away to parts unknown, conversations about magic rocks fusing together, and then to have Connie returning with an unconscious Steven clutched in her arms and begging her to help him…yes, calling it just a day was the most generous she could bring herself to be.

It was either that, or use a truly excessive number of expletives.

But it seemed even her day had paled in comparison to Steven's; bruises, cuts, severe exhaustion, and, worst of all, his right arm; the limb had swollen like a balloon from the elbow down. Connie had done her best to immobilize it with some sticks and cut strips of cloth before bringing him back, but…well, it was probably for the best that he had unconscious. Moving it unsupported would have almost certainly made him pass out, or worse, sent him into shock.

If Greg hadn't insisted the beach house was equipped with all kinds medicine and medical equipment—she wasn't sure why, something about a pearl wanting to be prepared—she would have immediately taken him to the hospital. But the man hadn't exaggerated; there were painkillers, icepacks, medical grade bandages—the works—and so she had gotten to work putting the boy back together.

Carefully, she pulled the last piece of bandage firm, but not constricting, so that his wrist was properly immobilized and sat back. It was a nasty break and there was a rather ominous bruise that looked, if she squinted, an awful lot like it a hand with its fingers wrapping around the wrist. Bringing her scissors to bear she snipped the excess bandages off and sat back with a sigh.

"Are you done?" Connie asked immediately, stepping forward and gazing at her work. "Is Steven going to be okay?" she demanded, without giving her a chance to answer. Priyanka looked at her daughter, then let her eyes slide over to Greg. The man's face was pinched with worry no less frantic than Connie's, but there was a hint of…resignation to it as he stared at his unconscious son. If half the things he had said were true, then he had been here before—helpless with worry, armed with nothing but hope that his child was going to be okay. She caught his gaze and nodded once, taking a certain satisfaction at the relief visibly swamping his features.

"Yes," Priyanka said for her daughter's sake and stood up, she held out a hand to catch Connie as the girl moved forward. "What he needs now is rest, you may sit with him if you like, but try to keep your voice down and do not touch him. Call me if anything changes."

"Why, where are you going?" Connie asked.

"Outside," she answered, "Mr. Universe is coming with me, I need to have a word with him." Connie looked back and forth between them suspiciously.

"If there's something you're not telling me because you don't think I can take it…" she began.
Priyanka raised an eyebrow at her. As a doctor, she had no truck with sugarcoating things to worried friends and family and Connie knew that. Telling a patient they were going to recover just fine when that wasn't a certainty was one thing—the placebo of a medical professionals' certainty could be better than any medicine—but it was cruel to give family false hope, it only made it hurt worse if things did go bad.

Her daughter got the message and looked away. Priyanka turned to Greg and nodded to the door. He nodded back and followed her out.

"He is going to be okay, right?" Greg asked softly, as he shut the screen door behind him and followed her down to the beach.

"He will live," the doctor said. "I am uncertain how well his hand will function in future, but I don't think it will affect his overall health."

The man let out a sigh and sat down on the sandy ground and running a hand over his face. "That's good, at least." He looked at her. "Thank you." he said quietly, the sheer relief in his voice giving his words a heavy weight. He was quiet for awhile, staring out at the sea. Priyanka waited, giving the man some time to pull his thoughts together. After a few minutes the man let out a deep breath. "What was it you wanted to discuss?"

"I want you to be honest with me, Mr. Universe." She asked, not looking at him. She was fidgeting with her hands and wished she had her lab coat on so she could shove them into the deep pockets. "How close do you think my daughter came to dying today?"

She more felt than saw the man's wince. A sidelong glance let her see him opening his mouth to splutter out an instinctual denial, but he saw her expression and thought better of it. "I don't know," he said after a few moments. "But…" he shrugged helplessly, looking away "I'm guessing it was… close."

Priyanka nodded. "I do not want her to be around your son any longer." she said bluntly. To his credit, the man didn't protest or look offended. If anything, he looked sympathetic.

"Connie's not going to like that."

"I am aware of that." She knew full well how much Connie cared for the boy; how happy she was whenever she came home after spending the day with him, the way she skipped around the tennis court and sending the balls soaring past her instructor and beaming all the while… "Nonetheless —"

"I get it," Greg interrupted, running a hand over his face. "Believe me, I get it." There was a long pause and she could see him trying to line up his thoughts. "You know," he said at last. "Steven's a lot like his mother." Priyanka blinked at the sudden shift of topic, but kept silent as the man kept talking. "Rose was a lot like the sun. She was big, warm, and she lit up the world." The man's eyes had gone misty with memory. "She certainly brightened my universe, I'll tell you that. But…" he sighed. "But the people she met tended to end up revolving around her, she always seemed to become the center of everyone's… universe," his lips curled slightly at what must have been an old joke. "She didn't do it on purpose, of course. She didn't have a mean bone in her body, she was just so… big." He frowned. "I don't mean physically, of course. I mean, she was really big, enormous really, but—"

"I believe I understand what you meant," Priyanka assured him, urging him to continue.

"Right, well… she became such a big part of my world the thought of leaving it, of leaving her,
made me feel empty, like there'd be just be a great big hole in my universe," he paused, leaning back and looking up at the stars. "In a certain way, Rose was actually pretty selfish. She always did exactly what she wanted with little regard for how others felt. But it's not that she didn't care about people," he added, glancing at her defensively. "It's more like she just didn't notice. She was a meteor, barreling along ahead of everything and everyone else was just trailing along in her wake —hoping to catch some of the light shining off her." The wistful smile on his face made Priyanka shift uncomfortably, like she was intruding on something intimate.

"Steven's not quite as bad, of that's how you want to phrase it." Greg continued. "He's better at thinking about other's feelings although sometimes you have to spell them out for him in great big letters." He shrugged and looked back at her. "Anyway, my point is: I've seen the way Connie looks at Steven; let's just say I found that twinkle in her eyes pretty nostalgic."

"And are my daughter's feelings going to keep her safe?" Priyanka asked, understanding but unmovead. "Should I let her kill herself simply because denying her the chance would make her unhappy." The doctor crossed her arms. "She is twelve, she has her whole life ahead of her, at least, she will if I have anything to say about it." she narrowed her eyes, glaring at the man. 

"Furthermore, I don't understand how you can allow your son to go on these adventures. Don't you feel any responsibility?"

Greg twitched, and, for a moment, she thought he was going to yell at her. But his body sagged and the words came out as a whisper. "I don't have a choice."

The man bowed his head and it struck the doctor how much older the man looked without his usual friendly, somewhat goofy, smile. "Steven was born into Rose's world." The exhaustion in his voice was almost a physical force, trudging into her ears and making eyelids feel heavy. "The magic, the monsters, these dangerous adventures—even if I stopped him from seeking them out, it wouldn't help. These things would find him, whether it was the because of the gems or something else." He sighed again. "I'm not a religious guy, but there's this one prayer I always remember my mom saying whenever I start thinking about this: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can—"

"And the wisdom to know the difference." Priyanka finished for him, sighing. She wasn't particularly religious either, but she had found solace in the words on one or two occasions—usually whenever she was recording a time of death. "But Connie doesn't have to be a part of this…" she waved her hand, reaching for any other word and turning up nothing, "universe. That is something I believe I can change."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Greg looked at her, and the look in his eyes made Priyanka bite back the angry words rising on her tongue. He looked tired. "Rose turned my life on its head, it's true. There were parts that were great and parts that weren't." He paused. "But given the chance, I would do it all again."

Priyanka hesitated. "What do you expect me to say?" she demanded. "You are not my daughter; the situation is different."

"That's true," Greg nodded. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. You should think long and hard about what you want to do. Speaking as someone who ran away from home when he was sixteen, cutting Connie off from something she really wants might not go over very well."

"Then what do you suggest?" Priyanka snapped. "Just because someone wants something doesn't mean it is a good idea. Prohibiting her from seeing him might upset her, but at least she'll be alive enough to be upset."
Greg shrugged. "Who knows? I'm not trying to fight you on this. I want you to know that, whatever you decide, I'll try to help. I like Connie too. I don't want to see her hurt any more than I want to see her unhappy." The musician got to his feet like the weight of time was weighing him down. "So..." he looked at her. "What do you want to do?"

Connie heard the door close behind her, but ignored it, unable to take her eyes off the couch where Steven lay. At the foot of the couch, Lion whined, resting his head on the cushions and staring at the boy sadly.

Connie knew how the cat felt. Steven looked... empty, like everything that made him who he was had been drained out, leaving only a hollow husk. Just looking at him sprawling on the couch like that made her own exhaustion raise its head, but she fought it off. The thought of sleeping right now was... no. Just no.

"So..." Peridot had sidled up next to her after the adults had left. "This is... human medicine?" the technician peered at the bandages skeptically and tsked.

"Humans aren't gems." Connie sighed, somewhat glad she wasn't alone, even if her company had to be someone as annoying as Peridot. "If you cut off our hands, we can't grow new ones."

"Gems have a term for something like that," Peridot huffed, "it's design flaw. If I was human I'd have some serious complaints to give my engineer."

"If you say so," Connie sighed, not really willing to get dragged into one of the technician's diatribes about how gems were the superior life form.

"And doesn't he have healing powers?" the gem went on.

"They don't work on himself," Connie answered dully, her head in her hands.

"Well, what about that fountain?" Peridot asked. "I'm pretty sure I heard Steven mention something about Rose Quartz crying a lot and making a healing fountain. Wouldn't that at least work on his fleshy bits?"

"We don't actually know where it is." Connie answered glumly. "Garnet brought Steven there once, but she never actually told him how to find it again."

"Bummer."

"I know." Connie bowed her head, she didn't need reminding about how helpless she was at the moment, so she changed the subject. "How's Lapis doing?"

"She's... the same." Peridot looked away. There was a long moment of silence then, "Why did you guys let her fight Jasper alone?" the technician's voice held just a hint of accusation. "That was really dumb."

"We knew that," Connie answered. "But none of us were thinking straight. We were... distracted." Connie glanced at the far corner of the room. Peridot followed her gaze and her face softened as she looked away.

Neither of them wanted to acknowledge the two green bubbles floating by the window. She didn't want to think about them or their contents. She didn't think she could deal with that right now. But they were like great hairy spiders sitting on the ceiling, doing nothing, making no threats, just... looming there, playing on her nerves.
"How long do you think it will take her to reform?" Connie asked, refusing to look at them again. Having all the Crystal Gems indefinitely out of commission was unnerving—what if Amber attacked the temple or something? After yesterday, Connie was in no hurry to fight something else. Having Lapis back would give them some welcome firepower if trouble came knocking.

"It depends." Peridot shrugged glumly. "Lapis isn't a quartz class, she isn't designed to get back to the fight in a matter of minutes." The technician's frown deepened. "And, of course, there's the circumstances of her poofing to consider.

"What do you mean?"

"She was poofed while fighting with Jasper." The technician answered. "Jasper was a touchy subject with Lapis. I mentioned her once or twice in passing and, well," Peridot shuddered. "Frigid doesn't do it justice." Peridot slouched, propping her head on her hands and her elbows on her knees. "I'd bet the barn that fight got pretty nasty. As such, I wouldn't be surprised if it took longer for Lapis to get her feelings in check enough to reform. It's not a thing you want to rush."

Connie frowned, the exact mechanics of this had always been somewhat hazy. "Are gems conscious when they get poofed or something?"

"Meh," Peridot raised a hand and tilted it from side to side. "Sort of? We can't see or hear anything around us, but we are capable of some form of rudimentary thought, otherwise we wouldn't be able to permanently change our forms." She leaned back, and Connie could practically hear her thoughts lining up in preparation for a lecture. "Of course, it varies depending on the strain of gem. As a peridot, I'm meant to be utilitarian. I'm mostly incapable of thought in gem form, as such, I reform quickly and without change. The reason being if I'm working on a project and accidently poof myself, I'm able to reform and pick up exactly where I left off within a minute. Same deal for soldiers like Jasper. But for gems more..." Peridot waved her hand, searching for a word. "Aesthetic in nature, such as a pearl, I'm told they are capable of complex thought in gem form so that they may effectively redesign their form to suit their owners wishes. Of course, this tends to lead to a longer reform time."

Connie tilted her head. "Is Lapis meant to be aesthetic? Her water powers are kind of over the top for eye candy."

"Well she is from the Blue Court, that lot is really into looking pretty—like having wings and stuff. But the Blues also specializes psionic gems—such as Lazuli's hydro-kinesis or Sapphire's future vision. Which results in a tradeoff of sorts: they can fly and move mountains with their minds and other, more ridiculous, junk. But they can't take hits or regenerate quick like the Yellow Court soldiers can."

"I get it." Connie nodded. Basically, the yellow court was the warrior class and the blue one was the wizards. "So it might be awhile before she's back?"

"Yeah." Peridot sighed. "Weeks, months, who knows? Maybe she thinks Jasper has her and try to rush back and fight, but it can be hard to get a grip on the passage of time while we're in our gems. So... I dunno."

Connie let the subject drop, staring at the stiff bandages around Steven's arm. "I... sort of assumed everything would always turn out fine in the end, regardless of what happened. It always seemed to." She sneered to herself, what did she think this was? some kind of story? Sure, they'd won. But where was their happy ending? Garnet was corrupted, and the others...

She glanced behind her to the kitchen counter, where Amethyst and Pearl were laying. The silvery
"I haven't made any progress on them," Peridot said glumly, not bothering to wait for her question. "Those things Jasper put on them, the prison rings? Yeah, those are old tech, obsolete, which means I don't know how they work."

"Didn't you get an ancient warship up and running in, like, ten minutes?"

"Well yeah," Peridot rolled her eyes. "But that was mostly recharging the power banks and hitting the computers until they did what I wanted. If I do that with the prison rings… well, they are specifically designed to react negatively to tampering. Steven tell you what they do if you try to pull them off?"

Connie nodded.

"Exactly." Peridot crossed her arms and scowled. "Not exactly a lot of room for error, is it?"

"Is there anything we can do?"

"I don't suppose that, when Jasper bit the dust, she dropped a little tube with a button on it?"

Connie shook her head. "Thought so. Assuming we can't find a controller, the only other thing I can think of is to bring em to Moonstone."

"Think she'll be able to free them?"

Peridot shrugged. "I'm assuming she worked with them, they're tech from her time, after all. But…"

Peridot trailed off. "This sucks."

"Yeah… yeah, it does."

The conversation dried up, the situation fully covered in just two words. Connie's eyelids began to droop. She'd been awake for almost twenty hours. Twenty *exhausting* hours that had been a roller coaster of emotion and exertion that had left her feeling empty.

There was a creak as the door opened and her mother let herself back in with Mr. Universe trailing behind her. Connie looked at them, meeting her mother's stare. "Connie, you and I are going to spend the night here," said her mother. "But we are going home first thing in the morning."

"…What?" fighting back the heaviness in her eyes, she stared at her mother, who met her gaze evenly, Connie looked over at Mr. Universe, who just shrugged at her in exhaustion. "I can't just leave." She said in disbelief. "What about Steven?" what if he didn't wake up before morning. What if he woke up tomorrow and she wasn't there?

"His condition is stable." Her mother answered firmly. "He will require no further treatment beyond additional rest, which does not require that you or I be present."

Connie spluttered, her mind groping for an excuse through the hazy fog of weariness that enveloped it. "I need to be *here*. Steven shouldn't be alone when he wakes up."

"He won't be," said Greg, moving forward to sit down heavily next to her. "I'm not going anywhere, and your mom's given me a list of instructions on what to do when he wakes up." He held up a hand to cut off her half-formed protests. "Connie, I know you're worried about him. But right now, I think the best thing you can do for him is get some sleep."

"I'm not tired!" Connie protested making a small smile tug at the man's lips. He leaned back and
gave a deliberate yawn. Connie felt her body betray her as she followed suit, the weight on her eyes doubling.

"Good night, Connie." she heard the man say as her eyes closed and she felt her body sag. "See you in the morning."

Chapter End Notes

I like Greg, he's a fun and silly guy. I don't know why he only appears in my story for serious conversations, I really don't. On a similar note, I'm not really sure what this chapter accomplished, which probably isn't a good sign.

Oh well, there's going to be more going on next chapter. People wake up, problems are discussed. All that noise.
Alright, next chapter!

Last chapter was filler, it really was. But I don't intend to do that again, I just needed a chapter to get straightened out after what happened with Jasper. See, I make stuff up as I go just letting the characters drive the story. But three quarters of my main caste are unconscious, imprisoned, insane, or dead… so… yeah, that generated some, In-hindsight, rather obvious difficulty.

Anyway, this chapter isn't filler, I assure you. The plot shall move forward!

Slowly, with the laborious drive of one who has all day, the turtle dragged itself out of the water and onto the sandy beach. It knew it was just a bit early, the rest of them wouldn't be arriving for a few days, but that was probably for the best; this way it could beat the rush to find the best patch of sand.

It dug its front flippers into the ground and sent columns of sand spraying into the air as the sound of the sea caressed its head. It went on until the vague poke of instinct told it that was enough. It shuffled itself around until its backside was properly in the hole and began to strain. There was a slow plop plop plop as white ping pong balls dropped into the hole.

As it went about its business, it dawned on the turtle that something unusual was happening, some kind of horrendous screeching was filling the air. with vague interest, it turned its head and watched as a giant, shiny something pulled itself out of the sea and staggered up the beach. Every move it made produced a more of that vicious screech as it made a beeline for the soon-to-be mother.

The turtle felt no panic, its brain not well designed for such things. If this loud creature was looking to make a meal of it, there wasn't much it could do beyond flipping some sand at it, so why get worked up? Besides, it wasn't done with its hole.

So instead it watched with detached interest as the shiny thing shambled closer. Finally, the thing came to a stop and reached down with one of its long, oddly-shaped flippers to scoop up something that had been laying in the sand. It held the thing up to its face and then, with more of that painful screeching, lurched of in the opposite direction from the sea.

The turtle watched as it disappeared over and a dune and out of sight. The turtle spared half a second of what passed for thought in its reptilian head to think about what had just happened, then realized it had finished with its hole.

It pulled itself forward and began to swipe sand back into the hole as the screech of metal on metal faded into the distance and out of memory.

Moonstone's visor flashed like a camera as she scanned the two gemstones laying on the
countertop, focusing on the silvery bands encircling them.

"So how's it going?" Peridot asked, not quite managing to mask her anxiousness with casual indifference. She was sitting cross-legged on top of Toad, who had dug his roots into the floorboards and appeared to be snoozing.

Moonstone sighed. "No better than it was when you asked five minutes ago." She paused. "Although strictly speaking, I suppose you could say it is going worse."

"What?" Peridot sat bolt upright, her sudden movement bounced Toad, the pink disks that were probably his eyes opening and staring reproachfully up at bottom of his cap. "What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong?" The technician's face paled "Are they doomed? They're doomed, aren't they?"

Moonstone closed her eyes and huffed, "No, they are not doomed." She answered, rubbing her fingers into her forehead. "I apologize, as my statement was poorly phrased. I was checking to see if these prison rings remain armed. It has been several thousand years since they were last used and I thought perhaps they might have run out of energy." She leaned back. "Sadly, I have verified that this is not the case. If we were to attempt forceful removal, the rings will shatter them."

"But that's what we already knew!" Peridot groaned, plopping back down into her haystack.

"No." Moonstone answered patiently. "It is what we suspected. I have merely confirmed those suspicions true. The hope of a safe and simple solution is now gone, which is why I said the situation was worse."

"Well… whatever." Peridot rolled her eyes, crossing her arms and plopping back down heavily on the mushroom's cap. Only to yelp as the fungus, clearly fed up with all this motion, tipped its cap and sent her sprawling face-first into the floor.

"I will keep such information to myself in future," Moonstone said as the technician shot the mushroom a dirty look. returning to her work.

Quite the disaster had befallen the remnants of Rose's rebels. One moment she had been quietly experimenting with Toad's spores, trying to see if she could replicate the process that had animated the mushroom, the next Peridot had popped in astride Lion, pulled her atop the cat, and whisked her away to the temple with Toad somehow managing to cling to her coattails.

She'd had a brief moment to take in the surroundings; none of the Crystal Gems were present, Steven was unconscious on the couch, and some kind of fat, hairy thing that she had later learned was the boy's Dad had been staring at her.

Then Peridot had gabbled a disjointed story about corruption and rings at her and shoved the trapped gems into her hands making the immediate issue clear.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Moonstone glanced up into the anxious face of the Greg.

"Well… yes," she said slowly. "There are two options. The best course of action would be locating the controller for these rings." She glanced at Peridot. "I don't suppose you would know where the jasper who did this might have left it."

"She was probably carrying it on her," Peridot answered. "I didn't really have time to search the area, but I could probably get Lion to take me back…" she trailed off doubtfully.

"Such an action would be fu-tile," a voice trilled. As one, the three looked back towards the couch.
The blue pyramid sitting on the floor began to glow and the top unfolded, and Blaire's projection shimmered into existence.

At least, it was probably Blaire; where there should have been an elegant, if strangely dressed, pearl there was a…well, a robot. The graceful frills or fancy clothing were gone in place of metallic limbs and blocky joints. For once, the projection's lamp-light eyes didn't look out of place on a metallic helmet that had two yellow spikes jutting out from her forehead in a wide V. Two tubes that looked suspiciously like canons were jutting from her shoulders. She looked ready to wade into a war and leave both sides destroyed.

Then she curtseyed, and the spell was broken.

"I apologize for intruding on your conversation," Blaire's voice still sounded the same; Moonstone couldn't decide if that made it less creepy or not. "But I have additional information that may be of use to you and would be remiss if I stayed silent."

"Yeah, yeah, you have no manners," Peridot waved her hand dismissively. "Get to the point."

"I believe I can inform you all of the events that transpired before your arrival on the scene. More specifically, about the actions taken by the quartz Jasper."

"And how would you know any of that?" Peridot asked crossing her arms.

"Once I knew exactly where Jasper was waiting, I commandeered a human surveillance satellite orbiting the area," Blaire began.

"Is that legal?" asked Greg. "I feel like that's not legal."

The mechanized head turned to consider the human. "That depends very much on whether I am subject to human law." A spikey finger clanked as she tapped it against her robotic chin, which made Moonstone frown. Blaire was a hologram, that finger shouldn't have been able to produce physical noise like that. Which meant the projection was intentionally playing an audio file just for the look of the thing…

"An interesting legal conundrum." The incorporeal robot beeped. "I am neither human, nor the product of a human. There is no particular reason that I should be, but it could be argued that I am stealing human technology. On the other hand, the Order of the Diamonds claimed this planet and everything on it as their property millennia ago. I am uncertain as to whether this claim was truly rescinded and, as such, it can be argued that any and all human devices may ultimately belong to the Diamonds. So no, I do not think my acquisition is illegal. At worst, I would designate it as impolite. I could send the satellite's human owner an apology note, if you wish." She added helpfully.

"Uh…" Greg frowned, sounding uncertain as to whether he should be offended on behalf of his race.

"Get over it, Steven's Dad." Peridot rolled her eyes. "Your human laws are not important. Nobody cares." She turned back to Blaire. "Forget the human niceties and spill!"

"Recordings of events show that the soldier Jasper smashed an object after returning her prisoners to Garnet. Based upon the fusions reaction, i.e. a blind rage, we have concluded that there is an eighty-three point seven six percent chance the destroyed object was the ring controller."

Moonstone frowned. Brutal and heavy-handed, yet an effective way to remove them from the fight for good while hurting her remaining opponent. It certainly sounded like something a quartz
soldier would do.

Unfortunate.

"I'm afraid that leaves one option," the scientist sighed. "We will have to construct a controller from scratch."

"Can you do that?" Greg asked hopefully.

"I can," the man's eyes brightened so much that Moonstone regretted what she had to say next. "But I would estimate there is only a sixty-four percent chance that it will open the rings when used." she paused for a moment, but she liked to think of herself as an honest gem and added quietly: "leaving a thirty-six percent chance that they will trigger the ring's failsafe protocol, shattering the gem inside."

"Then can't do that!" Greg declared, blanching. "There has to be a more reliable way to open these things."

"As a matter of fact, no, there does not." Moonstone answered simply. "I rather think that's the whole point of their design. Prison rings are very simple in their design: either they receive the correct signal to disengage the first time, or they trigger," she shrugged. "I will do what I can, but can make no guarantees. There is... little room for error."

"And there's no other way?" Greg asked, looking wretched.

"No," Moonstone stood up, brushing off her coat. "I shall return to the barn and get to work. Peridot, may I disassemble one of your drones? I shall require the parts."

"Yeah, I guess." The technician sighed. "You wanna take Lion?"

"No, there is no need to rush; walking will give me time to recall the exact design and the Crystal Gems are not going anywhere." She added, glancing at the ringed gems, then her eyes slid past them to linger on the pair of gems in bubbles. Her visor flashed and then she turned away. "Come along, Toad. There is work to be done." The toadstool perked up and scampered after her as she swept out the door.

"We'll let you know if Steven wakes up." Greg called after her.

"My thanks, do not let him touch the rings." With that, she stepped onto the sand and strode away, her hands in her pockets. The researcher let her mind wander as Toad scooted circles around her. Producing the new controller would be easy enough, syncing it to the rings less so, but she would worry about that later. She had a more important concern.

With a thought, she brought up scan she had taken of Ruby and Sapphire and poured over the data. Peridot hadn't said much about what exactly had happened, but a gem being corrupted? Just like that?

She needed to know more.

Her visor beeped and she focused on the numbers streaming across her eyes. With a blink, she brought up the scan from those gem shards that had attacked the barn and compared the readouts… and felt her curiosity nod in the satisfaction of being proved correct.

Both the gem shards and Garnet's gems had an extra energy matrix layered on top of their own. The one's from the shards were older and fainter, seeming to have sunk with the gem pieces.
Garnet's was cleaner, fresher…

But they matched.

Moonstone's eyes narrowed.

"Blaire." she said. "I know you have formed a link with my visor, I must speak with you." The screen went blank and a robotic face took the place of the numbers; the robotic eyes were dimmed, taking the shape of slanted half-circles and giving off an impression of sheepishness.

"I apologize, Head Researcher, I fear I have developed a rather wanton habit of inserting my consciousness into everywhere I can. There's just so much space."

"It is fine."

"And this planet's technology has no integrated intelligence, so nobody ever protests when I move in..."

"I said it's fine." Moonstone answered, a little louder and rolling her eyes. "What you do with human technology is no concern of mine." she paused, remembering a few dusty old gem tales of projected interfaces that had gone haywire. "Just don't start any wars," She added. "Anyway, you were observing what transpired between Jasper and Garnet, correct?" the projection nodded.

"Excellent." Moonstone nodded back. "I want you to tell me everything that happened and then, I suspect, I will have another task for you."

The first thing that trickled into his mind was that he was in pain.

Not horrible pain, but a dull persistent ache that sent waves of discomfort rolling across his body. He tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids felt as though they were coated in lead. He groaned.

He heard a noise. Someone nearby was talking, he thought he heard his name, but couldn't be sure. But he could just about recognize the voice. Time passed and something warm gently pushed its way underneath his head and slowly, ever-so-gently gently, tilted it up. Something tapped against his lips and he felt a cool wetness lap against his face.

In a flash the pain was overcome by a furious thirst, he opened his mouth and something wet poured in. His tongue was dry, practically sticking to the roof of his mouth, but he slurps at the trickle of cool relief. Eventually the trickle stops and he feels his head laid back down.

Oblivion rose to meet him once more and what little of him that could welcomed it.

The next time consciousness came trickling back in, he felt much the same, but his eyes didn't feel quite as heavy. He opens his eyes.

'Wow, that's really bright.'

The light glares against his eyes, but he was too tired to truly care. He waited and eventually his eyes adjust. He opened his mouth, croaked, and immediately there was something big, pink, and hairy blocking out the light.

"…ven! Steven?"

He twitches at his name and croaks again; his throat refusing to make the proper noises.
He feels something press against his lips again.

"Drink up, Stew-ball. It's medicine."

It was bitter.

The third time he woke up, he felt much better.

He opened his eyes, staring at the wooden planks that made up his ceiling. His eyes traced across the familiar dents and nicks that were inevitable in a place where a boy with unreliable magic powers was growing up. There was a dent where his shield had ricocheted off it when he'd first learned to summon it, and there was the imprint from the time Amethyst had been showing off her shapeshifting and had turned into a pogo stick, good thing he hadn't tried to ride her, or his head would have made a new skylight. Pearl thrown a pretty big fit as it was…

Well, there were worse things he could have opened his eyes to, especially with how fuzzy his mind felt. How had he gotten here again? hadn't he been…in a valley? He distinctly remembered an orange… glow…

Fuzziness vanished and he sat bolt upright.

"Jasp-GAH!" his cry morphed into a gasp as his arm caught fire. He stared in pained incomprehension at the thick roll of stiff bandages wrapped around his wrist and forearm.

"Steven!" he looked up with watery eyes as his dad scrambled toward him, arm outstretched. "No, buddy, sit still. You've been pretty beat up." The man crouched before him and smiled a little worriedly. "How you feelin' little man?"

"Not… great." Steven swallowed, he felt sore all over and his wrist throbbed. "It… hurts."

Greg frowned, turning and snatching something off the coffee table. "I'll bet, but hey, a little bit of pain is good. It lets you know you're alive." He wrestled with a tiny plastic bottle, got the top off and pulled out two tablets. "Think you could swallow these?" he asked, holding up a glass of water. "They're painkillers."

Steven opened his mouth wide and his dad popped the pills in, gently tipping some water in after to help them down. It took a few tries, the pills were kinda scratchy, but he got them down in the end.

Steven coughed a few times then asked, "Where's Connie?"

"Oh she's fine, she's fine." Greg waved his hands reassuringly. "Her mom took her back home a few days ago. I actually just got off the phone with her, she wanted to know how you were doing." He smiled so widely it was a bit awkward. "I better call her again in a minute and let her know you're properly awake now. You feeling any better yet?"

"A little." Steven answered, gingerly settling back down. Provided he didn't jostle it too much, his arm wouldn't do more than throb. More of an ache than a pain, at least. "So we won?" he asked. He still felt kinda drowsy, but there was something niggling at the back of his mind. Something that he wasn't sure he wanted to look at.

He was very aware of just how long his dad hesitated before answering. "Yeah, you and Connie saved the day."

Steven smiled softly. "That's good." he took his eyes off his dad and let them wander around the
"Where are the others..." he trailed off staring at something over his dad's shoulder. Two somethings, in fact, floating in the middle of the living room. A pair of green bubbles suspended motionlessly and inside…

Through the haze of pain and medicated sleep, a memory rose. Clouds of fire and frost and a pair of tiny arms sheltering two tiny stones against the hate.

"Garnet." The word came out slurred, and his chest started to heave. He felt like the floor had opened up beneath him and he was falling.

Greg winced and shifted a little closer so that his body was blocking the sight of the horrible things. A pair of hands were placed on his shoulders and gripped tight. "I know."

"That's not right" Steven said, his words floating through the air like frozen bubbles—cold and brittle. "Th-they shouldn't be in separate bubbles. They wouldn't like that. They can't talk to each other if they're in separate bubbles. They—" Steven felt his mouth continue to babble, but wasn't sure what he was saying. His dad moved closer and enveloped him in a hug. It was gentle as a kitten and Steven could feel scruffy beard pressing up against his hair. Steven leaned into it like it was the only warmth in world.

"I know." Greg answered.

They sat like that for a long time. Steven felt his mind subconsciously shutting a tiny part of reality out. He just… couldn't deal with that. Not right now.

"What about the others?" Steven asked after a couple long moments. He could hear the pounding of the bigger man's heart as he hesitated. "Dad, please."

"Alright..."

Steven listened as his dad told him what had been going on while he'd been out of it. About the Crystal Gems, Lapis, Moonstone—everything. Steven lay still for a long while, trying to absorb all the information and compartmentalize it. It… wasn't really working.

But he couldn't just lie there, there had to be some way he could help. His eyes moved to the pair of bubbles then shied away.

"Alright." He said. "Let's go to the barn."

His dad blinked at him. "Excuse me?"

"You said Moonstone is working on something to free Amethyst and Pearl." Steven answered, squirming as he tried to maneuver his legs off the couch without jostling his arms. They felt leaden, but if he could just get them under him, dad could probably support him. "So let's go see her. She said it'd take a few days to make her thing, right? Well I've been out of it for a few days, so she's probably done. I bet we can have them back within the hour!"

Right, this was a plan. Pearl would know what to do. She had to. And Amethyst would be able to help, probably.

They could fix this.

A warm hand was placed against his chest and gently, yet firmly, shoved him back down.

Steven stared up in disbelief. But the normally jovial face didn't budge. "No Steven." his dad said.
"You need to rest."

"But-"

"But nothing. I'm serious, Stew-ball. You need to rest. Doctors orders." He added, somewhat defensively.

"You can't be serious!" this was ridiculous! Amethyst and Pearl were in trouble and he was supposed to just do nothing?

"The situation isn't going to get any worse if you wait until tomorrow," said Greg, reading his thoughts. "The only thing that will change is you'll feel better."

"That doesn't matter!"

"It does to me!" his dad snapped. "Please Steven, I know you're young and not really in touch with your own mortality, but I'm old and I think about it a lot! So will you just sit back and rest?"

Sternness shifted to exhaustion as he added, "Please? Do it for me?"

The pleading tone caught Steven's attention and he looked at his father a little closer. He looked drained, huge bags were under his eyes and his hair was an unkempt mess. Steven couldn't help but wonder how much sleep his dad had actually been getting.

Still…

"What am I supposed to do?" Steven whispered. "Just sit here and try not to think about it?"

"Why not?" Greg asked, his voice quiet. "I've been doing it for years."

It was like being punched in the gut.

Steven settled back down, guilt pooling in his stomach. He couldn't figure out where to put his face. "Dad." He swallowed, not knowing what he was planning to say. "I'm-"

"I know." Greg sighed, he rubbed a hand across his face and groaned. "It's…fine." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a phone. "Here, why don't you give Connie a call. She's been asking about you three times a day." He looked away Steven reached for it. "It would… probably be for the best if you don't invite her over, though."

Steven paused mid-dial, frowning. "Why?"

"Because…" Steven stared blankly as his dad hesitated. "I… don't want you getting her to sneak you out to the barn when I'm not looking."

Steven opened his mouth to protest, but was pinned beneath a knowing look and thought better of it. "Yeah, that's fair." He admitted.

Greg ruffled his hair, smiling wanly. "I was a kid too once. Just stay put kiddo, for the sake of my blood pressure if nothing else, and we'll go see Moonstone in the morning." He pushed himself to his feet. "Now I'll see about scrounging up some food."

On cue, both their bellies rumbled and they grinned at each other.

Smiling despite himself, Steven turned his attention to the phone, finished dialing the number, and held it to his ear.
It lay upon a rocky crag, cationic in every way save for the trickle of gold pouring from its eyes.

its mind ran in around and around in frenzied circles.

It should be looking for her.

Why was it not looking for her? a voice in its head demanded, screaming for it to spread its senses across the planet and search.

But the screams were being drowned by the dull murmur of despair. What would be the point? It would not find her. It thought it had but that was a trick.

But it had almost found her. It had been so close!

Except it had not. It had never been her. It had been a fake.

It had been like waking to a world without her all over again and its heart had torn in two. Now it knew why the Ladies of Stone had not shown themselves to force them back into their prison. They had set them free and torn them apart, leaving it to wander alone; free as anything and just as wretched.

It should be searching, but it would never find her. It knew it would find nothing but false hopes.

It… it… it could not bear that.

Golden eyes slid shut as the world pressed in upon it, and its mind fled away, back to the distant dream of memory.

Everything was dark.

It could feel immense pressure crushing in on it from every side. Then the world filled with a crackle of lightning and the crunch of stone and it burst from the darkness into the open air.

And into the light.

It hit the ground hard and blinked, staring at the many colorful figures bustling around it and making a cacophony of noises. It was hauled off the ground and marched away. Led into a large chamber and left alone.

It wasn't sure how long it stayed there, but it could feel its mind crystalizing as consciousness settled in. Knowledge trickled into its mind unbidden, telling it where it was and what it was waiting for.

Then a section of the far wall began to slide away and it heard what it could now recognize as voices. "—the new strain of gem is ready" the first voice was high-pitched and somewhat irritating, like something tiny buzzing in one's ear. "and, if you will pardon me saying so, our first specimen has come out particularly fine."

"I do not care for your opinion." It stiffened at the second voice, it had never heard it before but that mattered not. The voice rang with a righteous divinity that could not be mistaken. It stood tall as the chamber opened fully and what could only be the owner of that voice stepped inside.

She was radiant, towering over it with an effortless sense of power and majesty it could scarcely comprehend. It wanted to fall to its knees and bow its head before its master, but did not. It stood ramrod straight at attention, waiting for permission to move.
"O-of course," the first voice spoke again from somewhere at the golden figure's feet, but it could not be bother to look. "You there!" it demanded. "Step forward and greet your Diamond."

It did so, unable to tear its eyes away from the shining deity. Golden eyes surveyed it for a long moment, calculating. Then nodded.

"It will suffice," the figure said at last, turning away. "You will follow me." It was not an order, but a statement and so, without question…

Amber obeyed.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, story progression.
Moonstone stared, but the nature of the image before her refused to change.

"Is this… accurate?" she asked softly.

"Indeed, Head Researcher. I took this image only several minutes ago."

Moonstone closed her eyes, unwilling to look any longer. "Thank you, Blaire," she murmured. "That will be all for now."

"Of course, I will maintain surveillance for as long as necessary."

The glow of her visor dimmed as the interface departed to wherever she went while not interacting with anyone. Moonstone reached up and pulled the visor from her face. She stared at its silvery surface with unseeing eyes as her hands shook. She tried to rationally about the image Blaire had shone her, there was a reasonable chance that it might not have been what it looked like. But…

"Hey, Moonie!" the researcher started as Peridot stuck her head through the door, "You coming or what?"

Moonstone shook her head, unwilling to think more on what she had seen. There would be time to investigate what Blaire had shown her later, after the current issue was dealt with. She scooped up the bits of machinery lying before her and nodded.

"Yes," she stood and followed the technician, instructing Toad to stay behind and keep watch on the barn and do his best not to decompose anything. Peridot eyed the device in her hands as she shut the barn doors behind her.

"That the thing that's gonna free Amethyst?" she asked.

"More likely than not, yes." Moonstone answered truthfully as they began to walk.

"… and if it doesn't work?" she continued in the tones of one who knew the answer but was hoping it had changed.

"It will trigger the rings, yes."

Peridot stared at her for a minute, then shook her head. "As Amethyst would say: this blows."

"I cannot I say that I care for the situation either." Moonstone sighed. "But our feelings do not change its reality. We either attempt to free them, or leave them trapped for however many thousand years it will take for the rings to run out of power."

"It's kind of funny." Peridot said, idly kicking a rock ahead of her as they moved down the dirt road. "A year ago, I probably would have thought these prison rings were a highly efficient and sensible device." The technician frowned as the rock skipped into a ditch and out of sight. "Now they just seem kind of… cold."

"They were designed for a war," Moonstone answered, unable to refute the sentiment. The rings were a very logical way of keeping rebels prisoner. There had been several instances were a
captured Crystal Gem had escaped, freed a second gem, and fused. The amount of destruction those solitary fusions had been able to cause... well, Homeworld had been eager to find another, more effective solution. "Homeworld… could have shattered them instead?" she offered.

"Plenty of gems got broken anyway." Peridot muttered, but let the matter drop. Moonstone eyed the green gem. Peridot had forsaken Homeworld in a rather irrevocable manner. One might even say terminally, if Yellow Diamond ever found out what role she had played in stopping the cluster. She wanted to ask just what had made the diminutive gem do it. But decided against it.

Moonstone wouldn't want to talk about it either.

"Why aren't we taking Lion?" Moonstone asked, changing the subject.

Peridot shrugged. "We don't know where he is."

Moonstone frowned. "He's enormous. And he's pink. How hard could he be to find?"

"He also teleports." Peridot pointed out. "And Steven doesn't really keep him on a tight leash."

"...fair point."

They lapsed into silence, as the scenic fields gave way to scraggly trees and then beaches as they neared Beach City. In what seemed like no time at all, they were walking up the steps to the house.

Peridot opened the door, and marched in, Steven looked up from his stool by the counter, his eyes lighting up when he saw them. There were two gems lying on a pillow in front of him; one white and one purple. He waved his left hand at them beckoning them over, his gaze locked on the device in Moonstone's hands.

"Is that it?" he said eagerly. Greg was standing at the stove, preparing some kind of food, but left off as they approached.

Moonstone nodded to the man and answered Steven's question. "Yes, it is."

"That's what will free Amethyst and Pearl?" Steven answered, looking at her for another confirmation. Moonstone raised an eyebrow at the unrestrained eagerness in the boy's eyes, she glanced at Greg, wondering if the man had informed Steven just what would happen if the rings don't open.

"It… should." She said slowly.

Steven picked up on her tone and woefully misinterpreted it as he smiled. "Don't worry Moonstone, I believe in you. And if it doesn't work, we'll try something else."

Ah. That would be a no. She raised an eyebrow at Greg and he shrugged helplessly. Moonstone sighed. "Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"I believe there is something else you should know..." he listened intently as she spoke, the eager smile sliding away as his face paled.

"...thirty-six percent?" He echoed.

Moonstone nodded warily. His face had gone curiously blank. "Err... that means that if we were to attempt this one hundred times-"
"I understand how that math works," Steven snapped, his face twitching. "You're telling me that there's a chance your thingy might kill them."

"That is exactly what I am telling you, yes." Moonstone nodded, glad that he understood.

"And... you can't make the odds better?" He asked.

"No." The bluntness of her answer threw him back on his heels.

Steven shook his head, something in his expression going slack. "No. That can't be right," he muttered. "If we can't do this safely, we shouldn't do it at all."

"Then I am afraid you will likely not see them again." Moonstone answered, suppressing a wince at the horrified look on the boy's face. Nonetheless, she persevered—facts didn't change just because you ignored them.

"Hey, come on now," said Greg. "I don't think that was called for."

"Actually, I think it was." Moonstone answered, glancing back at the adult. "Steven needs to know the options before him. And the consequences."

"But that's not good enough!" Steven exploded. "That's not good enough at all! There has to be another option!" Steven glanced around feverishly. "I... I... I could try to form a bubble around them!" He declared, eyes lighting up. "If I make it right, I could make it between the gems and the rings. Then I send the bubble to the temple and leave the rings behind!" He finished triumphantly.

Moonstone tilted her head to the side and stared at him. "Do you think you can make a bubble that precise?" She asked quizzically. "If you get it wrong, the rings will sense that someone is attempting to force them off and trigger. If you don't form the bubble perfectly the first time, you'll shatter them."

Steven's eyes were watering as he looked around the room, desperate for another solution. None presented themselves to him, and he slumped on his stool, his eyes squeezing shut.

"I'm sorry," said Moonstone.

"Me too." Steven answered. There was a long pause. "You... you can't think of anything better?"

"No."

Steven gave a very small nod. "And... you think it will probably work?"

"Yes." She could practically see his mind tearing itself to pieces as he thought hard, then he seemed to shut down. He slid the pillow with the gems toward her.

"...do it." he said softly.

Moonstone reached placed the remote on the counter and carefully scooped up the gems, examining the ring trapping Amethyst carefully. Then her eyes shifted to the other and she paused, hesitating as she stared at the silvery gem resting in her hand.

The Gem Cutter. She was holding the Gem Cutter in the palm of her hand.

Completely and utterly at her mercy.

That thought slunk into her mind like a sticky disease, looping around her mind again and again.
while producing dozens of similarly unpleasant thoughts. She was holding Rose Quartz’ Pearl, a gem who had unrepentantly slaughtered **thousands**. One who wanted—and **tried**—to kill her.

And here she was. Helpless. It would be easy. Oh, sure, there was a chance getting the ring off would shatter Pearl no matter what Moonstone did. But it would be the work of a moment to alter the frequency of her new remote, just a tad, in order to make it completely incompatible with the ring and guaranteeing that it would trigger. She could even make it look like an accident.

With any luck, she could shift the device back before trying it on Amethyst and it would succeed at freeing the quartz. 'Oh no, what a **tragic** accident! But at least one of your friends is still alive.' Nobody, least of all Steven would ever even **suspect**—

"**I** forgive you too."

The boy's words sloshed through her mind like a bucket of cold water, washing away the insidious thoughts like the grime they were.

Moonstone sighed, shame welling up inside. She had never once lifted finger to purposely hurt another gem—not that she hadn't hurt plenty anyway, of course, but the hurting had **never** been her purpose. She had only wanted to save as many gems as possible… the same way the Crystal Gems had wanted to save this planet.

Pearl wasn't innocent. But then again, neither was she.

"**The war is over.**"

Moonstone sighed and carefully placed the gems on the table. Steven was right. She would do her utmost to free both Amethyst and Pearl. If her efforts did not succeed and they died anyway, that was one thing. But she would **not** actively sabotage the effort.

She set the remote on in between them and materialized her visor. Very carefully, she adjusted the dials as much as she dared. She could feel everyone's watching her hands as though she was defusing a bomb.

Then, with a final click, she took her fingers off the remote and sat back.

Steven swallowed. "That's it?"

"Indeed. I cannot increase the chances of a successful sync without risking triggering the rings."

"And... you're sure there's not a better solution? Maybe if-"

"I assure you, if there were, I would have thought of it."

"Okay." Steven nodded slowly, running his tongue across his dry lips. "Then, I guess... there's nothing left to do but push the button."

Nobody moved.

Moonstone glanced at her audience. Peridot was eyeing the remote suspiciously, as though it might rear up and try to bite her. Steven and Greg's faces mirrored each other—a cocktail of hope, fear, frustration, and nervousness.

Steven reached out a trembling hand toward the remote, moving slowly as though every inch pained him. Moonstone looked at him. She knew it didn't matter which one of them pressed the
button, the outcome would be the same. But she knew in that moment, that if Steven pushed the button and it didn't work; he'd never forgive himself.

The solution was obvious.

Moonstone snapped out her hand and pressed the button.

It clicked. The sound seemed to suck all the sound out of the room, leaving a vacuum of silence that hovered over everyone's heads. The moment stretched on just long enough for Moonstone to begin to doubt.

Then, with a tiny click that thundered around the room, the rings dropped away and the gems began to shine like tiny suns.

An orange flash, a falling sword.

"You never met me."

Defeat.

She needed to reform. To… to fight on. But… fight what?

Steven was in danger. The thought kept repeating itself, sluggishly doing laps around her dazed thoughts. She was in her gem, she could just about grasp that thought. She was certain she was needed, that there was no time for to worry about what she would look like.

She was needed.

But… whenever she tried to make the burst back to consciousness, her thoughts hit a wall and fizzled out.

She needed to reform. But… why did she need to do that? There was something…

A jolt shook through her consciousness, something that had been blocking her train of thought disappeared, like a dam had been pulled down and memories came flowing back in.

_Jasper! Steven!_

Pearl pushed up and out, her mind exploding like a volcano as she clawed her way back into consciousness. The familiar feel of light and heat poured off her as she took form.

Then she was back and her spear was in her hand the moment her feet touched ground.

"Jasper!" she screamed, waving it around, she could sense frantic movement around her as the world swam into focus.

"-earl! Pearl! Calm down!"

"Steven?" she blinked as a red blob focused into something more recognizable. "Steven!" she rushed for the boy and throwing her arms around him. "You're alright!" She squeezed him tight and heard him hiss in pain. Pearl froze.

"Steven?" she pulled back, looked him over, and felt a rage explode inside her head.

He was hurt! Steven body was bruised, his arm was in a cast, and he was crying. Someone had hurt
"Steven!" she clutched him tight—but not too tight—and began to babble out a stream of words. "Are you alright? Who did this to you? Was it Jasper? I'll kill her, I-"

"Pearl, shaddup!" Pearl paused, her mouth open and looked around. Amethyst was sprawled out facedown on the table, her hands balled into fists and grinding into the sides of her head as she groaned. Peridot was hovering next to her, patting the quartz awkwardly on the head and looking unsure what else to do.

"Amethyst." she said, somewhat dumbly. "Steven's hurt."

"I hear ya," Amethyst answered, pushing herself onto her knees and sitting up cross-legged on the counter. "I get the feeling we missed… some…stuff." she trailed off staring at something over Pearl's. There was something about her expression, a sort dull incomprehension that made Pearl shiver. Pearl turned to see what had struck Amethyst dumb.

She stared, opened her mouth, closed it again. Then opened it. "Steven." she said blankly. "Why are Ruby and Sapphire in a bubble?"

She felt the boy shrink in on himself and she looked at him. "Steven?"

He shifted, "You guys might want to sit down. It's a… long story."

It wasn't really, but it felt like it. He didn't look at either of them, keeping his eyes firmly on the floor as he spoke. He started off by assuring them that Jasper had been dealt with, saying nothing else on the topic.

Then he told them what Jasper had done, how she'd kidnapped both of them and how Garnet had gone charging off alone, and then how he had… found her.

"Oh Steven," Pearl gave a smile that was just a touch too wide. "I understand that you've been through a lot. But you must be mistaken. I hardly think it's possible that Garnet is… Garnet is…" she trailed off, her grin falling to pieces as Steven just looked at her. It was a face devoid of hope, of anger, of despair, of anything… even doubt.

Pearl swallowed, her throat clamping down on any words she might have been about to say.

"I saw her too." Peridot said, shifting uncomfortably as her words echoed around the house. "Trust me, I'm the one that had to shoot her with an ion cannon. Garnet's gone nutso."

Pearl said nothing. She just looked back and forth between them, looking as if she was waiting for them to tell her they were joking.

"I think they're serious, P." Amethyst said quietly.

Something in Pearl's expression cracked as her face went blank. "…howHow?" she whispered.

"We don't know," Steven answered miserably. "It happened before we got there."

Someone cleared their throat and they looked around. Moonstone was sitting near the wall, clearly not enjoying the sudden scrutiny. "I believe I may be able to answer that." She said.

For a long moment none of them said anything. Then Pearl's eyes narrowed. The scientist made a point of not meeting her gaze.
"Moonstone?" Steven asked. "What are you talking about?"

The silvery gem looked at him. "Tell me," she said, "during the fight do you remember seeing a stone? About this big," She held her hands six inches apart. "Shaped like a pyramid." She stared into his blank expression and added: "pink?"

Steven's face was scrunched with the effort of recollection. After a few moments he said slowly. "I… I think I remember seeing something like that. Didn't… didn't Amber fly off with it?"

Moonstone nodded. "That's correct. I have surmised that this stone was the reason she appeared in the first place. If I had to guess why, I would say there is a reasonable chance she believed it to be Almandine."

"What are you talking about?" Pearl demanded, glaring at the scientist. "I thought you weren't there?"

"I wasn't. But Blaire witnessed everything." The scientist pulled off her visor, and placed it on a crate next to her. She tapped it and it lit up, shooting out a beam of light that coalesced into a six-inch-tall figure.

"Hello there," Blaire said, curtseying. She was wearing a light blue costume that stuck out over her head and from between her legs. It took a moment for Pearl to realize that she was supposed to be dressed as a banana and that she appeared to be clutching a tiny pair of maracas. "Pearl. Amethyst." She nodded curtly to each of them, her tiny hands clasped behind her back. "It is good to see you returned from the field unharmed." Moonstone started talking again, something about satellites and recordings. Pearl's eyes narrowed to slits as the scientists words rolled over her.

"You seem to know an awful lot about this." she hissed. Moonstone withered beneath her scrutiny, but answered nonetheless.

"This stone was mentioned in the files Steven provided me with. I believe it was the end result of the culmination of the PF-01-2 project. A device that could influence the minds and emotions of gems and force corruption."

"Where did Jasp-jerk get something like that?" Amethyst asked.

"Unclear," Moonstone shrugged. "But unimportant. I imagine she picked it up from wherever Homeworld left it." Pearl's eyes went wide, her mind running on ahead of the scientist's words. "All evidence points to the conclusion that this stone was what Homeworld used to corrupt all of the rebels when they left the planet." Moonstone looked away, her hands shoved deep in her coat pockets.

"...And?" Amethyst demanded. "You better not be stringing us along, Moonie. Why ya telling us all thing junk? Just get to the point!"

"Of course." Moonstone took a deep breath. "I believe there is a... nonzero chance, that if I can get my hands on this stone, I may be able to figure out exactly how it was used to corrupt Garnet and... reverse it."

"Really?" the fragile hope in Steven's voice echoed the feeling in Pearl's chest. "Moonstone! That's amazing!" the boy's relief was almost a physical force and Pearl wished she could share it, but the ominous phrasing of 'nonzero chance' that hung over her head like a sword.

Pearl took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm. This was all...so much. She'd had too much dumped on her in the past five minutes. She couldn't afford to be swept away by the first
thing someone said.

"What about Steven's healing tears?" she asked.

"You mean my spit?" he added.

"Yes," Pearl sighed. "Your spit. Have you tried that on Garnet?"

"Uh…no, I haven't" Steven admitted, "But I could try." he added.

"Have Rose's healing powers every worked on a gem that was fully corrupted?" Moonstone asked.

"They worked on you." Pearl snapped, making her flinch.

"…As I understand it, I was in the process of being corrupted and my form had not stabilized yet." The scientist answered meekly. "I've done research on Gem healing before; Technically speaking, it heals by restoring a gem to their natural state. However, once a gem is corrupted, that becomes their natural form. Steven's…spit… caught me at an intermediate stage and reverted me to my original form." She sighed, looking apologetic. "I believe Garnet has gone beyond that stage."

Pearl scowled; she wanted to demand what the scientist could possibly think she knew about anything. She opened her mouth to do just that when something brushed against her hip. She glanced down and saw Amethyst looking up at her, her own feelings reflected in the smaller gem's face.

Pearl closed her eyes and took another steadying breath. Rose was gone. Garnet was gone. That left her as the most senior gem. She needed to take charge of the situation, and that meant not screaming at the one offering a solution, no matter what her personal feelings of them were. She took a few more steadying breaths.

She opened her eyes, her mind was a still pool; calm, clear, and centered.

"You said the amber gem took this stone?" she asked, all animosity carefully stored behind a wall of steel.

"She did, yes." Moonstone replied, eyeing her like she might eye a suspiciously ticking package. "But she does not have it anymore."

"And why might that be?"

Moonstone jerked her head towards the holographic banana floating beside her. "I believe Blaire can answer that question."

"Of course!" the banana chirped, giving her miniscule maracas a shake. "When Amber departed the scene, I took the liberty of hacking several other satellites to track their movements. My footage shows Amber settling down several hundred miles from the scene of the incident, they remained there for some time, but eventually departed, leaving the stone behind."

"You're certain of this?" Pearl asked, doing her best to ignore the holographic gem's choice of attire.

The blue banana suit bobbed as Blaire nodded.

"Right then," Pear nodded. "Amethyst, I'm going to retrieve this stone. I want you to go to Rose's fountain and fetch some of her tears for Steven's injuries." She turned back to the translucent
"Blaire, I need you to give me the exact coordinates of this stone." Moonstone cleared her throat making Pearl glance at her.

"The stone is no longer where Amber left it." The scientist shrunk beneath Pearl's glare. "I'm afraid it appears that another," she paused for a long moment, a complicated expression playing across her face. "Corrupted gem… found it and took it."

Pearl closed her eyes. "Why?"

Moonstone shrugged. "I do not actually know everything."

Pearl took a long moment to keep herself from screaming, then opened her eyes. "Do you know where this stone is now."

"Indeed, I do." Blaire trilled. "I have borrowed a human surveillance drone and am keeping track of it."

Pearl looked away, thinking hard. She could probably handle a single corrupted gem alone, but that was exactly the carelessness that got them into this situation in the first place. "Amethyst, You and I will go after this gem, but only after we fetch some healing tears for Steven."

"What?" Steven gaped. "No, forget about me. You gotta get this stone thing. Garnet needs it."

"Steven, you're hurt." Pearl said automatically, but Steven wasn't having it.

"So is Garnet." He fired back. "Dad has some medicine for me, I'll be fine for another day. The fountain will still be there later, but you need to get this stone before the corrupted gem smashes it or something"

"Er," Peridot interjected, raising her hand. "ifff you tell me the coordinates, I can probably fetch some of this restorative lachrymose liquid you keep talking about?" Pearl blinked at her, Peridot huffed. "What? I'm an important and valued member of the Crystal Gems, aren't I? I can do stuff."

"That sounds good to me, P." said Amethyst, already moving towards the warp pad. "What are we waiting for? If it were the other way around, Garnet would already be halfway to beating the snot out of this gem and bringing the stone back. Let's go already!" The purple gem was standing next to Steven, both looking at her in determination, waiting for her to give the word. Pearl closed her eyes.

"Alright." She gave Peridot some quick instructions before moving to join the purple gem on the pad. She heard footsteps behind her as Moonstone stepped onto the warp alongside her.

"I shall be accompanying you," said Moonstone. Pearl stared, but the scientist wasn't looking at her.

"Excuse me?" Pearl said flatly.

"It is important that I accompany you." Moonstone said, just a shade defensively. Pearl's eyes narrowed.

"Why?"

"The corruption stone," the scientist answered promptly. "I have read all the data files on it and know how to handle it safely." She looked from her to Amethyst and back again. "You do not wish to accidently corrupt yourselves, do you?"
Pearl glared at the Homeworld gem, not trusting her in the slightest, but unable to refute the logic.

Amethyst groaned. "P, come on, we're burning daylight. If the moon nerd wants to come, then let her come. We're wasting time!" Pearl glanced at her friend, then at the pair of bubbles floating silently in the middle of the room and her gaze softened.

Amethyst was right, she was wasting time. There was a problem and it needed fixing. If that meant tolerating Moonstone's presence for a few hours, then so be it.

Besides, if she tried anything… Well, Pearl had been ready for just such a thing since the start.

In the quiet room, surrounded by the silent group looking to her for guidance, Pearl nodded.

"Let's go."

Amber twirled, smoothly stepping to the side as the bulkier soldier charged past her. The golden-orange gem pointed her rapier at the soldiers back and there was a crackle of electricity, a grunt of pain, and a tinkle as the soldier's gem rolled across the tiled floor.

Amber straightened herself and bowed to the throne overlooking the arena. Yellow Diamond stared down impassively for a long moment, then nodded and Amber felt her heart soar. She had done well! Yellow Diamond was pleased with her.

"You are ready." Said her Diamond and Amber's joy became tinged with just the slightest confusion.

"Ready for what? My Diamond?"

"To be sent to the Pink Court,"

Amber blinked. She was being sent away? Had… had she failed to meet her Diamond's expectations? Just the thought of it filled her with a deep horror. She longed to ask, to beg for forgiveness, but held her tongue. Yellow Diamond was still speaking.

"You are being given a special assignment. You will not fail me." Amber understood the warning in the last sentence and bowed even lower.

"Of course, my Diamond."

Amber followed the pearl silently, trying not to wrinkle her nose too much at her surroundings.

Everything was just so… pink. Where were the elegant shades of yellow and orange that were the hallmark of good taste? Amber shook her head in disbelief, it was clear the other courts had no taste. But alas, she was not here to critique the poor fashion sense of others, she was here to serve as a guard. Her Diamond had fortunately not skimped on the details of what she was to be doing in this strange place.

Pink Diamond had created a new strain of gem, an experimental one that could manipulate the feeling of other gems, possibly even control them outright—Yellow Diamond had expressed quite a bit of exasperation that foolishness, but Pink had held firm. The gem in question was not decommissioned, but trained to use her powers to serve as a general against the various intergalactic races the empire regularly skirmished against.

While such a gem might well make an effective commander, Yellow Diamond, in her foresight,
knew that if this gem should ever get ideas above her station, she could turn armies against the Diamonds themselves!

Such madness! The sheer chaos of that would wreak across the galaxies didn't bear thinking about.

It was against just such an eventuality that Amber had been crafted. She was to guard this gem and had, in fact, been specially made for this purpose—her gem had been crafted to be resistant to this gem's empathic powers.

Amber had always wondered why Yellow Diamond had made her fight so many gems, even though anygem could tell at a glance that she was not meant to be a fighter. She did not possess the menacing bulk of a quartz soldier, indeed, she looked more like the pearl currently guiding her: slim, decorative, and unassuming—Amber even had that distinct pointy nose!

But it was so clear to her now, and her Diamond's forethought had left Amber in awe.

Yellow Diamond had allowed Pink Diamond to keep her new gem on the condition that Yellow be allowed to provide the gem's attendant. One who could protect them from any enemy that might try to take advantage, one who could watch this new gem for any sign of disloyalty, and one who could deal with the issue, should it arise, all without the gem in question being any the wiser.

Amber was that gem. She was to be this gem's servant, guard, and, if necessary, executioner. Yellow Diamond had entrusted her with the safety of the empire, to be the Diamond's shield against the insidious forces of insurrection, and Amber was determined that she would not be found wanting.

"We are here." said the pearl guide, stepping aside and presenting a jeweled curtain. Amber nodded curtly, dismissing the servant who left without a word.

Amber took a deep breath. This was it, this was when she would meet the one whose very existence was the reason her own. The yellow gem pulled aside the curtain and marched forward to meet her destiny.

...Her destiny was a lot shorter than she had expected.

The gem staring at her was at least a full head shorter than Amber herself. Dark purple-red locks framed a pair of pink eyes that considered Amber with interest. Amber had been expecting an armored juggernaut that would make even quartz flee in terror, but the gem was... not fat exactly, but stout. She was dressed in a flowing robe that was draped over her in a way that made it look quite soft and impractical—certainly nothing like the utilitarian uniforms of the countless soldiers Amber had faced down.

"Yes?" the gem asked in a voice like a crystalline flute, which certainly didn't sound like the voice of someone who could be a threat to the Diamond Authority.

"Are you Almandine?" Amber asked hesitantly, perhaps there was another chamber beyond where her true charge awaited?

"That's me." The gem nodded, tilting her head to the side.

Amber stared for a moment, then remembered herself. She bowed low.

"Greetings, my lady. I am Amber, and I am here to serve."
Awwwwww yiiiisssssssssssssssssssssssssss! The purple bae is back! (and knife-nose, I suppose)

Pity she won't be the focus of the narrative. Amethyst I love you, but Pearl's trauma is much more delicious to me. Forgive me, oh purple lady of the dumpster.

But hmmm. what on earth could Moonstone be hiding? I mean, I know, of course. But that doesn't count. I think it could be reasonably guessed with five minutes thought as there are plenty of clues.

Aren't mysteries fun?
Wow, this was a long chapter. But one I really enjoyed and it just kept getting longer. I was in the zone.

So here's a fun story: I call my grandpa to chat once a week. He likes to hear about what I'm up to. He heard about how I'm writing this story and wants to read it. Something I'm totally fine with, it's just…

How do I explain the smorgasbord of crying gay space rocks that is Steven Universe to a 96-year-old man? I don't think for a second that he'd be offended by it, he's not that kind of guy, but he'd definitely be bemused by the whole thing.

So I skirted over the gender stuff, wrote up a cheat-sheet on who the characters are, and sent him the link to the first chapter. And he is actually reading it. I can't deny that I'm interested to hear what he has to say…

Pearl ducked as a whippy branch whistled towards her face and bite down the urge to shout. Contenting herself with glaring daggers at Moonstone's back as the silvery gem stepped around another patch of brush.

The scientist was leading them around a marsh, tiny winged things were buzzing around their eyes, trying to land on them and lay eggs in their flesh or whatever disgusting things such earth creatures did—the earth was lovely and everything, but sometimes it made Pearl want to blast everything in sight with lasers, it really did. At least she wasn't the only one suffering, if the way Amethyst was slapping her hands together irritably every few seconds was anything to go by. But slaughtering tiny creatures wasn't what they were here for, and Pearl kept her eyes glued on their guide, ready for any hint of double-cross.

She didn't buy the scientists excuse for accompanying them—making sure the corruption device was safely handled? Sure, and she was White Diamond. Moonstone was hiding something, and Pearl didn't believe for a second that the Homeworlder expected them to just let her get her hands on one of Homeworld's superweapons.

And that was another thing. this… corruption device. Could it possibly be what Homeworld had used to destroy the Crystal Gems? Rose had searched for millennia for any hint of how it had been done, combing the planet for anything Homeworld had hidden, but to no avail, and Jasper found it in a matter of weeks?

Not likely.

But it wasn't impossible. And if… if Garnet had actually been—and the look on Steven's face when he told them told Pearl he whole-heartedly believed it to be true… Pearl shook her head viciously, trying not to think about the friend who wasn't with them. They were going to get her, get both, of them back so there was no point in dwelling on it.
Pearl almost walked into Moonstone's back before she noticed the researcher had come to a halt. Moonstone was turning her head this way and that, frowning as her visor flashed in the dappled sunlight filtering in through the trees.

"Yo, Moonpie, what's the hold up?" Amethyst asked. She'd somehow shapeshifted her hair into a bug net around her head—it looked ridiculous, but the shorter gem had stopped slapping her hands around face so it seemed to be working.

Moonstone didn't answer for a moment, then her visor turned clear and she turned towards them "I'm having trouble relating the directions Blaire is sending me to our current location."

"So you don't know where this corrupt gem is?" Pearl asked sharply, Moonstone shot her a flat look.

"I know the gem is nearby," she answered coolly. "I merely require a few minutes to determine exactly where." With that, she sat down on a nearby log, her visor turned opaque in a clear message not to disturb her. They stood there, watching the Homeworld gem mutter to herself as seconds stretched into minutes with nothing but the buzzing insects and the call of birds to fill the time. Eventually, Amethyst took it upon herself to break the silence between them.

"So…" she began, her voice hushed. "Jasper got you too, huh?"

Pearl stiffened and glanced at Amethyst. The shorter gem wasn't looking at her, wholly in engrossed in prodding a patch of mud with her boot.

"Yes… she did." Pearl answered, looking away herself. "She attacked me when I was alone and I…"

"Was," Amethyst swallowed. "Was that before she got me? Or after? I kept trying to reform but…"

"I know," Pearl suppressed a shudder at the memory of seeing her friend's half-formed head being crushed back into starlight. "and it was after. Jasper… made that quite clear."

"Fuck." Amethyst squeezed her eyes shut tight. "Pearl, I'm sorry-"

"It's fine." Pearl put a hand on the purple gem's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. "I lost too."

"Well… I bet you put up a better fight than I did." Amethyst muttered, she still wasn't looking Pearl's way. But Pearl could feel a slight trembling beneath her fingers "She… she didn't even use her helmet." Amethyst opened her eyes and shot her a brittle, glassy grin. "How lame is that? I threw everything I had at her and she just took it all, picked me up, and tore me in half."

"Guess I really don't match up to a real quartz after all, huh?"

"That's not true" Pearl hissed, her eyes hardening as she stared into her friend's startled eyes. "Believe me when I say Jasper was different from other quartz. I should know, I've cut down hundreds. But Jasper," Pearl glanced down at her right hand, twitching her fingers to make sure it was still attached. "She was something else. I fared no better than you, she just toyed with me. Like… like I was…"

Just a pearl. She didn't say the words, but Amethyst reached up a hand and placed it atop the one Pearl had on her shoulder.

There was a cough behind them, and they looked over to see Moonstone, her visor turned clear once more, and pointedly not looking at them. Realizing she had their attention, she stood up. "I, er,
have finished calibrating Blaire's directions."

Amethyst let go of Pearl and stepped forward. "Then lead the way, Moon Nerd." She said, forcing a cheery confidence into her voice. "We got a monster to thrash and a friend to save."

"Er... yes." Moonstone turned and strode away through a stand of reeds. After a moment, Pearl followed.

"So any idea how far off we are?" Amethyst asked.

"About half an hour's walk, if we maintain this pace." Moonstone answered, ducking beneath a cloud of midges. "Blaire has reported that the mons—that our quarry has stopped movin-GAH!"

There was a squelch as Moonstone stepped on what looked like a solid patch of ground and sunk down almost to her knee.

"Careful, Moonie." Amethyst laughed, grabbing the scientist's shoulder and hauling her out of the mire with a second, longer squelch. She waggled her fingers theatrically, "the earth hungers."

"So I see." Moonstone eyed the coating of mud on her leg and the quickly-filling hole it had been pulled from. Absentmindedly, the Homeworlder ran her hand over her leg, banishing the grime. She looked across the swampy terrain with new consideration, no doubt thinking of all the sinkholes she was likely to step in.

"Amethyst, can you fly both of us?" Pearl asked, unwilling to deal with the delay the footing would inflict on them.

"Hmmm..." Amethyst tapped her chin thoughtfully, eyeing the them. "Nah, don't feel like it. But I can do something else." Her body glowed and flattened, leaving a carpet with white tassels around the edges lying on the mud. The rug stared at them expectantly. "well, hurry up and sit on me."

Pearl did so, Moonstone sitting rather nervously in front of her—although if it was from Amethyst's antics or her own proximity, Pearl couldn't be sure. "which way we goin'?"

"That way?" Moonstone answered, pointing out across the muddiest part of the swamp.

"You got it. Please keep your hands and feet inside of me at all times." The rug rippled and a set of long slender legs extended from the edges, they ended in broad feet that kept them from sinking as Amethyst trundled across the marsh, occasionally adjusting their course at Moonstone's instructions.

As they walked, Pearl gradually became aware of a noisy screeching, not like a bird or mammal, but like someone was holding a slab of metal flat against a grindstone. Pearl's eyes narrowed, and she summoned her spear. No earth creature naturally made sounds like that. By the time they left the muddy marsh behind for a field of firmer footing strewn with boulders, the noise had grown from a distant whine to a series of loud, repetitive screeches.

"Bet you that's who we're here for." Amethyst commented, folding in half and dumping them to the ground before snapping back to her normal form. She cracked her knuckles. "Thanks for your help, Moon, but we'll take it from here. Come on, P, let's break some faces."

"Just a second," Pearl grabbed Amethyst's shoulder before she could march off, she eyed the boulders suspiciously. Any one of them could have hidden a gem beast behind them. "We mustn't rush, Garnet needs us to do this right the first time." She glanced at their third companion, who was eyeing the boulders as though they might eat her and was very noticeably not the dependable square Pearl had come to rely on across the millennia. "I want you to stay near us." She ordered
tersely, "no wandering off, do you understand?"

Moonstone started and looked at her, she frowned at the look in Pearl's eyes. "I have no intention of leaving now." She declared, "This is something I need to see through." Pearl could see the quiet determination in the Homeworlder's eyes and raised a brow. She had half a mind to interrogate her on the spot. But the loud screeching was still echoing around them and Pearl didn't have the patience for it. She made a mental note to be prepared for any sudden movements from behind and turned her back on the scientist, stepping carefully through the towering stones.

It wasn't long before they found something. Right as they were about to round a particularly large rock, something crashed into it sending chips of stone flying past Pearl's face.

"Get down!" Pearl hissed, grabbing Amethyst and pushing her up against the boulder. Cautiously, she peered around the rocky surface, trying to get a feel for what they were dealing with.

There was a gem in the clearing, a blackish humanoid and only slightly larger than a normal gem. Nonetheless, their corrupted nature was clear: the figure looked bloated and was moving like they'd been shoved into a suit slightly too small for them. Which Pearl realized wasn't totally inaccurate; the black coloring of the gem wasn't actually their form, but a set of armor. Pearl could see lines of brighter silver turning across it where the tarnish had been scratched away.

The gem was standing before a misshapen pile of rocks, grabbing at them and tossing them carelessly away with one hand. Pearl could see the armor jerking as the warped plates ground against each other with the movement, filling the air with the screech of metal on metal.

Then she saw it, a flash of color against the neutral tones of the corrupt gem. The gem was clutching something in its free hand, something that was shining an angry dark pink.

"Is that the stone we are looking for?" Pearl asked quietly, half turning to face the Homeworlder. "Moonstone?"

The Homeworlder hadn't joined them behind their cover, instead stepping past them and out into the open. Pearl opened her mouth to demand what she thought she was doing, but paused as the gem seemed to crumple. Moonstone's shoulders fell and her whole body drooped as she stared at the metallic monster, as though she was watching it carefully tear her world to pieces while knowing there was nothing she could do about it.

"Moonie? What's the deal?" Amethyst asked, raising an eyebrow at Pearl who shrugged back.

Moonstone jerked, a jittery twitch as though someone had stabbed her with a pin. She swallowed. Tears were running down her cheeks as she stared at the armored figure. She opened her mouth and said a single word.

"Howlite."

Moonstone stared at the malformed figure, her mind trying desperately to deny any connection between its twisted frame and the calm and dignified commander she had known.

But… but the armor. It was tarnished, warped, dented, and scratched, but she would recognize it anywhere, especially that helmet. How many times had she seen the captain don it with that little flourish of hers? Howlite had even let her hold it once, letting her drink in every detail of its design and marvel at the craftsmanship.

The armor had been a work of genius, and it had fitted Howlite like a glove. But not anymore, it
looked as though her body had grown a size, bloating inside the armor and spilling out of the hairline cracks. The helmet was twisted to one side, with only a single baleful eye glaring out at them.

The images Blaire had shown her had left room for doubt, but seeing the creature in the gem left none. How had this happened? How had Howlite become corrupted? She must have been on earth when the Diamond's had set off their weapon, but why? The thought that the captain might have betrayed them was laughable. But... but here she was, twisted into a mockery of what she once was.

"Someone you knew?" Pearl asked tersely.

Wordlessly, Moonstone nodded.

"Unpleasant, isn't it?" the matter-of-fact tone made Moonstone blink.

The researcher looked at her and, in a hot flash of hatred, wished she'd ripped the ring off the pearl by force. Pearl blinked and her face softened as something that might have been guilt flashed across it. She opened her mouth to say something else, but Moonstone cut her.

"Who this gem was doesn't matter," she said firmly, lying through her teeth. "They have the stone and for Garnet's sake we need to acquire it without damaging it. I do not think that she, that they, will give it up without a fight." she glanced between them. "Any ideas?"

Pearl looked at her hesitantly, clearly wanting to say more, but changing her mind. "Yes," she said, turning to Amethyst and holding out her hand. The quartz caught the look in her eye and grinned.

"Watch and learn, Moonpie," Amethyst said, taking the offered hand. "We'll show you what the Crystal Gems can really do." Their gems began to glow and Moonstone took a hurried step back, knowing what they were about to do. It only took one smooth movement before both gems disappeared into a cloud of light.

The fusion materialized, and looked the new gem up and down. She had read files on a number of cross-class fusions, but Opal looked like a particularly fine specimen, lacking the disjointed roughness so common in such things. Admittedly not as fine as Garnet, but Moonstone had never even heard of any fusion that was.

The lightshow apparently attracted attention as the thing that had been Howlite turning back to look at them. Moonstone could see a single glowing eye staring out at them through the eye slit. The twisted creature considered them for a moment, then moved; holding the stone behind its back and extending one arm, a set of whips sliding out with a slick hiss. Opal waved her hands and a bow materialized in her hands.

"Be careful not to damage the stone!" Moonstone urged and, realizing she was in the perfect position to be caught in the middle of the ensuing fight, began to edge away.

"No worries." Opal said, her voice calm as she fluidly pulled back the bow string and a shining arrow of light materialized. "This will be over in a single shot."

She let loose the arrow and it flew straight and true, slamming head-on into Howlite's breastplate. The arrow fractured into shards of light and forced the corrupted soldier back with a grunt.

Moonstone stared, waiting for something else to happen. When nothing did, she looked to the fusion.
"That," Opal said, pursing her lips. "was supposed to go straight through."

"Oh." said Moonstone. "Err... I should probably mention that armor was crafted specifically with the thought of fighting fusions in mind." Howlite was meant to fight Crystal Gems after all, and the Diamond's had seen to it that the captain was prepared.

"Ah."

The awkwardly thoughtful moment broke as Howlite slammed her arm against her breastplate with a thunderous crash and lumbered forward, swinging her arm around like a scythe. The blunted tips of her whips whistled through the air towards them, but Opal was already moving. Cartwheeling towards Moonstone, she scooped the scientist up and leapt away as the whips swung by beneath them.

Holding Moonstone under one arm, Opal took aim from midair and shot another arrow. It left a trail of light as it shot downward and pinned on of the whips to the ground. Opal landed lightly on her feet as the corrupted gem tugged on the whip, trying to free it from the shaft of light.

Opal fired another arrow, aiming for an exposed section of body where Howlite's bloated body had wrenched open a gap. Howlite's arm snapped up and took the arrow on her gauntlet, shattering it much like the first. The arm lowered and that single burning eye glowered at them. It twitched its hand and one of the free whips snapped out, shattering the remaining arrow into scraps of light and freeing the trapped weapon.

Howlite growled, her armor squealing as she moved began to move. The arm holding the pink stone came around and tapped against the front of her armor. With a squeak, a section of metal slid back and the corrupted gem shoved the stone inside, closing the armor after it. A second set of whips slid out from the now empty arm as Howlite advanced upon them.

Opal frowned, glancing down at the shaken gem in her arms. "The thing I do does not seem to be working." She said, her voice slow and thoughtful. "I do not suppose you have any suggestions?"

"Err..." Moonstone blinked, being twirled through the air had made her head spin. "The armor is not built for mobility. We could certainly... outrun her?"

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"Hmmm..." Opal sounded thoughtful. "I am not sure that is helpful." Carefully she set Moonstone down behind a rocky outcrop. "I am going to try something else. I suggest you stay there." There was a flash and four spears materialized in her hands. She twirled them expertly, looking as though she really should have been cutting off her own hands, and strode toward the armored gem, gradually picking up the pace until she leapt.

The twisted armor snarled, twisting its body so that the spears struck metal, sending fountains of sparks flying and metal screaming. Moonstone clapped her hands to her ears and pressed herself against her stone cover, remembering the last time she'd seen the captain fighting it out with a fusion.

She felt sick as she watched the figures grapple with each other. Opal tried to bring her spears to bear once more, but Howlite wouldn't give her room, throwing herself onto the points and driving them aside as she landed and grabbed at her nimble opponent.

Opal stepped closer and spun, slamming the pommel of two of the spears into the armored figure's chin. Howlite's head bent back unnaturally far and staggered back a step, Opal stabbed towards the exposed neck with her other weapons, but two armored gauntlets grabbed the blades and wrenched them away, pulling the fusion off her feet and tossing her bodily away.
As Opal spun to land on her feet, a singled armored hand reached up and took hold of the displaced helmet, with a metallic squeal, the head was wrenched back into place.

Moonstone felt something like something was trying to claw its way up her thought. She… she didn't want to watch this. She couldn't watch this. She'd seen hundreds of corrupted gems; tragic, twisted, and lost, but this?

She had to do something.

Her feet were moving before her mind could catch up, carrying her out from her rocky cover and into the open. Howlite's back was to her, and her boots were quiet against the rocky ground, but she could feel Opal's eyes alight on her. The fusion's impassive stare did nothing to help her nerves, nor did the way the fusion lowered her spears slightly—she got the feeling it was less a vote of confidence and more an interest in seeing what was going to happen next.

Moonstone swallowed. The thing that had been Howlite looked worse up close, her commander had always kept her armor in immaculate condition and would have turned up her lip at its current state.

"C-captain?" she asked, hating how her voice wavered.

The twisted suit of armor froze, the creak of its damaged joints falling silent. As the echoes died away, it raised its whips, pointing them cautiously at Opal and the misshapen helm creaked around slowly. The single silver eye was vaguely curious, staring somewhat disturbingly from the center of the eye slit.

"C-captain Howlite?" Moonstone repeated, her subconscious demanding just what she thought she was doing. This wasn't her captain, who she had betrayed anyway and therefore wouldn't be happy to see her anyway. Whatever this was would grind her into paste without a thought and could she really trust Opal to save her? Pearl was part of her, after all. The serene commander she had known and admired was gone.

And yet, it may have been her imagination—or perhaps wishful thinking—but Moonstone rather thought she saw the figure stand just a little taller, straightening up at the sound of its former title.

She forced herself to salute, "Captain, I-I have a report for you." The helmet creaked as it tilted to one side. Slowly, the corrupted gem bent down, the eye inside narrowing as it examined her. Moonstone's hand twitched, but she steeled herself. Not yet. Not yet.

"it…it is a sensitive report," she said, beckoning the gem to lean closer. The armored head obliged. Moonstone couldn't be sure if it was because of her words, or if Howlite just wanted to get a closer look. The visible eye looked puzzled—like a volcano that wants to erupt, but finds itself needing a reason first and is trying very hard to determine an acceptable excuse for snuffing out the civilization living at its feet.

Now or never. Moonstone snapped her hand up and pressed her hand against the center of the helmet, just like Howlite had shown her all those centuries ago. Everything seemed to pause, the smack of her hand against the metal echoing as everyone stood still. That eye peering between her fingers went hard, the volcano figuring out that the villager's sacrifice hadn't actually been a virgin and boy were they going to be sorry.

Then there was a rasping noise, like a sword sliding back into its sheathe, the metal beneath Moonstone's fingers began to withdraw, flowing backward as it disengaged and revealing a face that would linger in Moonstone's nightmares: rough-hewn white stone with a spider web of black
veins running through it, the only facial feature to speak of was a perfect sphere of quicksilver—which began to boil as it glared at her.

Howlite reared back, her armor screaming and raised a hammer-like fist to grind Moonstone into dust.

Then a shining arrow blossomed from the burning eye.

Howlite shuddered, fighting against the inevitable, then, with a final lurch, burst into smoke. Moonstone covered her head as armor rained down around her, clattering together in a cacophony of clangs. When metal stopped falling, she looked up. Opal was standing still, two hands still drawn back where they’d released the bowstring.

The fusion nodded politely at her, using one pair of hands to applaud.

Moonstone gaped at her, then at the metal at her feet. The Homeworld gem dropped to her knees and began to scraible frantically through the bits of warped metal.

Where was it? where was it!? She needed to find it.

Spotting a twisted bit of metal that may have once been a shoulder guard, she lunged for it. Picking up the battered bit of metal, she upended it and a smooth stone dropped into her hand. Moonstone stared at it, her face going slack.

She'd never actually seen Howlite's gem before, it had always been covered by the armor. It was smooth and round, white with hairline streaks of black dancing across the surface. It felt...heavy.

"It would be best to bubble her." Moonstone looked up at Opal, the fusion looked blurry.

Moonstone wiped her sleeve across her eyes, "what?"

"You should bubble her," Opal repeated, calm yet not unkind. "Before she reforms. Do you know how?"

Wordlessly, Moonstone nodded. She concentrated and formed a shimmering silver bubble around her former commander.

Opal regarded her for a long moment. "I am sorry."

Moonstone met the fusion's gaze and nodded. "So am I." she looked down, spotting the warped breastplate and ran her hand along it. It took a few minutes of gentle probing before she found the panel and opened it, revealing the dark pink stone within. It glimmered as it caught the light, like it was chuckling at them. Moonstone reached out and, rather than touching it, formed a second silvery bubble around it. The stone went dark, as though she'd cut it off from its power source, and she lifted it up and slid it into her pocket.

Moonstone stood up. "We have what we came for," she said flatly. "Let's go."

"Very well." Opal strode off without another word in the direction of the warp pad.

Moonstone watched her go. She looked down at the bubbled gem in her hand, then at the pile of twisted metal. Among the tarnished scraps of armor, she noticed a gleaming crescent of silver. She crouched, scooping it up and turned it over in her fingers, feeling every familiar curve and edge. She brushed her finger against the center point and it swelled in her hands, reforming back into a silvery helmet. Moonstone traced her fingers along it, amazed that it still worked after all these
years.

She clutched the helmet to her chest and followed after the fusion, leaving the rest of the twisted metal behind.

"Lady Almandine," Amber began, doing her best to keep her voice polite.

"How many times have I asked you to just call me Dine?"

Amber stared at her blankly. "Lady Al-"

"Ah!" her charge held up a finger, dark pink eyes twinkling.

Amber breathed out a long breath through her nose. "Dine."

Almandine's smile widened and she turned away. "There we go."

Amber rolled her eyes at the turned back. Almandine was not what she had expected of a gem that Yellow Diamond herself was wary of. The stout gem didn't seem dangerous—annoying, perhaps, but not a threat.

"Hey! Watch it, runt!"

Amber snapped out of her musings and cursed her lack of vigilance. In the brief moment Amber had let her focus wander, Almandine had managed to bump into a quartz soldier. The hulking gem, a feldspar by the look of her, towered over Almandine who seemed rooted to the spot.

The quartz took a step forward, sneering at the shorter gem who seemed to shrink in the soldier's shadow. Amber was about to intervene when the quartz paused, a look of uncertainty crossing their face as they stared at Almandine.

Amber frowned, she recognized the look, it was the same one the gems she had trained against had when they realized that she was going to defeat them while their Diamond watched. But Amber hadn't summoned her blade yet, what was making the soldier afraid…

Amber's eyes snapped back to Almandine, read the fear in her charge's form and understood. If Almandine was passing her own fear onto the soldier, then no wonder they looked confused. Quartz didn't deal with fear well and they all reacted to the foreign feeling the same way.

The feldspar snarled and the gem on her cheek began to glow. She raised one hand to draw forth a weapon, but they never had a chance to find out what kind because it was at this moment that Amber moved.

The feldspar went cross-eyed, staring dumbly at the rapier sticking out of her face. Her eyes followed the blade back to Amber's, standing just behind Almandine with on hand on the smaller gem's shoulder, the other gripping the blade's hilt.

Then there was a puff of smoke and the feldspar's gem cracked against the floor.

"Are you alright, Lady Almandine?" Amber asked. Almandine craned her head back and to the side to stare into Amber's face.

"You poofed her," she said.

"She is a quartz," Amber dismissed the blade and stepped back. "She will recover."
"She is a quartz," Almandine agreed. "And you poofed her."

Amber remembered too late that, in almost every way, she resembled a pearl. And one thing pearls were quite well known for was not being able to cut down quartz at a moment's notice. Amber cursed herself, searching for an explanation that would allay suspicion.

"I knew it!" Amber blinked as Almandine stepped closer, beaming. The shorter gem's face was close, kept at bay only by the long point of Amber's nose. "I knew you were special."

"I… do not know what you mean." Amber said immediately, knowing she wouldn't be believed.

"I knew it the moment I met you," Almandine went on as though she hadn't spoken, beaming all the while. "Because I can't hear you!"

"I-" Amber blinked. "What?"

"I can't hear your voice," Almandine said. "You know, your…" she waved a hand vaguely. "Thingy. What you're thinking except not with words."

"My emotions?"

"That's it!" Almandine snapped her fingers. "Those. I hear those all the time, even Pink Diamond's! I don't think they mean for me to, but I do! But you, nothing! If I close my eyes." she did so. "It's like you're not even there!" she waved her hand in front of her face, nearly slapping Amber across the face.

"I apologize."

Almandine's eyes snapped open. "Oh, don't be sorry!" she grinned. "I have to feel everyone's thingies all the time, and it gets obnoxious after a while. Do you have any idea what it's like to be around an aquamarine and hear what they're feeling?"

Amber had met an aquamarine only once, when Yellow Diamond had brought requested one to test Amber's capacity against to fight against trickier opponents. The tiny gem had trapped Amber in a telekinetic aura and had spent a full five minutes gloating, slinging her around the room and going on about what a waste of her time this had been. Right up until Amber managed to force the tip of her blade around and lightning the little pest into smoke.

She couldn't keep her face from souring and Almandine nodded.

"Exactly! That's what makes it so nice to have someone around who makes me need to guess." She tilted her head to the side, suddenly looking thoughtful. "Is that why you were given to me?"

Amber came to the quick decision that if she was to conceal the whole truth, she would need to confess part of it. She nodded mildly, "it appears you are too intelligent to be fooled, my lady."

Amber glanced down. "Now, may I suggest we move on before our soldier friend reforms?"

"Should we really just leave her there?"

"It will do her no harm. As I said, she is a quartz and will be back on her feet in just a few minutes."

"I guess you're right." Almandine said doubtfully. "Do you think we'll get in trouble for this?"

"Only if she tells anyone and doing that would require telling someone exactly how she was
poofed. I doubt her pride will allow it. But perhaps it would be best if we were gone from here before she reforms. It could get...awkward."

"I..." what her charge had been about to say was cut off as the feldspar began to glow. Wordlessly, Almandine grabbed Amber's hand and took off, nearly dragging her off her feet. They had just managed to turn a corner when a confused and angry shout echoed behind them.

"Good thing we didn't linger." Almandine commented.

Amber rolled her eyes.

"What a dreadful place."

"That seems to be the general feeling at large, yes." Amber nodded dutifully. "It is why you are here."

"I suppose you're right," Almandine admitted, turning back to survey the crowd of gems moving around the chamber.

Amber glanced out the window. They had been on this colony for hours now, and the swirling maelstrom raging outside showed no signs of slowing down. The walls may have been soundproofed, but even the mighty architecture of Homeworld couldn't stop the facility from shaking under the storm's assault. But if the technicians and miners working here were to be believed, what was going on outside was considered mild weather on this star-forsaken planet.

Amber's eyes traced the path of a swirling ball of red light that arced lazily down from the clouds above and snorted—this planet couldn't even manage a proper a lightning bolt. She entertained the idea of stepping outside for a moment to show the sky how it was done. Amber snorted at herself before turning back to her charge.

Amber could hear her charge humming a tune to herself as she skipped along the factory floor. Amber followed close behind, in case any of the technicians or hulking miners got it in their head to start trouble. But knew she needn't have bothered—every gem in sight seemed wholly absorbed in their work; either crouching contentedly over their work or moving around with a quick efficiency and, Amber couldn't help but notice, a slight spring in their step.

She caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye heading straight for them and looked around. The colony overseer, a resplendent and well-groomed agate, was hurrying over.

"I just wished to tell you once more how truly honored I am by your presence," the agate oozed, bowing low to Almandine. "Your ability to pull these unruly coprolites into line is truly awe-inspiring!"

"Oh, they were just a little tense because of the recent incident." Almandine waved her hand breezily. "I heard all about how the storm tore the roof off and carried away more than a few gems—it sounded dreadful. Have all of those gems made it back?"

"Not quite..." the agate admitted, as though their inability to return to work was personally embarrassing. "Which should be all the more reason for them to work harder to fix the damage."

She scowled slightly, glancing around accusingly at the worker gems.

"Well, I've always thought people work better with someone around to...lighten the mood." Almandine grinned and Amber could practically see the ripple of contentment spreading across the mass of workers; shoulder's loosening, frantic urgency being replaced by calm efficiency. Even the
agate's sour look softened a little.

Amber felt nothing, as usual. But over the past few years she'd watched Almandine's control over her powers grow and it had made her start to wonder what it felt like. Did the gems around them realize that their feelings were being manipulated? Did it feel like something being forced upon them, or was it more of a gentle nudge? Did it tickle?

The agate was talking again, but Amber had tuned her out. But then the agate tried to move closer reaching out a hand, only find herself abruptly blocked.

"Kindly keep your distance," Amber said, lowering her head respectfully while not taking her eyes off the agate's. "No gem is allowed to touch Lady Dine."

The agate looked Amber up and down as though seeing her for the first time. From the way her nose wrinkled she likely didn't care for the view. "Perhaps we could find some menial task your... servant... could help with while we discuss important matters?"

Almandine's smile didn't slip, but it did become more rigid. Her dark pink hair swayed as she tilted her head to one side. "Oh, do you think so?"

"Indeed, and you might wish to discourage her from using such informal titles. She might get ideas above her karat."

"I'll give your words the consideration they deserve." Almandine said sweetly. "But if I wanted her to do a menial task, I would tell her to talk to you."

The agate blinked, taking a moment to realize she had been insulted. She opened her mouth to splutter something, but Almandine's eyes narrowed and the agate's mouth clacked shut as her eyes bulged in what Amber could tell was a sudden surge of unnatural dread.

"I-I see," the agate simpered, backing away. "Y-yes, well. I do have m-much work to do. I-if you will ex-excuse me." She bowed low before hurrying off.

"That was pebble-ish," Amber chided.

"I don't know what you mean." Almandine's grin turned warm again as it turned on her. Amber just gave her a look, telling her charge just how much it wasn't working.

Almandine looked down. "Sorry." She murmured, and Amber could hear the veracity in the word. Amber shook her head and relented.

"...Her expression was rather amusing."

Almandine's smile returned and, despite herself, Amber felt herself grinning back.

The screams of battle, roars of outrage, and crack of breaking stone filled the air.

Not that Amber had the time to pay them any heed as she ducked beneath a rocky fist, channeling as much energy as she could into her blade she stabbed up into the creature's rocky chest. The rapier and flexed beneath her fingers, nearly breaking, but after a moment her enemies' stony skin gave way and the blade ran it through with a sound like crunching sand.

The grotesque figure froze, its lithic lips parting noiselessly and toppled backwards, wrenching Amber's rapier from her hand in the process.
Amber cursed. Everywhere she looked more of these monstrous golems were rising from the ground, throwing themselves upon the scattered groups of gems with wild abandon.

Their scanners had detected life on this planet. But the initial scouts hadn't been able to find—likely they'd mistaken these creatures for scenery. A mistake that was costing the colonizing landing party lives and there was nothing Amber could do to stop it.

The stone golems were too numerous, too relentless, too sudden. She could see the fear in the wild eyes of the quartz soldiers as they grappled with stony hands. In a few moments, the sloppy lines the soldiers and technicians had been able to form would fall apart. Some would run for the ship, some would try to keep fighting, and all of them would likely die trying.

And there was nothing Amber could do about it. It took all her might to bring down just one of these rocky things, but she could see half a dozen more rising from the ground as she watched, and they didn't even notice when she shot lightning at them. Perhaps it would be best for her to cut her losses, grab Lady Dine, and flee. She could easily keep them out of the grips of these clumsy creatures and...a familiar voice shrieked and Amber's mind wrenched back to the present.

Her lady was in danger.

Amber whipped around, Almandine had been right behind her, hadn't she? And she still was, but one of the hideous things had risen out of the ground behind them and taken hold of her. It was trying to lumber away, unnoticing of its captives' struggles.

Amber screamed like a star-phoenix and threw herself forward. But a pile of rocks resting innocently between them stood up abruptly. Amber crashed headfirst into it, and lumpy arms of stone wrapped around her and carried her down to the ground.

"Amber!" she heard Almandine shriek and the renewed fear in her lady's voice drove her berserk. Lightning crackled from her body and the wretched thing holding her began to shriek as its limbs began to melt. But then a shadow fell over Amber and she looked up with a snarl to see a second golem, misshapen hands raised overhead to crush the gem in Amber's forehead to dust.

And then everything went still.

The golems stopped moving, the screaming gems fell silent. All was calm.

Amber hurriedly wriggled out of the motionless fingers and scrambled away. Looking around desperately, she spotted her charge hanging limply from the grip of the other golem and summoned her second rapier. Her hand crackled with sparks as she reversed her grip on the slender blade, intent on hurl it like a javelin through the creature's skull.

"Amber... no!" the words were slurred and strained, but no less urgent for it. Amber cut off the lightning immediately and hurried to her charge.

"Almandine!" she hissed, "what?" then paused. The shorter gem was shaking, though not from fear, but from exertion. Amber glanced around at the still scene around them. None of the stone creatures were moving, and the gems still alive were staring around mildly as though they'd forgotten where they were and couldn't bring themselves to be bothered. Amber turned her gaze back on her charge, realization dawning.

"This is your doing?"

"Need to... leave." Almandine huffed, her body so tense she could likely be strummed. "No attacking." she lurched and slid awkwardly from her captors grip. Amber caught her before she hit
the ground. Dark pink eyes stared into hers. "They'll wake up. I won't be able to stop them!" the last words came out at a rush, like she was running out of breath. But Amber was already moving.

"All gems disengage and retreat to the ship!" she barked, "immediately." Her voice cracked through the air, making all the gems stiffen, though the golems didn't seem to notice. Slowly, far too slowly, the gems turned their backs and began to trudge away.

Amber followed them, wishing she could shout at them to hurry, but not daring to do so again lest she break her burden's concentration.

An eternity later, Amber was marching up the walkway onto the starship. She had just made it onto the ship when her charge gave a gasp and went limp. Immediately, every gem other gem on the ship stumbled as though someone had blared a speaker in their ears. Amber glanced at the gem in her arms then back over her shoulder at the pile of rocks in the distance—which seemed suddenly to be moving.

"Get us off the ground!" She roared. The urgency in her voice cut through the general confusion and several olivine threw themselves onto the controls. There was a rumble, and then they were airborne.

There was a great deal of confusion, confusion that morphed into anger as all the soldiers and technicians demanded that someone else explain to them what had just happened.

Amber huffed, ignoring them as she gently lowered her burden to the ground and helped her to a sitting position. The other gems could squabble all they wanted provided they didn't do it on the ground.

"So." Amber lowered her voice so that none around could hear. "You did that."

"Everyone was frightened and angry." Almandine said weakly. "I made them calm." She glanced upward. "Except you," she purred, a loopy grin sprawling across her face. "My infallible Amber."

Amber raised an eyebrow, but ignored it. Her charge was clearly delirious from exertion and needed rest. Amber stood and turned to a nearby viewport, examining the shrinking ground beneath. "The Diamonds are not going to be pleased by this delay in this planet's colonization."

"It's going to be a lot more than a delay." Almandine replied, leaning back her head.

"And what makes you say that, my lady?" Amber's brow furrowed. "I admit the creatures took us by surprise, but you were able to force them into complacency. If we were to return with a larger force-" but Almandine was shaking her head.

"I managed to pacify several dozen of them," Amber corrected, her head lolling back further as she waved a lazy hand. "It was like holding back an avalanche and..." Almandine trailed off, her head rocking forward to stare into her lap, pursing her lips. Amber had learned to recognize that look over the decades. It was the one her charge wore when she was trying to put her powers into mundane words.

Amber knelt beside her. "Yes?" she prompted gently.

"I could feel a great many voices." Almandine frowned, her dark pink locks hiding her face from view. "They were all sleeping, but when we were attacked, they all began to wake up. The voices were... everywhere."

Amber glanced at her, then back out the window. Now that she looked closer at the geography of
the planet; it looked a little less like random boulders and rock formations, and a little more like misshapen figures curled up motionless against the ground. "You mean to say they are a lot more of them on the planet."

Almandine hesitated, tilting her head to a noise only she could hear. "It... might be more accurate to say they are the planet."

There was no real variation in the landscape, everything was just that same craggy, grey rock that those golems had been made of. And was it just her, or did that mountain range in the distance look a little bit like a set of fat, pointy fingers sticking into the sky?

"I think..." Amber said slowly. "We should leave."

Almandine closed her eyes and slumped against Amber. "That's a good idea."

"Come on, Amb, try to keep up!"

Amber made no effort to increase her pace. They had finished calming the nervous workers and feelings of unity for the colonists on this distant planet and there was no matter that needed their immediate attention and, thus, no need to hurry. Almandine ended up waiting for her, standing beside a pillar of blue crystals with her arms crossed and her foot tapping.

"I'm sorry, my lady, have I failed you in some way?" Amber said pleasantly.

Almandine rolled her eyes. "Yes, you've failed me." She declared, turning on her heel and strutting off between more crystal pillars. "And I'm afraid that's unacceptable. I'm going to have to trade you in for a better model."

"Of course," Amber nodded, following her charge through the crystals. "I shall inform Yellow Diamond immediately upon our return to grow a new specimen of amber. However, that will take time as we ambers are rather resource intensive. In the meantime, I'm afraid you'll just have to make do."

Almandine scoffed, throwing her hands up and strutting further into the crystal field.

"I regret your inconvenience." Amber said.

"I'm pretty sure you don't."

"Well, you are the expert in knowing how others feel." Amber glanced around. "But to be more serious, my lady, are you sure coming to this place is wise? I have heard ominous rumors about this place."

"Yes the local gems avoid this place," Almandine agreed, striding into the heart of the crystal field and settling herself down elegantly atop a boulder. "They think its haunted by cracked gems or something."

"And are you certain that it is not?" Amber asked, glancing around at the pillars of crystal. The places gleamed with colors, reds, blues, greens, purples all sparkling in the faint light of this planet's moons—it looked like something that a high-class gem artist would sculpt for an aristokarat's palace. But this colony was only just being established, Almandine was likely the highest-class gem to set foot on the planet to date. Which meant either the crystal pillars were natural, and Amber couldn't imagine what kind of phenomena would have caused them, or something else had put them here.
"I'm sure." Almandine nodded, sweeping an appreciative eye over the colored glow of stone. "I can't hear anything; not the voice of gems, or monsters, or organic life." She spread out her arms and basked in the light. "The only one I can hear is me. I'm all alone!"

Amber raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

Almandine snorted. "Well obviously you don't count. You know I can't hear your voice."

"Not my feelings certainly," Amber hesitated. But if her lady truly believed there was creature around to pose a threat Amber was prepared to take her word for it. Almandine hadn't failed to detect the voice of other creatures for well over a century. "If you truly wish to be alone," she began. "I suppose I could withdraw to the colony for a while, so that you might enjoy the silence better."

Amber paused, there was something about the way her lady was looking at her… "Oh."

"Amber slide herself over on her seat and patted the space on the boulder next to her. "Come sit with me, Amber."

Amber hesitated, something inside her telling her that she shouldn't, she was here to keep an eye on the empath, not make nice with her. But… Dine was looking at her.

Amber's feet moved automatically, and she settled herself down next to her companion.

Almandine smiled, and turned away. "Look at all the Crystals. Aren't they lovely?"

Amber looked at them. She could see their reflections in the natural gems. A hundred tiny Almandine's staring and smiling at her alone. "Yes… lovely."

Amber wasn't sure how long they sat there, enjoy the view and saying nothing as the planet's twin moons danced across the sky. But… Amber couldn't find herself to care. She turned to look at her companion, the gem she had come to know, had monitored and guided for centuries. She looked so peaceful, so unbothered by anything in this place that Amber could not bring herself to disturb it.

"I wonder if this place is going to be destroyed when the colony is further developed." Almandine murmured, leaning her head against Amber's arm.

"I doubt it." Amber answered, uncomfortably aware of the dark pink locks tickling her arm. "We gems have an eye for beauty. Some artist will surely gather the crystals up and preserve them, perhaps arrange them just like they are now."

"I suppose…" Almandine muttered doubtfully.

Amber shrugged. "Things change, that does not mean that the change is bad."

"You know…" Almandine murmured, turning a thoughtful gaze on her. "There are times when I look at you, and wonder what great thing I must have done for the Diamond's to have sent me you."

"I was made for you," Amber reminded.
"Yes." Almandine turned her face towards Amber's, the look in her eyes causing a strange mix of pleasant warmth and immediate panic to squirm through Amber's stomach. "Yes you were." Almandine leaned closer and Amber made no move to stop her, paralyzed by the pink pupils that eclipsed the world.

Amber wasn't sure what happened next, but she was dimly aware that the crystals around them were shining brighter, like a spotlight was being shone on them. She tried to look around, to find the source of the sudden light, but her body wasn't responding correctly; as though she was only half in control of it.

Then the light vanished, leaving Amber blinking. But something else was strange, the crystals seem to have shrunk. Where before they had risen half again as tall as Amber, now her eyes were level with their tops.

"Lady Dine? Amber?"

Amber paused. It was as though two voices had come out of her mouth, and yet neither had sounded like hers. The first bells of panic began to ring in her mind, mingling with those of confusion.

Amber looked down at herself and froze.

That wasn't her body. Her form was a dark yellow, not this brilliant golden orange. She could feel something brushing against her back and whipped her head around to see an enormous mane of spikey pink locks stretching almost to the ground.

Amber stood up, or tried to, it was like her mind crossed itself and one leg stood tall while the other curled up and she fell to the ground. Through great concentration she pushed herself to her knees, the bells of panic beginning to morph into sirens.

Something was wrong, her form was different, her body wouldn't obey her orders. Was her gem cracked? Had something attacked and damaged her? One hand flew to her forehead... and the other to the back of her neck. Both sets of questing fingers touched stone and Amber froze.

She rolled her fingers around both stones. Both felt undamaged, the one on her forehead was definitely hers and one on the back of her neck was... Almandine's.

The bells of panic and confusion were damped, falling silent in the crystal-clear silence of revelation. There was a blast of light and Amber hit the ground, a second thump nearby telling her Almandine had done the same. She scrambled upright, her wide-eyed shock mirrored in her Almandine's face.

"Amber!" Almandine's pupils had shrunk to pinpricks with panic. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean-"

Amber held out a hand cutting her off. It was trembling. Amber stared at it, unable to meet those pink eyes and willed it to be still.

"We... fused." Amber was surprised by her own calmness, even as the word turned her stomach with shock, disbelief, and... something else.

"I'm sorry!" Almandine repeated, babbling. "I didn't mean to, I, you, I wanted-"

Amber jerked her head up, meeting that panicked gaze and making it flinch back. This couldn't have happened. Almandine wasn't another amber. Amber wasn't an almandine. Such fusions were not supposed to happen. Almandine had... If Yellow Diamond found out that she...
Amber's train of thought threw on the brakes, but her treacherous conductor carried it to the end of the line.

Almandine would be shattered. The second part of the thought was that Amber would likely share that fate, but that didn't seem very important, not with the first thought running circles through her mind.

Almandine would be shattered. Almandine would be shattered. Almandine. Shattered.

Almandine was getting to her feet and was making to leave. Amber couldn't quite make out what she was saying over the noise of that thought screaming around her head. But that didn't matter, Amber was already in motion, wrapping her hands around Almandine's waist she hauled her off the ground and held her close.

"No." said Amber, shushing the panicking gem. "It's all right. It's fine. I promise." She kept repeating the words, trying to calm her lady down. Eventually, Almandine stopped struggling.

"Amber..." she said softly. "I'm... did I hurt you?"

"What?" Amber blinked. "No. You didn't. I'm not angry about it. In fact I..." she clamped her jaw shut before she could say whatever she'd been about to say or even think. "I'm fine." She held Almandine tighter. "But... Dine... no one can know."

Almandine flinched. But logic was reasserting itself. What had just happened was, of course, a betrayal of the Diamond's will, something she should immediately report to Yellow Diamond. What was, in fact, the very thing her Diamond had created her to keep watch for.

Except... Except it wasn't, not really. Her duty was to protect Almandine and keep watch in case she showed any sign of using her powers to turn gems against the Diamonds and that was something to this day Amber had not seen so much of a hint of. Almandine had performed centuries of loyal and faultless work.

Surely such loyal service shouldn't be undone by one silly mistake?

No. Of course not. Almandine could still do so much for the empire a potential that would be snuffed out if anyone ever found out about this. Yellow Diamond would be honor-bound to deal with it, lest all the other gems find out and start fusing themselves.

So obviously, the best way to ensure that Almandine continued to provide loyal service to the empire was to keep this secret from everyone. That was what Yellow Diamond truly wanted, surely.

Yes. Yes.

Yes... that was right. Nobody needed to know. Amber looked down into her charge's frightened eyes and knew her duty demanded this secret from her.

"Amber. I'm-"

It is fine." She said firmly. "There is no need to apologize, because there is nothing wrong." She smiled softly at the doubt in her lady's face. "I'm serious, Dine. It's okay. Nobody needs to know."

Hesitantly, tears in her eyes. Almandine nodded.

Amber smiled, and pulled her close once more. wordlessly staring up into the sky until both moons sunk beneath the horizon.
Everything would be fine.

Chapter End Notes

Boom, there's the big secret Moonstone was keeping. Blaire had shown her of the image the corrupted gem who'd come out of the sea and taken the pink stone when Amber abandoned it.

It was Howlite the whole time.

Did anyone suspect? I thought it was kind of obvious. Like, in the way Garnet being a fusion was obvious before the season 1 finale. I mean, I didn't realize she was a fusion until she was formed, but in hindsight it was obvious.

But seriously though, I'm really satisfied with this chapter.

It's a lot of raw emotion explicitly from my original characters and I thought Amber and Almandine's bits came out pretty nice. Turned out about… 3-4 thousand words longer than expected, but hey, that's life.

I'd be thrilled to hear your thoughts on the matter.
Everything They Care About Is What I Am

Chapter Notes

So I thought I'd take a minute to jot down my thoughts on the big revelation of Rose actually being Pink Diamond. I think my thoughts on the twist can be succinctly summed up with one word:

Meh.

The episode Single Pale Rose taken by itself was absolutely gorgeous: a creative, colorful, and artistic masterpiece of the vein that made me fall in love with Steven Universe in the first place. But for the wider plot…

Well, first of all it sort of weakens both Pearl and Rose's characters in a way that leaves me a little disgruntled. Pearl's not actually a renegade pearl who broke from her master, she's just a normal one following her master wherever she leads.

Rose being Pink… well that's pretty cliché. Like, of course Steven is the son of a galactic empress, why would he be the son of some random gem? Whatever faults Rose may have had, I'd always seen her as someone who changed the course of history by force of will. By being Pink it sort of makes her a figure of destiny no matter what she did and makes her actions seem less…self-realizing? Self-determining? I can't quite put it into words, but I know its slightly negative.

I didn't think Rose was Pink, because I didn't care for the twist. But I wasn't surprised because it explains a number of things: Steven's stupidly wide range of powers, why Steven started crying when he saw Blue Diamond mourning, etc. It also gives the Crystal gems a way to survive when Yellow comes looking for her cluster. Steven will be able to talk Blue around to his side. Of course, that will be after their emotional and tearful duet where Steven apologizes in song and Blue cries, then forgives him.

But beyond my personal feelings of the twist, there were three thoughts I had about the revelation.

One: Rose's whole thing where she gave birth to Steven, dying and abandoning everyone she cared about to deal with the consequences without a single shred of visible remorse? That wasn't a one-time deal, Rose/Pink made a habit of it!

Two: This makes the other Diamond's either his aunts or his grandmas. Either way, his number of moms has increased by three. Goddammit Rebecca! I shouldn't have been surprised, but you snuck three more moms right under my radar, you magnificent witch.

Three: This is more of a delicious, what-if thought: If Jasper had won the battle against Steven and torn his gem from his body, would she have recognized it? Would Pink Diamond have reformed in front of Jasper who just killed her son in her name? the trauma would be absolutely divine.

…okay, I think I got this nonsense out of my system. Onwards to story time!
Peridot stomped across the floor and threw out her fist. Steven gaze went from her grumpy scowl to the water bottle she was clutching, filled with a clear liquid that shimmered in the light. He looked back up.

"Did you have fun?" he asked weakly.

Peridot stared at him. Her body was covered in dirt and grime, her visor was scratched, on the left side of her head a chunk of hair was missing, and the rest of her head was covered in an array of flowers sticking out at every angle. "No. No I did not have fun. Plants are stupid. Rose is stupid. Her fountain is stupid."

"Did the plants come alive and attack you?" Steven asked sympathetically, reaching out to take the bottle of healing tears. "They did that to Amethyst and me once." He pulled the cap off with his teeth and stared at the liquid inside uncertainly. He couldn't remember, was he supposed to pour it on his wounds? Or drink it? Did it make a difference? He wasn't sure he wanted to drink his mom's tears. That would be kind of gross.

"I wish it had been the plants." Peridot said darkly, turning away and grumpily pulling out the flowers in her hair.

"Really?" Steven frowned at his heavily bandage arm. "If it wasn't the plants, what was it?" if he poured the tears on his arm, would he have to take off the bandages first? That would be tricky with one hand.

"Bees."

But taking off the bandages would be pretty painful and… Steven blinked as the answer registered. "Bees?"

"That fountain has a lot of giant magic flowers in it." Peridot grunted as she yanked a pansy out of her hair and threw it on the ground. "Did you ever wonder if that attracted earth fauna? because it does. It attracts bees. Big ones. Ones that seemed to have absorbed some of the gem magic permeating those flowers. They were, in fact, magic bees." Fed up with the one by one approach, she bent over and shook her head furiously, shedding a shower of petals and stems onto the floor.

"That sounds… not fun." Steven finished lamely. "Uh, but why all the flowers?"

"After analyzing the size of their stingers, I decided the safest course of action for retrieving the tears would be to camouflage myself." She glared at the pile of flowers as though they had dealt her a personal insult.

"Well… I assume it worked?" Steven said hopefully, holding up the bottle. Yeah, he was going to have to drink it, wasn't he?

"It did." Peridot snarled. "The genius of my disguise was beyond flaw. The stupid things absolutely thought I was a patch of flowers. It worked perfectly. I got in, got the tears, and was making my escape when… it happened."

"What did?"

Peridot's face twisted. "One of them tried to pollinate me."

"…Oh." Steven tried to picture what she meant by this and quickly decided that he didn't want to.
Peridot turned her glare on him. "What are you waiting for?" she demanded, staring at him with manic eyes. "Are you gonna drink that lachrymal fluid or not?" her tone made it clear that if he didn't, she was prepared to force feed it to him.

Steven's nose wrinkled. "I… guess I am." He said slowly, desperately wishing she hadn't called it that. You know, Connie's mom had actually done a great job, he was feeling loads better already. Did he really need to—

Peridot grabbed the bottom of the bottle, shoved the open end into his mouth, and squeezed. Steven gagged on the salty taste, but swallowed. Almost immediately, he began a warmth spread through his body. His arm started to itch beneath the bandages and he could finally move his fingers properly as an ache that had been so constant he'd stopped noticing it vanished. He breathed out a sigh of relief through the queasy feeling in his stomach and started to unwrap the bandages.

"Thanks, Peridot." He said gratefully, "I appreciate it."

"You better." She huffed, turning away and stomping off. Steven could just barely make out some of her muttering as she stomped for the bathroom. "fuzzy little legs all over my hair… stupid organics… get wrench… justice…"

Steven decided to ignore it, it would be best to let her sulk it all out. Then he heard the sound of the warp pad activating and all other thoughts fled. His head whipped around as Moonstone and… Opal materialized in the house. Aw man, it looked like he'd missed something exciting.

"Hey guys!" he waved his healed arm at them, while jumping off the couch and running over. "Did you get what you were after? Can we fix Garnet?!"

"We did." Moonstone answered, stepping off the pad. "And that remains to be seen." She stepped past him, heading for the kitchen area. Steven frowned at her, then looked up at fusion. "Hey Opal, how are you?"

"Hello Steven." the fusion nodded, smiling. "I see Peridot was successful in getting you the tears."

"Yep! But… I think she had a tough time of it. she's in the bathroom at the moment."

"I see. Was she complaining?"

"Yes."

"Then she's fine." Opal stepped off the warp pad. "Is there anything else we should know? Has Lapis reformed?"

"No." Steven sighed.

"I see. Then I shall be outside if you need me." Opal strode away, "I need to… meditate." She opened the screen door and squeezed through the space. Steven blinked after her then turned back to Moonstone. The scientist was clutching a pink stone covered in a silvery shine, turning it this way and that. He trotted over to her and climbed up onto one of the kitchen stools to get a better look. "So this is really the thing that Jasper used to corrupt Garnet?" he asked quietly. He had been expecting something…uglier, maybe with an oily sheen and lots of spikes?

Moonstone glanced at him and sighed. "It would appear so, yes." She set the stone down on the counter. "Could you drag Blaire's receptacle over here please? I would like her assistance without having her take up space on my visor."
"Oh, um, sure." Steven hopped off and went over to the couch. With a bit of effort, he hauled the blue pyramid off the ground and carried it back to the kitchen, setting it down on the floor. The interface materialized the moment he let go, dressed in a sky-blue lab coat similar to the Homeworlder's.

"Hello Moonstone," she curtseyed, the wide glasses on her face flashing in the light. "I am delighted to see that you were successful in retrieving the stone." Moonstone nodded and they both crouched over the pink stone.

Steven stared at the Homeworld gems, back and forth between the two, uncertain if they wanted anything from him. Moonstone looked, well, there was no way Steven could ever mistake that look. She looked sad. Sad and utterly exhausted, as though she were a wet towel and someone had squeezed all the water of her, leaving her limp and slightly damp.

It was becoming a pretty common look around here and he hated it. He wanted to do something about it... say something. Maybe about how much he appreciated her help in curing Garnet.

"I like your new hair thingy," he blurted. Moonstone blinked and looked up at him in puzzlement for a second before she realized what he meant. She raised her hand and brushed her finger along spiky silver crescent that was sticking out of the base of her ponytail.

"Oh."

Steven fought back the urge to wince. He knew he wasn't good at reading between the lines, but from that sad little noise he'd be willing to bet that slip of silver metal had a big something to do with why she looked so sad.

*Good Job Steven. Just stick your finger in the wound and say: "wow, that looks painful."*

"Thank you." Moonstone gave him a smile that looked about as fake as a politician. "But it's not mine. I'm just... holding it for a friend." Steven hesitated, then took the hint and changed the subject.

"How long do you think it'll take you guys to figure out how that works?" he asked, pointing at the pink crystal sitting on the counter.

"I don't know." Moonstone sighed. "Possibly an hour, perhaps a decade." She held up a hand at his obvious dismay. "I do not think it will actually take as long as that. I have read over all the files you gave me, many of which made a reference to this stone in one way or another, so I am not starting from scratch. Also, having Blaire's assistance should expedite matters quite a bit." She pulled off her visor and rubbed her fingers around her eyes. "I understand you are anxiousness for results, but please understand we require some time to examine the stone uninterrupted."

"Oh. Yeah. No problem." Steven backed off. The silver gem nodded and bent over it, the hologram joining her. Occasionally Moonstone would poke the stone or Blaire would mutter something to her, but not much else seemed to be happening so Steven turned away, grabbing his laptop and wandering out the door. He spotted Opal sitting cross-legged before the ocean, staring out into the waves, and made his way over to her.

"So... you guys are still fused." He said, plopping down onto the sand next to her.

"We are." Opal agreed. Steven waited, but she said nothing else, looking at him without expectation or urgency.

"You, uh, wanna tell me why?"
"Amethyst and Pearl are frightened and restless." The fusion said promptly. "Neither of them wish to face the problem before us alone. So they cling together so that I may help them."

"Oh… okay." Steven nodded, doing his best not to think of the pair of gems in the bubbles. He really wished Connie was here. But she said her mom was keeping her really busy with school stuff recently. "Um… can we… talk about it?"

Opal nodded. "If you wish."

"Do you think Moonstone will be able to cure Garnet?"

Opal shrugged, a somewhat complicated move for one with four arms. "I do not know. Nothing your mother tried for millennia ever worked. But she did not have the knowledge our Homeworld guest has. Nor did we ever know the cause of the corruption."

"Oh. Well, I think she can do it!"

"Perhaps. But can she be trusted to?"

Steven blinked, "what?"

Opal looked at him mildly. "Pearl does not think so. Amethyst doesn't see any other option, and therefore does. Do you think she can be trusted?"

"Yeah." Steven said immediately. "I mean," he thought desperately for an argument. "She's the one who told us about the stone in the first place, why would she do that if she didn't want to help?"

"So we would retrieve it for her that she might use it against us." Opal said it so matter-of-factly that Steven's jaw dropped.

He shook his head. "No. I don't believe that."

The fusion raised an eyebrow in neutral curiosity. "Do you not believe it. Or do you not want to believe it?" Steven opened his mouth to answer, paused, and thought about it.

Did he trust Moonstone?

He definitely wanted to. She was nice. But… she'd done bad things and… and she hadn't said she was sorry, either. Not exactly. How had she phrased it? I'm sorry that gems were needlessly hurt by my work? She said she'd believed she'd made the right choice, but it just hadn't worked out. Did that make her a Bad Guy?

Yeah. It kind of did, didn't it?

But… then mom would be a Bad Guy too, wouldn't she? She'd saved the earth, but started a war. Her choice had worked out for the planet, but not for the gems on either side. He could still picture the haunted look in the scientist's eyes as she described his mom's rebellion spreading across the galaxy. Would his mom have done that? Moonstone had thought so…

But what his mom had done didn't matter. This wasn't about her.

Did he trust Moonstone would actually try to cure Garnet? Garnet wasn't her friend, in fact, Moonstone was probably about as terrified of her as she was fascinated. Why would she help Garnet?

The answer came almost immediately.
Because it was the right thing to do.

It…sounded kind of childish, when he put it like that. But it felt right to him. Whatever she'd done in the war, she had been trying to save as many gems as possible. She'd tried to blow up Amber and Almandine, not because it was logical, but because she'd felt their pain and wanted to make it stop.

Intentions had to count for something. They just had to.

Otherwise, what was the point?

"I do," Steven said, and as he did so he realized that he really did believe it.

Opal considered this for a long moment, then nodded. "As do I."

Steven blinked. "Really?"

Opal gave him a sideways glance. "Through her actions, Pearl and Amethyst were freed." Her lips turned upwards, ever so slightly. "It is only through that freedom that I can exist. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I owe her my life. So yes, I am choosing to trust her."

Steven smiled.

Bee-eep Leedle-eep.

Steven blinked as his phone sung out. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw Blaire's face staring patiently out, her eyes hidden behind her overly-reflective round glasses.

"Hello Steven." She said politely.

"Uh… hey?" he greeted. "What's up?"

"Moonstone and I have finished with our work." Blaire chirped. "We are ready to speak with you about our options."

Steven stared at her, then looked up at Opal. Wordlessly, the fusion picked him up and leapt through the air, souring across the beach and onto their front porch in a single bound. She put him down and he ran through the door.

Moonstone was leaning back on her stool and staring at the Pink stone with a slightly sick look on her face. As Opal stepped in behind Steven, she lifted her visor slightly and massaging her eyes with her free hand. "This stone…" she wearily. "Is an ingenious bit of engemneering."

"Ingenious?" Steven echoed, staring at her. "Isn't it the thing that corrupted all the Crystal Gems?"

"I never said it was pleasant." Moonstone sighed. "It is a wicked creation that's ability to be used for the betterment of gemkind is far outstripped by its ability to do harm."

"So… what is it?" Steven asked nervously.

"Well, with my cursory inspection and the sparse bits of data at from some of those data files. It seems as though Homeworld grew a second specimen of amber and almandine, but injected the gem seeds together into the same hole."

"You mean… this thing is actually a gem?" Steven asked, furrowing his brow.

"In a way," Moonstone answered. "This gem was grown as a sort of natural fusion of two classes,
but were harvested before consciousness could form." Steven frowned at her and she hesitated. "It's like…" she trailed off, searching for the words. Blaire came to her rescue.

"This stone is a gem in the same way that a virus is a living creature." The hologram stated, she spotting Steven's blank look she clarified, "it cannot think, it cannot feel, it can do nothing by itself. But should a sentient lifeform come into contact with it, it reacts, feeding off their emotions and feelings and converting them into energy."

"Ok-ay…" He understood, or at least, he thought he did. "But how did Jasper use it to corrupt Garnet?"

"I believe Jasper supplied it with raw emotion and then discharged the energy into her." Moonstone thought for a moment. "I'm not sure the exact emotion matters, but somehow this put a layer of energy into place over Garnet's gems." She nodded towards the green bubbles and tapped her visor. "I can see these layers quite distinctly. If either Ruby or Sapphire were to take form, this layer would interfere with their natural flow of energy, distorting it. It is this effect that forces a gem to become corrupted. As for the madness that follows," She shrugged. "It could either be a direct effect of the foreign energy, or it could be the gems attempt to cope with the change. Perhaps it hurts too much and it's easier to go mad." She shrugged. "I suppose that doesn't matter either…"

Steven frowned at the pink stone. This was interesting and everything, but it didn't really answer the real question. "So… can we cure Garnet or not?"

Moonstone glanced at Blaire and the hologram nodded encouragingly. "Are you familiar with the concept of destructive interference?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Then I shall make this as simple as possible," Moonstone continued, not missing a beat. "If I can use the stone to generate an energy matrix that is of equal intensity to the one Jasper laid on Garnet, but opposite in direction, then the two should cancel each other out. With no interference to their flow of energy, Ruby and Sapphire should be able to reform as normal." She paused, then added. "theoretically."

"Theoretically?" Opal echoed, her expression didn't change, but her tone was noticeably cool. Moonstone tensed slightly, but met the fusion's gaze.

"Yes, theoretically. If such a thing has ever been attempted, there is no record of it."

"So if I'm understanding this right, we just need to channel as much energy into this thing as Jasper did, but opposite." Steven hesitated. If it ran on emotions Jasper had probably used hate and anger, so that just meant they needed to charge it with love. Steven brightened, if there was one thing he was good at...

He deflated a bit when Moonstone shot down the idea. "Emotions are tricky and difficult sustain. Without a mind directly guiding the power, such as Almandine herself, this stone is more of a club than the finely tuned scalpel we require. If we don't get it right the first time, there is a very real chance we could make the damage worse."

"What are you saying?" Opal asked, crossing both sets of arms.

"I'm saying neither you, nor Steven, nor I possess the precise control necessary to produce the correct wavelength."

"But luckily, you have me." Blaire cut in, leaning back and adjusting her new glasses smugly.
"With the expanded processing power I have gained to in integrating myself into this planet's technological network, maintaining a precise amount of energy needed should be little more than pebble play."

"Provided she doesn't corrupt herself by mistake." Moonstone pointed out.

The hologram paused, then nodded reluctantly. "Yes, provided I don't do that." The hologram tossed her head, drawing herself back up. "But I believe there is only a two-point five percent chance of that happening."

Moonstone raised an eyebrow. "Just for the sake of argument, what would happen to the technological network across the planet if your essence became corrupted?"

The pause was a lot longer this time. "I have excellent anti-virus software."

"I see." Moonstone answered. "That bad."

Blaire waved her concern away. "In the highly unlikely event that this occurs, I believe smashing my gem should be sufficient to prevent technological Armageddon."

"Not an ideal failsafe." Moonstone frowned. "That would leave us with no other way to control the Stone's power with the necessary precision." She looked at the hologram again. "Also, I have no wish to see you dead."

Blaire reached out a hand and hovered it over Moonstone's shoulder, "Why thank you," the hologram smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I don't wish to die either. But I have calculated the risk and found the odds favorable. I am willing to take it."

Steven's neck was getting tense from swiveling back and forth between the two. He felt unsure about asking Blaire to risk her life to save Garnet, But if she was already willing to do so... he couldn't bring himself to try to talk her out of it.

This talk about armageddon and shattering people was freaking him out, but the two seemed pretty optimistic and it was helping to ease his tension a bit. "How soon would we be able to try this?"

Steven asked, if he had a little time to mentally prepare...

"I would say..." Moonstone pursed her lip, staring at the gems in the bubbles. "Five minutes?"

...or they could do it now. That worked too.

It really was five minutes. They'd moved back outside and down to the beach, that way if something went wrong, his house was less likely to be destroyed.

They'd brought out two stools, one had Blaire's pyramid on it, the other had the pink stone, and, just beyond them, the pair of green bubbles floated quietly in the moist sea air.

Moonstone stood behind Blaire's console, looking serious. She glanced at him and Opal. "It's important that you don't interfere." She told them. "Do you an explanation as to exactly why?"

Steven shook his head. "Lets...lets just do this." if it didn't work, they could try something else. But it would definitely work, so there was no need to think about that, right? He found his hand
gripping Opal's with no memory of how it happened and squeezed tight. The fusion laid a second hand on top of his and squeezed back.

She nodded to Moonstone. "Do it. Should they take corrupted form, I will be ready to stop them."

The Homeworlder looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. She turned her visor on Ruby and Sapphire's gems and laid her hands on Blaire's pyramid. "Are you ready?"

"My processors are cleared for use," the computer gem chirped. "Firewalls are in place to shield against backlash. Ready to begin calibrations on your mark."

"Then let's begin." Moonstone's visor flashed and glowing beads of light began to run down her arms into Blaire's pyramid which hummed to life in response. A thin stream of light shot from Blaire to the pink stone, setting it aglow.

"Current frequency too high." Moonstone murmured, her eyes glued on the floating gems. "Decrease energy by twenty-five percent and hold."

"Acknowledged." Blaire hummed, and the beam connecting her to the stone dimmed slightly.

"Better. Now, match peak to peak intensity."

"Matching." The beam pulsed and began to waver, jerking up and down like a heart monitor.

"Energy signature match of ninety-nine-point five percent. Potential error set at zero-point five percent."

"Calibrating."

"Margin of error: zero-point one percent." The detached efficiency in Moonstone's voice actually managed. "Margin acceptable. Inverse signature."

"Inversing." The beam seemed to stagger, skipping a beat, before resuming what looking like the exact same pattern of motion.


The beam of light didn't seem to change, but the pink stone grew brighter and then two more beams shot from it, rupturing the green bubbles and striking the gems within, holding them in suspension as they were enveloped by the pink light.

Steven tensed and felt Opal do the same as he listened to Moonstone's muttering. "Maintain intensity… be ready to cut off on my mark…" her visor gave a beep that seemed to echo across the beach and Moonstone shouted. "Now!"

Immediately the beam shooting from Blaire ceased and the pink stone began to dim. All the light faded, Ruby and Sapphire fell into the sand with a pair of soft thumps.

Everyone waited with baited breath, staring at the gems in dreadful anticipation.

And then, like the rising of the sun, the gem began to glow.

Steven felt his heart begin to rise in time with the gems as they lifted themselves off the ground. The glow intensified and white light began to pour out of them and… took the shape of nothing in particular.
Steven's grin froze. The light around the gems was wavering, taking the form of neither monster, nor gem. Wordlessly, he turned to face Moonstone. She didn't answer, her attention firmly in the gems, her visor flashing like a strobe light.

"Moonstone, what's wrong?" He asked, trying to suppress his rising panic. "Did it not work?"

"No, it worked." She answered. "There is no trace of the foreign energy matrix left. Nothing is forcing corruption on either of them, which means their trouble stems from the lingering influence." She frowned. "Both took form while corrupted, as such their minds were warped to fit the form. Now their sanity and madness is on equal footing and they can't take form until one comes out on top."

"So what do we do?" He demanded.

Her visor went clear and she looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "I do not know. It may be up to them to come back."

Steven's heart fell. They were just supposed to stand here and hope Ruby and Sapphire would pull themselves together?

Yeah, right.

His legs were moving before his brain registered what he was doing, carrying him towards the gems.

He heard Opal call shouting something, but ignored her. He was tired of sitting around, waiting for others to solve the problem. Not this time, this time he would do whatever he could. He was aware of a pink light shining from his stomach as he reached out and placed one hand on each of the rippling balls of light.

The roiling radiance paused for a moment at his touch, then pulsed and expanded, enveloping his arms and beyond.

The last thing he heard before the world vanished was Opal calling his name.

Steven opened his eyes to a field of stars.

He knew this place.

"Ruby! Sapphire!" He called, twisting around to look. "Where are you?"

His answer came in the form of a growl, like the hiss and pop of a campfire, and then he was tumbling through the stars. The balls of light became streaks until he slammed into something. The impact didn't hurt, it was just abrupt and in moments he was pushing himself to his knees to take a look around. It looked like he was in an asteroid field. The rocks were a dark grey, creased and folded over each other with red lines running through them, like cooling lava.

Then he heard that growl again.

He turned, standing behind him was a dog. Its body matching the stone around them and glaring at him with bright red eyes. It wasn't the biggest dog he'd ever seen, but that wasn't very comforting;
not with the way its mouth was slightly opened, allowing a long blob of lava to drip from the stalagmites it had for fangs. It patted forward, its rocky feet grinding against the ground and its growl rose in pitch. As it did so, the red veins in the rocks around them flared up, sprouting flames in time with the noise.

Steven swallowed, and held his ground. "Ruby?"

The stone wolf froze, its mouth snapping shut. It stared at him for a long moment and a shudder ran through it. Several of the fissures along its body widened, rock falling away to reveal red skin.

"Ruby." He repeated, softening his voice. "I know that's you." He stepped forward, and the corrupted gem's hackles rose, its head lowered and the growl began anew. Softer, filled with warning, and, beneath that, confusion.

Steven paused, but only for a moment. Then threw himself forward and wrapped his arms around the wolf's neck before it could react. He felt his skin start to sizzle as it stiffened, but he held it tighter, whispering softly in its pointed ear.

"Ruby stop, it's okay. It's just me. It's Steven. I've come bring you back." The wolf shuddered again, hissing, but he didn't let go. He knew she was in there, she just needed something to bring her out. But what...oh.

Duh.

"Ruby, you need to come back." He whispered. "Sapphire needs you."

Everything went still. The fires went out, the growling ceased, and the canine's body became cool to the touch.

Then Ruby howled. She broke from his grip and began to claw at herself, ripping off huge chunks of stone bit by bit. Steven took a step back to avoid the flying chunks of rock. The wolf rose up onto its hind legs and hurl itself bodily on the ground with a crash that sent new cracks running through the rocky shell. It squirmed, rubbing its body against the stone to peel away more and more of the shell. As the stone crumbled, the beastly roar began to change, morphing into a shout—still angry, but with a distinctly human quality to it.

"Ruby?"

A claw rose and latched onto the furious scowling face and tore it off, and the shouting became words.

"Get it off. Get it off! Get. It. Off!" Ruby screamed. Steven hurried forward to help, ignoring the pinches and scrapes as the stone dragged at his fingers.

Then he helped Ruby to her feet, her body free of stone, as he did so, the stone field around them began to crumble away into nothing.

"Steven?" Ruby blinked, shaking dust out of her hair. "What are you doing here? Where's Sapphire? The last thing I remember is... is..." her eyes narrowed and a furious scowl crossed her face as she tried to remember.

"That's not important right now!" Steven said urgently. "Sapphire's in trouble, but we can save her. You can save her. We just need to find her." he turned his eyes back to the twinkling stars—was it just him, or did half of them seem... dimmer? Or maybe calmer? "do you know how to find her?
"Find her?" Ruby scoffed. "I can feel her." Ruby raised her arm to point in a direction that seemed no different from any other and paused, a blank look crossing her face that slowly morphed into horror. "What the heck happened here?" she demanded, turning on him.

"Well-"

"No," Ruby cut him off. "Forget it, I don't care. We gotta find Sapphire." Steven wasn't exactly sure how she spun herself around in midair, but before he could ask, the gem was already flying off into the night sky and leaving him far behind.

"Ruby! Wait for me." He tried following her, trying to swim through the air, or will himself forward, or whatever. The only thing he achieved was the impression that he was falling. So he fell, helpless, watching the comet that was Ruby disappear into the starlit night.

Then he came to an abrupt stop once again as he hit something solid face-first and groaned. He waited a minute before opening his eyes, whatever he was laying on, it was pretty cool and felt good against his aching face. Actually, it wasn't just cool, it was cold; freezing, actually. Like… snow.

Steven's eyes snapped open and he saw a land of ice and snow. Ice crystals floated through the air like frozen tears and huge snow drifts piled up around him. He got to his feet and crawled up the nearest one. Everything around him was a mix of white and blue and not much else. Except for a spot some distance away, where something was jutting from the ground while clouds of ice dust swirled around it.

"Sapphire?" he asked, his hands crunching into the snow as he pushed himself to his feet.

The thing made no movement as he staggered close enough to make out its features. It looked like a bobcat, with pale blue fur that jutted out in icy spikes that rattled in the cold wind. There was a single eye in the center of the feline's face, the deep blue of a glacial ice and staring at nothing.

"Sapphire." Steven said again, raising his voice. "It's me, Steven." The cat made no movement, the single eye sad as a broken dream as it stared through him.

"I've come to help you." he said, and that got a reaction… sort of. The shrieking of the wind intensified, threatening to push him back and swirling ice crystals painfully into his eyes. Steven yelped, shielding his face with his arm and attempting to push closer. "Sapphire, stop!

A particularly strong gust of wind bowled him over and sent him rolling back across the snow.

Steven pulled himself upright, shaking the ice from his hair and doing his best to think warm thoughts. Before he could get up and try again he heard the sound of yelling as well as a number of words he knew Pearl would never want him to repeat. He looked up just in time to see something red plummet out of the stars and hit a snow drift beside him.

Steven blinked, staring at the picture perfect outline in the snow. "Ruby?"

Two red hands rose out of the hole and grabbed the edges, Ruby hauled herself up, scowling. "Stupid mindscape." She muttered. "S'all screwed up." Then she seemed to register her surroundings and looked at him. "Steven?" her face became more urgent. "Have you found Sapphire?"

Steven nodded. "Yeah, she's over there. But I can't reach her!" he answered, trying to keep himself from wailing. "I've tried calling her name and telling her I'm here to help her but she's not listening."
"What?" Ruby looked at the motionless cat, completely unmoved by the sudden appearance of an angry meteor. Ruby's face crumpled. "S-Sapphire?"

Steven had thought the winds were strong before, but at the sound of Ruby's voice, they redoubled their efforts, coating him in a layer of frost and Ruby stumbled back into the hole she had made which collapsed on top of her.

"R-ruby!" Steven yelped, and threw himself down to dig at the snow as his teeth chattered. In seconds, he exposed a red hand and hauled at it, pulling the gem from the snow. Her eyes were shut tight. "Ruby, no! Don't fall asleep!" He wailed. "Stay out of the light!"

"I'm not sleeping!" Ruby snarled, opening her eyes. "I just… forget it!" she pushed him off her and turned back to the cat that was pointedly no longer looking in their direction.

"Ruby, what do we do?" Steven asked. "She's not listening to us."

"Oh, course she's not." Ruby snorted bitterly, angrily wiping away some steam that was pouring out of the corner of her eyes. "She doesn't think we're real."

"What?" Steven gaped. "Why not?"

"Because she's doing the thing she always does when she doesn't like what's going on." Ruby answered, squaring her shoulders and letting off a burst of heat that drove away the snow and melted the frost clinging to them. Ruby took a deep breath and when she looked at Sapphire again, all the horror and disbelief were gone, replaced by a pugnacious determination. "She's holed herself up in her future vision, trying to look for better times or some junk. Problem is, she gets lost. She probably thinks we're just some figment from a potential future."

"Then what do we do?"

"You do nothing." She answered, cracking her knuckles. "What I'm going to do, is fix this." Ruby began to march towards the icy feline. That deep blue eye flickered toward the approaching figure and the winds picked up again, shrieking with sorrow. Ruby growled and hunched her body, stamping her feet harder to resist the wind. When she was within arm's reach of Sapphire. She raised her hand, pulled it back, and punched Sapphire in the face.

The cat yowled, falling backward with an awkward crash. The howling winds fell silent as though wondering what had just happened.

Now the cat moved, its head craning up to look at Ruby in disbelief. Ruby crossed her arms and raised a brow. "That's right, Saph. I'm really here. You gonna come back to me or do I need to come getcha?"

A tremor ran through the ground and fissures opened in the ice floe, sending chunks hurtling away into the abyss. The ice cat shuddered, sending icicles falling from her coat. Ruby stepped forward, her hands glowing with heat and cupped the cat's face.

"Shh…" Ruby murmured, her words mingling with the hiss of the ice melting and evaporating beneath her touch. "It's okay, Saph, I'm here." Ruby pulled the cat into a full embrace and the ice melted away, into a blue dress. Sapphire wrapped her hands around Ruby as the ground fell away beneath them.

"Ruby!"

"Sapphire!"
They nuzzled each other and began to glow, and Garnet became whole once more. She floated there for a long moment, her arms wrapped happily around herself. Then she looked up and her smile widened. "Steven!" she spread her arms wide.

"Garnet!" he was in her arms in seconds, wrapping his arms around her waist and squeezing tight. "You came back!"

Garnet's smile grew softer. "Not quite," she pressed her lips to his forehead and everything went white.

Steven blinked. They were back on the beach outside his house. Garnet was still holding him, her smile warm as the sun. "You brought me back." She finished holding him tight.

"Garnet!" the shout came from one voice, or possibly two, and it was all the warning they had before Amethyst and Pearl hit them both head on, wrapping their arms around them and bowling Garnet over.

Tears, hugs, apologies, and joyful sobs mingled in a huge pile as they rolled together on the sand, and Steven laughed through it all.

Finally. Everything was going to be okay.

The memory of it haunted Amber like the ghost of dream.

Whenever she saw Almandine calm a pack of aggressive aliens, the memory was there. Whenever Almandine tripped over her overly long dress, pulled a long pout, and pointedly refused to redesign her outfit, the memory was there. Whenever Almandine was overcome by the cacophony of feelings from all the gems around them and her hand grasped Amber's for support, the memory was there.

But there was nothing Amber could do about it. She could not stop the odd tingle in her chest when the memory of feeling Almandine's essence mixing with her own flickered through her mind. Even if she had the courage to discuss it with Almandine, to ask her to make those feelings go away, Amber was the one gem the empath couldn't do that for.

And she could not escape Almandine. The pink gem was literally the very reason she existed! There was no reassignment, not that Amber wanted one.

So they didn't talk about it. There was not a gem besides us two who knew, and that was the way it had to be. If that fact ever changed, it would be their inevitable undoing. Almandine would be shattered and Amber would follow her into oblivion soon after.

It was for the best.

If she told herself that enough times, perhaps she could make it true.

"Amber?"
"Yes, Lady Dine?"

They were alone again. It happened often, a reward for their unique service. Amber sent a discrete status report to Yellow Diamond after every instance to ensure no suspicion about her lady's loyalty arose. It was a wonderful privilege, and these sojourns always left Almandine in a cheerful mood, as though listening to the constant whine and humdrum of all the other gems left her drained and the solace helped her recharge. For the most part, Amber appreciated them as well. It got her out from under the sneers of the high-ranking soldiers and courtesans—all of which Amber knew she could best with one hand behind her back—and it made her Lady happy.

But… it did mean they were alone.

Together.

Pink eyes inches from her own, a flash of light that blotted out the world, a sense of power and completeness that filled her with—Amber drove away the tantalizing memories through force of will. They were wrong, a betrayal to the Diamonds themselves, and worse; Amber knew that if she did not find a way to rid herself of them, her ability to ensure her Lady's safety would be compromised.

And that was unacceptable.

"…again."

Amber blinked, the word breaking through her thoughts and glancing up. Her lady's back was to her, but the tension in Almandine's shoulders told her that an answer was expected. "Forgive me, I was lost in thought. What did you say?"

Almandine sighed, her shoulders slumping as some of the tension dropped away. "I said: I wish you would talk to me again."

Amber quirked an eyebrow. "I am speaking to you right now, my lady."

Almandine sighed again. "Pretending to be stupid isn't helping anything, you know? I know that you know what I'm talking about."

Amber looked away, giving out a sigh of her own. "Speaking of it is unwise. It would be best to forget about it."

"Is that so?" Almandine whipped around and locked eyes with Amber, her hair seemed to vibrate with an angry energy as she glared. "Well, I disagree." She took a step closer, "I think about it all the time, and I don't know how to feel about it. I want to talk about it with you, but you never want to, and I have no idea about how you feel about it because I can't feel you and I want to feel you and…" she trailed off, not so much running out of steam as it was so many thoughts fighting to express themselves at once that they got in each other's way. She took a deep breathe, pressing her fingers into her temples like she did whenever they were in the middle of a densely populated colony. Then she dropped her hands and took another step closer.

"We fused." she said bluntly. "I want to do it again." the outright confession set Amber back on her heels and made something in her stomach squirm in an uncomfortable mix of horror and pleasure. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out as Almandine plunged on. "I just… you're always there." her voice grew a little more hushed. "It's like… you're like the stars. I wouldn't know you were there if I didn't look every now and then. But just knowing that you're there makes the world better. And all I ever do is make things difficult for you, I owe you so much and I don't know what
to do about it."

Amber swallowed. "You… I… It would not be an exaggeration to say I exist because of you, Dine. You don't owe me anything."

The shorter gem shook her head, balling her fists into the folds of her dress as she stared glumly at the ground. "That's not true. I'd be miserable without you. And I want you to feel the same about me. But I have no way of knowing that without talking about it and you don't want to talk." Her fists clenched tighter and she frowned more viciously. "I just… I just want to know you better." She finished weakly.

Amber looked away, unable to meet Almandine's gaze even if it wasn't even pointed at her. "I have spent most of my existence in your presence." she said, hating how hollow the reasoning sounded. "Who would know me better than you?"

"Nobody." The words were soft, but carried a hint of steel beneath them. "But I want to know more." She looked up, her eyes drawing in Amber's like a magnet.

"Dine, I..." Amber shut her eyes, so she couldn't see her frustrated tears... or let Dine see hers. How could she make her lady understand? The diamonds were wary of her, even after all this time, if there were even a hint of disloyalty...

The answer came to her in an instant, and Amber hated it instantly. She couldn't possibly tell Dine that truth, not when she knew it would hurt her...

And yet… if she knew, she would understand. She would have to.

Amber opened her eyes.

"Almandine?"

"Yes?" she looked nervous, as though Amber was about to strike her. The sight of it twisted Amber's stomach—all the more because she knew what she was about to say would likely hurt Dine more than that.

"Do you know why I was sent to be your servant?" Her lady's brow crinkled in confusion at the sudden turn the conversation had taken, but Amber pressed on. "I'll give you a hint. It has to do with your inability to sense my emotions." Almandine shook her head slowly, uncertainty creeping across her face.

Amber took a deep breath to steel herself; there would be going back from this. This would not fix the awkwardness between them, quite the opposite, but if it would keep her lady safe...

"I am a failsafe." she plunged onward. "Immune to your powers, skilled in combat, and always by your side. I was given to you so that if you ever strayed from the Diamonds, if your loyalty ever failed, I would be perfectly positioned and equipped to strike you down."

Almandine's eyes were like moons, wide and silent as Amber continued to speak, each word like a coffin nail.

"I, from the moment I met you, have been reporting to Yellow Diamond on both your potential to benefit the empire, and the threat you pose." Amber took a step forward, closing what little gap remained between them and could almost convince herself that she was glad when the smaller gem leaned away. Amber placed her hands on Almandine's shoulders. "I need you to understand." she said softly. "The Diamond's fear you, Dine. They fear that you will twist the emotions of their
subjects against them and start a war. That is why you must never give them reason to doubt your loyalty, because they are looking for an excuse to destroy you and have already put the perfect tool into place to do the job." Amber closed her eyes once more, unable to meet those wide eyes. "I'm sorry."

Almandine said nothing for a long time, and Amber couldn't bring herself to look, so she waited, eyes closed, for a response. Any response.

"So why am I still alive?"

Amber's eyes snapped open and she stared; she could see the shimmer of unshed tears in her Lady's eyes, but that wasn't all there was. "What?"

"Cross class fusion is taboo. It is a betrayal. But we did it ages ago and the Diamonds have not said a word." Now it was her turn to step closer, so that their chests were almost touching. "Which means you didn't tell them."

Amber's mouth started working again. "It's not the same!" she declared. "It was a mistake, but not actually a betrayal. You do not wish to turn on the Diamond's, do you?"

There was a moment's pause that made Amber's heart freeze, and then: "No... no, I don't."

Amber choked, her stomach squirming even harder. Was it just her imagination, was Almandine's gem glowing? It was hard to tell through the shorter gem's thick hair.

"And if it's not a betrayal to fuse with you, then what's the problem?"

"The problem is that the Diamond's will not tolerate it."

"Then they don't need to know."

Amber's jaw dropped. "Deceive the Diamonds?" she clarified.

"Why not?" Almandine shrugged. "I'm not a traitor, neither are you. We're still going to serve our Diamonds loyally, so I don't see why they need to know every little thing we do. It's none of their business what we do in private."

"Weren't you listening?" Amber snapped. How could she not see the point! "I am not what you think I am. I am not what you desire! I was given to you solely so I could shatter you if you stepped out of line."

"So?"

Amber's mind came to screeching halt at the monosyllabic reply. "So?" she echoed, throwing up her hands. "SO?! What do you mean, so? I am your executioner! The sword hanging above your head, ready to fall at any moment!"

"No. You're the one who makes sure it never needs to." The shorter gem closed the distance between them again, and her stout arms were wrapped around Amber's waist before she could react.

Amber opened her mouth to respond and found herself lost in those pink eyes, they had always been so expressive. Amber had long since learned to read most of their emotions. But this one was
different, it was like the way Almandine always looked at her, except…warmer, deeper, and much,
much more terrifying. It made her stomach twist itself in knots and she wanted to scream, but
screaming would require looking away and she couldn't bring herself to do that.

"...what are you?" Amber whispered, unsure if it was a question or accusation.

"I am what I have always been." Her words were soft, and made Amber's head swirl. "Yours. The
only difference is that now, I want you to be mine." Almandine's hair was glowing with rosy fire,
and knew that her gem must be glowing. Not forcefully, like last time, but gently; asking instead of
taking. "We can serve the Diamonds like we always have. Together."

She must have seen something of Amber's turmoil, because now she reined herself in slightly,
visibly tempering her desire. "But… but if you..." she swallowed and leaned back slightly, suddenly
hesitant. "If you don't want this, then... I don't want it either."

Amber stared at her, and saw that Almandine meant it. If she said no, if she pulled away;
Almandine would let her go, would never raise the issue again, and they could return to what they
had been before.

And Amber knew in that moment, that she was lost.

She felt something inside her shift. The Diamonds became second; powerful, respected, and
revered. But second nonetheless.

And Amber didn't care.

She grabbed Almandine, closed the space between them, and the world filled with light.
Until the End

Chapter Notes

So…

Here we are.

I'm just… I dunno. This day marks the two-year anniversary of when I posted the first chapter of this story on . Back when I started this story I was skeptical about my ability to make a story longer than five chapters, I'd tried, but lost steam. At that time, this story had been an idea bouncing around my head for about a year.

It was really just some idle thinking about how Garnet would react if she met a corrupted fusion. Not like the cluster, but two gems who had become corrupted and hung on to each other like Ruby and Sapphire would. Essentially chapter 22. That's right, this entire story was just an excuse to write that one chapter. The other 49 were just padding to give it context.

In fact, my skepticism about my ability to write such a story to completion is where the title came from: Until the End.

How long am I going to keep writing this story? Until the End.

Of course, there was plot relevance as well: How long were Amber and Almandine going to cling to each other? Until the End.

I thought it was neat.

I think this story has been a success. I've certainly received plenty of positive reviews, and I'm not sure if I've ever received one that could be considered truly negative. That's kind of nice. Sure, my story could have gotten more attention, reviews, etc. But fanfic readers are a strange bunch, the only thing that reliably brings them to the table is smut and ships. So I'm satisfied with the attention I have received without resorting to such things. Hooray for artistic integrity or something.

But anyway, to all of you who have read this far, and especially to those of you who have seen fit to leave comments:

THANKS!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was quiet.

There was nothing on this planet, if you could even call it that; it was more of a like an large rock with aspirations, maybe being a planet's moon or something. She wasn't sure why the Diamond's had asked her to investigate it, but she also couldn't bring herself care. It was a chance for them to be alone together, a chance for her to exist—what more could she ask for?

Everything was quiet, except for them. But that was okay, because they weren't noisy.
They were a symphony.

Neither she, nor her song had a name, but that was fine. Those who made her had never felt the need to give her one, or maybe they were afraid if they named her she would become real and the Diamond's would find out?

She shrugged, smiling to herself. Who cares? As long as she could exist like this, even for a little while, it didn't matter. She leaned back, tossing her long mane of spiky pink locks and listening to the mute song of the stars. No matter how many times she had seen them throughout the long centuries, whenever they could snatch a moment to bring her to life unobserved, she never grew tired of the sight.

She was unconcerned that she might be found out, that some passing gem might detect her. When they were joined together into her, the range of their senses stretched so far that the idea of a limit seemed to lose meaning. She would hear the voice of any who approached with more than enough time to separate and hide the evidence, so she was completely free to enjoy herself.

Whenever the noise of the masses overwhelmed them, whenever they were threatened to be overwhelmed by the onslaught of voices, the remote vastness of the universe always helped her to forget. How small they all seemed, how she seemed, how even the Diamonds seemed, in the context of such endless majesty.

She closed both pairs of eyes and relaxed, losing herself in the song even further. She would need to report that the initial scans had been wrong; there was no life on this little planetoid.

But that could wait. She let her senses expand even further and... felt something. Her head tilted to one side. Even out here, there wasn't silence. Space itself murmured in a sibilant chorus that enhanced the quiet instead of ruining it. But she could sense something off, a sort of sour note in the song.

It felt like there was one, no, two voices—except they weren't voices, they were more like a pair of silences; patches of hard soundlessness that were only noticeable because of the hole they created. They were slippery, but there, and she could feel them on the edge of her range and growing closer.

She frowned, was this what they had been sent to find and deal with? Some kind of alien race that needed to be assessed? It wouldn't be the first time they had been sent on such a task and they could deal with it. But... hmm.

She pushed herself to her feet, warily readying herself to fight. Whatever these creatures wanted, they would not find her unprepared. There was nothing she couldn't handle.

The patches of silence were closer now, so much that she could see them: two blazing streaks of light hurtling through the sky like streaks of light. One shone blue, the other yellow. She focused her senses on them, trying to gleam some kind of a hint as to their nature and instead of finding nothing, she felt herself forcefully rebuffed. She had a moment just long enough to be alarmed before the twin lights struck the asteroid nearby, blinding her in a brilliant explosion of radiance.

She blinked; rubbing at her eyes hurriedly to clear them, and took a look at what had come. One look was all she needed for a pit of horror to open up within her.

"It would seem that my suspicions were correct," said Yellow Diamond, her eyes hard as her namesake. The ruler stood tall as the world before her, back straight with both hands clasped regally behind her back.
"So it would seem," sighed the other, a giant garbed in a blue robe, her face hidden from view by the flowing cloth.

"M-my Diamonds," She said, her body moved on its own, her arms crossing and hands folding to form the proper salute. Yellow Diamond's eyes seemed to crackle with fire at the sight.

"How dare you stand before us like this and deign to take that pose." She hissed, her eyes narrowing into slits.

"My Diamond, wait! I-I can explain!" she thrust out her hands, trying to induce calm on the situation.

The hooded figure's head rose a fraction. "That will not work," said Blue Diamond. "You will not be able to bend our emotions to your will like some common gem."

"You have successfully tamped her powers?" Yellow Diamond asked.

"I have, Yellow." The blue gem inclined her head. "They are substantial, but no match for mine."

Too late, realization dawned. This was why they had been sent here, to a place with no witnesses that they might happily form her; sure in the knowledge that they would not be discovered, that they might sense any who approached and split apart.

How had they known? How had they known!?

Did it matter?

"Now, Amber-01," said Yellow Diamond, each word the rasp of a whetstone on a guillotine's blade. "Let us discuss your treachery."

"Pink is going to be so disappointed." Blue sighed, shaking her head mournfully. "She has oft told me of how proud she was of her almandine's successes."

"My Diamonds!" she cried, still maintaining her salute. She could not fight this, she could not force them calm, she had to convince them of the truth with words alone "I have not betrayed you! I serve you still! Loyal as ever!"

"We are not your Diamonds, abomination." Yellow Diamond declared. "Your very existence is a declaration of your defiance."

"Despite my form, I have done nothing but serve your will!" she answered. "I remain loyal as ever."

Yellow Diamond's eye narrowed. "Is that so?" she asked. "How long has this been going on, Amber-01?"

Under that gaze, there was nothing she could offer but the truth. "Centuries," she answered, quailing at the renewed flash of outrage in her Diamond's eyes. "But throughout that time, have I not served you well?" she asked, her voice was wavering, she could feel Amber speaking through her. "We can serve you better together than we ever could apart! We swear it!"

Yellow Diamond paused, considering this. "You claim that you remain loyal, Amber-01?"

"Yes, My Diamond!"

"I see..." Yellow Diamond nodded slowly. "Your record has indeed been exemplary, and one
Relief flooded her so fully it was like a physical force. Had she been wrong all these centuries? Was it possible the Diamond's would forgive?

"Very well." Yellow Diamond nodded. "Amber-01, I order you to unfuse and execute the almandine."

...What?

"Do this," the ruler continued, those golden eyes never leaving hers for a moment. "And you shall be forgiven. Pink Diamond will be allowed to craft a second almandine and you shall be assigned to her, under more careful watch, of course."

"...What?"

Those golden eyes narrowed. "I will not repeat myself, Amber-01."

"No." The word came out soft, barely audible, but without hesitation.

"Excuse me?"

"I said NO!" she roared, her hands balling into fists and sparking with lightning.

"Just as I suspected." The Diamond shook her head. "As always happens when two different class of worker gems fuse; you forget yourselves, lose loyalty, and become unhinged."

"I have not lost my loyalty," she snarled. "You just threw it away."

"Foolish pebble. Your loyalty was never important. What matters is your obedience." Yellow Diamond took a step forward, one hand coming from behind her back and held high. "And that, is something you have clearly lost." The hand began to glow with golden light, pulsing with the power of the stars.

For a moment, she was drowning in fear, but then she was swept out from the river of terror into a sea of rage. How dare she? Did Yellow Diamond not know just how deeply Amber valued her loyalty, how deep the warrior's desire to serve ran? To have it brushed aside just like that...

She raised her hands and lightning crackled, matching the golden glow.

If Yellow Diamond did not value that service, then it would be rescinded. Meaning the galactic ruler was nothing more than a threat.

And she knew how to deal with threats.

The lightning surged louder and she tensed, preparing to strike out at the one who had abandoned her.

Then something struck her so hard her knees nearly buckled. Her hands clapped to head and her eyes shut tight as something squeezed her mind. Something cold and unrelenting as the sea. Through the daze of pain, she glimpsed Blue Diamond, her face still shrouded from view, but a pair of icy eyes glowed like the heart of a glacier as the pain inside her head redoubled.

Then she saw Yellow Diamond standing before her, that hand still glowing with power.

"You wish to serve?" the words were empty, cold as the void beyond the reach of the stars. "Then
don't worry. You shall still serve, one way or another."

The hand slammed into her chest and everything became pain, as though the stars themselves were shrieking with her.

And then her song fell silent.

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Priyanka bit her lip, watching her daughter work on her schoolwork, dutifully, but without much enthusiasm. She had been keeping Connie busy; enrolling her in advanced classes that each came with a mountain of prep work.

Connie took to it without much complaint, but... Priyanka could tell she wasn't happy. Her daughter wasn't saying anything, giving little hint that she was frustrated with how much work was being dumped on her. But Priyanka has been watching when Steven had called her to chat, and the doctor would have had to be blind to miss the way her daughter's eyes lit up, the way her voice filled with joy as she talked about silly things and made little jokes. She tried to remember the last time her daughter had talked like that and couldn't think of one.

Priyanka sighed. She wanted Connie to be safe, not unhappy. Why did the two have to seem so mutually exclusive?

"Connie?"

"Yes mother?" The girl responded immediately, she looked wary, as though expecting to be handed another twenty-page study guide.

Priyanka cleared her throat. "I am planning to visit beach city this afternoon and I was wondering if you wished to accompany me."

Connie sat bolt upright, staring in disbelief "Really?"

"Er, yes." Priyanka nodded. "I wish to check up on Steven's arm to ensure it's healing correctly."

"Oh."

Priyanka's eyes narrowed, her mom senses tingling. "Is there something I should know?"

"What? No." Cookie answered, her face becoming carefully neutral. "Checking up on him is a good idea."

Priyanka crossed her arms. "Connie, if something has changed about his situation, as a doctor, I need to know."

Connie squirmed slightly, but caved beneath the potent power of the mom stare—she always did in the end. "Steven's arm is already healed." Connie admitted. Priyanka stared at her. "He got some... well, it was magic gem stuff." her daughter gave her a sheepish look. "Can we still go see him?"

She asked plaintively.

Priyanka only hesitated for a moment before nodding.

"If this is true, then it is something I would quite like to see." She said slowly, glancing at the pile
of study material in front of Connie. There really was a lot of it, and just the sight of all those papers gave Priyanka flashbacks to med school—the long sleepless nights, the pitcher of coffee she'd had to drink daily to keep up, it had been miserable… "I do not see why you cannot accompany me."

"Awesome!" Connie cheered, shooting to her feet. Then she glanced at the pile of papers herself and reluctantly picked up a packet. "I can bring one of the study guides in the car, so I don't lose time."

"There's no need for that." Priyanka said, making her daughter stare at her, nonplussed. "I fear I may have… given you more work than was strictly necessary. I'd like to go through that myself and slim down the material."

"Well… if you're sure." her daughter couldn't quite hide her relief as she put the papers back.

"You can go along to the car." Priyanka said, "I'll join you in a minute."

"Yes, ma'am!" There was a pounding of feet upon floor, and her daughter was out the door.

Priyanka took one last look at the mountain of papers and sighed.

She wasn't approaching this in the best way, but she didn't know what else to do. She could hardly keep Connie in her sight 24/7, how was she supposed to keep her safe? Could she even do that? Greg's advice had been helpful for dealing with the stress, but didn't solve the problem of Connie's life being in danger in the first place.

Perhaps she should speak with these gems…

Priyanka sighed. She would find a way to keep everyone happy, she just didn't know what it was yet. There was nothing for it but to buckle down and hope for the best.

Priyanka shook her head. All this thinking was solving nothing. She slipped on her shoes and turned to the door.

For now, she had a medical miracle to investigate. Steven's wrist had been fractured in two places, he should have spent months in recovery, but if the boy truly had a way to heal people like that…

Perhaps she should invite the boy to the hospital's terminal child ward…

Uncertain, but full of thoughts for the future, Priyanka went to join her daughter.

Pearl stood still, hand outstretched and ready to knock upon the red wood of the barn door. She had been standing like that for some time, unsure what to do, but unwilling to back away.

She knew that Peridot wasn't here at the moment. She had chosen to help with the reconstruction of Beach City muttering something about offering her unparalleled engineering skills to the primitive humans. Pearl had stopped listening at that point, merely reminding the green gem that humans were fragile and not to crush anyone in her efforts to help before setting out for the barn.

Amethyst had also wandered into town and nobody seemed sure where Garnet had gone—likely she was spending time alone to reconcile with recent events. Which, in a way, was what had
brought Pearl to the barn.

Pearl sighed, letting her hand fall to her side. This was ridiculous, she didn't need to knock. She had as much right to be here as anyone else. She reached out and grasped the handle to pull it open.

And then something powdery hit her in the face, like someone had thrown a handful of flour.

Pearl staggered back, coughing as the powder stung her eyes. She waved her hands to through the air to drive away the powder and coughed. Through watery eyes she looked up at her assailant.

Toad was perched on the roof of the barn, leaning out over the edge and utterly motionless, the oversized toadstool putting her in mind of an especially ridiculous gargoyle.

Pearl glared at it and reached out for the door again. The fungus twitched, powder wafting from its cap, it's round pink eyes never blinking. Pearl looked from the mushroom, to the barn door, then back up.

Oh. Now she understood.

"I wish to speak with Moonstone." She said, only half certain the toadstool could understand. Its stalk bent slightly, tilting its cap to one side quizzically, and Pearl got the impression it was going to require more.

"I'm not here to harm her," she promised. "I'm just here to talk."

The mushroom stared at her for a long moment, then slowly drew back. Pearl couldn't see the roots the creature used to walk and the rest of it didn't shift position as it withdrew, so it looked for all the world like it had slid away on a conveyor belt.

Pearl stared at the place where the fungus had been for a moment and was struck by the certainty that it was still watching her. She shook it off, deciding that she was being ridiculous. She grasped the edge of the door and paused, noticing that several tiny mushrooms were sprouting from the wood along the edge of the door. They were an unnatural neon orange and certainly not been there the last time Pearl had been here. They looked a little bit like eyes.

Pearl was silent for a long moment. She was an ancient war hero, a veteran and survivor of countless battles. She would not be intimidated by a mushroom that hadn't even been able to walk a month ago… or any offspring it may or may not have produced.

Pearl wrenched open the barn door, but gently, without disturbing the unnatural mushrooms, and stepped inside.

Moonstone's back was to her, bent low over a table made of a few crates pressed together. Above her head, a single silvery bubble was suspended in the air, casting a faint glow on the Homeworlder. Blaire's main console sat on one of the table's crates, aglow with light—although the computerized gem was not actually projecting herself. Pearl waited for a moment, but it seemed like neither gem, nor computer had noticed her entrance.

"Ahem."

The Homeworlder paused, then she straightened up and half-turned her head to get a look at her guest. She saw Pearl and let out a tiny, almost imperceptible sigh. The silver gem turned back and reached up, clasped the pair of silver-blue diamonds that became her visor and gently pulled them away, taking her visor off and placing it beside Blaire's pyramid. She took a moment to adjust her ponytail, her fingers brushing the spikey hair ornament she'd plucked from that ruined suit of
armor, and then, at last, turned around.

Moonstone stared at her, her eyes moving left and right as if to see if anyone else was there. The silver gem nodded to herself. "Is this the part where you dispose of me?" she asked, her expression unreadable.

Pearl shook her head gently. "I assure you, I am not here to do that… nor do I intend to in the future." She added, when Moonstone's expression didn't waver.

"I will not surrender the corruption stone either." Moonstone stated, her nose turning up ever so slightly in defiance. "I need it for my work."

Pearl's eyes narrowed, in the wake of Garnet's healing, the scientist had slipped away, taking what was quite possibly the most horrific weapon Pearl had ever known with her. She'd mentioned it to Garnet, but the fusion had seemed unconcerned.

That wasn't what she was here for either. But still, she had to ask: "And what work might that be?"

"Penance," Moonstone replied, her words clipped and devoid of emotion. "It was not solely my doing, but the fact that my work laid the foundation for this stone's creation is beyond question. As such, I have a certain responsibility to repair the damage it has wrought."

"You mean you wish to cure the corrupted gems." Pearl clarified.

The scientist nodded.

Pearl was quiet for a long moment. She could picture it now, all the corrupted gems they'd captured; cured. All those gems she had fought side by side with so long ago whole once more: Bismuth, Agate, Crazy-Lace, everygem.

"Crystal Gems and Homeworld gems alike?"

Moonstone thought for a moment. "If you did not wish to help the gems who did not fight on Rose's side, then why did you bother putting them in stasis bubbles? Shattering them would have been safer and, perhaps, kinder."

Pearl didn't answer. Her eyes strayed to the bubble above the Homeworlder's workstation, to the white gem floating inside. Moonstone saw where she was looking and tensed, her expression becoming more openly aggressive.

This was going badly. The Homeworlder still looked like she fully expected to be torn to pieces at any moment, but Pearl couldn't help herself. "Didn't you betray her? I doubt she would be happy to see you again."

"Thank you for reminding me." Moonstone answered, her voice carrying just a hint of a snarl. "But that does not matter. Howlite did not deserve this fate and I shall save her from it. If she does not forgive me, then that is my problem, not hers." She glared at Pearl. "Is that all? If it is, you can leave now. Toad can escort you to the door if you have trouble finding it." she gestured and Pearl was startled to see the fungus standing inches from her hand. She hadn't noticed him until now. The mushroom blinked at her innocently and Pearl scowled.

"No!" she snapped. "That's not why I-" She cut herself off and took a deep breath. Pushing her hands together and closing her eyes. When she opened them, her mind was clear. "I came here," she said slowly, looking the other gem in the eye. "Because I wished to thank you."
"It was through your efforts that Amethyst and myself from the rings. What's more, you helped cure Garnet. That…” Pearl swallowed. "That means more to me than you can possibly believe."

"I did not do it for you." Moonstone answered, bluntly.

"I know," Pearl nodded. "Even if you did it for Steven's sake, that does not change the results. I owe you my life, and the life of my fellow Crystal Gems, and for that, I thank you." Pearl bowed. Moonstone looked taken aback. She glanced at Toad, who turned up the edges of his cap briefly in an approximation of a shrug. "You are… welcome." She said awkwardly. "Was that all?"

"No." Pearl straightened. "I wanted to ask…” she swallowed, knowing some of her desperation was leaking into her expression and knowing she couldn't possibly hide it. "Do you truly think you can cure the other gems?"

"I… do not know." Moonstone said. "Garnet was freshly corrupted; her mind had not yet settled into its broken state and even then Steven needed to personally bring her back. As for the others…”

"They have been corrupted for a long time." Pearl answered, seeing the problem. "The scars to their psyche may have healed into permanence."

"I…yes, that is essentially correct." Moonstone nodded, blinking owlishly. "But the situation is not without hope. I had less than an hour to personally work with the stone before curing her. I knew time was of the essence and so felt the need to act quickly. For the others, so much time has passed, a few weeks or months will not make the situation worse. It gives me time to investigate… alternatives."

"Such as?"

Moonstone hesitated, eyeing Pearl as though she were a bomb whose sensitivity was unknown.

"She wants to cure Almandine." Moonstone frowned, and glanced at the blue crystal beside her. "Sorry," Blaire's voice chirped. "I was feeling left out."

"Cure Almandine?" Pearl blinked. "Why her?"

Moonstone rolled her eyes, then reached behind her and brought around the corruption stone, it's pinks vertices catching the light and twinkling. "This stone was based on her gem originally. The efforts Homeworld and myself put into manipulating her powers, and even this stone's, are ultimately quite crude. I hypothesize she might be able to more precisely wield it to cure those long broken." She shrugged. "It is as good a place to start as any."

"Why would she help us?"

Moonstone shrugged. "Because doing so would be akin to spitting in the Diamond's eyes? Or perhaps Steven can induct her into the Steven squad. He has a way of making people want to help him." she paused. "Or… maybe we could introduce her to Garnet. A permafusion like her, walking free from the Diamond's scorn…” she sighed, placing the stone behind her. "But until we can successfully cure her, these points are moot. I will need time to work on the issue, I have nothing else to do, after all."

"How can I help?"
Moonstone was silent for a moment, as though the words needed time to register. Then she started, blinking as though Pearl had asked her if she wanted to fuse. "Excuse me?"

"How can I help you?" Pearl repeated, not to be put off. "I have been scouring this planet for a cure for millennia." she declared. "In all that time, nothing has ever come close to working. I may not like you, Moonstone, but I am not about to let something so pitiful as a grudge stop me from pursuing the first sign of success I have ever seen." She met Moonstone's gaze firmly, earnestly. "If you need anything, anything at all, let me help. Please."

Moonstone stared at her.

"We could use a third head to bounce ideas off of," Blaire chirped. "Also, I deduce that she likely has a great deal of gem technology stored in the temple. That could be a great aid to our work."

Moonstone looked at the pyramid, then at Pearl, then at the bubbled gem overhead. Her face softened.

"Pull up a crate." She said, gesturing at a stack nearby. "There is much work to be done."

"So yeah, that's pretty much what went down." Amethyst finished, letting out a grunt as she hoisted a tree, trunk and all, over her head and stared carrying it out of the road.

"That sucks." Vidalia commented, gathering up a bundle of significantly smaller stick and following her. "Sounds like you got pounded pretty hard. Is your butt sore?"

Amethyst snorted. "Actually yeah, it's pretty tender." She turned it back toward the woman and looked up at her and batted her lashes. "Can you kiss it better?"

"Hmmm…" Vidalia pursed her lips, critically eyeing the proffered posterior. "Eh, maybe later. If you behave." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Gross." Amethyst laughed, plopping the tree down on the sidewalk with a loud thud.

"You know, why don't you stop eating garbage, and then maybe you can go around talking about how other people are gross." Vidalia commented, tossing her pile of sticks on top of Amethyst's tree.

"I'll have you know that my diet and style of life makes me uniquely qualified to pass judgment on such matter." Amethyst huffed, drawing herself up. "Nobody on this planet has my depth of knowledge on the concept of filth. And you are what we professionals like to call: one stanky sister."

"I can live with that." It was the nonchalant acceptance, the almost proud look on her face that did it.

Amethyst cracked up.

She bent double, clutching her gut and giggling. She almost managed to get it under control, when she peeked up and saw Vidalia's mock-offended look, and the way she managed wrinkle her nose set the gem off again. It felt good to laugh, and maybe a bit painful, like her body was trying to vomit out all the frustration and tension of the past month in one great big burst. So it was kind of
rough, but of the sort of roughness that told her she'd feel way better afterward.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help." Vidalia said after Amethyst managed to reel it in a few minutes later. The woman's face had taken on an upset frown. "If I was, I'd have introduced her face to my shotgun." She declared, draping an arm around Amethyst's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "Nobody messes with my main girl and gets away with it."

Amethyst rolled her eyes. "Yeah, she would have taken one look at those slippers and ran for the hills."

"Damn straight!" Vidalia beamed. "But… seriously, Ames? Are you alright?"

There was an uncomfortable pause before Amethyst nodded. "…Yeah, I think so. It's just," she shrugged. "Meh, whatever. Jasper beat me up, but she got what was comin' to her. I know from experience that worrying about it will do nothing other than drive me up the wall." Amethyst yawned. "Honestly, I'd rather just take a nap."

Vidalia gave her a long look. "You know, it's okay if you're not okay with it." she let the silence draw out for a long moment, then added. "I have, like, a lot of cheesy one-liners prepared to cheer you up… if you needed it." she trailed off suggestively.

Amethyst raised an eyebrow. Vidalia raised both of hers right back.

Amethyst narrowed her eyes. She didn't want to hear them. She definitely did not want to hear them.

Vidalia smirked. "Did you know purple is the color of royalty?"

"You're not short, you're fun-sized!"

Amethyst's nostril's flared.

Vidalia's smirk morphed into something more shark-like as she leaned forward and whispered her coup de grace.

"You rock."

Amethyst's eyes glazed over as her mind forced a hard reboot. Through great personal effort of the sort spoken of in ancient sagas, she managed to suppress the urge to groan, her eyes did not roll, and her face remained unpalmed. After a few long moments, she gave out a serene and long-suffering sigh.

"You," she said mildly. "Have become a dork."

Vidalia scoffed, looking scandalized "I'll have you know I happen to be the coolest mom ever. I got a mug that says so!"

"Probably going to get yourself a walker any day now." Amethyst said mournfully, wiping a tear from her. "One with tennis balls on the ends."

Vidalia turned up her nose. "How dare you."
"Gonna have to put you out to pasture…" Amethyst sighed, shaking her head and stepping closer. In one smooth motion, she wrapped her hands around the woman's waist and hoisted her up overhead. "Don't worry, Val, I know I saw a field somewhere around here. I bet they'll be plenty of old folks there to share your prune juice with."

"Put me down, you demented rock!" Vidalia shouted, elbowing Amethyst on the head and snorting with suppressed chuckles.

"I'll start a dumpster fire in your memory every year, I promise."

As Amethyst carried her friend across town against her will, the woman hurling verbal abuse and attempting to smack the gem in the head, she felt a tension inside begin to loosen. Things had seemed to more or less work out in the end. The sun had still come up, everyone was alive, and, honestly? There was nowhere she'd rather be than here.

And after Vidalia managed to land a particularly bony elbow against her nose, Amethyst decided that finding a field would be too much of a hassle. After all, there was a perfectly good ocean right there.

"Hey Vidalia? How do you feel about going for a swim?"

Lapis gasped as she returned to physical form, then gasped harder as memory returned.

"Jasper!" She snarled, reaching out instinctually for the nearest source of water and drawing it to her. There wasn't much, but she would make it work. If she used it to attack and her wings to defend… Lapis spun, searching for a flash of orange to sink several icicles into.

Instead she saw Steven, staring at her with wide eyes, clutching a plastic cup loosely in his hands. Then a smile was splitting his face and he was drawing closer at a run.

"Lapis!" He hit her at waist height, nearly bowling her over as he wrapped his chubby arms around her. Lapis felt the tension melt away with relief.

Steven gave the best hugs.

She wrapped her arms around him in return, lifting him off his feet and laughing. Once she'd fully reassured herself that Steven was all right, she set him down.

"I'm glad you're alright," she said, then her smile slipped a little. "What about the others? What about Garnet?"

"Don't worry." Steven assured her. "She's fine. It got… Kinda hard for a bit, but it all worked out." He bent down and picked up the cup he'd dropped when he'd tackled her and held it up. "Can I have my juice back?"

Lapis blinked and glanced around; there were a couple of dark purple icicles floating forgotten in the air. Oh.

"Sure, sorry about that." She gestured, melting her makeshift weaponry and sloshing it back into Steven's cup. She grinned sheepishly. "I was kind of panicking."
"No problem, if there had been any Homeworld gems around, they wouldn't have been able to withstand your grape-flavored wrath." Steven said sanctimoniously, bringing the cup to his lips. "Oh, nice. It's cold now." He sighed happily, a purple mustache clinging to his lip. "Everyone else is okay, by the way. We were just waiting for you to come back."

"That's good." Lapis looked away for a moment, her eyes sweeping across the room again, just in case. "Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"What happened to Jasper?"

Steven went still, his face blank. "I... don't worry about it," he answered, waving his hand dismissively and pointedly refusing to meet her eyes. "We dealt with her."

Lapis raised an eyebrow, "Steven."

"Oh, did you want some juice?" Steven asked brightly, "We have some more in the fridge and its really good."

"Steven," she repeated, and he wilted.

"What does it matter?" he tried. "She was awful and now she's gone."

"She was awful," Lapis agreed. "But I need to know."

Steven looked away and mumbled something.

"What?"

"-atttered."

Lapis frowned. "Steven, just tell me."

"I shattered her!" he snapped.

Lapis stared at him blankly, certain she had misheard, but his expression said otherwise. Jasper… was dead? That was… she didn't know what that was.

"I didn't want to!" Steven went on, the words pouring out of him like water from a broken dam. "We took her down, and I thought I had time to bubble her, but I didn't, and she was getting up and if she got up she would have hurt Connie, she would have taken you back to Homeworld and I know you didn't want to go," the words were coming faster than ever as he threw up his hands. "So I just moved, and I hit her gem, and she..." he paused, choking on a fast gulp of air. "She fell apart."

Lapis could see the hurt in his eyes and knew it did not belong there. She was going to fix this, this final way Jasper had hurt him. She put a hand on his shoulder and made sure he was looking her in the eye before she spoke: "Good."

Steven's jaw dropped. "Good? What do you mean, good? I killed her."

Lapis crouched down, bringing her to his eye level. "If you didn't, she would have killed you." she paused for a moment. "And I don't even want to think about what she was going to do with me."

"She said she was going to bring you back to Homeworld with her."
Lapis shuddered, "I said I didn't want to think about it." Here in Steven's house, with the cool smell of the sea, the breeze, and calm, the idea had lost what little luster it had held at the time. "It looks like you saved me again," she smiled softly, shaking her head. "Thank you, Steven."

"I…" Steven swallowed. "You're welcome." He tried to smile but his face wouldn't quite pull it off. "I just, I wish I didn't have to kill her." he looked down. "She just… wouldn't stop."

"And you shouldn't have had to, and you shouldn't feel guilty about it," Now it was her turn to look away. "Not when it was my fault."

"Uh, what?" Steven looked back at her. "How is it your fault? I'm pretty sure you were kind of poofed."

"I'm the one who told you I would take care of her. But I failed."

"It's not your fault you couldn't beat her," he protested, "She was really strong!" Lapis shook her head.

"No, you don't understand. It's not that I couldn't beat her. It's that I wasn't trying to." She could see the confusion on his face deepening even as pool of shame in her gut did the same. "I… I wasn't trying to win. I was trying to hurt her." She thought back to the fight, of the way Jasper's eyes had begun to gleam when the water started to fly and felt a rush of residual anger boiling up.

"She just made me so angry and I knew she enjoyed that. I wanted to take that away from her." She could feel the ocean from inside this tiny house: deep, dark, and ready to swallow anything that dared challenge it. She could feel it starting to roil in response to her anger. Nothing too serious, just an unusual ripple on the calm waves, but one that carried a promise of more. Lapis forced herself to calm down slightly. If Jasper was gone, then there was nobody who deserved her anger.

Lapis viciously seized that last thought, tried to force it down to the depths of her mind and lock it there, but it kept bobbing back to the surface.

"I got carried away." she said. "I was trying so hard to put her in her place, to prove that she was weaker than me, that she got me." She shook her head in disgust. "Jasper was in no rush to beat me. I could have stalled her out while pulling the half the ocean to us and dropping it on her head. But…" she shrugged helplessly, "I should have dealt with her. I'm sorry, Steven."

Then he was hugging her again. "It's alright," he said. "You're not the only one who messed up. We left you alone with her. I mean, c'mon, you and I could have fused or something and then we could have taken her with three hands behind our back!" Steven paused, then groaned. "Why didn't we do that?" he complained. "Why don't we fuse the moment something dangerous happens? It'd save a lot of trouble. I think we should have a new policy: fuse every day, beat the bad guys in seconds, and go home for snacks."

Despite herself, Lapis grinned. "I don't know. I think fusion can do weird things to a gem."

"Garnet handles it fine."

"Do you honestly think Garnet isn't weird?" Lapis deadpanned.

"…I mean, okay. But that's not the point," Steven's face sobered a bit. "I… I think everyone would agree that the whole thing with Jasper could have been handled a little bit better."
Lapis scoffed.

"Okay, a lot better." Steven admitted. "But…" he sighed and a certain weariness that spoke of stress and sleepless nights stole across his face. "I really don't want to have an argument about who messed up worse." he said. "Can we… can we just skip to the end where we forgive each other and move on?"

Lapis gave him a squeeze and a lopsided grin. "I think we can try." She stood up, lifting him up. "You wanna go find the others? If I'm not there to poke a hole in Peridot's ego to relieve the pressure every now and then, her head might explode."

"I think that might just be the best idea." Steven nodded. "I don't want Peridot's head to explode; there'd be peri-goo everywhere." He pointed toward the door. "Shall we go, madam?"

Lapis examined him for a moment, he looked… better, at least—she was felt that way too—but she could still feel the tension in his body. "If…" she murmured. "If you ever want to talk about it…" she trailed off.

Steven's hand slipped into hers and he gave it a squeeze. "You'll be the first to know. And if you ever want to talk about it, you will find me ready and waiting with both ice cream and chocolate."

As the blue gem carried him out onto the porch, she decided that walking was stupid and summoned her wings. Steven laughed as the ground slipped away from beneath them and she felt her heart loosen too.

It would be a long time before she forgot about the Jasper. But with Steven's laughter in her ears, she could feel the tension in the sea beneath them slip back into the depths, melting away as waves returned to normal ebb and flow as a knot she'd been carrying in her chest since Malachite began to unwind.

Somehow, Lapis was sure she was going to be just fine.

Nothingness filled her world.

She could remember pain, a brilliant light, and cold eyes. Then a scream. Things had gotten hazy after that, a rush of images and furtive gems. They blurred together, overruled by the tiny sun burning inside her chest, driving her to the depths of madness with agony. She dimly remembered being placed somewhere, a cage of pillars and tubes. She had struggled, feeble and uncertain as to what she could accomplish.

Then something dark had poured over her and the burning had ceased. The relief at the spreading coolness was brief, the sensation had deepened, becoming cold, and became deeper still. She was numb—she could not think, could barely feel, but she could sense the shuffle of time, and the chatter of others outside—real or imagined, it mattered not.

It had lasted… She did not know how long, could not muster the energy to ask herself the question even if she could remember there was anything of her left to ask. Then something happened, there was light, warmth, the wail of sirens accompanied by flashes of red light.

Movement returned a split second after the overwhelming flood of anger, she had exploded
outward, a tangle of mismatched limbs and fury, uncertain of what was happening, but knowing she must act and that everything was an enemy.

She could feel a network of tiny minds all around her, lighting up her mind's eye like stars in the sky. She did not recognize them, but they were all shouting, clamoring in panic and the voices sent new white-hot knives of agony skittering across her mind.

She had to make it stop. So, she did.

She reached out and crushed the minds into powder, shutting off the voices with a wink and leaving empty shells in their place.

And then, when all was silent. She heard another voice, another two voices, coming from within. What were they saying?

"Am-

"Lad…ine."

"Can… hear me?"

"Are you there?"

"Where are you?"

She trembled, not understanding. What were these voices? Why were they inside her? Why… why did they soothe her so?

"Amber."

"Almandine."

The names rung out like bells and she collapsed, unable to stand beneath the tremulous joy and fragile hope in the words.

"Amber… are you there?"

"I… am here my lady."

"What… What happened?"

"I do not know. I could not hear your voice."

"Amber, it-it hurts."

"I know. I am here now."

She did not move, but got the impression that she was embracing herself. Somehow, the pain felt more bearable. She… she could figure this out. She just needed time.

And then streaks of fire lit up the sky. Blue. Yellow. Two voices shrouded in rigid silence and quiet fury.

She felt fear. Fear and anger and hate and hurt.

"Amber… they are here for us."
"I know."

"I… they are going to cut us from one another again!" The voice became strained, unraveling at the edges and beginning to fall.

"I know." the second voice was firm, catching the unreeled strands of the first and weaving them back together through force of will.

"I c-can't do this." more cracks appeared. She could feel the voice coming undone and it chilled her, made her feel herself being undone along with it.

"Shhhhhhh," the second voice murmured. One pair of her limbs wrapped around herself unbidden. "Whatever happens… I will not let go. I swear to you."

"P-promise?"

"I swear."

"G-good. Amber. I… I l-love-" The streaks of fire struck the ground. Two figures emerged, striding out of fire and memory and filling her with outrage. The sight of them broke the first voice, words lost meaning, turning to hysterics and a maddening scream.

"Shhh," said the second voice, firm as ever yet aching with sorrow. The first voice’s shrieks rose to fever pitch and the second spoke louder. "It is okay. I am here. I am with you. You are with me. Now. Forever. Until the end."

She felt the second voice wrap around the first, catching its wayward pieces and pressing together. It seemed to compress itself, the murmurs of the second voice mingled with the demented shrieks of the first, and became one sound, one song inside her head; twisted and alien, but ringing out with a wondrous beauty.

As the song settled over her, she felt the change it wrought. Her body changed before her eyes, the mish mashed tangle of limbs straightened out, fusing together as they glowed with light. Her body became smooth, like a discordant jangle of sour notes rearranging themselves into a symphony, bringing with it a higher clarity.

She stood taller, raising herself up on two long limbs that had been her many arms, two sets of claws struck furrows in the stone beneath her. The jumble of legs trailing from her body fused into a single armored tail, lashing at the air and making the spikes dotting the tip rattle. She could feel her maw align itself, thick fangs straightening into an organized instrument of destruction. Her mind crackled like lightning and her eyes focused on the figures.

She knew them. The Blue Lady and the Golden General. Did not know exactly how she knew them, but knew that they were her enemy. They stared back at her, and she could feel the expanse of their disgust, their revulsion, laid bare.

It meant nothing to her.

The blue one thrust out her hand, her eyes glowing beneath the hood. She felt a pressure on her mind, attempting to squeeze her into submission. The force found the melded singularity the voices had become and pressed in for the final blow.

And found no purchase upon the seamless joining of minds.

Those glowing blue eyes widened, her mouth opening even as the golden one moved, hand aglow
to strike her down.

She snapped up a limb, caught the hand around the wrist, and stopped it in its tracks. Now golden eyes widened and she could feel beneath that ocean of disgust just the slightest hint of uncertainty.

She opened her mouth and thunder boomed. Lightning shot forth from the maw, blasting into that golden face and throwing it back. At the same time, she flexed her mind, and then shoved, white-hot streaks of light seared across her mind and poured into her assailant's. The blue lady let out a wail, those glowing eyes crackling with foreign energy as she clutched her hands to her head and writhed.

And now, beneath that uncertainty, she sensed just the slightest bit of fear.

And it was good.

She tossed aside the golden one and threw herself forward, claws outstretched to tear the blue one apart, but then the golden one was before her both hands glowing gold and locked against her claws. Lightning crackled and golden fire bloomed as they went down together.

She filled her mind with screaming rage, projecting it to the blue one and the golden lady, let them feel her outrage on every level and know what they had brought upon themselves. She would destroy them, she would grind them to dust that they might never silence her song again!

With an extra burst of fury, she threw down the golden one and pinned her arms to the ground. She opened her mouth wide, giving the golden one a good view of her fangs as the last sight she would ever see. She tensed her neck, to bring her head down and tear off her former master's head.

Then something splashed against her back, something so cold it made her body seize in pain. The golden one whipped her head forward, slamming into the opened mouth and throwing her away.

She writhed, scrapping her back against the ground in a futile effort to get the rid of the burning cold. Through the pain, she saw the blue one throw something. She wriggled, desperate to avoid it, but her body would not respond and it smashed against her, bursting and covering her in more of that horrid chill.

Her body shut down. Helpless, her limbs trembling as they clawed at an uncaring sky, she watched as the golden one got to her feet. Wincing and wiping off several droplets of the dark liquid. The golden one grabbed another flask from the blue one's outstretched hand and stalked forward.

She opened her mouth, and felt a dull tingle of lightning building up in her throat. If she could just...

The yellow one gave her a look of contempt, and threw the canister at her face.

And then there was nothing.

The memories stopped, but she didn't open her eyes. What would have been the point? She had promised to follow, promised to never let go, only to have her other wrenched from her hands.

And now she was gone, gone, gone.
But… she had to search. To look for her. She could not give up.

And so, fighting against the weight of sorrow and apathy, she let out a pulse of electricity, letting the power flow out of her. It would not circle the globe like it had before, it would barely go any distance at all. But it would be a start, it would tell her that she wasn't here and that she needed to get up and go find her and destroy anything that got in her way.

The energy returned, carrying no trace of her, no hint of that soothing balm for her fury. But it did not come back empty-handed.

She stiffened. Something was nearby. Behind her. A mind? A gem? One she knew. One she had met before. One that crackled like both fire and ice in the harmony of song.

It was the one who had taken her.

High overhead, the clouds began to darken.

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Garnet had been silent as she climbed, unhurried, but not slowing down for anything. Blaire's instructions had been clear and, now that she knew what to look for, it was all too easy to find her quarry.

And now she had stopped, staring quietly at the brilliant yellow bird sprawled across a rocky crag, motionless save for the trickle of gold pouring from its tightly shut eyes. It gave off an almost tangible feeling of loss and hopelessness, as though it had just finished screaming its heart out and had no energy left.

Garnet opened her mouth to speak, but then the enormous bird went rigid.

The gold crested head rose slightly, twisting around on that sinuous neck to look at her. The moment its eyes found hers, they began to crackle, snapping the air with sparks of power. Its beak parted slightly, letting out a drown-out hiss.

"Hello Amber." Could the gem understand her? Perhaps. Perhaps not. It was unlikely, considering how long it had been trapped and corrupted. But she had to try.

The hiss grew louder and the bird began to rise, the last traces of sorrow in its eyes wiped away by the rising rage. She likely had only seconds before it attacked. The fusion used them to try one last thing.

"I can take you to Almandine."

The bird went rigid, the air going dead as the electricity vanished.

She was not totally surprised, but nonetheless her heart sunk just a little under the weight of sympathy. Amber still recognized the name of its other. It would have been easier if she did not, then Garnet might have just been able to think of the ancient gem as just another corrupted gem.

But Garnet had needed to know. Needed to know that even in the depths of madness, there were some things a gem could still hold on to.

"Amber. I want to help you. I want to help both of you." Slowly, she reached up a hand and pulled
off her shades. "I am like you." she said. "A fusion. If you let me, I can help you. The Diamond's hold no sway here."

Amber had been staring at her unblinkingly, but anger had surged back into the bird's eyes at the last sentence and her heart sunk further. The more she spoke, the less certain she was that she was being understood. It seemed Amber was not so different from other corruptions after all. They could only hold onto the strongest parts of who they once were. The gem clearly remembered the diamonds, and if the smell of ozone assaulting her nostrils was anything to go by, they were not happy memories.

Garnet held up her hands, fingers splayed. "Listen to me, Amber. It doesn't have to be this way, we can-" Thunder split the air and Amber rocketed towards her. If Garnet hadn't been expecting it, that beak would have impaled her then and there. But she was.

Garnet through her hands up, gauntlets flashing into existence and caught the beak before it could reach her. She felt her feet sliding back under the weight and set her stance harder.

"This is the way it's going to be?" she asked sadly. The vivid orange eyes glared at her as she held the beak shut, Amber clapped her wings forward and electricity surged into Garnet from point blank range.

Garnet grit her teeth against the pain. It looked like this was indeed how it was going to be.

She sunk lower and heaved, whipping the bird around overhead and slamming it against the rock. She threw herself atop it, pinning its body to the ground as her gauntlets held the head still. The bird struggled, furiously beating its wings against Garnet's grip and sending lightning surging through all around. Above them, the clouds darkened and roiled.

But for all its struggles, Garnet didn't let go. It was almost… surreal in how easy it was. After all the fighting, the stress, and the struggling; she had the bird pinned helpless beneath her. The lightning stung, but she found she could bear it without too much trouble.

After all… it was less than half of what it once was.

Garnet shook her head, tightening her grip.

"I'm sorry."

Her fists closed and a moment later an orange gem clicked against the rock.

Above them, the clouds opened up and rain began to fall.

Gently, Garnet tossed the bubble upward, letting it float towards the up to join the rest of countless gems, suspended in time overhead.

I wish we could have done more for them.

There was nothing else we could have done. She forced our hand. She-

Didn't want to go on. Not alone. I know. I wouldn't either.
...I love you.

I love you too.

...let's go. Steven could use our assistance in the reconstruction of the town.

Garnet turned, heading for the door. It opened at her approach automatically at her approach and she stepped through. Before it could close behind her, she glanced back.

Floating in the middle of the room was a single bubble, set apart from the rest. In it floated two gems pressed up against each other, one pink and one orange. The stones moved inside their bubble, gently twisting this way and that—but never quite separating.

As the light of the room dimmed, they seemed to glow with a light that flowed between them, and if she strained her ears, Garnet could almost convince herself that she could hear the faintest sound of song.

Garnet sighed and smiled, ever so softly, and turned away, and the door slid shut behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Well. I... I guess it's time to say the words, Isn't it? Hold on. Those two words can wait just a little longer.

I'd like to take a moment to thank you all for taking the time to read my story. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it. It has been a blast.

I wonder what I'll write next? Who knows. Probably not something SU related. I think I've more than adequately contributed to this fandom, that's for sure.

Now. it is definitely time for the words I have been waiting for. The words that literally every other word in this story has been leading up to.

Are you ready? Because I am:

THE END.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!