The Stranger in Me
by Cyberwraith9

Summary

An accident bonds Connie to a strange new entity, one who might not have her best interests at heart. With the threat of a mysterious invasion on the horizon, she and the Crystal Gems will have to look for answers and keep the peace as potential disaster arises from within one of their own.

Notes

Disclaimer

Steven Universe is created by Rebecca Sugar and is a registered trademark of Cartoon Network. The following story is a work of fanfiction created for entertainment purposes only without any knowledge by or permission from the creators or copyright holders. No copyright infringement is intended. If someone asks you to pay for this story, just say no.

Chronological Note

The events of this story begin between the episodes "Three Gems and a Baby" (4x10) and "Steven's Dream" (4x11). The narrative to follow will diverge from main canon. I can't hope
to outguess the Crewiverse, and I wouldn't dare try.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Balance, Guts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cover by MJStudioArts
Connie gritted her teeth as she clutched her sword and found her balance. Balance is the key, she chanted silently. As her heart pounded and her senses flared, she became acutely aware of the sweat dribbling down the small of her back, and the loose hairs from her braid drifting against the bare skin of her shoulders. The pink blade in her hands felt heavier than it ever had before, trembling slightly, so she gripped it even tighter.

The high tide rolled into the shore, scattering foam over dark sand as it crashed over the creature’s back. The creature rose out of the surf on long, segmented, serrated legs, green and glistening in the afternoon sun. Razor mandibles split open and filled the beach with a shrill, rattling hiss that shook Connie to her core. The sound was alien, and rage, and pain, and it screamed at every instinct Connie had to run away.

Next to her, Steven raised his arm. The air before him shimmered and flashed pink as his shield blossomed into existence. “Um, do you think she wants to play too? We can take turns,” he said.

His voice drew the eyeless creature’s focus instantly. Mandibles clacking, it skittered forward at impossible speed. Connie dove to one side, rolling and back on her feet in one smooth motion, her tank top wet and gritty with sand. Steven caught one of the creature’s legs on his shield and tumbled back in the opposite direction.

The creature’s charge carried it through the net set up from their impromptu game of badminton. Its fluttering, waving-layered body shredded the net to pieces as it knocked the poles aside. Made of dozens upon dozens of chitinous sheets that fluttered around a central core, the creature looked to Connie like a sheaf of green papers, like a book spread so wide that the faces of its covers met. Its spidery legs were just more pages folded into shape.

As she watched, more pages on its back folded together, the motions too fast to follow, and suddenly the creature had a pair of spindly claws to match its legs. “It’s like origami,” Connie marveled.

The creature hissed in rage, and its claws snipped the closest metal pole clean in half. Steven blanched at the sight of the thick metal tumbling to the sand. “Deadly origami,” he agreed. Then he started toward the creature slowly, lowering his shield.

Connie’s frantic heart-rate doubled. “Steven!” she hissed, hesitating after him. They were supposed to talk to each other, to let the other know what they were doing so they could work together. And they were supposed to stay close to each other in case they needed to fuse.

“It’s okay,” he said, his voice softening. The shield vanished from his arm as he spread his open hands toward the creature. Connie couldn’t tell if he was speaking to her or to the monster. “Nobody has to hurt anybody here. Right? If you don’t like badminton, maybe we can try something else?”

The monster hissed again, but less sharply than before. It worried from side to side, the tips of its legs sinking deep into the sand. Its sheaves rustled uncertainly.

Connie bit her lip. What had started as a leisurely Saturday waiting for the Gems to return had quickly spiraled into chaos. She had been looking forward to lessons with Pearl. Now her teacher was nowhere in sight and the lesson had turned dangerously practical. She felt like a bundle of nerves.

Steven looked as impossibly calm as ever. His round face was spread into a smile as he gazed up at the eyeless, chittering beast, not seeming to care that it could snip him in half as easily as it had the badminton post. His dark, messy hair glittered with sea spray, and his eyes glistened with sincerity.

She wanted to run, either to flee or to rush into the fray. It took all of her control to fight her
adrenaline jitters as she watched Steven approach the monster. If the Gems had been present, Connie thought they wouldn’t have hesitated to leap to his rescue. But Connie was not an invulnerable, ancient warrior from another planet. And Steven had far more experience with situations like these.

She wanted to trust him. She did trust him. The monster, however, did not inspire the same level of trust. “Steven,” she pleaded.

“We’re okay,” Steven said, never taking his eyes off the monster as he edged closer. “We’re okay, right? You just came here because you’re lost. You’re scared and hurt. But it’s going to be alright.”

The monster’s hiss softened. It warbled, and its legs and folds stilled. Slowly, it lowered its mandibles, making noises that seemed somehow curious as it responded to Steven’s voice.

Steven grinned. “There, see? We’re not so bad.” He lifted his arms. As his shirt rose up on his stomach, the sunshine caught his gemstone, making it sparkle pink and bright.

The monster reared back, shrieking like a foghorn. Its sheer volume forced Connie back, wincing in pain. By the time she steadied herself, she saw two sharp claws descending to split Steven in half. “No!” she cried.

Even as she ran forward, too late to save him, a bubble of translucent pink light blossomed around Steven. The monster’s claws slammed into the top of the bubble hard enough to drive the bottom of it into the beach, leaving Steven sitting several inches below the sand in his protective shelter. He flinched as the creature hammered his bubble, the edges of which bowed with each hit before bouncing back into shape.

“There’s a breakdown in negotiations!” Steven cried, wrapping his arms over his head. Howling, the creature reared back again. Its folded claws unfurled back into sheets, rejoining the sheaf of green that made up its body. In one fluid motion, the creature coiled its sheets into a conical shape and reticulated its whole body. A hurricane gale exploded from the mouth of the cone and kicked a wave of sand into the ocean. Steven’s bubble, caught in the gust, shot out of the sand and went sailing over the water.

Gritting her eyes into the sudden sandstorm, Connie heard Steven’s bubble-muffled cry and saw a wall of pink hurtling at her. She dropped to her knees and threw her body backwards, flattening her arms against the ground. A fleeting glimpse of Steven flashed above her before the sandstorm carried him high and far over the ocean, where he disappeared into the surf.

The wind died down an instant later. Connie ignored the pain of the blasting sand and rolled back onto her feet. Her blade rose right in time to block a needle-sharp tendril folded and flailing from one of the sheets on the monster’s back. The tendril lashed back and forth, forcing Connie backwards toward the ocean. The tide began pulling at her sandals as she lost ground. Her sword flashed, catching the tendril at every turn, but she could feel her arms starting to burn with the effort.

As Connie parried and ducked, she heard Pearl’s words echo back to her. No warrior ever won a fight with defense alone. Choose the right moment, make your opening, and take your victory.

The monster’s attacks were fast, but sloppy. It lashed out at her without any discernable plan. It only wanted to hurt her, and it didn’t care how. Connie planted her feet and muscled the flashing tendril back, flinching as sparks kicked off her blade where the origami claw skidded too close for comfort. She tried to tease the creature into swinging high, pretending to leave her head open. Then, as it struck from overhead, Connie dove on her knees again, sliding across wet sand as her sword’s edge cut across the creature’s bottom folds, showering her in more sparks as the blade kicked against
Its scream filled the beach as Connie rolled onto her feet and spun to face the monster. “That’s right!” she bellowed over the sound of her own heartbeat thundering in her ears. “Don’t start what you can’t finish, Flappy!”

Legs skittering, the creature pivoted. The sheets between its legs hung limp, bisected by the sword. But the sheaf at its back stood straight up, quivering. Each sheet in the sheaf folded itself into a new tendril with its own needle-fine point, so that the creature resembled nothing so much as a furious, green porcupine with long spears for quills.

“Oh,” Connie said, feeling her stomach drop. “Instantly regretting that thing I said now…”

The monster charged her with tendrils flared and mandibles wide and screaming. Connie lifted her sword to defend, but it was over faster than she could see it coming. Three tendrils slapped the blade out of her hand and the rest lashed out at her from every direction. She twisted and jumped, spinning herself between deadly strikes, and for half a second thought she might make it through unscathed. But the green blur of living blades caught her against the hip, spiraling her to one side, and she fell in a bright flash of pain.

She hit the sand hard and rolled, losing her grip on her sword as the world tumbled around her. A hard jab in her side stopped her flat on her back. When her eyes focused again, she saw the green creature looming over her, its underbelly still hanging in tatters. The origami spears in its back curled around and stabbed the beach, pinning Connie’s legs and body between its deadly tips. Its mandibles split for another shriek and then descended upon her, snapping at her face.

Connie shoved at the monster, pushing with all her might against the bulk pressing down at her. The tips of its mandibles brushed her face, her throat, her chest, leaving hot little lines wherever they scraped. Deep inside its maw, Connie could see a large, square shape cushioned where its throat would be.

So it is a corrupted Gem, she thought, clinging to a sliver of rationality somewhere inside her panic. Of course, what else could it have been? The question only reminded her of how little she actually knew about this life and this war she had been so eager to join.

A splash of color teased the corner of her eye. It was her sword, laying just out of arm’s reach, even if she could spare an arm from the effort of keeping the creature from biting her head off. She tried to remember everything Pearl had taught her, but nothing she had learned covered wrestling a multi-limbed spider terror from the deep.

It was Amethyst’s voice that came to her instead. Fighting’s all about that feeling deep in your guts. What do your guts feel like?

Connie growled and pushed with everything she had left. Slowly, the monster inched away, its mandibles snapping right in front of her nose. Snarling through clenched teeth, Connie said, “Get your nasty face off of me!” Then she jerked one arm back and punched straight into the creature’s maw. Her knuckles struck hard gem.

The monster reared off of her, skittering back with a shrill cry. Connie rolled and reached, and fumbled the sword back into her grasp as she scrambled back to her feet. Wind and grit kicked up from the ground as the creature’s scream turned back on her, its legs pounding the beach in another furious charge. Squinting, Connie screamed back, meeting its charge head-on, her sword raised.

A green blur.
Her blade flashed.

The monster’s scream squelched into a whimper. Connie opened her eyes to find a cluster of its tendrils mere inches from her face, their sharp points glistening. The end of her sword had pierced the sheaves of its body straight through one mandible, deep behind its gem. The sheaves hung motionless together, trapped in the final moments of their battle. Despite its facelessness, Connie somehow thought the creature was staring back at her. Then it disappeared in a burst of green smoke. The boxy gemstone dropped to the sand, bodiless.

Connie let the sword fall, her chest heaving with ragged breath. She carefully collected the gem from the ground and clutched it tightly. Her fingers couldn’t quite wrap around the square, flat shape, but it seemed like such a small thing for what had been a deadly threat a moment ago.

“Woo! Go, Connie!” The shout drew her gaze to the surf, where a large pink bubble was rolling out of the water. Steven’s bubble popped, and he emerged splashing up to Connie. “I didn’t make it back to shore until the very end, but you were great! Pearl’s gonna be so proud!”

Her cheeks burned at the praise. “I’m just glad we’re both safe,” she said.

Steven’s smile gave way to a concerned look. “You’re hurt!” he cried.

Taking stock of herself, Connie noticed the small cuts crisscrossing her arms. The collar of her tank top had been torn by a long, shallow slice that had come dangerously close to her throat. She felt at her cheek with her free hand and hissed at the fresh cut on the side of her face. The worst one, though, was the gash at her hip where the creature’s tendril had ripped a long tear across her side. “It’s not bad,” she said shakily. “They’re all pretty shallow.”

Steven hardened his expression with resolve. He took her gently by the shoulders, staring deeply into her eyes. “Hold still,” he told her. Then, lips pursed, he leaned toward her cheek.

Connie froze as Steven drew closer. Her heart raced twice as fast as it had during her death-defying victory. She pressed her hand to her chest, still clutching the defeated Gem, as her mind and body leapt into overdrive.

Is he kissing me? He’s going to kiss me! He’s only healing me with his magic spit, so it doesn’t count. Yes, it counts! But it’s on the cheek, so it doesn’t count. Mom and Dad kiss you on the cheek, so it isn’t different. It’s different! It’s totally different when it’s Steven! What does this mean? I really like him, and I think he likes me, but does this mean he like-likes me? Do I like-like him? And what happens after? Tomorrow? A year from now? Are we dating? Am I ready for something like that? What if we get married? I could support us with a job while he went on Gem missions. Something in local government, building experience for larger representative positions. He could stay at home with the kids. Do your kids qualify for scholarships if they’re quarter-Gem? But maybe his responsibilities as a Crystal Gem would keep him too busy. I’d have to work AND watch the kids. That’s too much responsibility! And the strain would eventually lead to a bitter divorce, which could really sink my campaign for president. And I’d never see Steven again! He’d never see me or the kids again! This is happening too fast, I’m not ready for this, I can’t—

Tilting his head, Steven leaned close until his breath tickled Connie’s cheek, raising goosebumps all across her body. Then he stuck out his tongue and ran it across a clean patch of skin in a long, wet slurp.

Connie reeled back, swiping at her cheek. “Ew, Steven! Gross!” she laughed. When she examined her arms again, she saw perfect skin where the cuts had been. “But I can’t complain about the results. Thank you.”
“No problem,” he said, grinning. Then, sobering, he said, “Where’s the Gem? I’d better bubble her before she can reform and cause any more trouble.”

“Sure, it’s…” Connie looked down and saw her hands empty. Panicking, she began turning in place, taking her sword back up as she scanned the ground. “Oh, no! Did I drop it? I had it a minute ago!”

She caught sight of Steven staring at her uncertainly, and she stopped turning. “Uh, Connie?” he said, and pointed at her neck.

Looking down, Connie saw something green at the very edge of her vision, just above where her tank top’s collar had been sliced. Reaching up to the base of her neck, she felt a large, hard, smooth lump protruding from her skin, seated atop her breastbone. Her fingers traced the size and outline of the flat shape, and she recognized it immediately. It was the corrupted Gem she had defeated, sitting right where the cut in her chest had been.

Connie grasped at the edges of the shape, pulling at it to no avail. It refused to budge in her skin. “Uh, Steven?” she asked, panic rising in her voice. “Is this what I think it is?”

---

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: MJStudioArts, one of the talented members of the ConnieSwap team, did a cover for the story as a commission, and you undoubtedly saw it scrolling on your way down to this note! She's a wonderful artist, and I love how great the cover turned out. Be sure to check out her gallery, or if you're jealous of TSIM's awesome cover, hit up her commissions page!
“Yep. That’s definitely a gem,” Amethyst said.

Steven and Connie sat nervously on stools in the beach house kitchen, where they had waited for the Crystal Gems to return from their outing. Now the three colorful warriors loomed over Connie, examining the green lump seated high in her chest. Their intense scrutiny made Connie feel like she was a new museum piece on display, and she was being judged on her composition and subtext.

“We were pretty sure of that part already. Do you know why it’s stuck in me?” Connie said, fighting to keep her voice steady. She didn’t want to sound as worried as she actually felt in front of the Gems.

Humming in thought, Pearl bent forward to examine the corrupted stone embedded in Connie. Her long, pale fingers gently prodded the edge of the stone, testing its bond. Just as it had for Connie, the gemstone refused to budge. It was as though the stone had adhered to Connie’s breastbone, and the skin had moved aside to accommodate it without a single blemish.

“Tell us again what happened,” said Pearl. “And this time, try to think of anything you might have left out.”

Steven piped up immediately. “Connie came over early to hang out before training, and you guys were gone because Garnet thought her future vision had found something near the Kindergarten. Or was going to find? The tenses get kind of weird with future vision, I guess.”

Garnet gave a thumbs-up in reply.

“Anyway, since it was so nice out, we decided to play badminton. We set up the net, and then found the rackets back behind the board games, where we’d stuck them after the last time we played at my birthday party back at the barn. I said that Connie should serve first, since I had served first the last time we played, but—”

Her patience visibly straining, Pearl said, “Let’s focus on the part where this happened,” and pointed to the green stone.

“A corrupted Gem attacked us, and it knocked me into the ocean. By the time I got back to the beach, Connie had beaten it all by herself.”

“Nice!” Amethyst crowed, and offered a high-five that Connie awkwardly returned.

“But she got hurt fighting it alone,” Steven continued, “so I used my healing spit to help her. And when I did, the Gem ended up stuck there.”

“I got distracted when Steven was healing me because…reasons,” Connie said, and felt her cheeks grow hot. “But I think the gem was touching one of my cuts when he did it. That’s where it got stuck.” She tapped the gemstone, and then immediately felt foolish for doing so, because of course everyone could see where it was.

Folding her arms, Garnet lowered her head in thought. “Steven has used his healing powers on humans and Gems,” she mused, “but never both at the same time. And we know the healing has at least some effect on corrupted Gems.”

Amethyst scoffed and pushed Pearl aside. “You guys are overthinking this, as usual. There’s a big,
dumb rock stuck in Connie. So…” Her hand flashed, shapeshifting into a large and menacing set of purple pliers, which clacked loudly as she tested them. “Let’s pull it out! Garnet, gimme a hand?”

Garnet stepped next to Connie and spread her hands low, looking down at Connie and waiting. It took Connie a few seconds to understand, and she stammered, “Oh! O-Okay…” She stepped into Garnet’s hands, which slipped under Connie’s shoulders in a firm grip. Connie could feel Garnet’s gemstones pressing up into her armpits, and she was suddenly, excruciatingly aware of how sweaty the battle had left her.

With uncharacteristic gentleness, Amethyst settled the tips of her plier-hand around the edges of the green gem. Then she pulled, throwing her whole body into the effort, growling as she yanked on the gemstone. The stocky Gem’s feet scrabbled against the floor for purchase, and her face darkened as she strained. Garnet made no noise of effort, but her hands held Connie fast.

Connie felt her ribs and shoulders trying to move in opposite directions. Her muscles and joints screamed at the attempt, but the gemstone didn’t budge. It felt instead like Amethyst and Garnet were about to split her like a turkey wishbone. As Amethyst twisted back, the pressure doubled, and Connie’s vision began to darken.

She clenched her teeth to keep from crying out, but the pain must have been obvious on her face. Steven knocked Amethyst’s pincers aside and exclaimed, “Stop! It isn’t working!” He took Connie’s hand, trying to steady her as Garnet backed away. “Are you alright?” Steven asked her.

“Mm-hmm,” Connie grunted, still unable to speak. The stars and darkness clouding her vision slowly faded.

Shifting her hand back into shape, Amethyst said, “Aw, we almost had it. Hang on, I think I have something else in my room that can loosen it before we try again.” She ran through the temple door, which flashed purple and opened into a cavern of crystal pools and towers of garbage.

After catching her breath, Connie said, “Okay, it’s stuck in there. But it doesn’t hurt. I mean, trying to pull it out hurt, but just by itself, it feels okay, I think.” With a sudden realization, Connie’s stomach dropped, and she clutched her head. “Will this thing reform inside of me? Am I going to explode into blood and guts when it comes back out of its gem?” she shouted. A waking nightmare of chitinous green origami bursting out of her chest flooded Connie’s imagination, looking exactly like the horror movies her parents never let her watch.

Garnet’s hands returned to her shoulders, this time as reassurance. “If it hasn’t reformed yet, we can probably assume it isn’t able to while it’s inside you. Your body could be acting like a living bubble, keeping the Gem in stasis,” Garnet said. She adjusted her glasses, examining the gemstone once more. “I have to admit, I’ve never seen a Gem like this before.”

“Neither have I,” Pearl agreed. “It must be an unusual variety. Nevertheless, we need to get it out of Connie and bubbled in the temple without hurting either of them.”

Feeling a little relieved, Connie nodded and said, “Right. How do we do that?”

Pearl, whom Connie knew as a wise mentor and one of the smartest people on the planet, rubbed her chin and said, “I…have no idea. To the best of my knowledge, this has never happened before. The closest situation we’ve ever encountered has been Steven.”

“And I got my gem from my mom,” Steven added.

“We’re definitely not experts on human physiology. Or gemology, really,” Pearl said. “So much
knowledge was lost in the war. I’m afraid we’d need an expert to even start guessing at what’s happening here.”

“But what does that mean? What do we do next?” Connie asked.

Pearl opened her mouth to speak, but then snapped her lips shut. Her mouth twisted as she looked away, her expression sagging nigh-imperceptibly. Garnet, normally implacable, was tapping her foot, and the crinkled expression visible around her glasses belied concern. The room dropped into a defeated silence that fell squarely on Connie’s shoulders, and its weight was too much to bear. The Gems didn’t know what to do next.

If Pearl’s and Garnet’s reactions were muted to hide their worry, then Steven was an glowing beacon of distress. His eyes shimmered on the brink of tears, and his lower lip quivered as he stared at Connie. It was enough to get her started crying too, crushed under the realization that her heroes were at a loss to help her. But true to form, Steven’s expression flipped in an instant, becoming a bright smile without a trace of tears as he cried, “Wait a minute! We do have an expert on gem stuff!”

Before he could explain, Connie’s pocket began to chirp and vibrate. She pulled out her phone and consulted its glowing screen. “Oh, man! My mom just texted me. I’ll have to meet her at the boardwalk in, like, five minutes.” Her mother always texted when she reached the edge of Beach City so she did not have to leave the engine idling while Connie said her goodbyes. “What am I supposed to do?”

Pearl shared an uncertain look with Garnet, who shrugged. “I’m afraid we’re no experts on the subject of mothers either,” said Pearl.

“What are you going to tell her?” Steven asked, his voice shrinking.

One look at his face told Connie exactly what he meant. She could see him remembering the same scene outside the hospital after they had saved each other and her mother from the Gem mutants. That was when her mother had finally started to understand what Connie had been so afraid to tell her. It had been hard, but things between them had gotten better afterwards. Maybe her mother would understand this too, if Connie explained it to her.

Except…

Except Connie couldn’t explain it because she didn’t understand it. And if she didn’t understand, how could she expect her parents to understand? They would react the way parents were supposed to react if they learned their child was infested with an alien. Her mother would take her to the hospital and lock her away with every doctor, nurse, and stethoscope available until the stone was removed, which might be never. After all, if the Gems couldn’t come up with a better solution than to yank it out of her, what hope did human medicine have?

As Connie’s mind whirled through worst-case scenarios, the temple door opened again and Amethyst emerged, carrying an electric circular saw with her, its power cord coiled around her wrist. “Sorry it took so long. Now, let’s plug this thing in and de-gem Connie!” she announced. When she saw Pearl and Steven answer her with horrified looks, she frowned and said, “What? If I don’t cut her completely in half, Steven can still heal her back together, can’t he?”

Garnet calmly took the saw from Amethyst, and said to Connie, “How much or how little you tell your mother has to be your decision. You know her best. But in the meantime, we will do everything we can to safely remove your unexpected guest.” She tossed the saw aside, ignoring Amethyst’s protest.
As she took stock of herself, Connie was certain of at least one thing. She pulled at the hem of her tattered, stained tank top, and said, “I definitely know she’ll lose it if I show up dressed like I dove into a pool full of cheese graters.”

With a snap of his fingers, Steven grinned and said, “That part I can help with. Just leave it to L’Boutique Univers, mademoiselle.”

The sun had started toward the horizon, painting the beach in glowing swaths of red and orange. Even from the boardwalk, Connie could see the whole shoreline alight with the end of the day. In spite of everything that had happened, the sight of the sunset made her glad to be who she was and where she was. It was one more in the million other reasons she felt lucky to have run into that funny, awkward little boy with a glow-in-the-dark bracelet on a day that now felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

But when she saw her mother’s sedan round the corner and approach her, as it had so many other times, she forgot all about that sunset, and the mysteries and adventures. All she could think about was the lump on her chest, and her worry manifested into a lump in her throat.

The car stopped in front of her, and she climbed inside, stowing her training bag at her feet and buckling in on reflex. As always, her mother waited until the seatbelt clicked before she started the car forward, steering past the boardwalk and its off-season pedestrian traffic to get back to the freeway.

“Hello, sweetie,” her mother said, sounding tired. This was her weekend to work in the ER at the hospital, which had made it easier to wheedle an early morning ride and evening pickup out of her. “Did you have a nice time with the Universes?”

“Yes,” Connie warbled, trying to sound casual and non-committal and failing miserably.

Steven and Lion could have managed Connie’s commute without anyone needing to drive twenty minutes out of their way, but her parents had volunteered to chauffeur her trips to Beach City. Part of it, Connie knew, was their need to know where she was going, to have some assuredness of her location, after being blindsided by the revelation of Connie’s sword training. But she knew another part of it was their desire to show support for this side of Connie they were trying to understand, going out of their way and taking time to drive her themselves.

Connie appreciated the gesture, especially on weekends where her mother worked such long hours, but at that moment she would have given anything to go back in time and tell her past self to call her mother and beg off the ride. Still, between the rumpled state of her lab coat and the tired lines on her forehead, her mother might not be in a talkative mood.

And even as Connie thought it, her mother glanced over at her, and her frown deepened. “Connie, what are you wearing?” she said.

Connie tugged self-consciously at the sleeve of her pink shirt, smoothing the bright yellow star adorning its front. It had come straight from Steven’s wardrobe. “Oh! My, um, shirt got ripped up today,” Connie stammered. “Steven gave me one of his.”

Bullets of sweat gathered on Connie’s brow as her mother considered the hand-me-down shirt. The sleeves were too big, and the hem hung a little above Connie’s navel. More importantly, though, it was baggy on Connie, and it had a high collar, which was perfect for hiding her new accessory.

After a long, agonizing minute of thought, her mother shrugged and said, “Well, it’s a good thing we
kept all those old clothes for your training. And it was nice of Steven to lend you something to wear.”

Connie held her breath and forced herself not to look at her bag, where her actual training outfit was still neatly folded and untouched. Slowly, inexorably, Connie let herself exhale through her nose. She had prepared for a litany of follow-up questions, but perhaps that would be the only one.

“Honey, do you feel okay? You look sick.”

Her breath caught in her nose. Connie hiccupped and stared straight ahead through the windshield as the last of Beach City rolled past the car. She knew if she looked over, the truth would come pouring out of her all at once. Even now, her mother’s concerned glance felt like a lead weight pressing down on her conscience. “I’m fine,” Connie squeaked.

A quick hand to the forehead told her mother volumes. “You don’t have a fever,” her mother decided, “but you’re so sweaty. Are you sure you’re alright?”

Connie bit her lip.

Frowning, her mother glanced at her again. “Connie, did something happen? You’re worrying me.”

The question hit Connie like a punch in the gut, but one she had been expecting. She knew her mother deserved the truth, but it didn’t have to be the whole truth. “We fought a monster today. Steven and I, that is. Without Pearl or the others.”

Her mother blinked. “Oh,” she said simply. Another long, excruciating moment later, she said, “You were alone? I thought—”

“We didn’t go looking for anything,” Connie said quickly. “We were at the house, and it washed up on the beach and attacked us while the Gems were out. We beat it, but, well… I got a few cuts and scrapes. But Steven healed me, so I’m okay.” She held her breath again, watching her mother out of the corner of her eye.

Drawing a long, deep sigh, her mother gripped the wheel tightly. Connie could hear her swallowing her first reaction, and then her second, and third. Finally, her mother said, “That’s what happened to your shirt?” At Connie’s nod, she sighed again and said, “Well, I’m glad you’re safe. I know you’ve been working hard for this kind of thing. It shouldn’t surprise me when you actually use what you’ve been learning. Like your away mission up north, or that other fight you told me about, with… Jasper?”

“Jasper,” Connie confirmed. “And this time it wasn’t nearly as dangerous or scary.”

A slight edge worked into her mother’s voice as she said, “I wish you would have told me right away. I shouldn’t have to pry something like that out of you, Connie. You know our deal.”

Connie shrank in her seat, feeling three inches tall. “I know. I’m sorry,” she said. “I guess I just didn’t want you to worry.”

The steel drained from her mother’s expression, leaving only a tired smile on her face. “I’m your mom. I worry about you when you’re at school, or at math club, or when you’re asleep in your bed. I definitely get to worry about you during magical warrior training. That’s my end of the deal. Your end is to keep talking to me. Okay?”

“Okay,” Connie said.
“Okay,” her mother echoed, nodding. “So, is there anything else I should know about?”

That was the exact question Connie had been dreading, because she knew she couldn’t escape it with technicalities or omissions. There was absolutely something her mother should have known about, hidden in the ill-fitting camouflage of a borrowed shirt. Connie could have come clean with her mother, living up to their mutual promise to be more open with each other. Or she could count on the Gems to remove the stone before anyone else discovered it.

Connie knew which one of those choices was the right thing to do. And she chose the other one, like she knew she would.

“Pearl asked if I could train for extra sessions in the next few weeks,” Connie heard herself say. “We’re working on, um, something really important. Would that be okay?”

Thinking aloud, her mother said, “Your father is on the night shift this weekend, and I have the long shift tomorrow. But if you ask him nicely, I think your father would drop you off on Monday after school. Would that work?”

“Yeah,” Connie said, struggling not to throw up as she stared out her window. “That would be great.”
Connie awoke the next morning with the worst headache of her life. It felt like two bulldozers were fighting for dominance and had chosen the inside of her skull as the battleground for their climactic showdown. She rolled over, groaning, and rubbed at her eyes until the pain subsided enough for her to open them.

Then she froze. Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes darted around in panic. Nothing about her surroundings made any sense. The walls were festooned with strange images and unintelligible symbols, and the floor was covered in some kind of plush, frizzy material. Irregular furnishings sat against the wall, piled high with stacks of bound paper and trinkets she couldn’t recognize. And the platform she had awoken on had her pinned beneath some kind of fabric net.

Blinking again, Connie sighed and relaxed. She was in her room. She was safe. Gradually, as her headache faded, so did the feeling of disorientation. Rising slowly, she circled her room, letting her bare toes work between the carpet as she touched the posters, the dresser and desk, the chair, the laptop, and all of the other items she knew were hers. They were supposed to be there.

Her fingers traced the wood grain of her bedroom door as she reassured herself that it was all real. Why had she felt so lost? Had she been remembering a dream? A nightmare?

Connie looked down and tugged at the pink shirt she had worn home from Beach City. It didn’t hang right for daily wear, but its soft cotton and loose fit made it perfect for pajamas. And seeing the yellow star first thing in the morning made her smile. She even imagined that the shirt still smelled a little like Steven, as if the scent of powdered sugar and ocean breeze had survived Pearl’s meticulous laundering. It was probably her imagination, but it made her feel better, and safer.

As she pulled down on the shirt’s hem, she saw a glimpse of green peek out from the collar. Her smile faded as she remembered her predicament. There was a monster inside of her and no one really knew what to do about it. She had lain awake for hours the night before, trying to feel the gemstone’s presence in her body, wondering if Garnet and Pearl had been wrong, if the Gem really would reform inside of her. The thought of those razor-sharp tendrils exploding out of her had kept Connie awake in terror until exhaustion overpowered her. It was small wonder she had awoken from a nightmare.

The Archimicarus novelty clock on her nightstand told her the time. Her mother would already be gone, working another shift at the hospital until suppertime. Her father was working back-to-back overnight shifts and would be asleep well past noon. She had the day more or less to herself.

After she’d dressed, she crept downstairs into the kitchen to make breakfast. Most days started with fruit and toast per her mother’s dietary commandments, but Sundays were special. Connie dug in the cupboard and came back to the table with her prized box of Pumpkin Pete’s Marshmallow Flakes. The box featured the famous mascot’s smile and long ears, and proudly advertised its product as being “part of a complete breakfast,” even though its nutritional label read like that of a candy bar.

She poured herself a heaping bowl and carefully added just the right amount of milk. Her mouth watered, and she grinned as she plunged her spoon in for that first sugary bite.

Then she stopped and stared at the dripping spoonful. She watched the artificial colors swirling as they blended together to turn the milk a muddy red-brown. The cereal looked and smelled just like it always did, but for some reason, her stomach was churning at the mere thought of tasting it.
Connie could still remember wanting to try the cereal for years but never being allowed even a single bite. She had sung the commercial’s jingle, and drew comics of Pumpkin Pete’s adventures in crayon, and had begged and pleaded, and reasoned, but could not, would not, be given a breakfast that was basically just processed sugar. Even now, Connie knew she was a little too old to be enjoying the cereal so much, but she still loved it, especially after her mother had finally relented when…

…when they had talked outside the hospital that night. When they had made their promise to each other. When Connie had won the chance to show her parents that she could be trusted to make decisions in her life, even little ones, like occasionally indulging in a fun breakfast. Or big decisions like fighting aliens to protect the planet.

Pumpkin Pete stared back at Connie from his box, his beady eyes filled with disappointment. His place in the cupboard was a gesture of faith from her parents, a little slack granted to her after a lifetime of rules. And Connie was keeping secrets from them. Again.

She pushed the cereal away, no longer hungry. Her forehead rested on the cool spot where the bowl had been, and she groaned softly to herself. However hard it had been to wear her empty glasses and maintain her old “secret identity,” this new secret felt a million times worse.

Feeding the cereal into the sink, she let the garbage disposal chew it up, and then tucked Pumpkin Pete into the back corner of the pantry with his dumb rabbit face pressed against the back wall. Her stomach refused to settle, and her mind was too preoccupied to make any attempt at reading. At least she had finished her homework for the weekend on Friday night in anticipation of spending Saturday at the beach. With nothing to do and no real drive to do anything, she decided to watch television.

There was a marathon of *Under the Knife* on TBT, and no doctor in the house to cluck her tongue disapprovingly at Connie’s watching it. But halfway through the first episode, she gave up, frustrated. Nothing on the show made any sense to her: the interpersonal conflicts were so contrived as to be impossibly unreal, and the show’s knowledge of anatomy and medical practices were backwards, even laughable. It all seemed so fake, and usually Connie loved that about the show, but now the melodrama and unintentional satire irritated her.

After channel surfing through a string of equally obnoxious shows, Connie settled on something that felt more soothing. She wasn’t paying much attention to the screen anyway. All she could think about was how far away Monday afternoon felt.

She wanted to see Steven again. She needed to see him again. Somehow, no matter how crazy things got, he knew just what to say to make her feel better again. She could call or text him, but she knew she shouldn’t risk it. Her parents still checked her phone occasionally, and her father was still in the house, easily within earshot if he woke up at the wrong moment.

Monday. Everything would be okay if she could just keep herself together for another thirty-ish hours. The Gems would figure out what to do. Life would go back to the way it had been before. And one day, far enough down the road, when her parents could fully understand why she needed to take up the sword, she would tell them about the crazy weekend when she had accidentally become a Gem’s bubble.

“Connie?”

The sound of her father’s soft voice almost knocked Connie off the couch. She jolted out of her reverie to find him leaning out of the kitchen, already dressed in his work clothes. He must have awoken and come downstairs without her hearing him. “Hi, Dad,” she chirped nervously. “You’re up? Why are you dressed for work so early?”
He frowned and checked his watch. “I have to leave in an hour. Have you been watching that all
day?”

Connie checked the clock under the TV and was shocked to see that it was after five o’clock. Had
she been watching television for hours without realizing it? It had only seemed like a few minutes.
Wiping at her eyes, she said, “Yeah, I…”

Then she blinked at the sight of the television screen, which showed a live C-SPAN feed of the US
Senate floor preparing for a legislative debate on an upcoming vote regarding subcommittee
budgetary something or other. This was what she had been watching? She couldn’t remember.

“It’s for school,” she said lamely.

“Okay,” her father said, nodding. “Well, your mother texted me. She’s not getting home until late
tonight. Let’s put some dinner in you before I have to leave.”

Connie grinned as she turned off the TV and hopped down from the couch. “Breakfast for dinner?”
she asked knowingly.

He grew mockingly stern as he replied, “Young lady, breakfast is not a meal—”

“—it’s a state of mind,” Connie said with him, finishing his credo. In their family, her mother wore
the title of head chef for the sake of everyone else, but her father claimed authority over breakfast,
because he believed deeply in the most important meal of the day, and because it had been the only
thing he had learned to make for himself in college. Whenever it was his turn to cook, no matter the
meal, they all knew it would be breakfast.

She ran into the kitchen, her stomach growling as she leapt into her seat. Her father had pulled out all
the stops, using all four burners at once to craft his specialty meal: cinnamon pancakes, lean turkey
bacon, frozen hash browns, and an egg scrambler that he fed all the leftover scraps of the other three
pans. Connie watched him cook in silence, savoring the warm feeling in the pit of her stomach as she
watched him flip the pancakes with his signature showmanship. He always made such a big deal
about cooking, and Connie and her mother delighted in giggling at his expense, which only made
him showboat harder in his one-meal mastery.

“Et voila,” he said, presenting her with an overloaded plate. “The Maheswaran Morning Delight,
Served outside of normal hours for our favorite customer.”

Connie beamed at the food piled high in front of her. “Thanks, Dad!” she said, grabbing her fork.
“Gosh, it’s been forever since you went all-out like this.”

He sat down next to her with a mug of coffee. His own share of the breakfast feast was packed into a
mini-cooler for a late dinner during his overnight shift. “I just figured you might need a few extra
calories after your adventure yesterday.”

Her fork froze halfway into the top pancake, which oozed with real maple syrup and a pat of real
butter. Looking up slowly, she said, “What?”

“Your mother told me about what happened yesterday at the beach. Or at least, she told me what you
told her,” he admitted. A little half-smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Maybe I thought a little
bribery would get a few more details out of you. I’m devious like that.”

The fork wobbled, tilting toward the plate as Connie’s hand fell into her lap. “I’m not trying to hide
anything,” she lied, staring at her plate.
He rested a hand across her narrow shoulders. “Sweetie, I know. I’m joking…mostly,” he admitted. “Your mother and I worry about this new extracurricular activity you’re doing with the Universes, but we trust you. You know that, right?”

Cheeks reddening, Connie could only nod in silence. She tried to shrink out from under her father’s hand.

Drawing back, her father gripped his mug of coffee, staring down into its steaming brown surface. His glasses fogged as he said, “There’s still a lot we don’t understand about this. And I don’t know if we’re handling it well. It’s all still really new, you know? But I understand part of it. You’re working hard to protect people.” He tapped the patch on his jacket and smirked. “I can appreciate wanting to keep people safe. We’re all about safety, right?”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Her father sighed, drumming his fingers on the outside of his mug. “I don’t think I’m saying this right,” he said, frustration steeped in his voice. “I know everything is different now. It’s all moving faster than any of us imagined it would. And that’s before you add in this magic and sword business.”

“Please don’t let this be another talk about my changing body,” she moaned.

“Not this time, O Pubescent One,” he said, chuckling. Then his voice sobered. “I think this is the kind of talk where I tell you that I’m scared as heck for you, but even more than that, I’m blown away by what you’re doing. It can’t be easy, and if I’m scared, I can’t imagine how you feel. So I want you to know that your mother and I are here if you need to talk about it.

Tears slipped through Connie’s clenched eyes. “Dad,” she said, her voice wavering.

“You don’t have to hide it from us when you use what you’re learning with Pearl. Anything that happens, if you tell us, we’ll try to understand. And if we can’t understand, we’ll still listen. We’re proud of you, Connie. And we love you.”

Connie flew from her seat and wrapped her arms around her father’s waist, nearly bowling him out of his seat as she buried her face in his chest and cried silently. The stone in her chest felt like an anchor, dragging her down, making her cling to her father lest she sink through the floor and fall forever. He was stunned for a moment, but quickly wrapped his arms around her and held her close until her tears finally began to ebb.

“It’s okay, Connie,” he said, stroking her hair. “It’s okay. Come on, this is a congratulatory breakfast-dinner, not a punishment.”

She sniffled, and accepted a napkin from him to mop at her face. “Thanks, Dad,” she said, and forced a smile through her tears.

Checking his watch, her father rose from the table and collected his mini-cooler. “I’d better get going or I’ll be late. What time is bedtime?”

“In bed by eight-thirty, lights out at nine,” she said, reciting the school night creed by heart.

“Good.” He kissed the top of her head. “Eat your eggs before they get cold. Love you, sweetie.”

Her voice shook like a leaf as she called after him, “Love you, Dad.”

Long after the door closed behind him, Connie could only stare at the plate in front of her. She stared
until the food turned cold, and even after. The runny butter crusted into an ugly yellow cap halfway down the side of her pancakes. Hash browns and eggs congealed together at the edges, burying the wavy lines of her bacon.

Connie dumped the untouched dinner into the garbage can. Then she took the half-empty garbage bag to the bin outside. She didn’t want her parents finding the food uneaten when they came home. For good measure, she washed and dried the pans her father had left soaking in the sink.

With the sun still setting, the sky orange and bright in her window, Connie brushed her teeth and changed back into her pajamas. Her hands wrung the hem of the pink, yellow-starred shirt as she lay on top of the blankets and stared at the ceiling, hoping that sleep would claim her eventually.

Calculated Dodge

On a normal day, math class would be one of Connie’s favorite periods at school. Geometry and Pre-Algebra had introduced a whole new side of mathematics, a purpose behind all of the equations. Word problems weren’t limited to an endless, pointless parade of people who had a certain number of items and were giving away a different number of those items. Math had variables now. There was X, and X could be anything. Engineers used algebra to design bridges. NASA used geometry to put people in space. Other classmates might groan at the material, but Connie loved it.


That Monday, though, Connie felt incessantly bored. Her leg bounced under her desk as she tried and failed to keep her mind on Miss Gala’s lesson about single-variable equations. The homework Connie had gleefully completed last Friday sat neglected in front of her as the class went over the answers.


Part of the problem was another rough sleep the night before, one plagued with more nightmares. In the dream, Connie had been trying to get somewhere important, knowing somehow that time was running out, and that she might not make it. The dream ended in a white flash from above that had thrown Connie out of her sleep and onto the floor next to her bed with another piercing headache. Even halfway through the school day, her head still throbbed a little.


And breakfast had been another disaster. Connie hadn’t been able to even touch the piece of toast her mother had served her without feeling like she was going to vomit. She’d begged off eating, admitting that her father had spoiled her the night before with a big dinner, and had gone to school with extra carrot sticks in the sack lunch she knew she could not bear to eat.


For some reason, naming the various objects around her seemed to lessen her headache. It calmed her down to identify the pieces of the classroom. It was a simple task her brain could complete while still obsessing about her return to Beach City after school. As her gaze wandered the width of the room, she counted the posters, sorting them between their being motivational or displaying school rules. The other students’ clothes were too varied to subcategorize on the first pass, but if she kept at it, she could start grouping them by color, style, and popularity.

“Connie?”


“Connie?”

The insistent use of her name broke Connie’s naming game. She realized that Miss Gala was calling on her, and that half the class had turned in their seats to watch Connie stare through their teacher. Jerking upright in her seat, Connie blurted, “Three. I’m sorry, what did you say?”
“I asked,” Miss Gala replied curtly, her dark brows knitting in disapproval, “if you could please go to the board and…”

Then she trailed off, glancing back at the whiteboard, where her equation awaited solving. Connie read it as well, seemingly for the first time:

\[5x + 18 = 2x + 27\]

It took Connie a few seconds to throw her mind back into the class’s subject. The remnants of her mental game clung stubbornly to her thoughts. “Is… Am I right? I think it’s ‘three,’” Connie said.

Stepping back to the board, Miss Gala said, “Er, yes. Yes, that’s correct. But let’s go through how we arrive at the solution.” The teacher was obviously thrown off-guard, thinking she had caught another daydreaming student unawares.

Except, she had. Connie stared blankly as Miss Gala combined variables and moved numbers back and forth across the equal sign to arrive at the answer Connie had given her. Had the question been in the homework? Connie supposed she might have recognized it from the book. Or more likely, she had read it on the board during her silent game.

Whatever the case, Connie sat ramrod straight in her chair and listened to every word of the less for the remainder of class, keeping her eyes on Miss Gala, and pressing her jittering foot against the floor so hard that her leg began to cramp.

If preoccupation with the gemstone in her chest had ruined one of her favorite classes, it made the misery of Phys Ed a certifiable nightmare. Connie changed into her gym clothes with her face and chest practically inside one of the lockers in the school’s grimy girls’ locker room to keep any of her classmates from seeing the green stone. Her T-shirt had a tight collar, so as long as she didn’t get soaked in sweat, she wouldn’t need to field any awkward questions.

To help improve the miserable Monday afternoon, Coach Fuji had decided to divide the class on either side of the gym for a series of dodgeball games. Already sitting on the half-court line of the gym was a string of bright red rubber balls, the cruelest tool for establishing social hierarchy in middle school. The coach split the class himself to avoid squabbling, then sent them to opposite ends of the court with a blast of his whistle.

Connie lined up on the far wall with the rest of her team, her face twisting in dread. Normally she would have tried her hardest, but her stomach was a chain of knots, and her temples thumped at either side of her head, a metronome in stereo. If she took a hit early in each round she could sit out most of the class. Nobody would blink at the consummate bookworm taking a dive, just as no one would pull her back into the game if they happened to catch a thrown ball.

The only possible exception to that last notion lined up next to her as the class waited for the whistle to start the game. “Hey, Connie,” Jeff said, smiling at her, his fingertips touching the wall behind them.

She managed a weak smile in reply. “Hi, Jeff,” she said. “Ready for battle?”

The small joke turned Jeff’s expression sour. He glanced across the gym floor at the team on the other side. “I just wish I had your ninja skills. Something tells me I’m going to need them,” he muttered.

Following his gaze to the other team, Connie understood. She saw Mandy Petti meeting her glare.
immediately, as if the other girl had been waiting for Connie to look her way. Surrounded by her little clique of hangers-on, Mandy grinned at Connie and made mocking kissy faces.

“Is she still teasing you?” Connie demanded, a little surprised at the heat creeping into her voice.

Sounding embarrassed, Jeff said, “Some people seem to think a guy getting judo-flipped by his girlfriend is too funny to let go. When I told them you weren’t my girlfriend, they just laughed harder.” His face sank, his sandy brown hair failing to hide his blush.

Jeff wasn’t the smallest boy in their class, but he was close. Life probably owed him a few growth spurts that had yet to find him, and his arms and legs were skinnier even than Connie’s. He was a nice kid, a quiet kid, which was one of the reasons Connie had felt so miserable when she had inadvertently flipped him. That long-buried guilt began to resurface as she realized that, while she and Jeff had put the incident behind them, there were others who didn’t care to let it go so easily.

Connie’s eyes narrowed on prim, proper, strawberry-blond, designer-clad, never-had-a-pimple Mandy Petti. Who put on fresh makeup for gym class. Who commanded attention from all of the popular boys for all of the dumbest reasons. Who couldn’t tell a Dewey Decimal number from a Library of Congress number if you fed her the spine of a book. And Connie had felt sorely, sadistically tempted to do just that on more than one occasion.

Laying low could wait. Connie felt like putting her foul mood to good use instead. “Stay close to me,” she said darkly.

Jeff swallowed. “Guess it’s a good thing my mom kept that sling,” he said.

Two short blasts from Coach Fuji’s whistle launched both sides of the gym into action. Opposing waves of adolescents crashed into the center line and came back with the dodgeballs more or less evenly divided. Rubber flew, and children fell.

Connie had been fast enough to grab a ball from the line, but so had Miss Captain-of-the-Track-Team Petti. With her cronies in tow, Mandy began working one side of the battle line, scooping up missed shots and picking off the slower targets. None of the boys dared throw a ball at Mandy and risk getting on her bad side. Most of the girls avoided her for fear of angering the school’s nascent queen bee, and those that didn’t fear found themselves outnumbered by the queen’s clique.

The red rubber ball sat in Connie’s hands, waiting. Behind her, Jeff hovered close, keeping within arm’s reach of her. When a loose ball rolled nearby, he started to run for it, but then thought better of it and let it pass by untouched. A few balls tumbled at them, but most of the other students were content to try and hit their own friends first.

It didn’t take long for Mandy’s bunch to sidle along the line toward Connie and Jeff, picking off a few of the slower kids along the way. By the time they stood opposite Connie, each of them held a dodgeball and a wicked grin at the ready. No words were exchanged, not within earshot of Coach Fuji. No words were needed. Each side knew exactly where it stood with the other.

Mandy’s side threw their dodgeballs in calculated succession, one, two, three. It was a good strategy, and it would have worked. Jeff stumbled out of the way of the first shot and should have ended up squarely in the path of the other two.

Connie took her combat training seriously. As cool and fun as it had been to learn to fight from an immortal master, she knew that those skills came with a heavy responsibility. She was learning to fight so she could defend the Earth from whatever threatened it.
But defending the Earth was a broad job with a lot of room for gray areas. Sometimes the job meant battling aliens for the fate of the planet. Maybe it could also mean reminding someone that being popular in Middle School did not carry with it the privilege of being cruel.

In one smooth motion, Connie ducked the first throw and deflected the second with her own ball. Then she dropped into a spin, pivoting full-circle on the toe of her shoe. Her free hand snatched the third ball from the air and pinned it to her side, letting her adjust her grip on it as she rolled backwards and came back to her feet. Both her hands snapped out with tight, sharp underhand throws.

*Whap!* Mandy’s right-hand lackey, Generic Brunette Girl, took one of the dodgeballs in the leg and stumbled. *Whap!* The second lackey, Other Generic Brunette Girl, got hit in the chest. She was the one who had thrown the ball Connie had caught, which meant she was doubly out of the match. Mandy’s face curdled with indignation as her entourage was sent grumbling to the bench.

A surprised cheer rose from Connie’s team, loudest of all from Jeff. Connie smiled and blushed at the attention. Looking to her team’s bench, she pointed to one of Mandy’s previous victims to come back into the game as the trade-in for her fair catch.

That one moment of distraction was all Mandy needed to throw a dodgeball at Jeff’s head. The hollow impact of the ball rang out as it slammed into his cheek, the hit knocking him cleanly off his feet. He yelped as he struck the hard gym floor and clutched the reddening side of his face.

Connie whirled on Mandy, who drew her arm back from the throw and covered her mouth in mock-horror to hide her grin. The whistle blasted long and hard, halting the game.

Veins bulged in Coach Fuji’s thick neck as he let the whistle drop from his lips. “Petti! Below the shoulders,” he bellowed. “Next time, you’re out.”

“Sorry, Coach,” Mandy called back, her eyes locked with Connie’s. “Sweaty hands.”

As Jeff trudged back to the bench with his hand pressed to his face, eyes watering, Connie tried to catch his gaze. But his eyes were glued to his shoes. So she settled for glaring daggers at Mandy, feeling her knuckles ache as she clenched her fists at her sides.

The whistle blew again, and the game resumed. Mandy scrambled to the same ball she had thrown at Jeff. It had hit Jeff hard enough to bounce all the way back to her side. Then she toed the center line of the court, leaning forward to smile at Connie. The squeak of sneaker on floor, the sound of bouncing rubber balls, and the shouts of their teammates covered Mandy’s low, taunting voice. “You miss your boyfriend, Big Nose? Why don’t you go sit with him?”

Feet rooted, Connie did not budge as Mandy pitched the dodgeball squarely at her chest. She didn’t flinch. Instead, she stuck out a hand and caught the ball in her palm, cradling its momentum. Before it even stopped moving, she thrust her hand forward, snarling as she pushed the ball back at Mandy. It was a clumsy motion, a move dictated by anger with no balance, no precision, and no forethought, and it should have just sent the ball dribbling uselessly back to Mandy’s feet for the little diva to throw all over again.

A torrent of wind yanked Connie’s hair over her shoulders and into her face as the ball left her palm like a cannon shot. It hammered into Mandy’s stomach, knocking the girl backwards a dozen feet before she tumbled and slid to a stop on the gym floor. Mandy collapsed, clutching her midsection and moaning, her body curling like a shriveled caterpillar as the red rubber ball bounced merrily away.
Coach Fuji’s whistle blared again, but he needn’t have bothered. Both teams had stopped to stare at Connie as she untangled her hair from her face. “Maheswaran! The point of the game is to hit the other team, not knock them through the wall,” Fuji barked.

Mandy groaned pathetically, rolling onto her side. She clutched her stomach and mewled, “Coach…”

“Fair hit, Petti. You’re out,” the coach gruffed.

“It really hurts,” Mandy cried, her voice cracking. “It hurts!”

Grunting, Coach Fuji went to Mandy’s side and knelt to examine her. Evidently he couldn’t diagnose the issue through her shirt and hands, so he helped her up and said, “Let’s get you to the nurse’s office. Come on.”

As her mind whirled, Connie felt a flash of panic as she wondered if she really had hurt Mandy. Then that panic evaporated when she caught sight of Mandy giving her a murderous glare behind the coach’s back. Knowing that Mandy would live to make her life miserable another day was actually a relief to her, because it meant she could focus all her attention on worrying about exactly how she had launched the dodgeball like a rocket in the first place.

“Everybody take five. No horseplay,” Coach Fuji said as he ushered a theatrically suffering Mandy through the door. But he paused and looked back, and snapped, “Maheswaran!”

Connie jerked out of her worry-spiral, and squeaked, “Yes, Coach?”

“Softball tryouts are in August. Bring that arm of yours.”

Once Coach Fuji had left, the teams dissolved into their more familiar groups and cliques, milling about the gym floor in quiet conversation. No one wanted to break Fuji’s ban on roughhousing and risk spending the rest of the class running laps. That left Connie more or less on her own to stare blankly into space until Jeff worked his way through the crowd to find her.

Though half of his face had turned bright red, Jeff smiled widely as he ran up to her. “Holy cow, Connie! That was incredible! Did your sensei teach you to throw like that too?”

“Um…not really,” Connie murmured.

Immediately, Jeff dropped his excitement, looking at her instead with concern. “Hey, are you okay? You look like you’re gonna be sick.”

She motioned weakly toward the bleachers on the far side of the gym, and mumbled, “I, uh, I’m gonna go sit down for a little while. Okay?”

He recognized that her words were not an invitation to join her. “Sure. I hope you feel better. And… thanks,” he added, the other side of his face reddening to match the first.

Connie barely heard him. She staggered to the far bleachers and sat in the floorboards three rows up, wedging herself out of sight behind the plastic benches. Her hand clutched at her shirt to press against the warm, hard shape just below her throat. Rasping breaths whistled through her nose as she tried to think rationally about what had happened, but her only thoughts were of the battle on Saturday, when the corrupted Gem had summoned a hurricane gale to blow Steven into the ocean. Her hair fluttered behind her, still windblown from her impossible throw.

Heart pounding against the green gemstone, Connie shut her eyes and tried to calm herself. “Just
make it through the day,” she whispered. After school, her father would drive her to Beach City. She would see Steven again, and by now the Gems would know what to do. They always had the answers. And according to Steven, they had an expert who could help her.
"Hmm," Peridot hummed thoughtfully as she stared at Connie's gemstone. "Mm-hmm. Uh-huh. Aha! Wait. Hmm…"

Standing in the middle of the barn, Connie tried to hold still as the self-ordained "gemetics" expert poked and prodded at the green stone nestled beneath the hollow of her throat. She had changed into a tank top after being dropped off at the boardwalk by her father, and then had been whisked via warp pad straight to the old farm for an examination. Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst waited to one side with varying degrees of patience, but Steven hovered close, practically holding her hand all through the process. Close by, Lapis Lazuli lounged in an old easy chair, pretending to read some old graphic novel donated from Steven's collection, but her cool blue eyes flicked more often to the exam than to the comic panels.

As the diminutive green Gem continued to make noises of discovery, Pearl broke first. "Well? What can you tell us?" she demanded with hands on hips.

Nodding, Peridot stepped to one side as if to present Connie to the rest of them as her own creation. "After careful analysis, I can conclude with modest certainty that your efforts were successful. It seems that Steven has successfully reproduced, and his spawn appears to be stable." She turned to Steven and shook his numb hand. "I believe the customary response is 'congratulations,' right?"

Connie couldn't tell which of them turned redder, she or Steven. "His spawn?" she echoed hoarsely.

"That's the term, isn't it?" Peridot asked. Behind her yellow visor, her brow crinkled. "Ew, or was it more of a budding process?"

Amethyst snickered and Pearl rubbed the bridge of her nose while Steven and Connie grew redder still. "Peridot," said Pearl, "She is not Steven's offspring, she's his friend! She has a Gem stuck inside of her, and we need to get it out."

Throwing up her arms, Peridot exclaimed, "Well, next time start with all of that! You just show up right in the middle of a delicate stage in my latest project, shove something Steven-like at me, and say, 'Hey, Peridot, look at this for us.' What was I supposed to assume?"

"In my defense," Amethyst said, "I asked if you had any food."

"Though, if you are trying to make more Stevens, you probably shouldn't start with a corrupted Gem next time," Peridot said, missing or ignoring Pearl's mounting irritation. "And apparently you were feeling nostalgic, since you picked a Gem nobody's even made since early last Era."

That comment perked Pearl out of her tight-jawed annoyance. "So you do recognize it?" she asked.

Peridot scoffed. "Asking a Kindergartner if she recognizes a gem is like asking a human if they know where food goes."

Connie felt her stomach lurch. "Please don't talk about food," she moaned.

Rapping her fingertips against Connie's passenger, Peridot said, "This is a Jade. We don't even have them on Homeworld anymore. I've only read about them in archives."

"Why don't they make Jades anymore?" asked Steven.
"Because they're obsolete," Peridot said impatiently, as though she were stating the obvious. "Jades are archivists. Their job was to catalogue, record, curate, and disseminate information. They're repositories of knowledge. Some would survey entire worlds, gathering intelligence to help in the planning stages for new colonies. The really important ones served in the Diamonds' courts as chroniclers. I mean, if there wasn't already an Amber around."

Connie touched her gemstone in wonderment. The creature that had attacked them had been some kind of explorer, or a historian, or like a living library. "What made them obsolete?" she asked.

Peridot slapped Connie's hand away from the gem. "Because we're not savages, Steven Junior."

"Steven Junior is a goat," Steven corrected her.

"Steven, please, there's no need to be cruel. She's standing right here," Peridot chided him. "What I mean is, we developed technology: data storage and networks to keep information; quantum entanglement communication so we don't have to shout at each other through Wailing Stones; ships with scanners simple enough even for a Quartz soldier to operate. No offense," she added at Amethyst.

Amethyst shrugged. "S'cool. We've all come to appreciate the 'Amethyst Isn't Allowed to Touch Buttons' rule for a lot of reasons. It's actually a good rule. Super-hard to follow."

"Why make one specific Gem to do all that when you can give every Gem the tools to collect and share information? So we stopped making them," Peridot said, shrugging. "None of that explains why you decided to shove one into a human. Aren't we supposed to bubble them?"

"Getting her in there was an accident," Steven insisted. "And we can't bubble her now. The bubble just kind of fizzles."

"So she's just stuck in there?" It was Lapis who spoke, surprising everyone as she set aside the pretense of her book. She rose from her seat, shoulders tensed as she stared at Connie's neck. "If she can't reform, and she's not in stasis, that means she could still be awake in there. She could be trapped."

The rising urgency in Lapis's voice made Connie shuffle backwards a step. She still remembered meeting Lapis for the first time, when the immensely powerful Gem had stolen the ocean. Sometimes Connie still had nightmares about drowning above dry land, her head suspended in a floating sphere of water that pressed through her lips and down her nose. Connie had seen little of the ocean Gem since her return to Earth. It was hard to know if Lapis's mood could turn as deadly again with the sensitive subject of imprisoned Gems in question.

Garnet must have had the same concern, and put herself between Lapis and Connie. "We don't know what's happening inside either of them right now, but the important thing is to remove Jade without hurting Connie. Jade hasn't tried to reform, and nothing has changed since she was healed into Connie, so we can assume she's in some kind of dormant state, bubbled or not."

Connie rubbed at her arm and bit her lip. "Well…" she drawled.

She told them about her headaches, and about the time she had lost on Sunday. She described the events of gym class and her mental game during math class. As she recounted the weirdness of the past few days, she watched Steven grow horrified, his eyes shining with tears, his hand pressed over his mouth.

Peridot, on the other hand, became overjoyed. "Yes!" she said, interrupting Connie. "Preoccupation
with cataloguing surroundings? Definitely correlative to classical Jade temperament. She could be rattling around inside your head right now, unable to communicate except to influence your behavior."

A dark look crossed Lapis Lazuli's face. She glared at Connie, her hands curling into delicate fists. Then, wordlessly, Lapis flicked her wings out to their full span and launched herself through the barn door in a single push. The anger she left buzzing in the room made Connie shiver.

Sparing a sad look at Lapis's departure, Steven said, "Can Jades make wind? She blew me completely off the beach when we fought her."

"Absolutely. Jades were capable of creating localized atmospheric pressure differentials to use for mobility and defense. Oh, hold on!" Peridot ran to the far corner of the cluttered barn and came back with an old, dusty blanket, which she draped across Connie's shoulders. "If a Jade had to survey a planet, she needed to get around quickly. So they would form with these big flaps, kind of like capes or sails, and would use them to ride the air currents they made."

"Or apparently they could blast some jerk with a taste of their own medicine," Amethyst said, laughing. "Tell us the part again where you tornado'd that ball into what's-her-name. Did she cry?"

"This is all fascinating, but it doesn't help us remove Jade," Pearl said.

Peridot blinked, confused. "Why would you want to? Now we can have a Jade walking around wearing a human, just like Steven is a Quartz wearing a human. Imagine what kind of information she could retain!"

"Steven is a half-Gem," Garnet corrected her. "He's a hybrid. Connie was born fully human."

Peridot looked unimpressed. "Okay, sure. Hybrid. Except, what's the difference? Physically, Steven is indistinguishable from a human except for his gem. He's made of meat, requires sleep, and food, and other functions…bathroom functions," she said, shuddering. "He's a human exhibiting gemetic traits. Steven Junior seems to be functionally the same, if less developed. We could just be seeing the process happening at an earlier larval stage."

A new fear struck Connie, joining her previous imaginings of the Gem reforming inside of her and popping her like a meat balloon. What if instead Jade decided to set up shop in her body as-is? Would the person Connie already was just be erased? Would she feel herself fading away, becoming someone else entirely?

Huffing, Pearl insisted to Peridot, "That is a gross oversimplification of what Steven is, and it's pure speculation, and you know it."

"Firstly: it's 'educated' speculation, you clod," Peridot snapped back, her voice rising and her hair puffing out like the tail of an angry cat. "And secondly: of course it's speculation! Nobody else is sticking gemstones inside other creatures to see what would happen. Evidently, Kindergartens aren't good enough for Crystal Gems. You need to raise your new Gems free-range!"

Connie felt her head throbbing as their voices rose into shouts. She tried to mask her discomfort, but like always, Steven noticed immediately.

"Now listen here, you—!" Pearl shouted.

"Stop it!" Steven cried, shoving himself between Pearl and Peridot. "Just stop. What are we going to do to help Connie?"
Her anger fading into curiosity, Peridot said, "Why don't you just pull it out?"

"No good," Amethyst said, and shapeshifted her hand into oversized pliers by way of explanation.

That set Peridot to thinking. Then she snapped her fingers and exclaimed, "Wait here. I think I have something that can assist in the extraction." She ran to the nearest pile of scavenged junk and began to dig.

Pearl's frown of disapproval chased after Peridot. "If Jade is bonded, or fused, or whatever, like Rose is with Steven, then removing her could be dangerous to both of them. We need to know more about what's happened to her. Them."

Steven met Connie's gaze, and a spark of realization glimmered in his warm eyes. "Maybe what we need is an inside perspective. What if Connie and I fused? I might be able to come out of Stevonnie with some idea of what's happening with Jade."

Connie felt a slight rise in her stomach, and her headache lessened a shade. When they fused, there were no secrets between them. It wasn't as if they could thumb through the pages of the other's memory at their leisure, but whatever they felt, whatever they thought, they did it together. Steven might glean some insight into what was happening that Connie lacked the context to understand.

But with Jade inside of her, they might not be able to fuse at all. And if they did, would they still be Stevonnie? Steven had told her how Gems fused in different combinations to become different people, different experiences. With Jade added to the mix, fully awake or not, they might not be the same fusion anymore.

Everyone was surprised when Amethyst stepped forward and grabbed Steven's hand, yanking him away from Connie. "Steven, no!" she snapped. "You can't fuse with a corrupted Gem. Not even if it's Connie. You know what happened to Jasper."

For half a breath, Steven looked ready to argue. Connie spoke first, cutting off his protest before it began. "She's right, Steven," she said miserably. "I won't let this hurt you too."

As his argument withered in his mouth, Steven took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Connie, you haven't said much. What do you think we should do? What do you think about any of this?"

"I think…" Connie didn't know where to start. Every time she thought she was numb to being scared of her predicament, some new fear reared its ugly head. Her body ached from all the worrying, and her head felt like a balloon being inflated with liquid pain. On top of that, she had to wonder if it was still her head that hurt, or if it was now Jade's head suffering under the misconception that she was still Connie. And now, realizing that she might never fuse with Steven again was one more disaster heaped atop the pile.

Peridot came back to them with her answer held aloft in triumph. It was an electric circular saw, the power cord of which snaked and clattered behind her as she ran. "Here we go! Steven Junior, go stand next to the outlet. We'll get that Jade out of you in no time!"

Connie worked her fingers into her hair, clutching at the sides of her head. She thought her skull might roll off her shoulders if she didn't hold it in place. Her skin felt hot, and her brain felt leaden with the worries and aches compounding on each other. Her pulse thundered in her ears, sending a spike of pain running between her eardrums with every heartbeat. "I…I think…" she said.

As Garnet took the circular saw from Peridot, ignoring the diminutive Gem's protests, she adjusted her glasses and said, "Steven, catch Connie."
Catch Connie? Why would Garnet tell Steven to catch her? Connie wasn't going to run anywhere. She was too busy wondering why she suddenly felt so light, and why the barn was lurching onto its side all around her. She thought she heard someone say her name, but it was lost in the pounding of her own heart and the rising, ringing tone that swallowed all other noise around her.

Then she watched Steven lunge sideways, his arms outstretched toward her, and lost sight of him when she fell out of the world.
¡Soy Delicioso!

Connie awoke somewhere strange and plush to the sound of hushed whispers. Soft warmth cradled her as she opened her eyes to the semi-familiar ceiling. Her head still hurt, but not in the intense way it had before everything turned to black. When she tried to stir, she found her limbs responsive but sluggish, as though they had unseen weights tied to their ends. So she laid still and listened to the nearby voices.

“—forcing it out didn’t work before, and if what Peridot said is correct, it could be incredibly dangerous,” one of the voices insisted. *Pearl, worried.*

“Don’t cast aspersions on my hypothesis without any contradictory evidence!” another voice protested. *Peridot, shrill.* Quieting, she continued, “But she’s right. Proceeding blindly with any removal process could endanger the Jade. Steven Junior would be at risk as well.”

“Her name is Connie! And we can’t just give up.” *Steven, upset.* “Somebody has to know something about removing gems. I mean, somebody stuck Lapis in a mirror, right?”

“If Homeworld knows anything about this stuff, we should totally pile into the Rubies’ ship and, like, stealth-mission!” *Eager Amethyst.*

“If I thought Homeworld knew anything that would help, I would invade it myself.” *Garnet, straightforward.* “But devices like the one that imprisoned Lapis were designed for Gems. Connie is a living organic being. The closest thing to experts on how Gems interact physically with organics are…well, us.”

As her senses cleared, Connie realized that she was back in the beach house, lying on Steven’s bed in his elevated, open-air bedroom. The Gems must have warped her there while she had been unconscious. Rolling onto her side, she saw Steven and the others gathered around the kitchen counter, their expressions grim and their postures furtive. The thick comforter on Steven’s bed tried to swallow Connie while she watched, and the smell of fresh linen and strawberry shampoo filled her nose as half her face sank into the pillow.

“‘Expert’ might be a bit generous,” Peridot sniffed, “but the sentiment is more or less accurate.”

“Okay,” Steven said, his whole body clenching to echo his expression, “so we need to learn more. How do we do that?”

Pearl and Garnet traded a silent dialogue through their shared glance. Then Pearl admitted, “We don’t really know where to start, Steven. When you came along, to be honest, our biggest goal was to keep you alive and happy.”

“Yeah, and Greg handled most of the hard parts until you figured out all your human biz on your own,” Amethyst added.

“We can work to keep Connie healthy,” Pearl continued, “and wait to see what happens. If something changes, and an opportunity presents itself to extract the gemstone, of course we’ll do whatever we can. But until then…”

Frustration bloomed red and full in Steven’s face. He clenched his fists, looking like he was about to scream, but his voice remained soft. “We can’t just wait and hope something happens. We have to fix this. We have to do something!”
Stroking her chin, Peridot grinned and said, “Lucky for all of you, you happen to have a brilliant gemetics expert standing in your midst. I can start designing an array of tests that will determine the extent of the subjects’ connectivity and interaction. That will at least give us more information moving forward.”

“Yo, forget the microscope. We’re gonna put that jumble under the Peri-scope and see what’s what!” Amethyst hooted, pumping her fist.

Looking askance at the purple gem, Peridot said, “Er, yes. I recommend we start with a diagnostic vivisection.”

“What’s vivisection?” asked Steven.

“It means she wants to open me up and look around inside.” Connie was surprised at how weak and somber her own voice sounded in her ears. She thought the possibility of someone scooping out her insides would have horrified her more, but she felt numb. Perhaps her feelings had simply been exhausted. The rest of her felt that way, certainly.

“Connie!” Steven exclaimed, looking up at her. Then her explanation clicked, and his eyes bugged in horror. “No! No vivisection!” he cried.

Climbing onto the kitchen counter, Peridot found a pad of paper and a pen and began taking notes. “No…vivisection…” she said as she wrote, feet kicking idly over the counter’s edge. “Got it.”

Steven scrambled up the steps to his bed, tripping twice on the way. He collapsed at the bedside and stared at Connie, whose head was still half-buried in his pillow. “Are you okay? You wouldn’t wake up in the barn, so we brought you back to the house,” he said.

With herculean effort, Connie pushed herself upright, swinging her feet over the edge of the mattress. Her head wobbled, threatening to send her back to the comforter, until she grasped her temples to steady herself. As soon as she did, her stomach began to cramp painfully. “I’m okay,” she said, pressing a hand to her midsection. “Just a headache. And my stomach hurts a little.”

As the other Gems gathered below at the foot of the stairs, Peridot continued to scribble furiously on the pad. “Potential systemic failure of bio-components due to gem rejection,” she muttered.

Panicking, Steven snapped at Peridot, “It might not be! M-Maybe she just ate something that didn’t agree with her. I had a bad frozen Salisbury steak dinner once, and Pearl thought I was exploding from every hole in my body.”

Azure blush colored Pearl’s cheeks. Folding her arms, she groused, “We agreed to never speak of ‘The Incident’ again.”

Groaning, Connie said, “But I didn’t eat anything this morning, or for lunch.”

“Maybe something from yesterday?” Steven suggested.

She searched through her blurry memories of the previous day. “…I didn’t eat anything yesterday either,” she realized aloud.

“Whoa,” Amethyst said, gaping. “That’s crazy. I would never go two whole days without eating something. Eating is the best.”

“Amethyst is right, after a fashion,” Pearl admitted. “Humans require fuel to function.”
“Garnet! Leftovers!” Steven exclaimed.

Garnet went back to the kitchen and returned with a pizza box from the refrigerator. She passed the box up to Steven, who plopped down on the bed beside Connie. Opening the box, he revealed half of a pizza dotted with herbs and toppings and layered in thick, cold mozzarella cheese. “Here, have as much as you want. It’s pepperoni and mushroom, your favorite. I got hungry for it yesterday because I was worried about you. And it’s even better cold.”

Connie nodded gratefully and dug a slice out of the box. Pepperoni and mushroom from Fish Stew Pizza was indeed her favorite, especially since she could count on one hand the number of times her parents had ordered pizza for dinner at home. The smell of it made her mouth water. But as soon as her lips touched the rubbery tip of cheese on the slice, she felt a surge of bile rising up her throat, and had to drop the piece and clutch her mouth to keep from vomiting.

“I can’t,” gagged Connie. “I thought I was just feeling worried, or guilty, but every time I try to eat…”

The notepad and pen worked furiously in Peridot’s hands. “Aversion to food. Fascinating. More data supporting my theory. After all, only a crazy Gem would gunk up their insides with useless bio-matter.” Nodding to Amethyst, she said, “Again, no offense.”

Sniffing haughtily, Amethyst said, “I’m just a misunderstood visionary, that’s all.”

“Okay, well…we just need to find something you can eat that won’t make you sick. Which means it can’t be…food,” Steven declared, his confidence waning as he set aside the pizza. He thought for a moment, his brow scrunching with intense concentration. Then he exclaimed, “Oh, wait a minute!” He leapt from the bed all the way to the couch below, bouncing off the cushion to thump onto the floor.

“If she’s gonna start eating not-food, I can make a few suggestions,” Amethyst offered.

Grunting, Steven dragged a cardboard box nearly as large as he was from behind the couch. The box design and its shipping label were both in Spanish, and the tape on the box had already been broken. Tearing open the top of the box, Steven revealed stacks of smaller boxes, each of which in turn contained a multitude of small, brown, prepackaged rectangles. He grabbed handful of the shapes, unwrapped one from its packaging, and tossed it to Pearl. “Quick, Pearl, tell me what you think of this.”

Pearl fumbled with the tiny brown bar. She turned it over in her hands, then sniffed it. When she broke it in half, the bar gave a sharp crack and rained whitish particles onto the floor. “Is this some form of building material? Maybe a paperweight, or a very dull toy?” she asked.

“Perfect!” Steven leapt ten feet back up to Connie’s side, tumbling onto the bed. He offered her one of the many bars spilling from his arms, and said, “Here, eat these!”

Connie took the bar and examined its wrapper. Its logo was a picture of a large, muscular man dressed only in bicycle shorts and wearing a realistic horse mask. He had enormous dumbbells in his hands, and was flexing, poised over the name of the product written in Comic Sans lettering. “¡Soy Delicioso!” she read, sounding out the name. “An all-vegan, gluten-free, carbon neutral meal replacement system?”

“It’s one of those workout bars,” Steven explained, smiling. “My Dad bought a bunch of them in bulk the last time he said he wanted to get back in shape. He ate one, and then he gave the whole box to me and went out to get cheeseburgers. If Pearl can’t tell it’s food, maybe it won’t make you
Taking up one of the bars from the box, Amethyst read the back label aloud. “Vitamins and powdered protein compressed for convenience and coated with a delicious, authentic carob substitute? Yeesh. For once, I agree with Pearl. There’s no way I’d put this in my body.”

Unwrapping her bar, Connie took the very tip of it between her teeth and snapped off a tiny bite. The chunk turned to wet chalk in her mouth, and it tasted like recycled newspaper pulp. She hated it. But, as she chewed, and swallowed, she didn’t feel her stomach trying to kick it back up her throat. She devoured the rest of the bar in two more bites, barely chewing, and then opened a second bar.

Garnet collected Connie’s backpack from by the door and dumped several of the smaller boxes of ¡Soy Delicioso! bars inside it. “Well, that’s one problem waylaid,” she declared.

“Yes,” Peridot concurred, filling page after page of the pad with notes. “With the threat of starvation minimized, our odds of success are skyrocketing. At this rate, Steven Junior…excuse me, ‘Connie’ might actually survive long enough for me to devise a non-lethal extraction process!”

The sense of relief poured out of the room, leaving awful silence to fill the void. Connie swallowed the remnants of her second bar and stared at the empty wrapper. It twisted between her fingers and rained little crumbs of not-carob and vitamin-rich protein dust into her lap. Already, her headache was lessening, and her stomach was beginning to settle. But that only left her feeling empty in new and unsettling ways.

“I, um…” Connie stood, collecting another bar from the pile on the bedspread. “I’m gonna get some fresh air. Maybe it’ll help my headache.”

Pearl and Amethyst shared worried looks, but said nothing. Even implacable Garnet pressed her lips together in a pinched expression.

Evidently sensing the shift in the room, Peridot began backing slowly toward the warp pad, and said, “Yes, well, I’ll begin prepping those tests. No vivisection,” she added, and tapped the notepad.

Though Connie could not bring herself to turn around, she could feel Steven’s stricken expression following her out through the screen door. She knew she should be feeling exactly the same way. But as she leaned on the porch banister and stared out at the ocean, she marveled at how empty she felt.

If Peridot was correct, then perhaps she really wasn’t Connie anymore. She might already be Jade, and the memories and feelings she thought she was having were just the last embers of Connie growing cold inside of her. Jade would tolerate the highly-engineered meal replacement system as a necessity of her new meat body, at least until Peridot developed a cure for that. Maybe she would move into the temple, or the barn, and live with the other Gems.

Jade wouldn’t need to lie to her parents. She wouldn’t have parents to lie to anymore. She absolutely wouldn’t miss eating real food. She wouldn’t need to go to school. She wouldn’t care about hanging out with Steven, or taking lessons with Pearl, or rereading *The Spirit Morph Saga* every year, or learning a new violin piece.

Would Jade remember anything about being Connie? Would she feel anything for the skinny, gawky, sweaty human she had gotten stuck inside?

The screen door opened and shut behind her, and Steven set a glass of water on the railing. Connie reached for it without thinking. The water was crisp and tasteless, and washed away the bar-grit
stuck in her teeth.

Steven settled an arm’s length away from her on the railing and stood with her, watching the ocean waves lap into the shore. They stayed that way for a long time without speaking.

At last, Steven murmured, “Please say something.”

“What would you like me to say?” Connie said dully.

With his gaze locked on the ocean, Steven said, “Tell me you’re scared. That you’re not sure what’s going to happen, and that it’s freaking you out. Or that it’s even scarier that the Gems don’t know what to do or how to help you.”

All of it true. But Connie didn’t say it.

“Tell me you’re mad. You’re angry because this never should have happened to you, and nobody has any answers, and you can’t even eat pizza anymore. We can’t fuse anymore. And you feel like you have to lie to your parents again, which is awful.”

Connie should have been angry. Not the kind of anger she could direct at anyone, or even at the stone in her chest, but an aimless, helpless anger, the kind of meandering rage that was only possible when there wasn’t anything to blame. But she didn’t feel angry.

She felt numb.

“Tell me it’s all my fault.”

And then she didn’t. She heard his voice breaking, and her gaze snapped to him immediately. His fists were curled atop the rail, and he glared out at the ocean with tears in his eyes. “Steven,” she said, and reached out to take his hand.

He recoiled from her, squeezing his eyes shut. Tears cut down his cheeks and soaked his collar. “Tell me this never would have happened if I could control my powers like I’m supposed to. That you’d be better off if you’d never met me. That you’ll never forgive me, because you shouldn’t!”

Her heart rose into her throat, and she felt her eyes grow hot. “That’s not true,” she said hoarsely.

“Tell me you hate me,” Steven hiccupped, pounding his fists onto the railing as he wept. “Just promise me that you’ll be okay, because you have to be okay. You can hate me and never want to see me again, because this whole mess is my fault, but you have to be okay, because if you’re not okay…if I did this to you, and you’re not…”

Connie caught him in a hug, squeezing him as tightly as she could. Tears spilled from her eyes to join his, their foreheads pressed together, noses bumping.

She knew in an instant that she was not Jade. She couldn’t be, not yet. As numb as she might feel toward her own fears and worries, Connie, the real Connie, would never stand to watch Steven’s heart breaking and not break with him.

“This is not your fault,” Connie said, her voice thick and quavering. “It’s just something that happened, and we’ll figure it out.”

“But—“

She shook her head, rolling her forehead against his. “No. No ‘but’s.’ I’m not going anywhere, and
you and the Gems are going to figure out what to do, because you’re heroes, and that’s what heroes do. And I could never, ever, ever, ever hate you, Steven. No matter what happens.”

Steven shook with a muddle of laughter and sobs. “I came out here so I could make you feel better,” he said.

“You just did,” Connie told him.

“But you’re crying!” he insisted, giggling and weeping.

She smiled and cried too, and said, “So are you.”

They held each other until their tears ran dry and their laughter waned. They held on until the silence didn’t feel as gloomy anymore, until the sound of the gentle tide soothed them back toward something closer to normalcy. And they kept holding on for a long time after.
It happened four nights later.

Stocked with several weeks’ worth of ¡Soy Delicioso! meal bars, Connie was prepared to survive the time it took Peridot to come up with a solution that did not require discombobulating her. So the next problem was keeping her new aversion to real food a secret from her parents.

The solution to keeping her secret was easy, if convoluted. Connie had taken a box of garbage bags from the beach house to hide in her room. Steven had been reluctant to help her lie to her parents, but he had also been the one to suggest the bags. The last thing Connie wanted to do was drag him into her deception, but she didn’t have many other options.

From there, it was a simple matter to ask if she could take her meals to her room so she could study while she ate. After all, if she was going to spend extra time on “Gem stuff,” which wasn’t quite a lie, then she could keep up her studies by using her mealtimes. Once her door was closed, she could stuff her food in a garbage bag, then hide the bag in her backpack to throw away at school.

Unsurprisingly, her parents loved the idea. Anything that helped her schoolwork usually received immediate approval. It was almost a perfect solution: there was no mess, no evidence, a clean plate to fool her parents, and Connie actually did get extra studying done, because going over the same lessons and homework twice was still a welcome distraction from the chalky taste of her new diet.

The only real weak point in the plan was Connie. By Thursday night she felt exhausted, hungry, and more than a little grouchy at the green lump living in her chest. Her fear of the situation had dulled into annoyance once it became clear that she would not explode like a meat balloon. But there hadn’t been any other outbursts like the dodgeball incident, and no issues beyond her hunger and headaches. So she endured.

That night, however, her endurance began to crack. As she sat at her desk with an empty ¡Soy Delicioso! wrapper next to her and the day’s English homework twice-finished, she stared longingly at the cold plate of food next to her laptop. It was her mother’s mushroom stir fry, served atop a bed of seasoned rice. The baby corn, carrots, pea pods, water chestnuts, and shitake mushrooms glistened in their savory brown sauce. The smell of it taunted Connie to the brink of insanity.

She tried to concentrate on her homework instead, but the collected short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne were boring enough to read on a full stomach. Shutting her laptop, she signed and pulled out a fresh garbage bag from her hidden supply to deal with the temptation. It would sit in her room overnight, waiting to be joined by her morning toast and fruit. Luckily, after more than a decade of cleaning up after Steven and Amethyst, Pearl insisted on buying odor-proof bags.

As Connie dumped the food into the bag, a generous dollop of the sauce ran along her thumb. She stared at the cool, garlicky residue, lifting her hand slowly, delicately toward her lips. Just a taste wouldn’t make her sick, would it?

DESIST/NEGATIVE/ABSTAIN

The sudden thought threw Connie out of her chair. It wasn’t the volume or the vehemence of the notion, but the fact that she had been thinking the exact opposite at the same time. She sat on the floor, breathing hard, and stared at the runnel of sauce on her thumb. Hand shaking, she raised the sauce toward her lips again.
Her stomach heaved in warning. “Okay, okay!” Connie said, and hurriedly sealed the garbage bag.

Wiping her thumb on her jeans, Connie pressed at the gemstone through her shirt. The thought hadn’t come in words so much as it had in feelings she could recognize. They felt like her feelings, but she knew they couldn’t be hers, because they made no sense.

Cupping the shape of the stone, she murmured, “Jade?”

Connie had no idea what to expect as moments passed in perfect silence. Those moments became minutes, and her expectations became impatience. She rapped her knuckles against the stone and looked down, as if the shape would open like a door and Jade would squeeze out of the gem and into her shirt.

Nothing happened. Connie climbed back into her chair and braced her elbows on the desk, cradling her head as she tried to quell her spinning thoughts. She wanted to text Steven immediately, but knew better. Any evidence on her phone could ruin all her clever trickery if her parents were feeling particularly nosy one day. But she had to do something. The alien in her body was making first contact, and she doubted there were any TubeTube how-to videos that could give her good pointers on nonverbal interstellar mediation.

She sat for nearly an hour, whispering and thinking at the Gem inside of her. Nothing seemed to stir the fickle creature like her dinner had, and Connie did not want to risk puking just to get another rise out of her. If Jade really was waking up, Connie didn’t want their sole relationship to be an antagonistic standoff about food, especially if Jade remained as temperamental as other corrupted Gems.

After exhausting her brain, Connie was ready to quit. She started absently straightening her desk, if only to distract herself from her failure to communicate. Maybe with more time she could establish a rapport with Jade, but in the meantime, she gathered her schoolbooks, starting with the story collection for English class.

She froze, staring at the picturesque cover of the book. Its quaint pilgrim village was a far cry more pleasant than the actual contents of the book, but now Connie held it with new appreciation. She flipped to a random page and began to read a piece of one story. Her eyes skimmed the familiar words, barely registering them as she held her breath, waiting.

Snapping the book shut, Connie laughed. “Well, that’s at least one thing we can agree on,” she said. She sorted through the other books on her desk, seeing if she could repeat the experience. “Is there something you do like? We don’t start Edgar Allan Poe for another week, but I don’t mind reading ahead.”

When her search came across her math book, she felt a different twinge. She opened the book to the chapter they were working on in class.

Connie grinned and closed the book. “What’s that thing Galileo said about math and language?” she mused aloud.
Nobody answered her, but she didn’t mind. She thought she was beginning to understand. Checking the clock, Connie saw that it was late, but not too late. Her parents wouldn’t object to a little extra practice, and it was in the name of diplomacy.

She collected her violin and bow from their case. After rosinign the bow, she took her seat back at the desk and opened a project file on her laptop that she kept buried deep in a hidden folder. An array of sheet music glowed on the screen, the clefs and notes immediately familiar to her. She spent a few minutes messing with the same handful of notes she always did, changing them on the sheet, then changing them back, running the melody through her head.

Then, lifting the violin to her shoulder, she tested the strings. The instrument was still mostly in tune from her practice before dinner. She took a deep breath, set her eyes to the screen, and began to play.

There were other songs that she knew better, more polished songs she could have played. But this piece was different. It was one of her own, started long before she and her parents had moved into their current home, almost immediately after she had started learning the violin. Her bow moved smoothly, her fingers finding the notes more by memory than by the screen. As she looked at the sheet music, she focused instead on remembering all of the time she had spent arranging the notes.

She had started the song as an elegy from the perspective of Lisa, the main character from *The Spirit Morph Saga*. She imagined Lisa singing it in her lowest moment, trapped in the Underworld and separated from Archimicarus just after learning the horrible truth about Plinkman. As she had grown older, and after that debacle of a final book, Connie had hidden the song away without looking at it for over a year.

Then she had met Steven, and something had made her unearth the song again. She began to see it differently. It wasn’t supposed to be an elegy. Lisa wouldn’t wallow in the Underworld, she would persevere. The song needed to be hopeful, and so the melody had changed to reflect it. As Lisa fought her way out of danger and back to Archimicarus, the notes came faster, brighter, and the whole song began to turn.

As Connie played, humming the lyrics because she was too embarrassed to sing them aloud, even to herself, she came to the same realization she always did when she revisited the song. It wasn’t about Lisa anymore. It was about her, and about Steven.

Her bow drew the final note. She stilled, quieting her thoughts as she closed her eyes.

Connie smiled. “Thank you,” she murmured, touching her shirt and the warm gemstone underneath.

Before Connie could wonder how to explain the purpose of music using only feelings, a knock at her door startled her. “Connie? It’s time to get ready for bed,” her mother called through the door.

“Okay!” Connie called back, and hurried to bundle her garbage bag out of sight.

She bussed her plate to the kitchen, then brushed her teeth and changed into her pajamas. The whole time, she remained silent, waiting for some other reaction from her passenger. No new feelings arose during her mundane bedtime ritual, but Connie didn’t mind. As she climbed into bed, her stomach gnawing at her with hunger, she felt eager for the next day, and doubly so for Saturday, when she could tell Steven and the Gems about this mind-blowing development. Peridot’s theory had been correct, at least in part. Her connection with Jade was more than just physical.
It was a fight to get her mind quiet enough to find sleep, but as Connie closed her eyes, she felt hopeful, and excited, and trapped, and eager to wake again to a day of new possibilities.

“Connie?”

Blearily, Connie shook herself awake. Her head pounded, the pain so intense that it was almost a noise in her skull. She blinked, her eyes sticky with tears, and saw that it was still dark outside through the window. Something warm and metallic pressed into her grip, and made a clacking noise as she tried to turn it.

A hand rested on her shoulder from behind, and she heard her name again. “Connie? Sweetie, what are you doing?” her mother said.

Connie blinked again. She was looking at the front door down in the entryway of the house. Her bare feet were cold against the hardwood floor. She was still dressed in her pajama pants and the pink shirt she had borrowed from Steven. A ferocious case of bedhead had sent her hair in every direction. And her hand sat on the door’s knob, jiggling the locked door as if to open it.

As the headache faded, Connie felt the orphaned emotions resonate against her confusion. She didn’t remember waking up or walking downstairs, but evidently she had, and not by accident.

“Mom?” she whispered shakily.

Her mother knelt down next to her, smoothing Connie’s hair back behind her ear. She was dressed in her thick white robe and matching slippers, her own hair disheveled. The baseball bat that was kept beneath her parents’ bed lay discarded behind her on the floor. “I heard something downstairs and thought someone was trying to break in. Connie, what are you doing up? Why are you trying to go outside?” The words were soft, a genuine question instead of an accusation.

“I…don’t know,” Connie said. She could still feel an overwhelming urge to open the door and leave, even though the notion frightened her. It took real effort to pull her hand off the doorknob. She took the hand back, clutching it to her chest as she stared at the door in shock.

“I think you were sleepwalking, sweetie,” her mother said, and rubbed at Connie’s shoulder reassuringly. “Maybe you were having a nightmare, or maybe you’ve been working too hard. I should schedule an appointment with Doctor Jagrat. He’s the hospital’s sleep specialist.”

A sudden vision of billowy hospital gowns and stethoscopes clacking against hidden gemstones knocked Connie fully awake. “No!” she exclaimed, surprising her mother back a step. Clamping down on her voice, Connie said, “I mean, you’re right. It was probably just a nightmare. We shouldn’t waste the doctor’s time if this is just one bad dream. Right?”

Her mother did not look convinced, but she drawled, “Alright. Well, let’s get you back to bed.” Her hand lingered on Connie’s shoulder, still comforting and perhaps a little possessive.

Connie felt the squalling behind her own worry. She turned and wrapped her arms around her mother, hugging her hard enough to knock her back a step. Pressing her face into the soft fabric of the robe, Connie said, “Don’t let me run away, Mom. I don’t want to go.”

A warm embrace wrapped around Connie in reply. “You’re not going anywhere,” her mother
murmured. “If I get my way, you won’t move out until you turn thirty. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Shaking her head, Connie still clung to her mother, ignoring the wordless protest welling in her chest. “I’m sure. I’m okay now.”

“Any more late-night escapades, and I’m making that appointment,” her mother warned her.

They walked up the stairs together, and her mother even went so far as to tuck her back into bed, something she hadn’t done since before they had last moved. Connie might have thought it embarrassing, or maybe sweet, but she was too focused inward, looking for any thought, any feeling, that might not be her own.

As the door shut behind her mother, Connie shivered and squirmed deeper under the covers, and hoped she would still be under them when she awoke. Peridot’s theory wasn’t only proving to be correct. It was just the tip of the iceberg. She would have to wait until Saturday to see what the diminutive engineer thought of this terrifying new development.
"So she tried to abduct you?" Peridot said. Her eyes sparkled excitedly behind her visor. "That's outstanding!"

The interior of the barn hummed with a plethora of new devices, each one a mishmash of repurposed junk. All of the other sculptures and oddities—meep morps, Steven had called them—and the furnishings had been shoved up against the walls to make room for Peridot's ultimate creation. As the green Gem tinkered with her devices, Connie stood back with Steven and Amethyst, watching far enough back so as not to be caught in the blast radius if anything went dramatically wrong.

Connie grimaced around a headache that had long since outgrown her skull. "Not really," she said. "I keep waking up afraid that I'm going to be halfway to Ocean Town, and my mom keeps 'checking up' on me."

Half-buried in the hood of a pickup truck propped on cinder blocks, Peridot waved off Connie's words. "Yes, yes, I'm sure the strain on your family unit has been difficult. But the actions you describe don't just confirm my hypothesis…I told you so, by the way…but they denote the presence of an intelligence beyond anything I anticipated!"

Amethyst idly crunched on the contents of a bag of CHAAAAPS. Cheese dust sprayed from her lips as she said, "So she's smart? So what? I thought you said Jades were all about information and junk. Turbo-nerds, kinda like you."

Running a set of jumper cables from the truck's guts to what appeared to be an inside-out washing machine, Peridot said, "The turbo-nerdiest, to use your parlance. But corrupted Gems never retain their capacity for reason. They're just big, dumb, mindless creatures acting on instinct."

A wave of CHAAAAPS spattered against the back of Peridot's head, spraying crumbs and flavor dust across her back and crunching at her feet. She stiffened and whirled around to see Steven already armed with another handful from Amethyst's bag. Steven gave her a reproachful look, one that Connie did not quite understand.

Brushing the orange dust out of her hair, Peridot said through her teeth, "Excuse me: corrupted Gems are lost, tortured beings, lonely and incapable of expressing themselves."

Steven nodded in satisfaction and handed the CHAAAAPS back to Amethyst, who ate the whole handful in a single bite.

"But why does trying to sleepwalk me out a door make Jade smart?" Connie asked. The tantalizing, tangy nacho cheese scent of the CHAAAAPS was driving her crazy, so she tried to focus on the reason they had come to the barn instead. Her lunch bar sat in the pocket of her jeans, waiting to make her miserable.

Crawling inside the inverted washing machine, Peridot said, "I assume your human habitation pod features viewports? Either as aesthetic choices or for passive climatic control?"

"I think you're asking if my house has windows," Connie said slowly. "And yes, it does. So?"

Peridot's head popped out the top of the machine, her hair phoomping back into shape. "So, why would a locked door stop a corrupted Gem? It would just jump through a win-dow and be gone long before your matriarch discovered you."
Connie thought through Jade's wordless murmurings while Peridot unspooled a length of heavy wire to wrap around a rusty piece of flagpole. All through Friday's classes at school, Connie had gotten flashes of impatience and boredom that weren't entirely her own, although she could empathize with those feelings during history class. Those feelings were coming more frequently, the emotions clearer and more complex than before.

"But why is that important?" asked Connie.

"Why?" Peridot echoed in disbelief. "Because whatever Jade's doing inside of you, she's doing it semi-rationally. Something about the bonding process might have suppressed, or even reversed, her corruption! That's unprecedented!" she cried. Then she looked to Amethyst and said, "That's unprecedented, right?"

"Uh, I can't be sure. It's never really happened before," Amethyst said. Her *CHAAAAAPS* consumed, bag and all, she laced her hands behind her head to watch Peridot work. She glanced around the cluttered workshop and asked, "Where's Lapis? She get bored by all the nerd stuff too?"

Peridot paused in mid-coil. "Lapis is…elsewhere," she said, and then stabbed the flagpole and coil into the heart of the washing machine. "I promised her I would have her morps moved back before she returned."

More likely, Connie thought, Lapis would refuse to return until the experiment, and its subject, were long gone. She shivered at the memory of the graceful blue Gem's anger when she had first suspected Jade might be aware inside of her. It was hard to blame Lapis for not wanting to watch her barn-mate poke and prod another trapped Gem.

"What about the others?" Peridot asked, quickly changing the subject. She ran a new cable over to a microwave sitting atop an old engine block, both of which had lost most of their pieces. The microwave was an ancient model, the kind that used a dial instead of a proper, civilized touchpad. The dial was labeled with numbers, and it had little pictures of microwavable foods pasted around the outside of the dial as a quick reference for the foods' cooking times.

"Eh, they're out checking the Beta Kindergarten," Amethyst said, shrugging. "Something keeps bugging Garnet's future vision. This is, like, the third time this week she and Pearl have run off on a wild duck chase."

"Goose chase," Steven corrected her.

"Her precognitive abilities make her pursue local water fowl? That makes no sense," Peridot said. Then she produced a small toy car and carefully, exactingly, placed it in the center of the gutted microwave.

"The farther out Garnet sees, and the bigger the possibilities, the more room there is for different stuff to happen or not happen," Steven explained. Puffing out his chest, he said, "Garnet's lent future vision to me before. I'm kind of an expert."

He had to jump out of the way as Peridot shoved a large brown easy chair into the center of her machines. The chair had been modified, or maybe impaled, with a series of metal rods that formed a reticulating armature that hung above the seat. Peridot fitted the arm with some kind of forked apparatus made from old grilling tongs and electrical tape.

"Enough preamble!" Peridot announced. "Behold the fruits of my genius: I give you a fully functional Kindergarten-grade Gemological Dissipation Inducer. And I didn't even use a single resonance crystal." She blew on her knuckles, obviously impressed with herself.
"I just heard a bunch of words, but I don't think any of them explained what this stuff actually does," Amethyst said.

Frustrated, Peridot gestured to the armature above the easy chair. "It's a tool we use in Kindergartens. Sometimes when a Gem emerges and forms, she has trouble making a workable construct. Too many arms, an extra torso, mouths for knees, that sort of thing. So we just give 'em a zap with one of these, and they go back in their gem, typically correcting the issue on their next attempt. Of course," Peridot said, snickering and slapping the side of the truck, "ours were handheld, but I've improvised a working model."

Steven squinted at the prongs looming above the chair. "That part looks like the thingy you zapped us with when you abducted us," he said.

Her self-satisfaction cracking, Peridot said, "Yes, well...once the technology was developed, certain other military applications were discovered. It uses the same principles as the Gem Destabilizers supplied to us on our mission to Earth."

Connie stared up at the menacing prongs. Her eyes followed the cables snaking across the floor to each piece of the composite apparatus. Visions of Victor Frankenstein's laboratory flashed behind her eyes, with herself cast as the reanimated monster. She wanted to seem brave, but there was a tremor in her voice as she asked, "Will it hurt?"

Tapping his chin, Steven said, "I got zapped with one of the Gem Destabilizers, and it's kind of like a cross between being tickled and being a phone stuck on vibrate."

"The device is worthless against whatever Steven is," Peridot agreed. "But if Jade's connection to you is different than Steven's is to his Quartz, we could see a different reaction. If the connection Jade has with you has anything to do with her partially taking form inside of you, this process will disrupt the connection. Best-case scenario: we turn the machine on, and Jade just falls off of you."

"What's the worst-case scenario?" Connie asked.

Peridot grew absolutely still. An awkward smile spread slowly across her face, ostensibly meant to reassure Connie. It had the exact opposite effect. "Let's not get lost in speculation," Peridot said. "This is an experiment. So, let's experiment!"

With trepidation, and a helping hand from Steven, Connie climbed into the overstuffed easy chair. Her body sank into the upholstery, her skin sticking noisily to the cracking vinyl where her tank top left her bare. Without warning, the chair flipped backwards, its footrest extending and its back tilting until Connie laid flat. She clutched the armrests in surprise, swallowing hard as she stared up at the grimy, holey barn ceiling high above.

Hopping onto a wooden stool, Peridot aimed the tines of the armature squarely at the green stone beneath Connie's neck. The metal tips loomed above the gemstone. "Amethyst, I'll need you to regulate the power from the repurposed radiation food preparation device while I maintain calibration on the de-attunement tines. I've routed power control to the device's primary dial."

Amethyst followed the direction of Peridot's gesture and found the gutted microwave with the toy car inside. "I'm on it," she called, readying her hand on the timer dial.

Connie's empty stomach knotted itself as Peridot lowered the tines to grasp either side of Jade's flat, blocky stone. The cold touch of metal raised goosebumps across Connie's skin. "Peridot, are you certain about this?" she asked.
The green Gem scoffed in reply. "Nothing in science is certain until after it's happened. Sometimes not even then." She produced a set of thick, clunky welding goggles, which she layered over her yellow visor. "Okay, Amethyst, start the device on the corn fragment rupture setting," she called over her shoulder.

"Crankin' it to popcorn," Amethyst said, and twisted the dial so its arrow rested on the little picture of a piece of popcorn.

Seven different mechanical noises arose, filling the barn with a discordant hum-clatter-wonk that rattled the walls. The assembled machines shook with bolt-rending force, but aside from a few loose pieces here and there, they remained intact. All of the machines' thunderous work poured up the armature of the chair and into the metal tongs, where it manifested as a yellow light that shimmered and arced.

Connie stiffened at the sensation filling her body. It was as if every inch of her had simultaneously licked a battery. True to Steven's word, it did not hurt, but it was a far cry from a tickle.

Peridot's mouth puckered in concentration. "No reaction yet. Let's increase the power to the vapor-prepped plant matter setting," she said.

Turning the dial further, Amethyst called back, "We're up to steamed veggies!"

The tingling intensified. Connie felt herself start to shudder involuntarily at the power coursing through her. The vinyl of the chair squeaked and squalled as her skin shivered against it. She watched her hair begin to rise at the edges of her vision, drifting and dancing with static. Her fingers dug into the armrests as she tried to remain still, but all she wanted to do was throw aside the tines. And she wasn't sure that the desire was entirely her own.

Evidently displeased, Peridot smacked the side of the armature as if to jiggle loose some extra effect she had been expecting out of the device. "Okay! Take it up to cryo-preserved animal byproduct pre-convection!"

"Meat defrost!" Amethyst confirmed, cranking the dial. Her own long, white hair began to drift upwards as the power flowing through the cables steeped the air.

In a flash of yellow light, the noise of the machines became a deafening roar. The washing machine jerked itself across the floor by inches as its unbalanced insides whirled. A keening honk arose from the old truck, its horn joining the din. Peridot had to keep both hands on the armature to hold it in place above Connie. The triangle of golden hair surrounding the Gem's goggles became a wild bottle-brush puff.

Doubled over beside the chair, Steven had his hands over his ears. Connie wanted to shout to him, but her jaw was locked shut by the numbing, seizing force of the energy. Veins of yellow light began to crawl beneath her skin, forming lines in her arms and legs that were almost technical in their pattern. It would have amazed Connie if she still had the capacity to think or feel anything beside the raw power that was turning her into the filament of a light bulb.

The stool quaked beneath Peridot, threatening to toss her to the floor. "Amethyst!" she screamed, "raise the power level to subterranean tuber preparation!"

"We're going baked potato!" Amethyst bellowed, and turned the dial to its furthest. The tiny car inside the microwave became a fountain of sparks.

Connie clenched her eyes shut and gripped the armrests. Her mouth tasted like pennies, and her
whole body felt like cold, crackling fire. She could see the yellow lines forming in the skin of her eyelids, turning her vision into a blinding haze. She needed the sensation to stop. She needed to break free from that terrible machine. She was already late, and she needed to get back with what she knew, before...

The light and sound vanished all at once, plunging the barn into dark silence. Daylight streamed in through the open doors to paint the lifeless machinery the color of the late afternoon sun. The quiet was its own kind of deafening, the sudden change startling all of them as the composite device powered down.

Connie jerked forward as the tension in her muscles relaxed. The motion shoved the tongs off her chest, which threw Peridot off the stool. Looking down at her arms, Connie found that the glowing lines had vanished. A soft halo floated around her head, and when she reached up to touch it, she found her hair in a static cloud hovering above her.

Peridot snarled, ripping away her goggles. "It's that lousy circuit breaker again," she snapped. "You humans have a laughably low threshold for what constitutes 'acceptably safe' levels of voltage."

Steven rested a hand on the chair, his features heavy with concern, his hair puffed out from the static cloud in the air. "Connie?" he said.

"I'm okay," she told him, trying to smooth her hair. "Just a little rattled."

Amethyst made a wide circle around Peridot's griping tantrum to stand beside Steven. Her own hair still floated about her head. "Nice 'do!" she said to them. "It's like we're all cartoon characters who got scared. Did anything happen with Jade?"

"EXTREME DISCONTENT"

Touching the gemstone, Connie said, "She's still here. If anything, her feelings are clearer than ever. And I kind of agree with her right now."

Peridot's tantrum abated and she look up, exclaiming, "Really? Fascinating! Perhaps if I recalibrate for our next attempt..."

Connie laid back in the armchair, sighing. Her body ached from the strain of the machine as if she had forced a week's worth of sword training out of herself in just a few minutes. As she lay there, her thoughts untwisting, she saw a fleeting glimpse of something shimmering above her. Through a gap in the distant roof, she thought she saw something watching her from above. But when she looked back once more, it was only the blue of the sky.

"I'm willing to try again," Connie said, "but maybe not today. And I don't think Jade will appreciate it much."

Peevishly, Peridot retorted, "Well, if Jade has any better ideas, I'm all ears. ...in the colloquial sense. If I was actually all ears, you'd need to use a Dissipation Inducer on me."

"Hear, hear!" Amethyst agreed. Her body flashed white, and she reshaped herself into a giant human ear, her face dangling from the lobe.

Connie chuckled and said, "If she comes up with any suggestions, I'll be sure to let you know."
Long Walk

Warm sand wriggled between her toes. She drew a long, deep breath, savoring the taste of the sea breeze brushing gently through her hair. The surf lapped gently against the shore, white foam dancing over her feet and soaking the hem of her long dress. Her footprints vanished into wet sand behind her as she wandered the shoreline.

It was night, but her skin felt as if it were bathed in summer sunshine. Stars glittered overhead, brighter and more numerous than they ever had before. It reminded her of the time her family had moved cross-country, driving on the highways far between cities, where there had been no light pollution to dull the sky. She looked up as she walked, her breath stolen by the sight of new constellations, and her face split into a laughing grin.

The laughter echoed off a cliff face abutting the beach and vanished out toward the black horizon. Aside from the soft thudding of her footsteps and the gentle waves, there was no other sound. Normally she would hear seagulls quarreling over sticky garbage or the quiet bustle of small-town night life. But even the breeze passed in silence, felt but not heard.

She closed her eyes and spread her arms, letting the surf babble over her feet. The dark of night, the silence, and the warm waves were perfect. It had been her favorite thing about her new home ever since…

Ever since…

She struggled to remember.

"Is someone there?" a distant voice called faintly.

Opening her eyes, she saw a figure in the distance, tiny and shadowed in the night. Even still, she could feel the attention of the figure. Its gaze was fixed upon her.

Feet splashing, she ran toward the figure. Another shape began taking form from the dark, this time in the cliff face looming over a sharp curve in the beach. As she drew closer, she watched the cliff coalesce into a looming quartet of arms extending out from the granite. The arms belonged to a towering statue carved from the stone, its features warm, inviting, and not quite human. It was artistry on a scale she had never seen before, at least not in person. The statue looked beautiful, and stoic, and confident, and sad.

She walked for a time, too lost in the statue's face. When she finally looked away, she was surprised to find the figure she had seen standing before her at arm's length. "Oh!" she exclaimed, startled. "Hello."

The figure stared back at her. It wore a dress with a long skirt, the hem of which danced in the seafoam as waves lapped over its bare feet. The dress was festooned with a ribbon tied into a bow that hung at the base of the figure's throat. It had a pronounced nose and thick eyebrows, and its eyes glittered with silent questions. A wave of dark hair spilled over its shoulders all the way to its waist. Thin and lanky, it looked as though its body was an argument between two different growth spurts, unable to decide if it was sick of growing or just getting started.

"Hello."

The figure stared back at her. It wore a dress with a long skirt, the hem of which danced in the seafoam as waves lapped over its bare feet. The dress was festooned with a ribbon tied into a bow that hung at the base of the figure's throat. It had a pronounced nose and thick eyebrows, and its eyes glittered with silent questions. A wave of dark hair spilled over its shoulders all the way to its waist. Thin and lanky, it looked as though its body was an argument between two different growth spurts, unable to decide if it was sick of growing or just getting started.

Most striking, though, was the figure's pallor. Its face, its clothes, and even its hair, all shimmered under reflective waves in shades of old, weatherworn green. Even the whites of its eyes were instead a bright, pale green that made its dark irises into endlessly deep pools.
They stared at each other, their feet sinking into the sand and surf. Neither of them could take their eyes off the other. The world drifted away, as though the infinite shoreline had shrank into the handful of feet between them.

"Awkward silence is awkward…" she muttered, and tried to smile at the green figure.

The figure blinked owlishly. Finally, it spoke. "Are you real?" it asked in a soft, familiar voice.

She considered the question carefully. "I think so," she decided aloud. "Are you real too?"

"I am trying to be," the figure answered.

She fidgeted for a moment, taken aback by the sour note in the figure's voice. Lines of concern creased its green forehead, its dark brows knit in an intense expression. Gesturing below them, she asked the figure, "Would you like to build a sandcastle with me?"

The figure blinked again, its consternation becoming surprise. "Alright," it said.

They knelt just beyond the edge of the surf, piling a foundation between them. With no tools but their hands, they began to shape the rough outline of their castle. For a long while they worked in silence that gradually became less awkward. Patting wet sand into place, they crafted details into the structure, building it so tall that they were forced to stand in order to add to it.

As she added finger-spaced crenellations to her side of the walls, she smiled at their joint venture. It felt nice to be doing something with someone else for once, even if they weren't talking. Or maybe it was pleasant because of the silence, and not in spite of it. After all, she had spent so many of her days in silence with books as her only companion. She liked having friends, but she found she also liked the quiet. Now it was as if she had found both in the same stranger.

Then she looked up and inadvertently broke that silence. "Oh! That's beautiful," she exclaimed.

The figure looked up with a start, its hands still cupped around the tip of a long spire. Whereas her half of the castle was shaped into a prototypical Western European castle, the figure's half was something else entirely. Tall towers lined the far wall, their heights rising in a fibonaccian sequence. Thin spiral shapes ran the height of each tower, carved with the figure's green thumbnail, their intricate pattern formed from a single line that never crossed itself.

"Beautiful?" the figure repeated. "I suppose. It is a place I used to know."

"Where is that?" she asked.

"Home…I think," the figure said.

"Where's home?"

The figure stared out at the ocean. "Far. Very, very far."

"You must miss it a lot. Can't you go back?"

Staring down at its hands, the figure said, "Not like this."

"What made you leave home? Why come here?"

The question made the figure think. "I believe…that I like this place. This beach. It is peaceful," she decided.
"How long have you been here?"

The figure regarded her. Green lips tilted into a smile, clearly an awkward and unfamiliar gesture for it. "You ask a lot of questions," it said.

"Yup!" she agreed cheerfully.

Its smile fading, the figure stared over the top of their sandcastle for a long moment. A debate raged behind its green eyes. Then it blinked, reaching a consensus, and it stood from the sand. Brushing clean the front of its dress, the figure said, "I know where you can find all your answers."

"Really?" she said, jumping up with excitement. She had always been made of questions, bursting at the seam with questions, too many questions for teachers or parents or books to answer. "Where?"

"Out there," the figure said, and pointed to the ocean.

When she turned to look, she saw that the water had grown utterly still. It sat like a perfect sheet of glass, mirroring the night sky, making the shoreline look as though it sat at the very edge of the universe. She squinted at the horizon but only saw stars. "Where? I don't see anything," she said.

"You have to go out there to find it," the figure told her.

She left their sandcastle and stepped hesitantly toward the still waters. Her bare foot settled atop the water's surface, which felt hard and slick against her skin, like sun-warmed stone coated in morning dew. Carefully she walked a few paces out from the shore. Though slippery, the water remained solid beneath her.

"You can do it," the figure said encouragingly.

Her heart racing, she began walking toward the starry horizon. Her feet slapped wetly against the impossible path. As the shoreline left her periphery, it became impossible to gauge distance. The stars glimmered beneath her, making it seem like she was traversing the galaxy on foot. The sense of adventure made her feel giddy and light.

Gradually, infinitesimally, the horizon began to change. The stars around her began to fade away. Whole constellations grew dark, disappearing into the sky above and the mirrored ground below. As she kept walking, she was confused by the number of stars in the world behind her and their disappearance in the world ahead.

Standing beneath the giantess carved from the cliff, the figure called, "Keep going."

The surface of the water chilled, sapping the heat out of her skin. She shivered and hugged her arms, and her pace slowed. With each new step the slap of her feet became more muffled. The sound of her own ragged breathing dwindled to a whisper in her ears.

When she looked over her shoulder, the shore was a single bright line in the darkness. The stone giantess was barely a dot in the distance. Drifting ethereally from nowhere, the figure's voice said, "You are almost there."

She took another step, then stopped. Something felt terribly wrong. It was colder than before, but she had stopped shivering. The freezing ground had sapped all of the feeling out of her body. She felt smaller. Lesser. Diminished. Like more of her was missing than was still there.

"Almost," the figure whispered.
Shaking her head, she said, "No. No, I don't want to be here anymore."

"No, please, you are so close!"

She stumbled backwards a step, and her foot struck sand. The warm beach caught her as she fell, awash in the sound of the waves and the sensation of the ocean breeze. Looking up, she saw the giantess looming above her, arms spread wide and high. The stars were back and bright again, shimmering in the ocean.

A shadow fell over her. It was the figure, who stood over her, its fists trembling, its face twisting in rage. "Why could you not just keep walking? You were so close! Why did you come back?" it demanded.

Shrinking back, she stammered, "I didn't…"

"You were supposed to leave!" the figure bellowed. "If you left, I would finally be alone here, and maybe then I could finally find my way home!" The breeze began to circle the figure, stirring the sand into a whirling spray at its green feet. "Now I am stuck here forever with you!"

The breeze became a cyclone that lifted the figure off the beach. She had to scramble backwards from the figure, flinching at the sand spray blasting against her skin. Wind howled in her ears, resonating with the same rage and pain that filled the figure's voice. "Please, stop!" she begged.

"Just leave me alone!" the figure howled.

The rest of the beach vanished into a raging sandstorm. As she squinted, trying to shield her face with her arm, she caught sight of the giantess above her, now a silhouette in the storm. There was another silhouette below the giantess, sheltered between the stone arms. She recognized the shape of it and staggered forward, leaning deeply into the wind.

Each step felt like it lasted a hundred years. She thought the sand would strip her down to the bone. But she kept putting one foot in front of the other. As she peered through watering eyes, she saw the shape being sheltered under the giantess's arms. It was her house.

Spurred by the familiar sight, she ran up the steps of the house. The windows glowed pink with warm light inside. She grasped the knob and threw the door open, collapsing inside.

---

Connie yelped, landing on the floor next to her bed. Her sheets were twisted around her and soaked through with sweat. Panic thundered in her ears and inside her chest, rattling against the gemstone at her throat.

The beach, the ocean, and the cold…it had seemed so real at the time. She could remember every detail of the experience as vividly as any other memory in her head. Her skin still ached with the sting of the sandstorm, and her eyes watered as she blinked heavily.

A shiver ran through her as she relived the cold and darkness of her long walk across the ocean. The chill had soaked into her, going deeper than skin, deeper than bone, to places she had never known before that darkness had poured into them. The green figure from her dreams had wanted her to walk deeper into the darkness. Would anything have been left of her if she had taken another step?

It had seemed so real. But she was awake now.

Wasn't she?
Scrambling to her desk, Connie fumbled for her phone. She didn't care about the early morning hour that glowed in the phone's clock, or the fleeting chance that her parents might hear her through the wall. Her thumb hammered the phone's face until it began to ring.

Pressing the phone to her ear, she closed her eyes and whispered, "Please pick up. Please pick up." She repeated the words too many times to count.

Just before the fifth ring ended, the call connected, and Steven's sleepy voice on the other end said, "...hullo?"

"It's Connie," she said, and then clutched her face in embarrassment. Of course he could see who was calling him at this miserable hour. "I'm sorry I called so late. Early. Whatever it is right now. I'm not sure."

"Are you okay?" His voice became clearer. She imagined him sitting upright in bed, staring at the phone with that look he got whenever he was worried.

Her voice shook as she said, "I shouldn't have called. I'm sorry. Go back to bed. Sorry."

She was reaching for the button to end the call when Steven's voice froze her. "Connie, wait. What's wrong?"

The beach had felt so real. Her room, her phone, her fear...it all felt real too. But was it?

Clutching the phone in both hands, she said, "Tell me something that happened today. Something only you would say. Please."

"Oh. Um, let's see...I couldn't find the Crying Breakfast Friends lunchbox my dad got me as a gift last month, and Pearl said I needed to put my stuff away if I wanted to keep track of where it was. But it turns out that Amethyst ate it because she didn't understand that 'lunchbox' means you're supposed to keep food inside of it."

Connie clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. The muffled laughter spread through her chest in a warm wave, chasing away the last of her chill. She could imagine the scene between the two Gems perfectly, with poor Steven between them, but she never could have conceived of such a ridiculous moment on her own.

The sound seemed to soften Steven's worry. "Did something happen? Do you need help?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow. I mean, later today. You should go back to sleep."

"...okay. Goodnight, Connie."

Connie smiled. "Good morning, Steven," she said.

The phone went silent. Connie turned the phone over in her hands as she knelt on the floor, staring blankly through the wall. Gradually the warmth in her chest cooled, not to a chill, but only just. She relived the furious shout of the figure in the sandstorm. The memory of it lingered, mingling with memories of the fight on the beach with the corrupted Gem.

Reaching up, Connie touched the gemstone through the collar of her pink shirt. She was still scared, but not only for herself anymore. "Why are you so angry?" she whispered.

She waited, but found only silence. No answer came by the time sleep finally claimed her once more.
No answer came until she woke again.
As her bleary vision coalesced, Connie saw the bright rectangle of her laptop's monitor glowing in front of her. A powerful ache throbbed in her back and neck from sitting ramrod straight in her chair. Her fingertips rested on the trackpad, scrolling through an article on the screen faster than she could make out the individual words. Dried tears made her eyes sticky as she blinked herself awake.

"Where… Why am I…" she mumbled, and looked around her room. She was seated at her desk with the bed abandoned behind her, the sheets and comforter kicked to the floor. Scrolling up the laptop screen, Connie saw the header for a Ficklepedia article on human psychology, with other tabs in the browser for similar articles on neurology, neuroscience, language, and sandcastles.

"Wait, why are the fingers no longer responding?" The thought resonated in Connie's head, sounding and feeling like any other thought she might have. But the thought was not hers. "Oh. Are you conscious again, human?"

Connie rubbed at her eyes. "Why am I out of bed?" she mumbled to herself. "And why am I reading this?"

"You were not." The thought came to her riding a wave of annoyance. "I have spent the last several decicrons devising a means of communicating with the lump of fats and protein at the center of your cranium using the meager tools provided to me. Lucky for both of us, it appears I was successful."

She froze at the thoughts. Her room was silent save for the sounds of birdsong outside as morning light spilled in through her window. The inner voice she heard felt like her own, but it was not coming from her. Reaching up, she tapped the gemstone through her shirt and whispered, "Jade?"

"Ah. It seems you already know what and/or who I am," came the silent reply. "Good. That will save us some time. I require your assistance, human. Does your tribe, or pod, or whatever you call your group unit, nest in close proximity to a Gem outpost?"

Clutching her temples, Connie pushed away the last of her headache and mentally clutched at the voice, her heart thundering in excitement. "I can't believe it. You're actually talking to me!"

"Talking' is not the most accurate term for our communication. I have found a way of using nerve impulses to imitate your brain's primitive form of sub-vocalization by—"

"This is incredible!" Connie exclaimed, drowning out the thought. "Can I do it too?" She closed her eyes and concentrated hard on the words, "Can you hear me?"

A choking sound filled her mind in reply. "Nngh, stop! Stop, stop, stop! If you do not know what you are doing, your attempts simply add white noise to the process. Besides, I can understand you fine when you vocalize your thoughts."

"But I—"

"We have now wasted all of that time I thought I had saved by not needing an introduction. So listen very carefully, human: I have somehow gotten stuck inside of you, and I require assistance in being extracted. If you can locate the nearest Gem facility, they will be able to remove me from you with minimal damage to your body. Probably."

Connie frowned. "You don't remember how you got here?" she asked.
"Given your species' proclivity for sticking things in your mouths, I can only assume you tried to eat me. My attempt to reform must have been hindered by this disgusting, sloshing bag of liquids and bones."

A surge of irritation bubbled in Connie's empty stomach. She had pictured her first meeting with the Gem inside of her ever since Jade had begun to stir, but somehow this wasn't the moment of first contact for which she had tried to prepare.

That annoyance at her rude passenger brought back a flash of the nightmare that had thrown her to the floor. "You were the person I met on the beach last night, weren't you? In my dream," she said. "What were you trying to make me do when I was walking on the ocean?"

"Oh! You, uh, remember that encounter. The connection via your subconscious was my first attempt at communication, and I had hoped…I mean, I thought you might not remember. In any case, it did not work, and now that I have established contact, it is irrelevant. We must make haste. However or for whatever reason you ingested me, I do not want to risk exiting by natural means if at all possible." A shudder of discontent rattled alongside the thought.

As a teenage girl, Connie was no stranger to being evasive when a topic of conversation turned uncomfortable. If anything, she had earned a gold medal in verbal gymnastics to keep herself from accidentally blurting Jade's existence to her parents. "Don't change the subject," Connie said. "You were making me sleepwalk last week. What were you trying to do?"

"I do not recall those events. I only became aware of my predicament within the last twelve of your 'hours,' and will not assume responsibility for your nocturnal wanderings. I do not even know how to sleep, to say nothing of doing so in an ambulatory fashion," Jade said.

"You tried to make me run away in the middle of the night!" Connie snapped.

"Even if I did, could you blame me?" Jade retorted. "You ate me!"

"Oh, for the love of…I did not eat you!" Connie stalked over to her full-length mirror on the closet door. She grasped at the collar of her shirt and tugged it down, revealing the gemstone seated beneath her neck. It felt odd to be giving her reflection an I-Told-You-So look, but she was too angry to care.

"Is that…me? How did… What did you…?" The vitriol in Jade's thoughts evaporated. Her ephemeral voice shrank, wobbling as if on the verge of tears. "I'm not just inside of you. I…I am you!" she cried.

It was hard for Connie to stay angry as she heard the tremor of genuine fear in Jade's words. Sighing, she released her shirt collar and said, "It's a long story."

A knock at her bedroom door startled Connie. She whirled at her mother's voice, which filtered through the closed door. "Connie? Are you on the phone? Who are you talking to?"

"It's nothing, Mom," Connie called back. Then, thinking twice, she added, "It's this funny playlist on TubeTube. This one guy takes bottled soda and breath mints, and he—"

There was no faster way to guarantee her mother's disinterest than to mention some byproduct of the internet media generation. "You have school today, Connie. Get dressed and come downstairs for your breakfast."

Connie held her breath and listened until she heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs. Then she sighed and began digging through her dresser for an outfit to wear to school. Her choices had
become limited to shirts with a high enough collar and thick enough material to hide her passenger. As the weather grew warmer, her wardrobe options would become exceedingly sparse. "Breakfast," she said wistfully. "Hey, now that we're talking, we need to figure out what to do about food."

"Ugh," Jade replied, regaining some of her former superiority. "Yes, you humans require constant sustenance and respiration to maintain your physical form. I can abide by the latter, but the former is nigh-unbearable. All of that wet, sloppy, disgusting bio-matter sliding inside, churning and breaking apart and reforming into…urghhh. Fortunately, I have found a nearly acceptable alternative. Look next to your primitive communication hub."

It took Connie a few extra seconds to discern Jade's meaning, and then she went to her desk and picked up a wrapper next to her laptop. "You mean this? This is just from my meal bar last night."

"Exactly. I had feared that our shared 'issue' might become an extended one—a fear which I now find was fully justified—and so when I discovered the discarded nutrient container, I researched its properties on the communication device while I still possessed control of our form's locomotion. This ¡Soy Delicioso! product meets all the caloric and dietary needs of the average human, and is engineered to produce as little byproduct as possible. Given the circumstances, I find it efficient and, based on its olfactory remnants, satisfactorily tasteless."

Connie scowled and threw the wrapper aside. "That isn't fair! It's my body, which makes it my stomach!"

"Human," Jade said warningly, "I already have a front-row seat to the stadium of horror that is your biology. Everything inside of you is constantly sloshing, pumping, oozing, emptying, and refilling. I have already come to terms with the fact that there is no immediate way to circumvent the necessity of your bodily functions. But if I have to endure the loathsome process of your consuming organic matter only to expel it again, I want it to be as preprocessed and removed from its origins as possible, and these bars meet that criteria while ensuring that you will not starve."

Longingly, Connie pictured the toast with orange marmalade purchased fresh from the farmer's market, and the tart raspberries and sweet blueberries, all of which would be waiting downstairs on a plate for Connie to stuff into a garbage bag. "But I'm so hungry," she pleaded. "Can't we compromise?"

Even as she imagined the food, she felt a separate wave of nausea rise up at the back of her throat. "This is a compromise, believe me," Jade grumbled. Then, before Connie could debate, she said, "That voice on the other side of the hatch. That was your commander?"

The title gave Connie pause, as it wasn't entirely inaccurate. "That's my mother," she said.

"Aha, a matriarch. Splendid. Request permission to use your pack's means of transit, and you can take us to the nearest Gem outpost. Does your species still domesticate beasts of burden to use for transport?"

Struggling into a high-collared shirt, Connie said, "I can't drive myself anywhere!"

"Well, then request an escort," Jade replied testily. "Do not bog this issue down in semantics, human. We need to extricate me from this form immediately!"

"I mean," Connie said, fumbling with the shirt's buttons, "I can't just go off and do whatever you want on a whim. I have to go to school."

"School? A learning facility? Unacceptable," Jade insisted. "I have no time to waste on your
"remedial education. You can regurgitate human trivia once we have found a solution to our integration."

"Tough. I already have experts working hard on a way to get you out of me at the local…er, 'Gem outpost.' In the meantime, my Mom isn't going to let me skip school. We'll go visit the Gems right after school, I promise." If what she suspected about Jade was true, it would make their trip to meet the Crystal Gems potentially tricky. It would be better to leave the details vague until they actually reached the beach house, where she could explain the situation with help and, if things went especially poorly, backup.

"You have already contacted a local outpost regarding our issue? Splendid!" Jade said. The thought came with the first glimmers of happiness and hope Connie had felt from the Gem since waking in her chair. "But if you simply explain to your matriarch the nature of the emergency, I am certain she will allow you to—"

"No!" Connie exclaimed, breaking into a sweat at the mere thought of explaining the gemstone to her parents, much less at ditching school to go to Beach City. "No, we have to keep you a secret. If my Mom found out about you, she would drag me to the hospital and never let me leave until they had yanked you out of me. Then we'd never make it to the Gems for help, ever."

"A human medical facility? Perish the thought. The last thing I need is one of your shamans scratching at my gem with their blunted bronze knives." Connie didn't know whether to be relieved or offended by the disgust behind Jade's thoughts. "Very well. We can maintain your subterfuge until we reach your 'school,' but then I insist we leave for the outpost immediately after."

"We will. Immediately 'after' school is over," Connie retorted.

Wordless exasperation resonated in Connie's thoughts. She imagined the bodiless Gem storming from one side of her skull to the other in a tantrum. "Of all the creatures to be embedded into, I became stuck inside a stubborn anthropoid with delusions of civilization. This would have been so much simpler if you had just kept walking—"

The tirade ended in a mental choke. A wave of complicated feelings followed before they, too, were squelched.

Connie's gaze drifted back to the mirror. She looked herself—her selves—in the eye, her brows crashing together in a deep frown. Dark suspicions intermingled with a rising nervousness she knew was not her own. "What happened in that dream? What were you trying to make me do?" she said.

An uncomfortable silence passed. When Connie refused to break her own gaze, Jade's thoughts surfaced reluctantly. "Gems are a much more advanced species than biologicals. We have more direct control over ourselves and our functions, even those whose organic equivalents would normally be autonomous."

"You can shape and control the light that makes up your bodies. I know all that," Connie said, unimpressed.

"That control extends to our minds as well, to a degree." Moments ago, Jade had sounded acerbically, unswervingly smug. Now she seemed hesitant. "The occasion does not arise often, but in the event that a Gem's physical body needs to be reutilized—for lack of resources, or to correct a defect—that Gem can choose to…relinquish her material self."

It took Connie a second to piece together Jade's admission with something Steven had confided in her long ago, when she had first asked him about his parents. "You're talking about giving up your
"Physical form," she realized aloud. "But in the dream, you wanted me to…"

"Er, yes," Jade thought. "I surmised that, if we were linked in such a way as to merge our psyches, that you might also have the ability to give up your… Well, you did not. And here we are. It is best to focus on the here and now, yes? We should determine the fastest means of conveyance—"

"What would have happened to me?" Connie demanded, "if I had kept walking?"

Deeper, longer silence passed, and Connie refused to look away from the mirror. At last, Jade answered, "Your physical body would likely have remained unperturbed, its functions continuing unabated. But those functions you associate with your conscious self, your thoughts and memories… would have…"

Connie's face grew slacken. "You were trying to get rid of me. You were trying to…delete me, or erase me!" she hissed.

"Human, you misapprehend my intentions. Your primitive understanding of—"

Whirling toward the door, Connie furrowed her brow, concentrating her thoughts into sub-vocalized white noise. Jade's voice in her head dissolved into a pained squawk as Connie kept her wordless fury circling, chasing itself in an unbroken stream that drowned out any other silent words the Gem tried to form.

Connie didn't expect gratitude. She knew Jade hadn't chosen their fate any more than she had. But for all the fear she had weathered, the anxiety and the hunger pangs she endured, she thought the Gem could at least not be completely horrible to her in return. And to find out that Jade had thought to dispose of Connie as their first moment of real connection was too much to forgive.

"Connie," her mother's distant voice drifted from the bottom of the stairs, "I won't call you again. Let's go, or you're going to be late."

The badgering sparked fresh annoyance in Connie, which she turned inward as a stream of wordless, biting thoughts toward the green passenger in her chest. In a strange way, she was grateful to the Gem. For all the frustration she had felt since becoming stuck to Jade, she now had a valid target for it. She had imagined Jade's awakening a hundred times since her visit to the barn. In some of them, she had comforted a heartsick, frightened new friend. In others, she had tried to calm the rage of a righteous and rightfully fearful passenger. Others still had Connie commiserating with a fellow prisoner.

But she had never imagined herself at the mercy of a petty, spiteful, self-important jerk who would try to trick her into an unspeakable act.

Throwing her bedroom door open, Connie marched out to collect her breakfast so she could sneak back upstairs to make it garbage. Her fists hung white-knuckled at her side, and her mouth drew into a tight, miserable line.

Somewhere, beneath the anger and gloom, one darkly humorous thought bubbled to the surface despite Connie's best efforts to quash it: she and her passenger still shared at least one thing in common, because they both could not wait to be rid of each other.

Connie spared a thought to send another blast of mental white noise at Jade's insistent pestering. The rest of her attention was focused forward toward the front of the classroom, where Miss Gala was handing a stack of papers to the first student in each row of desks.

"The test is front and back," Miss Gala explained while the papers were passed back through the rows, "and it covers everything in the last three chapters. You'll have the entire period to complete the test, so double-check your work. Once you're done, you may bring the test to me and leave for the period." As a murmur of approval rippled through the class, she smiled and raised a finger in warning. "Make sure to be quiet and respectful of the other classes when you're in the hallway. If I get any complaints or hear any disruption out there, this will be the last time I cut you any slack. Capice?"

The class mumbled in halfhearted assent, then bent their collective heads to the test. Pencils scratched against paper, and the keys of calculators clacked loudly, their anachronistic presence a result of Miss Gala's refusal to simply let them use their phones instead. A familiar tension drew across the silence as they pitted their chapters' worth of experience against single-variable equations.

As Connie set to work on the first problem, her thoughts resonated with a disgusted sound. "Are you serious? This is the reason you are delaying my mission? I have seen Quartz soldiers emerge from the ground with a more advanced understanding of mathematics than this paltry display. We simply do not have time for this."

Connie clenched her teeth and tried to drown the voice out in variables and numbers. She thought about blaring more incoherency at Jade, but every time she did so, it made her headache a little worse. Whether that was Jade's petty retaliation or her own mind suffering from being their battleground, Connie wasn't certain, but it didn't matter either way. If her head started hurting much worse she thought her skull might split apart.

Jade did not seem to like being ignored any better than she did their mental shouting match. "The fate of an entire planet hangs in the balance, and I am stuck inside a primate counting on its fingers. Unbelievable. You might not be able to comprehend the scope of what is at stake, human, but I suppose that is not your fault. However, your persistent obstreperousness most assuredly is, and unlike me, it is not going unnoticed."

Connie wrote **SHUT UP** in the margin of her test and stared at it for ten whole seconds before erasing it and continuing to work.

A mental sigh drifted behind Connie's silent work. "Very well. The answer to the first problem is 'eight.' The answer to the second problem is 'five.' The answer to—"

"Hey!" Connie protested. Then she blushed as the entire class turned to look at her outburst. Shrinking in her chair, she stooped to her test, burying her eyes in the equations.

"It is 'eight.' Eight. Oh, for...the total number of your hands' phalanges less that of your opposable thumbs! Great swirling star-stuff, the answer is eight!"

She wrote **SHUT UP** in the margin again, this time leaving it there and underlining it for good measure.
“Human,” Jade pleaded, her thoughts tinged with exhaustion, “if you refuse to aid me until your educational ministrations are complete, then at least allow me to expedite them. Please.”

Connie tapped her pencil against the paper, biting her lip. Every ounce of her conscience screamed at the thought of using an embedded ancient alien to cheat, even if it was bellowing the answers at her. But she couldn't force herself to forget the right answer, and she couldn't exactly plug her ears. Was it really cheating if the answers were coming from her own brain? Technically no, but ethically, yes. Probably.

Either way, Jade would not stop giving her the answers, and silencing her would cost Connie more attention than she could spare if she wanted to finish the test. So she settled for taking each answer and working backwards to show each of the steps in finding it the right way. At least if she was cheating, she could show that she actually understood the material.

Even after double-checking her work, Connie finished both sides of the exam with more than half of the class period remaining. There was a bonus question at the bottom of the test she spent more time considering than any of the actual problems:

**+1 Bonus Point: Draw something that makes me laugh.**

**Crude humor had better be extra-funny if you draw anything gross.**

After a moment's thought, Connie drew a little stick figure being bisected by a falling division symbol. Then she added speed lines to the symbol and a word balloon above the stick figure, giving it the dialogue: "Help! I've been divided!"

"...am I missing some kind of cultural context? How is this sketch relevant to mathematics?" Jade asked, resonating confusion behind the thought.

Connie ignored her and gathered her belongings into her backpack, then sidled through the rows of desks to hand in her test. Miss Gala raised an eyebrow at Connie, checking the time on the wall clock, but when she saw the completed test, she smiled and nodded. At that, Connie shouldered her bag and left the class, ignoring the shocked looks from a few jealous classmates as she closed the door behind her as quietly as possible.

"At long last!" Jade heaved. "Does that complete your academic drudgery, human, or is there yet more? I am happy to assist in expediting whatever base tasks are provided you if it means we can reach the outpost sooner."

Fists clenched, Connie ignored the Gem's thoughts and marched down the hallway to the nearest bathroom, then shoved the door aside. The dingy, faintly odorous tiled room was empty save for the echo of her stomping footsteps.

“What kind of room is this? Some kind of examination chamber? Abandoned, judging by its upkeep," Jade pondered. Then her curiosity paled into horror as Connie kicked open an empty stall, revealing its toilet inside. "No! You keep those installations here too?"

"Don't even start with me," Connie snapped. She closed the stall and hung her backpack on the hook high on the door.

"But we already expelled your byproducts today! You can't possibly need to do so again! Human, NO!"

Jade's wailing disgust went ignored by Connie with more than a little tinge of satisfaction. The Gem's
internal sobbing and retching didn't subside until Connie was washing her hands at the sink. By then, Jade could only produce wordless feelings of discontent like those Connie had felt at the Gem's first awakenings. Connie could hardly reconcile the cloud of emotions her passenger had been with the spiteful, impatient, condescending misery she was now.

"We are spending the whole day at school because I have to be here," Connie said, tearing paper towels out of the dispenser to mash against her hands. "Then, after school, we're going to see the Gems because I want you out of me even more than you want to be out of me. And I swear, if you don't pipe down and stop cheating for me, I will do nothing but drink water all day so I stay up the whole night 'expelling byproduct.' Understand?"

The Gem's voice coalesced behind a wave of dejection. "I should have emphasized your species' capacity for cruelty when I first documented you. To think I once found you fascinating. I must have been cracked."

"Cruelty?" Connie repeated in disbelief. "You think I'm the cruel one?"

"Yes! You are cruel, and you are selfish, and you are petty!"

Connie flung the wad of wet paper towel into the garbage can mounted in the wall, where it rang out against the metal backing with a solid, satisfying thud. Whirling on the mirror above the sink, Connie glared at her selves and snapped, "You tried to kill me!"

"I…" Embarrassment bubbled up around the stammering thought. There was something else too. Shame? Guilt?

"It was not like that."

"You wanted me to give up my physical form so you could have my body all to yourself. Everything that makes me who I am would be gone." Connie scowled at her reflection. "That sounds like death to me."

"Well, given your species' limited capacity to perceive your own existence…"

Too angry for words, Connie slammed her fists down on the edges of the sink. The blow actually sent a hairline crack through the porcelain, the sharp sound of it echoing in the bathroom. Horrified at the thought of breaking school property, Connie reeled backwards, stuffing her fists under her armpits and clenching her eyes shut. She tried to breath deeply, tried to call upon the lessons of meditation and calm that Garnet had taught her, but her own anger swelled and mixed with the stench of the bathroom to swallow any peace she thought to muster.

"…I am sorry," Jade murmured.

"Just stop," Connie growled, crushing her eyelids harder and clenching her whole body to keep from lashing out again.

Jade's breathless sigh washed over Connie's anger. "When I first regained awareness, I did not know where I was or what had happened to me. I only knew that I could not move, or see, or hear, or feel. Then I slowly became aware of you through the sensory data we appear to share. I came to understand that I was trapped in something, and it was subjecting me to experiences without consent, seemingly without end."

Slowly, Connie uncoiled her body, letting her fists relax and drop at her sides.

"Then, when I encountered you in our shared sub-cognitive sensory experience and realized what and who you were, I…saw an opportunity to regain control of myself. I was desperate."
Connie turned back to the mirror. The scowl was gone from her face. She was sweating, and pallid, and her eyes looked hollow.

“When I failed to…trick you, it made me work instead to establish the dialogue we now have,” Jade told her. “And I came to regret my subterfuge. I can see now that you value your existence as much as I value mine. Even though your comparatively paltry lifespan means that my existence will be the more statistically significant of the two. But still, I am sorry.”

The thoughts felt and sounded sincere. Connie watched the last of her anger dissolve in her reflection, feeling exhausted and empty as she ran her fingers over the hairline crack in the sink. "What about when you tried to make me run away? You took me over while I was asleep, like you did last night at the computer."

"I do not remember doing so. But admittedly, my memory still features extreme gaps. That incident may have occurred while I was regaining awareness."

Connie sighed and bowed her throbbing head. As righteous as she felt throwing her anger and frustration at Jade, she knew it did neither of them any good. She paused and forced herself to rise above her first reactions.

"Look," she said, "we may be stuck together like this for a while, even with the Gems' help. Let's call a truce."

"An agreement of mutual nonaggression?" Jade mused. "I can agree to that, provided we set a number of terms."

"Me first," Connie said. "Number one, you can never, ever do what you tried to do on the beach. Never again."

"A redundant term, really. Giving up one's physical form is a conscious choice a Gem must make. Even if the choice is uninformed…" Jade trailed off, growing quiet for a moment, and then replied, "I understand the sentiment behind your proviso, however. Let me say this: I will not, through action or inaction, knowingly allow you to come to harm, physical or otherwise, if it is within my ability to prevent said harm. Acceptable?"

"Fine," Connie said. "Number two: you have to stay a secret. My parents are already processing a lot with my, um, Gem-related extracurriculars. If they find out I'm housing an alien in my body, we'll both be in deep trouble."

"Once again, redundant. I have no intention of allowing some human with delusions of knowledgeability to poke and prod me with its primeval tools."

"But that also means we do things my way," Connie said warningly. "Nobody can get suspicious of us. We keep to my schedule. And no more cheating in school. And definitely no late-night shenanigans."

"What? But your regular periods of unconsciousness are the only times I have access to your motor functions! Had I not absorbed your species' crowdsourced database, I never would have had the neurological understanding nor the cultural context needed to instigate sub-vocalized communication with you."

Connie blinked. "You read Ficklepedia? Like, the whole website?" she exclaimed.

"Perhaps? Certainly a large portion of it. The scrolling speed on your communications device was too slow for my preferences, but I managed to glean a few important facts about your species."
With a twinge of amusement, Connie wondered how many of those "facts" were from the lovingly curated pages for every television show ever aired that seemed to make up most of the website's material. Maybe Jade would enjoy debating the existentialist subtext of *Crying Breakfast Friends*. Then, shaking the thought away, Connie said, "Okay, just…make sure I stay in my room while I'm asleep. Wandering around at night will get us both caught."

"Acceptable."

Drawing a relieved breath, Connie said, "Good. I'm glad we—"

"Hold. I have my own conditions," Jade announced. A good measure of her previous, pompous self arose with the stiff words in Connie's thoughts. "Firstly, you will confine your biological processes to their absolute minimum requirements. Bad enough to have to endure your autonomous functions, but what you did back there, in that…that 'chamber' was horrific. I will not have you starve yourself or induce sepsis, but neither will I suffer indulgences. I read about the human practice of 'eating contests,' and I refuse to let us participate in one."

A ¡Soy Delicioso! bar lurked Connie's her backpack, its chalky taste waiting to dry out her mouth. Her tongue shriveled at the thought of it, but she said, "I guess I can work with that."

"Good. Secondly, you defer to me and/or a Gem expert on the subject of my extraction. I do not need human squeamishness delaying any extrication."

Connie smirked and parroted Jade's earlier response. "Redundant. I was going to do that anyway. And I'm not as squeamish as you probably think I am."

"Splendid. Then if you will not object to my informational gathering within the confines of your sleep chamber during your unconscious periods, I accept these terms of nonaggression, human."

Grimacing, Connie said, "Maybe since we're friends now, you could call me by my name?"

"Our peace is literally seconds old, and already you insist on testing its limits."

The school bell rang, filling the bathroom with the sound of miserable, pointless urgency. Connie could hear doors opening in the hallways beyond and the sound of a throng of footsteps flooding out of classrooms. The privacy she and Jade were enjoying would probably not happen again unless another one of her teachers was feeling as generous as Miss Gala had. "Come on. We have five more classes to get through today," Connie said, shouldering her backpack.

"If your feeble grasp of mathematics was any indication, this will be an excruciatingly long day."

Connie paused with her hand on the bathroom door. "Funny. I was thinking the same thing," she muttered.
"Thanks for the ride, Dad," Connie said, and hauled her training bag out of the back seat of the sedan to rest on the sidewalk. The pink hilt of her sword jutted through the zipper, bright against the old black nylon of the bag.

Her father leaned his shoulder out the car window. "Your mother will pick you up this evening before dinner. Make sure you keep your phone on," he said.

"I will."

"And what are you going to be?" he asked. His face was stern, but there was a glimmer dancing behind the thick lens of his glasses.

Drawing her hands together in front of her, Connie recited, "I will be a good student who is mindful of her teacher but not afraid to ask questions."

His mouth broke for a smile. "And what are you going to do?" he asked.

Connie grinned back, rolling her eyes as she said, "Kick a socially responsible amount of butt."

"Darn tootin'." He reached out and squeezed her arm. "Have fun, Connie. Love you."

"Love you, Dad," she said. Then she waved at him as he drove off, rounding the corner and leaving Beach City's boardwalk.

As soon as his taillights were out of sight, an impatient noise bubbled up in Connie's thoughts. "Finally. For creatures with such truncated lifespans, your species is determined to waste a great deal of time on trivial pleasantries. And that land vehicle was abysmally slow," Jade complained.

Collecting her bag, Connie began making her way toward the cliffs at the beach. "It got us here faster than a 'beast of burden' would have," she noted dryly.

"Given how much time we frittered away on your so-called education, the vehicle's superior speed was hardly preferable," Jade retorted, equally sarcastic. "Still, I suppose it would be unreasonable to expect any remaining humans to have access to the colony's warp pads regardless of their familiarity with our facilities."

The thought made Connie miss a step. There had been good reason to avoid addressing certain uncomfortable truths with Jade before, but those reasons were dwindling as quickly as the distance to the temple. "Yeah, about that," Connie drawled. "There's gonna be a lot to talk about when we get there, but you should know some stuff first."

"Human, please. I appreciate your intentions," Jade said, sounding anything but appreciative from inside Connie's head, "but we both agreed to defer to Gems in the matter of our situation. And given however much time I might have missed, I would prefer to receive information from a source that is not so biologically incapable of understanding the scope and span of such matters. Additionally, I have my own vital report to make, late though it may be."

"Okay, see, you might have a problem with that part," Connie insisted.

A wave of surprise prickled up her spine as Connie rounded the side of the cliff face, her shoes plodding deeply in the warm, white sand. "Wait a moment. I...I have been here before," Jade
realized, her words soft and thick with confusion.

"This is where we were in my dream," Connie said. "Well, sort of. The dream version was a little surreal, but the big details about it were pretty much—"

Jade's inner voice rose in alarm as the knuckles of the temple came into view around the edge of the cliff face. "That was not your dream, human. That place was my sub-cognitive projection, not yours. It could not have been. The location was drawn from my own memory. Except, if you recognize it, that means this Gem facility you spoke of…"

The temple was in full view now, looming above the weathered beach house, the clear sky vibrant and blue behind its stoic vigil. There was a pink shape at the house's railing, and as Connie drew nearer, the shape resolved itself into Steven, who leaned on tiptoes to wave at her. "Hi, Connie!" he called distantly.

Connie smiled and waved back until an overwhelming sense of confusion flattened her expression. "Is that a human structure abutting the temple? Do humans occupy the location? I do not understand."

As Connie tried to answer, she saw the screen door of the house swing open, and Pearl stepped outside to join Steven at the railing, her outline graceful and lithe against the sky as she waved.

"Wait. Is that a Pearl? What kind of facility infested with humans would warrant a commander influential enough to possess a Pearl?"

Then the door opened again, and Garnet joined the other two. She didn't wave, but her head tilted in a brief nod of acknowledgment.

Connie started to jog forward, drawing breath to call back to the Gems. She had so much to tell them, and so much to explain to Jade, that she didn't know where to start.

Then she stopped cold, seized in a moment of terror so profound that she could not move, or breathe, or think. The world around her snapped into crystal focus, each sight and sound hammering into her like a tidal wave of sensory information. Everything around her slowed to a crawl, making her frantic heartbeat the fastest and loudest part of her world.

The beach spun around her. Connie lost sight of the house as he arms and legs pumped furiously, sand flying off her heels in a dead sprint. She felt something rough pressing against her through the back of her shirt. Taking deep breaths, she found herself again, standing with her back to the cliff just out of sight of the temple, her ears buzzing. Ragged breathing worked her chest like a bellows.

"What is happening?" she gasped.

"Human, listen carefully," Jade told her, the words edging into panic to rival Connie's inexplicable terror. "I am stimulating your adrenal gland to facilitate escape. We must egress to a secure location."

Connie dug her fingers into the rock face behind her. "What? Why?" she demanded.

"That Gem on the human structure," Jade said. "That was the defector from Blue Diamond's court fused with her treacherous bodyguard. And that means the Pearl with her is the one that belongs to the rebel commander. They are two of the rebellion's top lieutenants!"

"Jade, it's not like that," Connie tried to explain.
"Did you know this was a rebel base? Is that why the Beta Male provided you with your armament?" Jade demanded. Then, before Connie could reply, Jade snapped, "Never mind. It does not matter. Your frail body will not survive the rebels' attack. We must escape!"

Footsteps padded in the sand, making Connie and Jade fall silent. It was only Connie who relaxed when she saw Steven circle around the cliff face at a jog. His face was red and his breath was short as he said, "Connie! Are you okay? You looked really scared. Did you see something?"

"It is the human from the base," Jade hissed. "He must be some kind of servitor culled from the indigenous population. Quickly, use your weapon to hobble him. His bleating might distract the rebels long enough to cover our escape."

Connie stuffed her hands underneath her armpits, horrified. "I am not going to attack Steven!" she cried.

Steven blinked, tilting his head. "Um, thank you?" he said.

A new shape blurred from above, landing next to Connie with a spray of sand. Still adrenally-charged, Connie stumbled backwards from the smiling purple figure crouched next to her. "Hey, what's up? How's our favorite walking, talking bubble?" Amethyst said, laughing. "We're joking about that now that you're not gonna explode, right?"

Jade's mental scream shook Connie. "It is some sort of deformed experimental shock trooper!" she wailed.

An explosion of wind yanked Connie's hair into her face and staggered her forward. The full force of the gale blasted Amethyst, sending the Gem tumbling into the air, where she dwindled into a tiny purple and white mote. Her arc carried her so high and so far that she had time to shout back at the beach, "You could have just said 'no!'" before she splashed into the ocean halfway to the edge of the sky.

The vortex from the blast knocked Steven off his feet. He rolled in the sand, propping himself up on his elbow to gape as Connie tried to untangle her face from her hair. "Connie! I know Amethyst's humor can be an acquired taste, but that was a little extreme!"

"It wasn't me!" Connie protested, parting her mask of hair. "I promise!"

"That...was me? I still have my winds?" Jade's hushed wonderment broke into cackling, silent laughter. "I still have my winds!"

Garnet and Pearl rounded the cliff side, pounding through the sand to kneel next to Steven. Pearl helped Steven to his feet while Garnet swept the beach with a turn of her shades. "Steven! Connie!" Pearl cried. "We saw Amethyst being thrown into the ocean. Are you okay? What happened?"

Connie tried to answer, but her thoughts were filled with a bellowing war cry. "Back away, rebel scum!" Jade roared in silence.

Before Connie could warn anyone, she stumbled as a new blast of wind dragged her forward and plowed into the three Gems before her. They were sent rolling across the beach in a gritty spray to land at the edge of the surf, white foam spilling around them as they sank into the dark, wet sand.

"Sorry!" Connie shouted to them. Then she turned away, facing the cliff, and snapped, "Jade, you don't have to hurt them. They're my friends!"

"Then you have fallen under the sway of their leader's cult too? Blast!" Jade swore. "I will have to
Both Jade and Connie yelped as a pair of enormous gauntlets wrapped around Connie's midsection from behind and lifted her into the air. The grip was firm, and it pinned her arms to her sides, but Connie could tell the grapple was not meant to be hostile. "Connie," Garnet said from behind her. "I need you to stop before you injure yourself. Or us."

"It isn't me, Garnet! It's Jade! She's—" Connie pleaded.

The beach beneath them swirled as a vicious cyclone manifested. Connie spun at its exact center, buffeted but unscathed by the force of the gale. But the eye of the storm was only just big enough for her tiny teenage frame, leaving Garnet to spiral in the full power of the cyclone, caught in the howling wind and scathing sand.

Garnet spun around Connie, her grasp fighting against the pull of their motion, until Connie's bones started to creak beneath the thick gauntlets. Even as Connie winced, she felt Garnet's grip loosen in an instant, and the Gem vanished soundlessly into the spinning world. Garnet was more than strong enough to hold on indefinitely, Connie realized, which meant she had let go on purpose, almost certainly so as not to crush Connie.

In seconds, the cyclone dwindled into still air. Connie floated back to the ground and immediately fell onto her hands and knees, trying to catch her equilibrium back from the sudden end to the spinning. She might have thrown up if there had been anything in her stomach besides wet vitamin chalk. "She's awake," Connie called dizzily, lurching to one side as her inner ear disagreed with her on which direction the ground actually was.

"She's awake?" Pearl exclaimed, running back with Steven close behind her. "Is she communicating with you?"

A tight blast of air cut the beach a few feet to Pearl's right, kicking up fresh grit that send the Gem diving to one side.

"Among other things," Connie answered. "Sorry, I don't know how to stop her!"

"Hang on, I have an idea!" Steven called.

As Connie collected her senses, she saw Steven charging toward her at top speed. The air around her began to stir with the threat of a blast that would throw him farther than the one that had launched Amethyst. But the wind came too slow, and Steven hit Connie in a diving tackle that drove them both into the sand.

Tumbling, Connie watched the beach around her turn bright pink. The sound of the ocean became muted and hollow as one of Steven's bubble shields swallowed the both of them. Perfectly smooth energy cupped them where they lay, slightly warm to the touch as Connie unjumbled her limbs from Steven's.

"Sorry if that was a little rough," Steven said, helping Connie to her feet.

Connie rubbed at her twice-bruised ribs and smiled weakly. Despite the circumstances, she couldn't help but feel a warm tingle of nostalgia at their predicament. "Well, at least this time you know how to take the bubble down," she said. "And thanks. That was quick thinking."

"No, no, no!" Jade cried. "Their servitor is outfitted with some Gem-like capabilities?"
Loud splashing rose up from the surf, and a strange, misshapen porpoise with the face of a woman beached itself in the wet sand. Its body flashed as it assumed a familiar shape dressed in a white tank top and dark leggings. Spitting out a stream of brine, Amethyst snapped, "Yo, what was that about? Even Pearl doesn't hate my jokes that much."

"Not usually, no," Pearl agreed, joining Amethyst to stand at the edge of Steven's bubble. "But evidently the Jade inside Connie is awake, and she's retained some control over her abilities."

Plodding up on the opposite side of the bubble, Garnet joined them. Sand mottled her dark afro and rained grit onto her shoulders as she said, "She doesn't seem to like us very much."

"Can she hear us?" Steven asked. At Connie's nod, he spoke in a gentle tone aimed at her neck. "Jade, we aren't going to hurt you. The Crystal Gems want to help get you safely out of Connie. I promise you, we want to help. I'll let us out of the bubble, but first we need you to calm down. Okay?"

Connie held her breath, listening for the answer inside her own thoughts. The rapid thud of her heartbeat counted the moments as they passed in silence. There was no answer from the trapped and cornered Gem, which worried Connie. But neither were there any vicious outbursts or rejections. Perhaps the silence was Jade surrendering to reason.

A tentative sigh rushed through Connie's nose. But then, when she inhaled, there was nothing to fill her lungs. Her eardrums throbbed as the air pressure around her vanished. Before her, she saw Steven's face turn red as he clutched at his throat, his mouth gasping as if to gulp for air, but without any sound. Then Connie's lungs emptied violently, shriveling inside her chest as every ounce of her breath was sucked out of her.

As she dropped to her knees, Connie felt her hair being yanked by an invisible force. Particles of sand from her jeans and shoes spilled away from her to swirl at the very edge of the bubble, where their precious air had gathered into a wide ring that whorled against the inside of Steven's pink field. Connie thought the force of the vortex would rip her and Steven from the ground, but Jade's control was too precise. Instead they were left in a dead eye of the storm, suffocating inside a tornado built for two.

Though the edges of her vision began to go black, Connie could see the shape of the bubble distorting against the wind, bulging, ballooning into a flat disc. The Gems were forced to step back as the bubble's edge lurched at them, threatening to burst and unleash the tempest right in their faces.

Connie's skin tingled and burned. Looking down, she thought she saw great brown marks mottling her arms. It was hard to see through her darkening eyes, but she would have sworn that her arms were starting to bulge and distend, as though lumps and shapes were pushing out from the inside of her skin.

With thunderous noise, the pink bubble ripped open, dissipating into nothing. The three Gems poised outside were blasted backwards by a wall of air that struck with the force of a tsunami. Pearl and Amethyst were thrown back into the surf, while Garnet slammed into the cliff hard enough to leave a jagged impression around her outline.

Instantly after, the whirlwind quelled. Connie sucked in greedy lungfuls of air, falling onto her hands and knees. As she gasped, she saw that her arms were intact and unmarred, her skin as smooth as it had been before. Had she just imagined otherwise?

"Get up, human!" Jade bellowed in her thoughts. "We cannot—"
"NO!" Connie screamed.

She drew upon all her anger, all of the frustration of the last few days, all of the fear at watching Steven as he still struggled to breathe, and she pushed those feelings inward. Every lesson Pearl and Garnet had taught her about focus she savagely unlearned in an instant of discordance. Her mind was hers, and she filled it with too many thoughts and feelings for anything else to exist in it.

Jade's voice disappeared into the mental noise. The air around Connie puffed, but there were no gales or typhoons to meet the Gems as they gathered back around Connie.

Clutching at her temples, Connie said through her teeth, "I don't know how long I can hold her off. You need to do something!"

Her expression darkening, Amethyst growled, "Oh, don't worry. I'm gonna do something." She reached into her gemstone and drew forth her studded whip. The weapon's deadly ends dug lines into the sand as she grasped its coils in both hands.

Steven tried to protest, but Garnet silenced him with a gesture, pushing him back out of harm's way. "If Jade can't see us, she might not be able to attack us. Connie, close your eyes."

Connie swallowed hard and shut her eyes. She added fear, apprehension, and uncertainty to the chaos filling her thoughts. The last thing she saw was Amethyst looming above her, the deadly whip drawn taut between the Gem's clenched hands.
You Lost

The world around her was dark, and it clutched her like a vice. She couldn't tell up from down anymore. Her stomach lurched with every jarring motion as voices drifted around her, distant and muffled. But she concentrated on one thing only, desperately focused for her survival and the survival of her friends on a single, solitary thought.

*Friday night! We're gonna party till dawn,* Connie sang silently, humming the melody so loudly that she couldn't hear anything else. *Don't worry, Daddy, I've got my favorite dress on!*

Her eyes still clenched tightly to the brink of pain, Connie ran through her fifth mental rendition of *Taking Over Midnight,* the latest song from the Hot 100 Billboard that made her wish she didn't have ears. Even humming a few bars of the song guaranteed that it would be stuck in her head for days. That made it the perfect weapon to levy against Jade's influence. She just had to hope there was no intergalactic court to charge her with war crimes for weaponizing pop music.

*Ohh-oh! Girls do what we like! Ohh-oh! Taking over to-night!* She belted out the chorus in her head, humming hard enough to make her throat ache.

Something patted her shoulder, and she heard a voice repeating her name through the din of her own silent singing. She quieted at once, letting the ear worm fade into the back of her mind. Cautiously, she cracked one eyelid, wary of any blast of air that might meet her as soon as she—and Jade—could see again.

She was inside the beach house, standing in the kitchen and unable to move. And somehow she had gotten much taller since closing her eyes, as she saw by glancing down at the floor and furniture around her. The Gems stood before her, Pearl and Garnet both tensed and anxious as they stared back at her.

Amethyst, on the other hand, seemed pleased as she dusted off her hands. "There. Problem solved," she said.

Tilting her chin down, Connie found Amethyst's whip coiled around her, covering her body from ankle to neck and pinning her arms at her sides. A cold, hard shape pressed into Connie's back. With a little effort, she saw that she had been tied to an old, enormous fisherman anchor, the kind with two curved arms at the bottom and a crossbar right behind her head. The anchor stood over six feet tall, its tip digging into the wood floor, and Connie was trussed to its shaft like a damsel to a railroad track from some ancient black and white movie serial.

"That was quick thinking, Amethyst," Pearl said, nodding in approval. "But where on Earth did you even get this thing?"

Amethyst shrugged. "From some boat guy. He obviously didn't need it or else he would have asked for it back instead of just floating away."

"Was that &dra?" Steven said excitedly, and dug out his phone. "I love that song! I should make that your ringtone for when you call me."

"Please don't," Connie and Garnet said at the same time.

"...miserable, treacherous, primitive, backwards, stupid excuse for a dominant species!" The thought rose in Connie's mind with such force that it made her wince. "I would have been better off being swallowed by some ichthyc bottom-dweller. At least their actions are consistent!"
Shaking her head, Connie warned, "Guys, Jade's waking up, or coming back online, or whatever."

"YOU!" Jade thundered in Connie's mind. "You led me straight into an ambush. You knowingly brought me to the rebels with every intention of making me their prisoner! But it seems they have turned on you as well. I would say that it served you right, but your stupidity has only managed to doom us both. Reflect on that for our final, miserable moments before they torture us and shatter us."

"Yeah, she's unhappy," drawled Connie.

Gesturing triumphantly, Amethyst said, "Ha! That's 'cause we kicked her butt without her even having a butt! Oh, and don't think you can try your little tornado trick again, because all it's gonna do is tear this house down around you and probably crush your tiny, fragile meat body."

"There's a chance we didn't completely think this plan through," Steven said, blanching.

Pearl folded her arms and said, "There's no need for any of that. Now that we've all calmed down, I think it's high time we discussed this situation civilly, like Gems." She waited a beat, and then asked Connie, "Er, she can hear me right now, can't she?"

Before Connie could answer, Jade snarled, "So it is to be interrogation first? Splendid. Human, repeat only what I tell you, word for word."

"Jade, they—" Connie began.

Her protest ended in a migraine so intense that it turned her vision kaleidoscopic. The pain faded as quickly as it had flared, and Jade's silent voice returned in its place as the world stopped spinning. "For future reference," she said snidely, "that is what it feels like when someone overrides your cognitive processes with thought-noise. Now, repeat only what I tell you."

Connie grumbled under her breath, but said nothing as Jade fed her a message for the Gems. Then, flattening her voice, she recited, "To my captors: I am Jade One-Bee-Two-Jay, Cut Two-Ay-Gee. I serve at the pleasure and magnificence of Blue Diamond. I do not submit myself as your prisoner, nor do I recognize your authority. I will tell you nothing."

"Hi!" Steven said, waving. "I'm Steven! This is Garnet, and Pearl, and Amethyst. I guess you've already met Connie. And you're not our prisoner. Well, I mean, you are trapped right now, but if you promise not to attack us or blow my house down, we'll untie you. And Connie. Sorry again," he added, the last part for Connie's benefit.

Expression hardening, Pearl said, "We have no reason to or interest in taking you prisoner. As hard as it may be for you to believe, we actually want to get you out of Connie. Now, are you going to cooperate with us to make that happen?"

A moment passed as Connie listened, and then sighed. "I am Jade One-Bee-Two-Jay, Cut Two-Ay-Gee. I serve at the—are you seriously going to make me say the entire thing again?" she broke her monotone to snap. Then she hissed as another flash migraine exploded in her head.

Throwing up her hands, Pearl cried, "Oh, for—! The war is over, Jade! It's been over for five thousand years. You lost."

Connie listened, and then repeated, "I will not be interrogated by a… Okay, there is no way I'm saying that to Pearl. No. No! I'm not calling her that!" Sighing impatiently, Connie said, "She's demanding to speak to the leader of the Crystal Gems. The 'real' leader. …yes, I did. I told them! I was just nicer about it!"
The Gems shared an uncomfortable glance that ended on Steven. Hesitantly, Steven started forward, reaching for the hem of his shirt. But then Garnet stopped him with a gentle hand and stepped ahead of him to stand before the anchor.

Connie saw her own uncomfortable expression mirrored in Garnet's shades as the Gem said, "What you're asking for isn't possible, Jade. But we aren't lying to you. In fact, you..." She trailed off, her expression twitching with a hesitation Connie had never seen in her before. "In fact, right now you're addressing almost every Crystal Gem that remains on Earth."

"Yeah, Peridot's back at this barn you probably don't remember," Amethyst said, lacing her fingers behind her head. "And Lapis. Do we count Lapis? We should probably call Lapis a 'maybe.'"

"Preposterous," Jade hissed at Connie. "Human, tell them—"

"It's true, Jade," Connie insisted. "You don't have to believe them. When you were reading online last night, how much of that cultural context was about human history? Do you really think we wouldn't have any information about a Gem colony going up all around us? Or an interstellar war if it was still happening? Look at all of the human stuff you've seen with me and think about what we looked like the last time you saw us. How long do you think it took us to develop internal combustion engines or harness electricity?"

"Yeah," Steven added, "and we have planes, and computers, and donuts, and satellites..."

Connie braced herself for another retaliatory migraine. Instead, a tense silence followed in her thoughts, undercut somewhat by the unstoppable lyrics of T'Baking Over Midnight that looped in the back of her mind.

After a long moment, Jade said, "Even if I were willing to entertain such a notion—which I am not—none of this lie accounts for how such a ragtag band of misfits overcame the Diamond Authority, or why I have no memory of the intervening millennia."

When Connie relayed the thought, tactfully translated, Pearl said, "It was the Diamonds. They ended the war with one final...attack. It infected every Gem on the planet with a form of corruption. Only a handful of us survived uncorrupted, and, well...we've just been here ever since." Her eyes glistened, and the pale Gem turned her head.

"Yeah," Amethyst said. "All the Gems still on the planet became these wild, uncontrollable monsters that don't remember who they used to be. They even did it to the Gems on their side who were still here. It's pretty janked."

"But that makes no sense!" Jade protested inside Connie's thoughts. "If I escaped this so-called 'corruption,' then why do I not remember it?"

"You didn't escape the corruption, Jade," Connie answered without relaying the question. Her words made the other Gems flinch. "That's actually how we found you. You came up on the beach and attacked us, even though you didn't know what you were doing. We had to poof you. And then... Um..."

Steven twisted his hands together, looking down at his feet. "It's my fault you two got stuck together. Connie was hurt after the fight, and I—"

Once more, Garnet stepped forward, silencing Steven with a gesture that moved him behind her. The towering Gem loomed before Connie as she said, "What matters now is that we are the only ones left on the planet who can help you. And we do want to help you, just like we want to help Connie. You
are not our enemy. You are not our prisoner." Glancing to one side, she added, "Amethyst."

"Huh? Oh!" Amethyst hurriedly touched the whip that bound Connie to the anchor. The thick coils dissipated into the sparkling air.

Connie started to fall, but Garnet caught her under her armpits and lowered her gently to the ground. She wanted to say something, but she could feel waves of confusion cascading up inside of her. Jade's crisp sub-vocalizations had become a web of feelings too scattered to untangle. So Connie waited.

Finally, a voice arose through the disbelief inside Connie. "It's a trick. It has to be," she insisted. "Of course it is! The enemy is so desperate for a victory that the moment they caught a Jade, they spared no effort to concoct this ridiculous interrogation so as to force me off my guard!"

When Connie paraphrased the thought, Pearl rolled her eyes and made a disgusted sound. "No scout in history has ever warranted that kind of elaborate ruse."

"Yeah!" Amethyst agreed, smacking her fist into her open palm. "If we wanted you to talk, we'd just put the hurt on you!"

"When we found you, we didn't even know what you were," Pearl scoffed. "I mean, Homeworld doesn't even make Jades any...anymore." She trailed off, her cheeks flushing with azure shame as she realized her own words.

The web inside of Connie turned dark, oozing into despair deeper than any Connie had ever experienced in her life. Her eyes stung and her vision blurred even though the feelings weren't hers. Wiping at her cheeks, Connie said, "Um, guys? I don't think Jade is taking any of this well."

"Which part?" asked Amethyst. "The fact that she's missed the ber-jillion years since the war ended, the fact that her side lost, the fact that Homeworld doesn't even need Jades anymore, the fact that she was a mindless corrupted monster before she got stuck inside a human, or the fact that it was Homeworld that corrupted her? 'Cause we haven't even gotten to the part about how we have no idea how to actually get her out of Connie." She ticked each problem off on her fingers, shapeshifting a sixth finger to finish the count on her hand.

Garnet manifested a gauntlet to bop Amethyst into silence, then let it dissipate. "We should give Jade some room to process all of this information. Now would be a good time for us to survey the mountains around the Sky Spire. Let's go, Gems," she said.

Steven's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Wait, another mission? But we've been on, like, six missions in the last four days, and we still haven't found anything."

"When you're looking for trouble, finding nothing is the best kind of disappointment," Garnet said. She touched at her shades, kneeling down to lay a hand on Steven's shoulder. Connie jerked in surprise as Garnet's other hand found her shoulder as well. "Right now, though, there's a much more important mission here. And it's going to take our new ambassador," she said, smiling at Connie, and then added to Steven, "and our best diplomat."

"Diplomat, right," Amethyst said. "Then I'll stay here with Connie and Jade while you, Pearl, and Steven go look for our mysterious menace."

Garnet and Pearl stared through her with the same blank look.

Amethyst laughed. "Nah, I'm just kidding. Let's go. Good luck, you two!" she called back to Steven and Connie as she climbed onto the warp pad with Pearl and Garnet. "And good scrap out there
today, Jade. Nice hustle."

The three Gems gave the teens a final wave before vanishing into a column of light, leaving Steven and Connie alone with the sound of the tide, the gentle creaking of the house in the ocean breeze, and the silent anguish of a Gem who had lost everything in the space of a single day.

Connie poured herself onto the couch, exhausted at the emotional roller coaster by proxy she had just experienced. It was easy to feel annoyed at a passenger in her body who derided every choice she made and refused to let her eat proper food. It was even easier to be furious at the alien who had tried to kill her, take her body, and attack her friends. At the moment, though, she could only feel pity for Jade.

She thought back to all the times her family had moved to accommodate her father's promotions. Connie's life had been worse without friends, but perhaps a little easier with no one to miss each time her whole life was uprooted. At least she'd still had her parents and all of her things. But the familiar places she had grown to love with each new home, and the little mundanities that came with living somewhere long enough, like hiking through the local woods, or getting fried cactus from a street vendor, or seeing the sun come up over mountains, all were things she knew from experience hurt to lose.

How many places could she grow to love if she lived for a thousand years? How many little habits would she develop? How many people would she meet? And what would it do to her if they all vanished in an instant. What would she do if she didn't have her own eyes to cry with, or a mouth to scream?

How could Connie possibly start to make any of that better for Jade?

In the uneasy stillness, a soft, mumbled song drifted in the air. "Hmm-hmn, girls do what we like," Steven sang unconsciously and under his breath, his hands clenched in absent unease. "Hmm-hmn, taking over midnight."

Sighing, Connie rubbed at the bridge of her nose, and her own misery arose to keep Jade's company. It wasn't helping, but it was a place to start.
"Thanks," Connie said, accepting a glass of water from Steven with both hands. He had offered lemonade at first before remembering her new Gem-compliant diet. Even water with a lemon wedge might be too much for her distraught passenger to handle in better circumstances, which theirs were not.

Steven set his own glass down on the deck table and sat in the chair next to hers. The afternoon sun had sank behind the lighthouse, making a shadow of the beach, but it was still warm and bright outside. Waves lapped gently at the shore, a pleasant thrum to fill the unbearable silence that haunted Connie's thoughts. Hours ago she would have given almost anything to quiet the cantankerous Gem. Now Jade's silence made her worry.

"Is she still, um, processing?" Steven asked after a few minutes.

Connie nodded, sighing. The dark web of feelings inside of her was hard to separate from her own concern, but she supposed she would have plenty of practice deciphering Jade's moods from her own unless Peridot came up with some kind of miraculous breakthrough.

"I guess it's a lot to take in," Steven said. "I mean, I went for years without knowing anything about the Gem war. They still don't like to talk about it much either, and they've had thousands of years."

The corner of his mouth twitched in an absent grimace. "Something that happened so long ago is still messing them up, and now it's doing it to Jade too."

She drummed the rim of her glass with her fingertip, watching the water ripple with each tap. "I didn't make things any better. When she woke up, I was pretty sure right away whose side she was on, and that she didn't know how long she had been gone. I told myself that saving all the details for later so you and the Gems could explain would help, but really, I think it was just an excuse to not deal with it."

Steven smiled weakly. "Can't say I blame you," he said.

Connie's mouth cracked with thirst, but she sipped at the water, remembering her deal with Jade about her bodily necessities. "No," she said, lowering the glass. "I did it to make it easier for me, not for her." A silent laugh shook her shoulders. "I finally understand all of those terrible mentor characters from fantasy novels. They never tell the hero anything because it's too hard for them, which always makes it worse for the hero later on."

Smirking, Steven asked, "Does that make Jade the Lisa to your Plinkman?"

The song she had played for Jade drifted through Connie's head, this time in its original arrangement as an elegy. "I don't think this story has any heroes," she said.

"Well, I think it does," Steven said firmly. "In fact, I think it has two. And I can be the plucky sidekick."

A smile threatened Connie's somber expression. "Plucky sidekick?" she echoed teasingly.

Puffing out his chest, Steven bragged, "I have a can-do attitude and my own ukulele for traveling music. Both are a must for any sidekick. Maybe I'll make a theme song for you two."

"I'm sure I'd love it," Connie said, and meant it. "And if Jade didn't, well, she wouldn't say anything."
The weak joke fizzled, tamping down on their smiles. Connie absently tapped Jade's gemstone through her shirt. Its rounded face felt smooth through the fabric. The green stone had survived entire chapters of history before her family line had ever existed. A week felt like a long time to Connie. A month was an interminable wait. A year was so far into the future that she could hardly imagine what life would be like by then. But five thousand years? That kind of time passed only in the abstract. It didn't feel real. But it was terrifyingly, awfully real to Jade.

"Can I ask you something?" Steven said suddenly.

The question jolted Connie out of her reverie. "Huh? Oh, sure."

His brow furrowed as he looked down. He kicked his sandaled feet idly, and said, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I'd understand."

"I can't answer if you don't ask," Connie prodded gently.

Steven's smile didn't rise at the bait. Hands twisting in his lap, he said, "Wh-What does it feel like? Having her inside you. Awake, I mean. What's it like?"

Connie considered for a moment, letting her fingertips drop from the stone. "Sometimes it's like reading something silently to yourself. Like you're sounding out words on a page, only there's no book or page. It's someone else doing it for you, or at you," she said. "Other times, it's harder to understand. It might be a feeling or a reaction to something I didn't expect. She made her feelings about food pretty clear, but I can't be sure about other things. Now that we can talk, though, I hope it gets easier."

"But when you hear her, the voice in your head sounds like your own," Steven said. When she nodded, he bit his lip and continued, "And those feelings feel like yours too, even though they're Jade's. Your feelings, and her feelings… Your thoughts and her thoughts… They're same-y, sort of. Right?"

Connie frowned quizzically at his squirming. Then, as she drew a breath to ask, she caught sight of his hands worrying the hem of his pink shirt. His fingers ran the edge of the fabric, stretching and tugging at it. A piece of sunlight caught the gemstone where his navel would have been, making it flash for just an instant.

Suddenly she understood what he was asking, even though he couldn't bring himself to say the question directly. Smiling gently, Connie said, "It is, but it isn't. I can feel what Jade feels sometimes, but I know they're not my feelings because they don't match what I'm thinking, or because I'm feeling differently at the same time. And even though Jade's voice sounds like mine in my head, it's obvious which one of us is talking. She speaks like she's trying to be a thesaurus, and she doesn't understand human stuff very well." Her eyebrows rose in an apologetic expression. "Trust me, when you have someone else talking inside you, you know it."

Steven's expression wavered. He might have been relieved or disappointed, or perhaps both. But his hands lingered at his shirt's hem as he seemed to come to a decision. "Is it okay if I tell Jade something?" he said.

Reaching up, Connie undid the button on her shirt collar, exposing the top edge of the gemstone beneath the hollow of her throat. The sound of the ocean was her only reply as she listened for Jade's reaction. "I don't know if she's listening right now, but you can try," Connie told him. "She seems to see and hear everything anyway."

He climbed out of his chair to stand before her, hands clamped at the bottom of his shirt. "Jade?
There's something you should know," Steven said. "I don't think the other Gems wanted me to tell you yet, or maybe not ever, but you deserve to know. Rose Quartz…well, she did survive the war."

Connie strained inwardly, but her thoughts rang hollow. She only heard the light breeze from the ocean brushing across the deck and stirring through her hair.

"It was her shield that saved Garnet and Pearl in the end," Steven continued, his eyes sinking to the deck. "She stayed here on Earth to protect it from the corrupted Gems and everything else the war left behind, until…until she met my dad. And then she gave up her physical form for me. To make me."

Lifting his shirt, Steven exposed the pink gem on his belly. It gleamed brightly, its edges crisp and perfect despite its long history.

They both waited in silence, Steven looking questioningly to Connie. She started to shake her head, but then she noticed that the wind was blowing harder. The umbrella in the deck table began to sway in its mounting, and Steven's hair spilled over his brow at the sudden gust. Connie could feel her own hair lifting in the wind as well as she squinted to watch Steven.

"I'm Rose Quartz's son. Her child, or offspring, I guess," Steven said, raising his voice above the wind as he settled his shirt back into place. "And I know things were really bad back when you knew her. I know we won't be friends at first. Maybe never. But I don't want us to fight either."

The wind changed again. Connie could see the shape of it in the loose sand as the air began to swirl around Steven. His empty chair slid in jerking, skittering little steps as the tiny windstorm's intensity grew, making the whole table rock as the umbrella jerked hard against the wind. But when Connie stood and started to cry out, Steven raised his hand and gave her a pleading look.

"Jade, Earth isn't the same place you knew before you woke up. The Crystal Gems aren't what they were before," Steven shouted into the tempest surrounding him. "We'll do whatever we can to help you and Connie. I promise."

Connie held her breath, gripping the arms of the chair as her hair whipped around her. The umbrella's post bent at the base, and the sand on the deck sprayed wildly at their feet, rattling against her shoes. A wordless, hopeless cry arose inside Connie, more a feeling than a sound, but it shook Connie in her seat.

Then, gradually, the wind began to ease. Its blowing softened into a limp breeze, and then stilled entirely, leaving the table's umbrella leaning drunkenly to one side and dropping the sand back to the decking. The mute wail inside Connie dwindled into her own background anxiety.

Looking at the ring of loose sand that had settled round them, Steven sighed and sagged back into his chair. "Well, she didn't say 'no,'" he said.

Connie slumped in relief. A brief smirk pulled at her lips. "Garnet was right. You do make a good diplomat," she told him.

"I think the most important thing is being honest, open, and genuine," Steven said, smiling back, "and doing it quick enough that they don't squish you first."

As Connie let her arms dangle over the arms of the chair, she felt thick fur suddenly push through the fingers of one hand. She looked back around her chair to find Lion crouched beside her, pushing his head under her dangling palm. Her notice made the great cat pour the length of himself under her touch, letting her fingers trail through his mane and down his back.
"Hello to you too, Lion," Connie said, scruffing his flank as he passed.

"He must have woken up from all the wind and noise to protect me," Steven said. When he reached out to give Lion's mane a scratch, the cat turned away and out of reach to sniff suspiciously at the ring of sand.

Connie smirked. "He certainly didn't wake up when Jade was tossing everyone around on the beach," she noted.

Shrugging, Steven said, "He probably just knew that was a misunderstanding."

The pink creature's snuffling led him back to Connie. His nose traveled up her leg, then up her stomach, as she sat patiently still. When his examination reached her open collar, he stopped, his nose twitching at the green gemstone. Then he leaned back and sneezed at the gem, promptly losing interest.

Giggling, Connie wiped at her face. "I guess Lion's in favor of diplomacy instead of fighting too."

"Maybe he just wants to be part of the story!" Steven exclaimed. "What do you say, Lion? There's always room for one more sidekick."

Lion stared unblinkingly at Steven for ten whole seconds. Then, lifting a paw, he batted Steven's water glass off the table and over the railing of the deck.

"He's considering it," Steven said as Connie fell into peals of laughter.

Connie stared searchingly into the mirror as she brushed her teeth, scrubbing the last of the not-carob out of her mouth for another few blissful, hungry hours. Dressed in familiar pajamas, her reflection stared back at her, eyelids drooping with the weight of the day. It was hard to believe that her secret world had grown so much more complicated since just that morning. It felt more like four weeks since those first moments when Jade began to speak.

As she spit and rinsed, she wondered at Jade's mute acceptance of the toothpaste. It wasn't food, and it didn't stay inside Connie, so perhaps its minty flavor wasn't as objectionable. Or perhaps it fell under Jade's largely arbitrary definition of necessary human functions. Connie wished she could ask her passenger, but Jade had remained silent ever since meeting the Crystal Gems.

Jade wasn't gone, physically or otherwise. Her despair at Steven's confession had proven as much. Not that Connie could blame her.

When Connie opened the door, she found her mother waiting in the hallway, arms folded and leaning against the wall. She was wrapped in her thick white robe. "All ready for bed?" she asked.

"Mom?" Connie said, surprised. Suddenly she was doubly glad for Jade's silence. Her half of any conversation with the Gem would have carried through the bathroom door. "Is something the matter? I haven't been sleepwalking again, have I?"

Her mother smiled, relaxing her posture. "Nothing's the matter. I just thought I'd say goodnight since we're both actually home at the same time for a change. Seems to be a rare occurrence these days. Too many hours at the hospital, and maybe a little too much hard work from my daughter."

Connie glanced down guiltily, clasping her hands before her. "I'm sorry," she said.

Sighing, her mother pushed off the wall and wrapped her arms around Connie. "Oh, sweetie, don't
be sorry. I just miss you, that's all. I never get to see you anymore except to drive you somewhere or hand off your meals." Kissing the top of Connie's head, she added, "You know, you don't need to study during every single meal if you don't want to. I'm glad you're taking your schoolwork seriously, but it's okay to eat down at the table every once in a while."

As she returned the hug, Connie hated herself for making sure she didn't let the embrace grow too tight or too close in case her mother felt the stone in her chest. "I know. I just want to do my best," she said. "I want to make you proud of me."

"Too late," her mother retorted, smiling down at Connie. Then she frowned and gently lifted Connie's chin, turning her daughter's face from side to side. "Are you growing again? You look like you've lost a little weight."

"M-Maybe?" Connie stammered.

"I guess that'll mean new clothes this summer," her mother said. Tugging at the sleeve of Connie's pink, yellow-starred shirt, she added, "Speaking of which, we will actually need to wash this eventually, you know."

Connie felt her cheeks grow hot. "I like it. It's comfy," she insisted.

Raising an eyebrow at the ill-fitting shirt, her mother simply replied, "Uh-huh." Then she kissed Connie on the cheek and said, "Goodnight, sweetie."

"Goodnight," Connie said, and held her smile in place until her mother descended the stairs. Then she sighed in relief, breathing deeply to ease her heartbeat after yet another near-miss at being discovered by her parents.

Turning out her lights and climbing into bed, Connie felt her mother's kiss lingering on her cheek. Even while she felt guilty for her latest deception, she was grateful that things with her parents had improved so much. She had always leaned heavily on her parents through their many relocations. More often than not in her life, they had been the only people she knew, the only ones to turn to and count on. And no matter how busy they seemed, they had never really let her down, not when it mattered. But now they were treating her more like an actual person instead of a project to make perfect.

Safe and warm in her own bed, Connie tried to imagine how horrible it would be to lose her parents, to lose everyone she had ever known and be totally alone, to lose her home and her familiar places all at once.

"Jade?" she whispered into the dark. "I'm gonna make you one more promise. No deals, or treaties, or bargaining. When we finally get separated, if it's what you really want, I'll help you get back to Homeworld."

No reply came.

She bit her lip, hesitating, and then said, "The Crystal Gems have a ship. A small one. And Steven's told me about the Galaxy Warp. It's broken now, but, well...broken things can be fixed, can't they?"

Nothing.

"The Gems may not like it. I think they're afraid of what you might tell Homeworld about them. About Earth. But they shouldn't get to make that choice for you, not on their own. So when the time comes...I'll help you however I can. I'll help you go home. Okay?"
Silence.

Closing her eyes, Connie settled her head onto her pillow and snuggled into the bedcovers. "Remember, no leaving the room until I wake up. Goodnight, Jade."

As her breathing slowed and she felt herself drift off, Connie thought she might have imagined a tiny voice whisper back to her in the stillness of her bedroom.

"Thank you."
"Human," Jade said suddenly, "I require context."

Connie jerked her pen across the page in surprise, leaving a wobbly line through the middle of her social studies worksheet. The blunt request had been Jade's first attempt to communicate with her in the three days since their disastrous trip to Beach City. Since then, there had been no complaints, no condescension, no threats against the Gems, and barely even the churning feeling of disgust every time Connie set foot in a bathroom.

Leaning back from her evening homework, Connie said cautiously, "What kind of context?"

"Those volumes gathered at the corner of your workspace."

Glancing across her desk, Connie brightened at the sight of her Spirit Morph Saga hardcovers sitting in a neat stack, their covers perfectly aligned. She hadn't noticed them missing from their shelf, but Jade must have taken them during her nightly coopting of their body. "You've been reading The Spirit Morph Saga?" she exclaimed.

"Have read. But yes."

"What did you think of the ending?" Connie said, leaning forward to dig the last book from the bottom of the pile. "Wasn't it a nightmare? I've read on some message boards that—"

"The ending? I cannot make sense of any of those ridiculous things!" Jade groused.

Connie reeled back, pausing in her search of the passage where she was certain the publishers had hijacked the entire ending to make it nauseatingly cute. "Wait. What?"

"This nonsense," Jade insisted. "This pap. This unconscionable betrayal of documentation. It is not simply meaningless, it is misleading! By design!"

She rested her hand on the cover of the book, frowning through a sharp pang of annoyance. "Misleading? It's a story. It's fiction," she said. Then her eyes widened, and she smiled. "Wait, did you think it was real? You do know what fiction is, right?"

"Of course I know what fiction is! I mean, now I do," Jade retorted, waves of irritation bubbling up in Connie's thoughts. "But what I cannot fathom is why you have fiction at all, and in such unbearable quantities. You have sheaves of it, terabytes of it, an archive devoted entirely to events that never happened. Why?"

"I don't understand. Don't you tell stories on Homeworld?" Connie asked.

A rolling chuckle burbled through Connie's head. "Oh, human. That you would ask such a question of me, of all Jades, is highly amusing. Sometimes your staggering ignorance is the only delight I can muster in this hollow semblance of existence."

"So glad I could help," Connie grumbled, rolling her eyes. "How about letting me in on the joke?"

"I," Jade explained, her silent voice imperious, "am a trained Chronicler, tasked with preserving the
memory of our empire for all Gems who follow. I seek and record the greatest truths that make us the pinnacle of intergalactic culture."

Connie gasped, letting her book thud on the desk in front of her. "Whoa. Really? So you have all of Homeworld's history inside of you? Like, everything?" Her thoughts dizzied at the idea of thousands upon thousands of stories from dozens of worlds stretching back across millennia.

"Well…not everything," Jade admitted. "I was chosen to train under a master Chronicler. She spent centuries teaching me technique, objectivity, impartiality, and recollection. Being a Jade, only the last of those qualities came naturally to me. My 'aptitude' in the other qualities often drove her into fits, but she finally deemed me ready to carry our legacy."

"But you didn't?" Connie guessed.

A cynical scoff arose in reply. "I did not. Your friends saw to that with their rebellion. Suddenly I found myself thrust to the front lines as a forward scout for a battalion of Quartzes and Rubies. Centuries of training, all for naught."

Smirking, Connie said, "Yeah, well, actually being from Earth, I can't say I feel all that bad for you losing your dream job. And besides, you're seriously going to blame the Crystal Gems for that?"

"Being that I was training to become Chronicler to Pink Diamond herself?" Jade snapped. "Yes, I believe I know where the blame lies."

Flashes of Stevonnie's memories raced through Connie's mind. They were secondhand impressions, feelings of guilt from half of her that wasn't her, guilt for events that had happened an unfathomable amount of time before she had existed. But even a shadow of a memory of a story was enough to weight on Connie's spirit. "Oh," she said.

"Quite," Jade said, her faceless sneer dripping from the word. "So rather than becoming a courtesan, I skirted traitors' weapons to feed intelligence to ungrateful Agates until…er, until…"

The tirade dwindled into silence. Connie could feel a tempest of quiet emotions rising in place of the words, the feelings too jumbled and conflicting to pin down, but none of them pleasant. "—until Homeworld corrupted everyone," Connie said softly.

"Preposterous!" Jade snarled too quickly. "Propaganda! Perfidy propagated by brigands and rabble-rousers. You have only the word of traitors to verify your quote-unquote 'facts,' human. And that generously presupposes you are not a part of the deception in the first place."

A biting retort leapt to Connie's tongue, but she forced herself to swallow it. Taking a deep breath, she said, "So then what's the explanation for your five thousand years of amnesia?"

"I…am still exploring a number of theories," Jade said indignantly. "Besides, I simply cannot trust you as a source of objective truth with all of this 'fiction' you covet so obsessively clouding your dull-witted mind."

Connie recognized the insult for the transparent deflection it was. But Jade had been practically mute for days. Deciding that a condescending passenger was better than an eerily silent one, she took the bait. "And what's wrong with fiction, Miss Fancy-Pants Chronicler?"

"What is wrong with it? None of it happened!" Jade insisted. "You humans have produced exhaustive amounts of historical accountings of events that never occurred and figures who never existed. It is madness! It serves no purpose!"
"It serves lots of purposes!" Connie argued. "Are you seriously telling me that Gems don't tell stories just to tell stories?"

"Of course not!" Jade exclaimed. "Every chronicle is related for a specific purpose. They can be used for education, clarification, or context for decision-making. But humanity has produced such a glut of falsehoods that they muddle truth and fabrication: tales 'based on a true story,' false events set in real periods of your history, or fictional histories entirely crafted to loosely resemble actual eras. It is a great wonder your species has any ability at all to differentiate between reality and fantasy!"

Being that Jade's primer on humanity had been a crowd-sourced internet encyclopedia, Connie found herself at a disadvantage in the argument. Still, she felt some call to stand up for her species, especially when it came to books. "There's plenty of room in the world for truth and fiction," Connie insisted. "And we know the difference between the two. ...most of the time. Maybe if Gems can't appreciate the value of a good story, it just means your culture is boring."

"Boring? Boring!" Jade sputtered. "Gem culture has produced tremendous wonders the likes of which would melt your hairless simian vision spheres!"

"Everyone's eyes are hairless," Connie noted smugly.

"You know what I mean! My people aren't so starved for accomplishment that we invent whole histories out of nothing!"

"You're acting like made-up stories are some kind of attack on facts," Connie said. 

"Exactly! The sheer irresponsibility is staggering!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Connie huffed, throwing herself out of her chair.

She stalked over to her bookcases, both of which were taller than her and extra-wide, and both of which had overflowing stacks in front of the shelved books because she had run out of room. She kept meaning to organize them, but never seemed to have the time or the space. Even so, her books were immaculate, their covers clean and pages still crisp. Just the thought of dog-earing a corner was enough to make her feel ill.

"Look, stories aren't just stories," Connie insisted. "You might know that if you actually read them."

"Is that your feeble attempt at humor, human? I read every scrap of information in this chamber the night I awoke. It confused me to no end before I found the communication hub at your workspace."

"You read all of these in one—? Right. Forgot who I was talking to," Connie said, sighing.

"How is that possible? I am literally inside of you."

"It's an expression," Connie grumbled. "Look, humans are complicated. We don't always say exactly what we mean, and we don't always approach a difficult subject directly. Sometimes we go at things sideways," she said, and gestured to the bookshelves.

"Still more evidence of Gem superiority," Jade said tersely.

Ignoring the jab, Connie picked up a favorite from her childhood, a collection of European fairy tales. "Like these: they teach kids lessons about life. Hansel and Gretel is all about not trusting strangers."

"I suppose it should not surprise me that a species obsessed with eating would devise an extended
metaphor about an ensnarement constructed entirely of food," sniped Jade.

Jamming the fables back onto the shelf, Connie drew out a different volume and tapped the cover. "Okay, fine. How about this one? A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. You didn't find a story about some super-advanced traveler ending up with primitive humans from long ago even a little bit relatable?"

Waves of disbelief rose up on reply. "Are you comparing all of my knowledge to that of a human with remedial engineering skills? I am not some Peridot or Polarite, human!"

"Ugh, fine!" Connie groaned. She picked up another book instead. "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: coming to a new place that's strange and familiar all at the same time, and finding out you're more important than you ever imagined, and having to make friends with unfamiliar creatures. Nothing?"

"You cannot imagine how disappointed I was to discover that humans were actually still the only creatures on this planet to develop speech. Not that the animals' quibbles were any less pointless in that insufferable drivel."

Gritting her teeth, Connie yanked a paperback off the shelf and shook it. "Stranger in a Strange Land! Come on! Someone raised in an alien culture from another planet comes to Earth and learns all about humans." Then she blinked, and added, "At least, that's how it starts out. Then it gets into all this stuff about religion, and there's a bunch of stuff I'm really glad my parents don't know about. Like, a lot."

"Religion?" Jade scoffed. "Do not even start down that road, human. I might crack myself laughing."

Glowering, Connie skimmed the titles on her shelves, looking for something to put the Gem in her place. One title caught her eye, but her hand hesitated. She wasn't sure if she should open that door again.

Slowly, gently, Connie pulled a book from the shelf and ran her hand across the cover. "The Count of Monte Cristo," she read aloud. "A good person is betrayed by friends and by the authorities of his time, and sentenced to imprisonment because of it. Does any of that sound familiar?"

The sense of mirthful superiority vanished from inside Connie's thoughts. Dead silence took its place.

Setting the book down, Connie gestured to the shelves in front of her. "These stories do a lot more than relate fake history, Jade. They're feelings: the feelings of the people who wrote them and the feelings of the people who read them. The good ones, the bad ones, they all matter. Stories are our way of dealing with thoughts and emotions too big to just tell each other. Sometimes they're the only way we can say anything that matters."

Inner silence rang after her words. Connie kept looking at the shelves, letting her hands fall to her sides.

"Metaphor," Jade said at last, though her voice had lost its haughty edge. "Your language is choked with metaphor."

And the thought itself was a metaphor, but Connie graciously left that unspoken. "Just because something doesn't have any value for you doesn't mean it isn't valuable at all," she pointed out instead.

"Perhaps," Jade admitted begrudgingly. "But fiction is still confounding and senseless."
"You know, at first I thought it was culture shock," Connie said, returning to her desk. "And then I figured it was a Homeworld thing. But now I get it: you're just a jerk."

"I am not!" Jade protested. "I am actually quite pleasant. My current acquaintanceships simply leave much to be desired."

"Nope. I have literally met Gems who wanted to kill me that are more fun to be around than you," Connie retorted. Granted, she was making a few assumptions with Lapis. But kicking Jasper in the face had been fun, so it was still technically true. "I bet even other Gems didn't like you. Are all Jades as mean and nasty as you are?"

"I am not nasty! I...I have scores of friends. Hundreds!" Jade insisted.

Snickering, Connie picked up her pen and resumed her homework. "Now who's making up fiction?" she muttered. "You hate the Crystal Gems, you hate me, you hate all humans, you really hate food... is there anything on this planet you do like?"

There was a pregnant pause. Then Jade snapped, "No."

Connie frowned. It wasn't the tone or the terseness of Jade's answer that struck her as odd, but instead the feeling that it was an obvious lie.

"Well, maybe we can change that," Connie said.

_____________________________________________________

Chapter End Notes

The team over at ConnieSwap let me write an omake chapter for them! ConnieSwap is a fantastic series starring a completely different Gem-powered Connie and her own unconventional family, with phenomenal artwork and a great reimagining of SU canon. If you haven't checked out the story yet, go read it right now!
Friday arrived with the speed and timeliness of a glacier. Seconds, minutes, and hours blurred together into a cold quagmire that never seemed to end and never let go, pulling, dragging, and suffocating every moment leading up to the weekend trip to Beach City. More than once, Connie would have sworn that she saw the clocks around her were moving backwards just to spite her.

But after eons of waiting, the school day reached its halfway point, and Connie found herself in the lunchroom with the dull roar of conversations all around her and a lunch she couldn't eat sitting on the empty table before her.

Like she had been doing with her other sack lunches, she wrote "Eat me, Alice!" on the brown paper bag and left it on the nearest empty table, then snuck out the back doors of the cafeteria into the empty hallways. The teachers monitoring the room didn't seem to mind, and it made Connie feel better to think her food might not be going to waste, even if no one ever actually ate the mystery bag.

Her hand idly drifted across rows of locker doors as she walked the halls. With each classroom she passed, she could hear the muffled lecture of a teacher or a rumbling of class discussion, but it was otherwise silent.

"I have noticed," Jade sub-vocalized, "that you always leave the communal areas during your consumption times."

Grimacing, Connie murmured, "Yeah, well, since I can't eat any of it, being around all of that food isn't much fun." She kept her voice low despite the solitude. If anyone else happened across her, she didn't want to be discovered having an argument with herself.

Patiently, Jade replied, "Your nutritional replacement is adequate for the average human's needs," just like she now did every time the word "food" came between them.

"Uh-huh," Connie grunted, far from agreeing.

"But I was actually more curious about the social aspect of your choice. Or is this behavior purely in response to our superior efficiency diet?"

A snarky reply bubbled up Connie's throat, but she clenched her teeth and swallowed. "No," she admitted. "I don't really know anybody in my lunch period, because…"

She tried to think of a way to explain her tepid history with making friends to an alien who had the personality and social skills of conceited pond scum.

"…anyway," she said, "I usually like to find a quiet place to read. But walking around helps me forget about how hungry I always am now."

"Any additional caloric intake would only be converted—" Jade began.

"Oh, shut up," groaned Connie.

Her knuckles bumped over the sea of locker doors lining the hall, the metal cool against her swashbuckling calluses. The dull ache in her stomach was familiar now, but she didn't like it any better than she had before. It was a fight to keep herself from checking her phone to see how much time had passed since the last time she had looked. Saturday was achingly close, but still an eternity away.
Maybe if Peridot didn't have any tests to run she might actually get to train with Pearl. It had been weeks since the battle on the beach, and she itched to resume her lessons. Her frustrations with her passenger might feel more manageable if she had a way to sweat them out. At least it would give her something to hit.

"Where is your spot?" Jade asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Connie stumbled at the question, letting her hand drop from the lockers.

"Your spot. Where you read," said Jade. "May I see it?"

Connie waited for the snide, condescending follow-up, but only found patient silence in reply. Shrugging, she turned and followed the corridor to the back stairwell of the school and climbed up to the top floor. She settled on the top step, her back resting against brick wall, where a narrow window above her cast bright sunlight across the grimy tile. The stairwell was far enough from any other classroom that, with the halls empty, was as close to perfectly quiet as the school got.

"This is it," Connie said, looking around the plain, slightly dirty stairwell. "Not much to look at, but nobody bothers me, and teachers don't seem to care as long as I don't leave a mess."

"Functional, I suppose," Jade replied.

Sighing, Connie dug her actual lunch out of her backpack and stared at the wrapper. The bodybuilder mascot stared back at her with his blank-eyed realistic horse mask. "I hate this stupid horse guy," she grumbled, and tore his face in half as she unwrapped the bar.

Puzzlement drifted up as Jade said, "Am I missing cultural context for this product's iconography? I do not understand its intended appeal."

"There isn't enough context on the planet to explain whatever the ¡Soy Delicioso! guy is," Connie assured her. She devoured the bar in four precise bites, chewing as little as possible. The larger chunks hurt to swallow, but the alternative was letting the taste linger between her teeth for even longer, so she had gotten used to the discomfort. As much as she hated the bars, part of her actually looked forward to each unwrapping. It was one of three times each day when she didn't have to feel quite so hungry, even for just a minute.

Sucking the carob substitute from her fingertips, Connie leaned back against the wall, feeling the rough surface tug at her hair. "How did you know I had a spot?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't ask why I don't have any friends to sit with at lunch," Connie said, and stuffed the wrapper in her pocket. "You didn't say anything snooty about the books I read, or complain about how tiny and pointless the school is. You didn't even ask if I 'had' a favorite spot. You just asked where it was, like you already knew I had one."

Jade sounded surprised. "Oh? Um, well... I have noticed a propensity for habitual behaviors in Earth-based anthropoids. Surely that would not change in five thousand measly years."

Connie frowned, un convinced. "Do you have a spot?" she asked.

"Obviously. It is the anterior region of your sternum, wedged amidst your epidermis."

Rolling her eyes, Connie said, "Ha, ha. I meant back when you had your own body, Smarty Gem. Did you have a spot on Earth where you liked to go? Somewhere quiet that felt like it was just for
you?"

Jade remained silent for a long moment before answering. "There was not much time during the war to myself. And even less time while I was training as a courtesan."

The lingering, inaudible tone in Jade's voice made Connie lean forward expectantly. "That's not an answer. You did have a spot, didn't you?" she guessed. "That's why you thought I did too. You think we're a little alike," she said, smirking.

Thoughts bristling, Jade snapped, "I am a soldier and a loyal servant of the Diamonds. You are a meaningless pawn to traitors and deviants. We are nothing alike, human, and we never will be."

Snorting, Connie dug through her backpack for the old paperback she was rereading for the sixth time. "Whatever," she said, and thumbed to her place in the book by memory.

Her eyes had just found the next sentence when Jade's voice interrupted her. "You cannot trust them, you know. The Crystal Gems will betray us."

The thought struck Connie like a slap to the face. Her hands dropped in her lap, still clutching the halves of her book, as she said, "No, they won't! They're trying to help us. They're the only ones who can."

"Human," Jade said gravely, "I have seen their kind do terrible things. I watched their warriors merge into gruesome fusions that could cross a battlefield in two enormous strides, crushing waves of Rubies underfoot without even noticing. I watched a simple Bismuth tear apart a Beryl's form using nothing but her hands. Their Quartz leader mowed through battalions of her own kind like your people harvest grain. Whole Gem convoys dropped from the sky in ribbons of smoke, felled by stolen light cannons. The rebels hold nothing sacred save for their own sovereignty and their aberrant desires. The instant we threaten that, they will eradicate us without a moment's hesitation."

Connie drew a sharp breath, ready to berate the Homeworld Gem. Steven's family was nothing like the terrors Jade remembered. They were her…

Her what? Were the Gems her friends? Steven certainly was. Amethyst seemed to find her company mildly amusing. Pearl seemed pleased by Connie's growing skills as a swordswoman. Garnet seemed like a huge supporter of Stevonnie, at least. Peridot probably saw her as a puzzle to solve. And Lapis had to see a reflection of her worst memories when she saw Connie. How much of that actually amounted to genuine friendship?

Those first weeks taking up the sword had come with one extra lesson, a lesson that had been hard to unlearn: that she was nothing. To an ageless being, she was just a blip. She was an oddity blinking in the periphery while the rest of the world roared by at the speed of time. Could Pearl actually be proud of one human's accomplishments over a handful of months? Or was she just humoring Steven's insignificant little human friend? What if they all saw her as just a temporary distraction?

Would they tire of trying to remove Jade safely? Now that her passenger had proved to be an enemy, and still armed with her wind powers, would the Gems eliminate that enemy and the human accidentally standing in the way?

…no. No. Maybe the Gems weren't her friends, at least not in the sense that she understood the word. And maybe they cared more for the Earth at large than for the individual humans living on it. But Connie knew them well enough to know that they never spent their time on anything that didn't matter to them. Nor were they gifted enough at deception, nor motivated enough, to fake an entire relationship with her.
Pearl was proud of her for how far she had come in such a short time. Amethyst wouldn't tease her if she didn't care. Garnet never wasted a single word, and she had promised their aid, and even called Connie their ambassador. Peridot didn't seem to like anyone, ever. And Lapis…well, there was genuine room for improvement with Lapis.

The Gems were secretive, but they were not liars. Whatever she meant to them, Connie knew they were genuine. And they had earned her trust and her belief in them. She couldn't let the words of some alien zealot fill her with doubt.

She steeled herself to tell Jade off, to tell her that the rebels from that long-ago memory were not the Gems she knew today. But then Connie noticed her hand moving all on its own, flipping idly through the book in her lap, where her unfocused gaze rested. "Hey!" Connie exclaimed.

"This concept of feudalism baffles me," Jade groused as Connie's hand continued to rifle the book's pages. "Why assemble such a rigid caste system if you are not going to base it on aptitude? Heredity is a terrible metric for leadership."

Connie jerked the hand back, clenching it into a fist. It responded like it always had. "Was that you? Were you controlling my hand?" she said.

The question seemed to surprise Jade. "Of course not, I have no motor functions while you are still conscious. I just wanted to see if I had missed something in this historical fantasy about knights and wolves and nonsense, so I…" She trailed off at the sudden realization. "I…I was controlling it. That was me!"

Excitement and concern swirled inside Connie. "Can you do it again?" she asked, and held out her arm.

Feelings of intense strain poured through Connie's thoughts. Jade even went so far as to sub-vocalize a grunting, choking growl, as though she were trying to lift the book solely with her mind. But the only result was a brief tingle that ran down the length of Connie's arm.

Mentally heaving with effort, Jade said, "The limb refuses to respond. Do that thing you were doing before when you made your thoughts more scattered and unfocused even than they usually are."

Connie drew her legs together and took a long, steadying breath. She focused her annoyance on Jade's pathological need to belittle her and imagined it as a bright, gleaming butterfly that floated in the blackness between thoughts. As she continued to breathe slowly, she pictured the butterfly gliding, then landing, its feet rippling against a cool black liquid surface.

As she concentrated on the feeling of stillness, she looked down. Her arm had risen from her lap and was slowly turning itself over, all without her guidance.

Jade's laughter rang through Connie's mind. "Ha! That's splendid!" she crowed. The mental noise of Jade's voice startled Connie's butterfly into the air, where it shattered into sparkling motes of light. Connie's arm fell back into her lap, once more under her control, but that didn't seem to dampen Jade's glee at the brief victory. The Gem's silent laughter was so giddy that Connie couldn't help but smile as she rolled her arm experimentally.

"And here I thought you only knew how to be angry or sarcastic," Connie said.

Curbing her laughter, Jade cleared her nonexistent throat and said, "Yes, well, any improvement to my circumstances is a welcome development. Not that occasional consensual daytime motor control will affect matters greatly."
The beginnings of an idea sparked in Connie. She stared down at her hand, smiling. "You might be surprised," she said coyly.

High up on the wall, the school's speakers rang with the period bell, ending lunchtime. Doors down the hallway opened as students left for their next class in droves. Connie packed away her belongings and fell into step with them, riding the human current back toward her locker to collect books for her next class.

"Social interaction seems to be a primary, nigh-exclusionary concern of your species," Jade said, "or so one would surmise to see the poor design of your education center. With so many units crammed into such a disproportionate space, I can only assume your kind cringes in terror at the thought of being isolated. Your paltry information network correlates the observation, being that humans use it almost exclusively to talk at each other rather than for the exchange of pertinent information."

"Mmn," Connie grunted softly. As much as she might want to argue, she didn't need her classmates thinking she had an imaginary friend, especially one so infuriating.

"But you seem to largely eschew the social trivialities of your species. It may be your one redeeming quality, human."

Connie almost tripped in surprise. That thought was as close to anything nice as Jade had ever given her. She grinned stupidly as she twisted the combination into her locker, wondering if Garnet expected their Gem ambassador to file progress reports. "Hostile detainee said something almost kind" would be hard to stretch into a full page. Then again, none of the Gems would know what to do with paperwork anyway. Except maybe Peridot.

When Connie opened the locker, she had to jump backwards to avoid a deluge of folded, colorful paper pamphlets that tumbled out from the door. Each pamphlet was small enough to have been slipped through the locker's horizontal vents, and whoever had done so had stuffed nearly a hundred of them through so they would erupt as they had, now spilling under the feet of the kids around her.

As several students bent to read the pamphlet, Connie did likewise, picking one up. The name and logo for a plastic surgery clinic in Ocean Town was printed on its glossy paper.

"Rhinoplasty?" Jade read on the pamphlet. "I have not encountered that term before. What does it mean?"

Even if Connie hadn't known its definition, the word was made obvious by the pictures in the pamphlet: a woman's before-and-after pictures depicted her first with an enormous nose and a miserable expression, and then with a pert, movie-star nose and a bright, white smile. "Trust the doctor who 'nose' how beautiful you can be," Connie read, glowering at the smiling man in a lab coat pictured with the slogan.

"Tsk. This advert is misspelled," Jade said dismissively.

Connie's cheeks burned as a few of the other students around her snickered at the littered pamphlets. Most of the kids ignored the whole ordeal, but one face in particular stood out from the crowd, watching smugly from the safety and innocence of a classroom door. Connie glared at Mandy Petti, who smiled sweetly in reply and tapped the side of her cute button nose.

Stooping, Connie began to crush the pamphlets into a ball. Her teeth ground tighter with each smiling doctor she crumpled into the wad, but she refused to look up at any of the inquisitive glances from the students around her.
“Wait,” Jade said in sudden realization, “is this meant to be commentary on your facial configuration? I would think above-average nasal capacity would be a beneficial adaptation. Or are facial features determinative of social ranking? Does your face make you an inferior specimen?”

Connie felt her vision grow hot at the question and the muted laughter around her. She closed her wobbly eyes and took another long, deep breath. "One step forward," she muttered, "two steps back."

"I do not understand."

The crowd parted absently for Connie to stuff the pamphlets into a garbage can. "Yeah," she grumbled too softly for anyone else to hear. "I know."
Versatile Design

The tingling flash of the warp pad dissipated, leaving Connie and Steven standing a few hundred feet from the mouth of the open barn. A breeze stirred the morning air, rippling in the stubby, silk-topped field of corn that was just now growing taller than either of the teens. The day was sunny and warm, but a bank of clouds loomed on the horizon, threatening their Saturday with the beginnings of a storm.

She, Steven, and Jade were the only ones to make the trip. The other Gems had already been gone before Connie had arrived that morning, off on another patrol to find the threat that kept eluding Garnet's premonitions. Connie felt disappointed at their absence, but she knew that it was probably for the best. The spike of protest she felt mixing with her excitement when she saw Steven again made her think that Jade still had a lot to work through before she could be regularly trusted to be civil around her old enemies.

Connie's insides jittered as she and Steven approached the barn. She wanted to blame her miserable breakfast, or Jade's mood spilling into hers, but the truth was that she felt nervous about the visit. There hadn't been any great strides made toward removing the gemstone before Jade had awoken, and unless Peridot had found a sudden flash of insight, they were all likely to face more disappointment.

The sound of barking drew Connie's gaze to the edge of the field. Lapis Lazuli stood with her back to the corn, her teardrop gem glistening on her bare back as she waved a stick for an excited pumpkin jumping at her feet. Even having heard the story from Steven, and believing him about the barn Gems' pet, it was still surreal to see the animate gourd bounding on stubby legs, its vine-like tail lashing back and forth in delight. When Lapis threw the stick, Pumpkin ran pell-mell after it, yipping and panting, and fetched the stick back to the Gem so she could throw it again.

*Is it really any weirder than a pink lion?* Connie thought, and then immediately decided, *Yes. Yes, it is way weirder. But it's still pretty cool.*

Lapis straightened, letting Pumpkin dangle from the stick in her hand as she grinned and waved at Steven. But when her gaze fell upon Connie, the Gem's smile evaporated. Her whole face darkened, and she spun around, shaking Pumpkin loose so she could throw the stick in the opposite direction of the barn, moving the game of fetch as far from the teens as possible. The wordless statement couldn't have been clearer, and it doubled the anxiety churning in Connie's stomach.

"These fools have a Lazuli? Then why is this region so woefully underdeveloped?" Jade said.

Running out of the barn at a wild sprint, Peridot waved her hands high over her bushy hair and cried, "You're finally here!"

Steven grinned and said, "It's nice to see you too, Peri—"

The green Gem bowled him aside, declaring, "No time for that, Steven. They're finally here!" She stood in front of Connie, bouncing lightly on her toes, actually giggling with excitement as she clutched her face.

Nervously, Connie smiled and waggled her fingers. "Hi, Peridot," she said.

"And hello to you too, Connie! And Jade!" Peridot squealed, ignoring Steven as he picked himself up from the ground. "Steven told me about Jade's cognitive emergence, and I'm just so...so...GAH!"
It's incredible! I have so many tests to run. So many questions!" she shrieked in delight.
"That's…great," Connie said, and took a measured step backwards.
Amidst her own discomfort, Connie felt a surge of confusion bubbling up in her as Jade said, "Why
is that Peridot so small?"
Peridot's grin collapsed into seriousness, and she stroked her chin, frowning. "What do I even call
Cojonade? Jonaddie?" She clutched at her temples, her eyes screwing shut with concentration.
"Rrrgh, Connie-Jade…something!"
As the Gem devolved into wordless muttering, Connie took another careful step back. "I, uh, kind of
like 'Connie Jade.' Does that work?"
Peridot stiffened, dropping her fist into her open palm. "Exquisite! It's simple, neat, and
acknowledges you both. Nice work, Connie Jade!" she exclaimed.
"I have reservations regarding the names' respective order," Jade told Connie dryly. "I also take
issue with one of those two names even being included."
Grabbing Connie's hand, Peridot dragged her bodily into the barn, forcing Connie to stumble to keep
up as they entered the circle of repurposed machinery and scrap from the previous test. The machines
looked more or less the same as they had the last time, but the armchair at the center was missing.
"I have another test to gauge the connectivity between you and your gemstone," Peridot said.
"Whose gemstone?" Jade said sharply.
"And then afterward," Peridot rambled, oblivious to Jade's mood as she moved from piece to piece
of her assembly, checking each connection, "I have an extensive questionnaire to complete with your
counterpart to determine the state of her corruption. I can't wait to see how much of her original
cognitive faculties remain. Though it might be difficult to differentiate any corruptive effects from the
natural degradation inherent in a Gem of her extreme age."
"My what!" Jade hissed, making Connie cringe.
Hopping from foot to foot, Peridot danced with excitement as she squealed, "What an incredible
opportunity! Communicating with a defunct member of the Empire's earliest tentative steps into the
greater cosmos. A Gem whose like was reprocessed for their obsolescence, whose purpose was
replaced by more prevalent and accessible technology, here in my barn! I can't wait to see how
impressed she is by how far we've come since she mattered!"
"Who among the farthest stars does this half-formed pebble think she is," Jade snarled in Connie's
thoughts, "talking about me like—"
"Oh!" Peridot said, brightening. "Here I am talking about her, and she's right here! Is she excited? Is
she happy to meet me too?" She bounced back to Connie, eyes wide and glistening with anticipation
behind her visor.
"—forged the borders of our race and trod upon the very dirt that made her millennia before any
kindergartener had the extreme misfortune to pull her out of the muck and—"
Connie made her smile rictus-wide and said, "She's…really excited right now."


"Ha! Of course she is!" Peridot cheered. Then, collecting herself, she sobered and said, "But such pleasantries can wait. We should proceed with the physical portion of the test first. Stand there, please, and make yourself ready."

Watching Peridot trot over to her microwave-regulator, Connie looked around and said, "Um, what should I do to get ready?"

Peridot returned with a large metal colander, the kind Connie's mother would use for washing vegetables or straining fresh-cooked pasta in the kitchen. A pair of electrical leads had been soldered to the base of the colander, and a rat's nest of copper wiring was haphazardly woven through its tiny holes. "Put this on," Peridot instructed.

Taking the colander, Connie eyed it hesitantly, following the cables on its leads back to Peridot's machines. "What is it?" she asked.

"Telling you what it does might contaminate the results of the test," Peridot said. "At this stage of the experiment, you only need to know that it goes on your head."

Steven's gaze made a circle of the barn. "It just looks like you hooked up a pasta thingy to your Gem Destabilizer from last time," he said.

"Her what?" Jade shrieked.

Testily, Peridot said, "It can do two things! My designs are as versatile as they are brilliant. Now put on the pasta headpiece and let's proceed."

"Human, do not put that garbage on our...head," Jade said, making the final word a sigh of defeat as Connie settled the colander into place. She could feel the tiny holes and wires tugging at her hair as she nervously shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Nodding, Peridot said, "Good. Steven, I'll need you to regulate the power at the control knob. We should only need 'popped corn' for today's experiment. At my signal, if you would."

"Human, do not let him activate that machine!" Jade insisted as Steven set his hand to the microwave dial.

Connie frowned, adjusting the colander. "Peridot, this is safe, right?" she asked.

"I am one hundred percent certain that it could be safe," Peridot said. "Steven!"

"Human, I need your primitive survival instincts to intervene. Right! Now!" Jade wailed.

Steven glanced back at Connie with a questioning look. Bitting her lip, Connie closed her eyes and nodded, and heard him twist the microwave knob. The machinery around them alighted with a hum-clatter-wonk. Rattling on its blocks, the old pickup truck began to shimmy with the knock of its engine, and the taste of coppery static filled the barn to the rafters.

Cracking a single eyelid, Connie was relieved to find that she hadn't exploded. The worst she felt was a light tingling in her scalp to accompany the soft hum of the live wires woven through her makeshift colander cap. "Huh. Okay," she said.

Peridot collected a pen and notebook and adopted a studious posture in front of Connie. "Now," she said, poised to write, "I will ask you a series of questions. I need you to answer honestly, carefully, and to the fullest extent of your knowledge. Are you ready, Connie Jade?"
As Connie nodded, the colander tilting with the motion, she heard Jade mutter to her, "This sensation is quite unusual, but not discomfiting. Perhaps the little bolt-cranker is merely unpleasant instead of dangerously incompetent."

"Question One," Peridot announced. "What does Amethyst say about me when I'm not around?"

"Never mind," Jade groaned as Connie goggled the green Gem in disbelief.

"What?" Steven exclaimed from the microwave. "Peridot, what does that have to do with—?"

"Steven, please! You are risking the viability of the experiment's results!" Peridot snapped. Looking back at Connie, she tapped the pen against her notebook and said, "Answer the question, please. Data collection is crucial at this stage."

Exasperated, Connie shrugged and said, "I don't know. I've never really heard her say anything about you when you aren't there. But Amethyst doesn't hang out with me and Steven that much. We're usually off on our own, I guess."

Peridot's mouth flattened into a thin line as she scribbled something onto her notebook. "Hmm. Not promising, but we'll proceed. Question Two: of Garnet's two component Gems, who do you like better? Please cite specific situations or reasoning that forms the basis for your preference."

"I…what?" Connie said. She shot a glance at Steven, who could only shrug helplessly. "Um, I've never met Ruby or Sapphire unfused. But why would I like one of them better than the other? And why does that matter?" she said.

Still writing, Peridot said, "Refrain from responding with your own questions. You risk upsetting the delicate flow of my prepared inquiries. Now, Question Three: what is the most embarrassing thing you have ever personally witnessed Pearl do?"

Connie bit her lip. "Um, pass," she said.

Shaking her head, Peridot said, "Not good at all. No. But we'll proceed. Question Four: would you, with your own comparative experience in the matter, characterize Steven's use of bathroom facilities as typical of humans? I'm speaking in terms of duration and frequency of use, as well as average volume of—"

"Peridot!" Connie exclaimed, feeling her cheeks blaze. Though she couldn't bring herself to look at him, she saw Steven turning bright red out of the corner of her eye. "What is up with these weird questions? What does any of this have to do with getting Jade out of me?"

Peridot sighed. "Okay, Steven. Shut down the machine," she said, and dropped her pen and notebook.

The machinery around them coughed silent. Peridot waved her hand, and the colander lifted itself off of Connie's head, dragging strands of dark hair with it in the Gem's ferrokinetic grasp.

Still pink in the cheek from Peridot's question, Steven left the microwave and said, "So what did all of your, um, questions tell you, Peridot?"

"Oh, the exact questions themselves are completely irrelevant to the procedure," Peridot said as she examined the floating colander. "Technically I could have asked Connie Jade to perform any basic interaction and obtained the same results. I just really wanted to know all of that stuff."

"You wanted to gossip?" Connie said, incredulous.
"No, I did not want to gossip!" Peridot shot back indignantly. "I simply wanted to collect social data about our mutual acquaintances without their direct knowledge, as they may have found my inquiries too probing."

"Peridot, that's gossiping," Steven chided her.

Harrumphing, Peridot said, "I consider it multitasking, thank you very much."

"I am going to be stuck in here forever," Jade groaned.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Connie silently counted to ten. She wasn't certain how much patience it took to deal with an insufferable green alien, but she knew she did not have nearly enough patience for two. "Then what was the point of the test?" she said through her teeth.

Brightening, Peridot plucked the floating helmet from the air and presented its interior to the two teens. "I modified my Dissipation Inducer to dampen human cognitive processes. As soon as it started up, the machine should have prevented you from forming your own conscious thoughts or accessing any personal memories whatsoever."

Connie frowned, disappointed. "So the machine didn't work," she said.

"Oh, it worked perfectly. That's the most exciting part," Peridot insisted. "While the headpiece was active, you maintained cognizant interaction with me and responded to inquiries wholly dependent on memories exclusive to your human component. Do you know what that means?"

"Connie's brain is smarter than your helmet?" Steven guessed.

"No!" snarled Peridot, throwing out her hands. "Last week's test with the Dissipation Inducer demonstrated that the Jade gemstone is as intrinsic a part of Connie Jade as Steven's Quartz is with his body. But this test suggests that the human half of Connie Jade's mind resides as much in her gemstone as it does in her organic brain!"

Ice water crept through Connie's veins as the realization struck her. With her own mind dampened by Peridot's machine, everything she was and everything she remembered had been coming from the gemstone instead. Her eyes widened as she wondered if her thoughts were still coming from the gem now that the experiment was over. Was her brain superfluous? Was she as much a passenger to Jade as Jade was to her?

"...that is a deeply disturbing revelation," Jade uttered in a daze.

Connie's thoughts scattered like bursting fireworks. She couldn't be certain if the confusion was her own, or Jade's, or if there was even a distinction anymore.

"So Jade and Connie share both of their brains?" Steven said, his brow furrowed as he wrestled with the idea. "That's a little unusual, though I guess it's nice that they're sharing. But Peridot, how are you so sure that your machine did what you wanted it to do? You would have gotten the same results if the pasta thingy didn't work at all, right?"

Sniffing, Peridot turned her nose up and said, "Firstly, Steven, your doubt is hurtful. You've insulted my professional credibility and my genius, and I don't know if I can ever forgive you."

Steven's face sagged, and he cried, "Oh, no! I'm sorry, Peridot."

Giving his hangdog expression a long, searching look, she clenched her jaw and decided, "Mmn, an emotional counteroffensive. Clever. I forgive you, Steven. Secondly, the function of this device is so
laughably simple that even the dullest clod couldn't get it wrong."

"Evidently, living proof stands before us," Jade grumbled, forcing Connie to stifle a laugh.

None the wiser, Peridot continued, "All the headpiece does is dampen any and all electrical activity within the confines of its volume. It forms a dead zone that would prevent any human caught in its effect from remembering how to tie its foot-shirts, let alone carrying on a conversation."

Connie's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Peridot, that's actually really impressive," she said, and looked into the colander with new appreciation. "How on Earth did you make the helmet so it only dampened my conscious mind without turning off all of the other stuff my body does?"

The question seemed to confuse Peridot. "What do you mean?"

"Like my breathing, and my heartbeat. What's the word?" Connie mused aloud.

"Autonomic."

"Right. Thanks, Jade. My autonomic functions: how did you keep those going when you shut down the rest of my brain?" asked Connie.

Peridot blinked slowly, and then said, "Your organs don't self-regulate?"

Connie's knees wobbled as she realized what Peridot was saying. She had to grab onto Steven's arm to keep from collapsing. "You didn't think of that?" she cried, her stomach lurching at the memory of that seemingly innocent tingling feeling in her scalp. "Peridot, you could have killed me!"

"Peridot!" Steven cried, aghast.

The diminutive Gem pitched her colander to the ground, letting it bounce away as she retorted, "Well, how was I supposed to know? I don't have any glorified water sacs churning inside me! And if I did, you could be sure they would know how to conduct themselves on their own! Besides, what kind of control system contains such a catastrophic singular point of failure? That's just bad design!"

The air between all three of them exploded, dragging Steven and Connie forward as a hammer of wind smashed into Peridot. The green Gem arced high into the wall and crashed through the wood in a blast of splinters. Her head slammed visor-first into the wall as her hips wedged into the jagged planks, leaving her to dangle more than a dozen feet above the floor.

When the air settled an instant later, the teens stared up at the lolling Gem. "Whoa…" Steven breathed.

Brushing her wild hair back over her ears, Connie said, "Okay, that wasn't me, but if I'm being honest, I'm not a hundred percent sorry it happened."

"That miserable little pebble is not to touch our body again. Of all the ignorant, foolish, sloppy, half-concocted…" Jade's tirade dissolved into flashes of dark emotions, the thoughts too angry to coalesce into words.

Up in the wall, Peridot pushed dizzily at the wood digging into her waist. "The experiment must have triggered some kind of unintentional pressure differential reaction from her Jade component. Steven, help me down. We'll need to perform a follow-up questionnaire to determine if her corruption played any part in the accident."

The wordless storm inside Connie intensified. Glancing worriedly at Steven, she murmured, "I'd
"I'll go find a ladder," Steven said, nodding in agreement.

Connie left through the barn doors, trying not to look at or think about Peridot's unintentionally life-threatening machinery, or the idea that her entire sense of self might have been lost the moment Jade entered her body. Their bond had grown stronger in just a few short weeks, to the point where they were all but reading each other's mind. Would they ever stop growing closer? How long until their thoughts and memories pooled together as well, making them both into someone else?

"—should be relegated to Pearl-polishing, and repairing illumination units in only the most remote of outposts," Jade groused to herself, her thoughts becoming clearer as her anger faded to a dull roar.

Shaking her head clear of Jade's blustery anger, Connie heard more barking, and saw Lapis teasing Pumpkin with the stick again. The two of them played at the edge of the field, the blue Gem darting in and out of the corn while the gourd chased after her on stubby legs.

Connie patted her pocket, feeling for the secret tools she had tucked there before leaving her house that morning. Then, tentatively, she began to approach the frolicking Gem.

"We should go back in there so I can put that pebble through another wall, and..." Jade trailed off when she realized where they were going.

"Wait. What are you doing, human?"

"Something way scarier than being Peridot's guinea pig," Connie said.

"What? You're not a rodent, you're a hominid," Jade said. "And what terror could you conceive that would be worse than deferring to that stunted fool?"

Lapis's eyes fell upon Connie, and the Gem stopped in her tracks, her face a dark mask in the shadow of the corn. She stared back at Connie, frozen, unblinking, her body tensed either to run or to strike.

Swallowing hard, Connie muttered to Jade, "Being an ambassador."
The deep, glimmering color of Lapis Lazuli's implacable gaze brought memories rushing back to Connie. She stood once again on a dry ocean floor that crumbled underfoot while she stared up at the impossible sight of Earth's oceans, its collective blue, rising before her in a column that stretched taller than the sky. Watery doppelgangers battled Steven's strange and mysterious guardians, their conflict tearing apart the landscape. And then a vicious tendril lashed out, lifting Connie from the ground as it snared her head in a globe of crushing, inescapable brine.

Her feet scrambling in the air for purchase, Connie had clutched at the solid water surrounding her head. It had pushed down her nose, fought through her lips, and pressed her eardrums to the point of bursting. She remembered the searing flood of the water filling her lungs as her final breath bubbled out of her in a sob.

"Um…hello?" Lapis said, tilting her head at Connie, her expression crinkling.

Connie shook herself out of the memory and back into the present. The lithe blue Gem watched her from the edge of the corn field, the stick in her hand dangling limply. Down at her feet, Pumpkin jumped and barked, nipping at the stick, trying to coax their game back into action. The animate gourd's vine tail whipped back and forth with excitement as she looked between Lapis and Connie expectantly, demanding that someone play with her.

Taking a deep breath, Connie started forward, putting a broad, friendly smile on her face. "Hi, Lapis!" she called.

Her gaze dropping, Lapis said, "Yeah, hi. Um, I'm pretty sure Peridot is still in the barn. She said she had a whole bunch of tests for your today." Her mouth struggled around the word test, making it into its own troublesome world.

"Right. She's, um, stuck with a problem right now, and Steven is trying to help her, so I had a free minute," Connie said, stepping cautiously toward Lapis. "Actually, I was hoping you could help me with something. If you have the time, I mean."

Lapis's delicate eyebrows rose in surprise. "You need my help? With what?"

"Human, what are you doing? Unless you have a mountain you need relocated, we have no business with a Lazuli," Jade groused.

Forcing her smile through Jade's silent complaints, Connie lowered herself to the dirt and sat cross-legged, waiting. Curious, Lapis mirrored her actions, letting Pumpkin claim the stick as she sat opposite Connie.

Pumpkin immediately lost interest in the uncontested stick, deciding instead that Connie was a much more interesting game. The gourd ran in a circle around Connie, barking, yipping, and sniffing at her. When Connie held out the back of her hand, Pumpkin inspected it carefully, and then stamped Connie with an approving lick from a tongue made of webby, wet, seed-dappled innards.

"What. In the Empty Sky. Is that thing?" Jade said as Pumpkin licked Connie's fingers. "And why is it touching us?"

Giggling, Connie rubbed at Pumpkin's smooth side while the gourd panted eagerly. "She's definitely the friendliest vegetable I've ever met," she said.
"Pumpkin's great," Lapis agreed. But her smile was strained, and her eyes kept darting back toward the barn.

Connie sobered, leaning to one side to draw out her secret weapons. She unpocketed a spiral notepad and a pair of felt-tipped pens and set them on the ground between her and the Gem. "Right, sorry. I was actually hoping you could talk to Jade for me. With me," Connie said, quickly correcting herself.

"What?" said Jade.

"What?" said Lapis, drawing her feet up under the hem of her dress.

Opening the notepad to a fresh page, Connie said, "Steven told me how much better you were doing since you came back from Homeworld and moved into the barn. Jade has been having a really tough time since she woke up, because of the whole…you know." She gestured to her neck, then to the rest of herself.

"…being stuck in a walking, talking pustule of organic liquids?" Jade suggested archly. "Human, why are you doing this? You know I cannot—"

"So," Connie continued loudly, steamrolling over Jade's thoughts, "I was hoping you could talk to Jade about how you got used to things on Earth. Or maybe just complain with her about all the stuff here that's weird or confusing. You can talk about anything you like, really. She's sick of me, and she hates the Gems at the temple."

Lapis's eyes bugged. "Really? What about Steven?" she asked.

"Especially Steven," Connie said. "Issues with his mom. She's also not getting along with Peridot right now either," she added in a conspiratorial whisper.

That drew a small laugh from Lapis. "Peridot does take some getting used to. A lot of this place does." As Pumpkin snuffled at the hem of her dress, she gathered the gourd into her lap, hugging Pumpkin close. "Um, okay. How do I…? I mean…"

Uncapping a pen, Connie took it in her hand and poised it over the blank notepad. "I figured you two shouldn't have to use me like a phone if you don't need to. So…"

She took a deep breath and then imagined a cool, calm river where her arm rested at her side. The mental brook pattered gently over smooth rocks, its waters slipping through the shade of an old, large tree growing at its bank.

"Jade, I'm giving you the arm. Okay?" she said, her voice sounding distant in her own ears.

"What? Human!" Jade sputtered.

"You can write whatever you want to say on the paper," Connie said. "Why not start by saying hello?"

A long moment passed in silence. Lapis leaned forward, watching the still pen with a mixture of confusion and anticipation, all while Pumpkin squirmed in her lap. Letting her thoughts bob along her mental stream, Connie worried that Jade would simply retreat into herself at being put on the spot. It had been a risk to spring this surprise on her passenger, but she knew Jade never would have agreed to it in advance.

As one moment stretched into two, and Connie felt nervous sweat gathering at her brow, the pen finally moved, scratching a message onto the page in neat, black lettering, written backwards and
upside-down to avoid smudges.

**FELICITATIONS, LAZULI.**

Lapis looked up at Connie, confusion deepening her frown. "Is that her?" she asked.

"She's saying hello," Connie explained, and then added dryly, "She just likes to use big words. I think she's trying to impress you."

"Oh. Um, hi, Jade. How are you doing?" Lapis said. She shifted her gaze back and forth between Connie's eyes and the embedded green gemstone.

**I AM TRAPPED IN A PRIMITIVE BIPED AND SURROUNDED BY TRAITORS. CIRCUMSTANCES ARE LESS THAN IDEAL.**

There was another brief pause, and then:

**HOW ARE YOU?**

The corner of Lapis's mouth twitched. "I'm okay, thanks. I'm sorry you're stuck in there. That must be awful."

**IT IS WORSE THAN ANY FATE I FEARED SUFFERING IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE REBELLION. EACH DAY BRINGS A NEW WAKING NIGHTMARE OF ORGANIC BODILY NECESSITIES BEYOND THE KEN OF CIVILIZED GEM-KIND.**

Chuckling, Lapis shifted her posture, rolling Pumpkin over in her lap to rub the gourd's belly. "I guess that means it's gross," she said.

**QUITE.**

As Connie flipped to a fresh page in the notepad, careful to leave Jade the other hand, Lapis watched her with an odd expression. "Believe it or not, I kind of know what you're going through," the graceful Gem said. "Not all the squishy human stuff, but being trapped. I get that. I think that's the real reason your...your, um..."

Seeing Lapis's eyes flick searchingly over her, Connie realized what the Gem was looking for. "Connie?" she suggested. Maybe it wasn't the exact word Lapis was looking for, but it had to be better than *prison or cage.*

Nodding gratefully, Lapis continued, "I think that's why Connie actually wanted me to talk to you. It kind of feels like she's playing a trick on both of us." She wore a tiny smirk when she said it, which filled Connie with relief.

**THE HUMAN IS MORE DEVIOUS THAN HER APPEARANCE BELIES.**

Connie cleared her throat. "About that," she said, and gestured to the second pen with her off hand. "I thought you two might not want 'the human' butting in, so if you want, you can both write on the notepad together. Jade has told me all about how advanced Gem culture is, so I assume that comes with a written language, which no lowly human would know."

The jibe made Lapis smirk again as the pen scratched furiously in retort.

**HAD I WANTED TO EXCLUDE MY WALKING, TALKING BUBBLE FROM THE**
DISCOURSE, I WOULD HAVE DONE EXACTLY THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE. OF THE TWO OF US, ONLY ONE RELIES ON OBFUSCATION AND SUBTERFUGE. THE OTHER OF US IS A GEM.

Lapis tittered as Connie made a sour face. "It's okay with me too," the blue Gem said. Then she added, "But thanks. It was nice of you to think of it."

ARE YOU A PRISONER OF THE REBELS AS WELL, LAZULI?

The smile drained out of Lapis's face, and a shadow fell over her features. "I was," she said. "Eventually. During the war, soldiers put me into a mirror and interrogated me. I didn't get out for thousands of years."

HORRIBLE. MY CONDOLENCES. BUT WHY DID YOU NOT RETURN HOME WHEN YOU WERE FREED?

The blue fingers rubbing Pumpkin's belly froze in place, making the gourd kick impatiently and whine for attention. Chin dropping, Lapis looked down at her squirming vegetable friend, her eyes growing distant. "I did," she admitted. "It's the first thing I did. I almost destroyed the Crystal Gems doing it, too."

REALLY? SPLENDID! BUT WHY RETURN HERE?

Turning to a fresh page, Connie watched Lapis fighting to keep everything inside of her from pouring out. The Gem's bottom lip trembled, and her eyes flashed with rage and pain, before she clenched her fist and stuffed it back inside. "They made me come back," she growled.

WHY?

"They thought I knew something about Earth. About the Crystal Gems. It was just like when they stuck me in that mirror. I told them everything, and it still wasn't enough." Tears pooled in her eyes, slipping down the smooth contour of her cheek to rain on Pumpkin. "All I wanted was to go back to the way it was before. But I couldn't," she said bitterly.

THAT MAKES NO SENSE. HOMEWORLD WOULD NOT DO THAT TO ITS LOYALISTS.

Lapis choked on a tiny laugh, wiping at her eyes. "You really are just like I was, aren't you? Homeworld isn't the way we remember it, Jade. It's so cold, and stiff, and it all moves so quickly. The war changed everything. By the time I got back, the only thing I was good for was information on a failed colony nobody even wanted anymore."

The pen fell still on the pad. Blackness pooled under its felt tip, soaking and spreading into the page.

Biting her lip, Connie watched Lapis crying and wished, like she had so many other times, that she knew what to say. She wished there was something she could say to either Gem. But she said nothing, and held onto the stillness inside of her that let Jade borrow her arm.

Pumpkin heard Lapis sniffling and heaved herself back onto her stubby legs. The gourd pushed herself under Lapis's arm, cuddling into the soft folds of the Gem's dress, and whimpered in sympathy. With a gasping, tiny laugh, Lapis held Pumpkin close, stroking her orange skin.

"I'm sorry," Lapis said, chuckling through her tears. "It's dumb to feel this way. So much of all of this happened so long ago, it's like the world I remember is just a dream."
As Lapis mopped at her face, the pen came to life on the pad again.

**CAN YOU TRULY NOT GO BACK? YOU ARE NO TRAITOR. YOU DID NOT CHOOSE TO BE HERE.**

Her tears ebbing, Lapis smiled and said, "That's the weirdest part. I never chose my old life. I never chose to come to Earth, or to come back to it. But when I had the chance to leave again, I chose to stay."

**BUT WHY?**

"Steven," Lapis said, and her smile widened. "He gave me a place of my own. He freed me from my mirror, and he gave me the chance to choose for myself. Now I decide where to go, or what I do, or who I'm with. Not Homeworld, and not the Crystal Gems."

**YET THE REPUGNANT LITTLE ENGINEER REMAINS IN CLOSE PROXIMITY. LIKELY SHE HAS INSTRUCTIONS TO TERMINATE YOU IF YOU BECOME A THREAT. SHE ALREADY TRIED TO DO SO TO MY VESSEL.**

"Peridot takes some getting used to, just like everything else on this planet. But she's not so bad," Lapis admitted, scratching at her ear self-consciously. Then the Gem fixed Connie with a searching look, and her brow furrowed in silent deliberation. A moment later, she added, "Maybe the Crystal Gems aren't all bad either. Not completely."

**THEY IMPRISONED YOU!**

"Homeworld imprisoned me," Lapis said, "and cracked me. Steven healed me and freed me. And the others...well, they saved me and let me go when they had every reason not to."

**THEY CANNOT BE TRUSTED.**

Grimacing, Lapis said, "They're a lot of things. Some of them bad. But if Steven told you that they'll help you, then they will. You can at least trust that much."

The pen stilled again. Connie could feel several different arguments brewing in the Gem's well of bitter emotions, but none of them made it to the page.

As ink bled into the paper, Lapis's eyes shifted form the pad to Connie's face. Those blue eyes, dark and stormy not so long ago, had softened a few shades. A sideways smile pulled at Lapis's cheek as she said, "I know what you're going through, Jade. I really do. But I have to admit, I think your mirror might be a little better than the one I had."

**PLEASE DO NOT COMPLIMENT THE HUMAN. THAT WILL ONLY ENCOURAGE IT.**

Lapis glanced up from the page to snicker at Connie. "Steven warned me that she was kind of mean. Is she like this all the time?"

It took Connie an extra second to realize that Lapis wasn't talking to Jade. "We're working on her interpersonal skills," Connie said graciously, earning another laugh from the blue Gem.

**SPLENDID. I AM NOW SURROUNDED BY TRAITORS AND WOULD-BE COMEDIANS.**
Stifling her chuckle, Lapis said, "Sorry. I know Earth is a big adjustment. I'm still getting used to it myself."

…I AM ACTUALLY QUITE FAMILIAR WITH EARTH, AT LEAST AS IT USED TO BE.

"Did she actually write out an ellipsis?" Lapis said, quirking an eyebrow.

Connie could feel Jade's hesitation. "Do you mean from your time as a scout, Jade?" she said.

NO, FROM BEFORE THE WAR, WHEN I

A shadow flashed across the ground where they sat. Connie wondered briefly if it was the storm pushing inland, but the shape of the shadow was too fast and too distant to be a cloud. Glancing up at the sky, Connie felt her jaw drop and her stomach freeze. The pen tumbled from her fingers as the cool river in her mind dissipated, swallowed by disbelief.

There, hanging in the sky above the corn field, was an actual, real flying saucer, gray and sharp against the blue sky. And it was descending.
Connie had read almost a dozen different books on the subject of UFOs, most of them before she had ever set foot in Beach City. She had watched countless TubeTube compilations about lights in the sky, and abductions, and government cover-ups. A poster of skeptic-turned-believer Jillian Vanderstone from the classic TV series *Archive X* hung on her wall right next to posters of Marie Curie and Valentina Tereshkova. To her mother's utter chagrin, she had watched all of the alien encounter specials on the HISTOR-EE Channel.

She was on a first-name basis with several aliens. Her best friend was half-alien. She had an alien living, albeit begrudgingly, in her chest.

And somehow the idea of a flying saucer still seemed farfetched.

Nonetheless, that was exactly what descended onto the corn field, stirring Connie and Lapis to their feet to watch in shock as the strange craft approached. A deep, almost inaudible buzz shook Connie's bones as the craft tilted above the silky tops of the field. Some unseen force flattened the corn stalks beneath the saucer in waves, pushing them to the ground under the saucer's wide, lazy turn. Then, completing its circle, the saucer dropped into a straight path at the girl and Gem watching it.

Greenery and dirt clattered up from under its hull as it touched down, skidding toward the pair.

"What an unusual aircraft," Jade remarked, unimpressed. "I don't believe I've come across that design in my Earth studies yet."

Her eyes widening at the oncoming spray of broken stalks, Connie said, "That's not from Earth, Jade!"

She and Lapis backed away, the Gem using her water wings to scoop Pumpkin into her arms. The saucer grinded its way to the edge of the field and came to rest on a mound of packed dirt, resting at an angle. Its basso whine ceased, leaving the air deathly still in the wake of its landing.

The craft was smaller than Connie had first thought, perhaps a dozen feet across. Its hull was made from featureless metal and capped with a black bubble cockpit that sat in the exact center of its shape. As Connie edged slowly toward the still craft, she saw her warped reflection in its smooth, immaculate surface doing the same to her.

"Hey!" A shrill cry arose from the barn, and Peridot charged out into the yard wearing splinters in her hair. "What clod decided to park their ship in my—" Then, seeing the shape of the ship at the field's edge, Peridot stumbled to a halt, her eyes wide and mouth agape.

Two steps behind her, Steven bounced off of Peridot's sudden stop. "Whoa! Is that a spaceship?" he cried.

In answer, Peridot yelped and ran for a wheelbarrow sitting nearby. She jumped into the wheelbarrow's bed and leaned, grabbing its edges as it flipped upside-down, swallowing her under it with a hollow clang. Light glinted off her visor where she peered out through the gap at the bottom, quivering and whimpering.

The black bubble on the saucer melted, its material retracting like liquid into the fuselage, revealing the cockpit inside. A host of controls circled a single seat, each panel too complex and strange for
Connie to even guess at their functions. Even if she could have guessed, most of the interior was blocked by the two passengers awkwardly sharing the seat inside, a feat accomplished by jumbling their limbs together for what must have made for an awkward ride.

"Gerrof, you lummox!" one of the pilots said, untangling her gangly limbs from the pale bulk of her copilot to shove herself free from the cockpit. "Swear, I'd put my knee to dirt for any poor sod who could get us a means of transport with two chairs."

The pilot was clearly a Gem, but like none Connie had ever seen before. She was tall and thin, dressed—or rather, formed—in a black bodysuit with dark crimson paneling at her ribs, and bright red boots capping her feet. Her skin was dusky gray and had a weathered sheen to it, matching the color of the flat, ugly gemstone at her shoulder. Tight red curls formed a puff of hair framing her angular features. She hopped down off the rim of the saucer, landing atop the packed edge of the crater.

Unfurling, the mass in the cockpit revealed itself to be another Gem, this one almost as wide as the first one was tall. She was thick, with a powerful build that strained the volume of her gold doublet and matching leggings. Her skin and wild mane were bleach-white, almost blindingly so. Tiny growths of jagged crystalline skin jutted from her elbows, her knees, and from the bottom of her lantern jaw.

Most shocking, though was the second Gem's arm, which was grossly disproportional to its opposite. The limb was larger than the entirety of the gray Gem, and long enough for the cantaloupe-sized knuckles to drag on the ground as the white Gem jumped after the first. "Sorry. I tried to think small, just like you said," she rumbled.

The annoyance vanished from the first Gem's face. "Ah, s'Alright, Milky. Now," said the first Gem, turning to her dumbstruck audience, "let's take a gander at the place, eh? Maybe we'll finally get lucky. You're sure they're here this time?"

"Uh-huh!" the pale Gem said, nodding her rough features. "They're definitely here! Or, somebody is, at least."

"Quartz soldiers!" Jade exclaimed inside Connie. "Quickly, ask them which Diamond they serve. We may be able to secure competent assistance with our conundrum after all."

Though the two Gems were night and day standing next to each other, Connie saw one commonality between them: it was a stenciled design on their clothing that formed three sides of a diamond. The design's fourth line, the one that should have closed the shape, instead veered into its negative space, forming a jagged, zigzagging crack halfway across the incomplete diamond.

"Um, hello?" Connie called to the new Gems. She glanced back at Lapis, who could only shrug. Pumpkin squirmed in Lapis's arms as she growled and barked at the strangers.

Eyes brightening, the gray Gem said, "Aha! You must be one of the talking fauna around here. Greetings and whatnot. I'm Flint, and my boon companion here is Milky Quartz."

"Hi!" Milky Quartz said, smiling and waving with her smaller arm.

Steven walked forward, moving past Connie and Lapis, and returned Milky's wave. "Hi there," he said cautiously. "Can we help you?"

"Human, ask them!" Jade howled.

Wincing, Connie took a step forward and raised her hand. "Um, hi, sorry. Did...did Homeworld
"Send you here?" Connie called. Her wince deepened at the looks of disbelief Lapis and Steven shot her. "I'm asking for, uh, a friend."

Laughing, Flint said, "Well, aren't you a clever whatever-you-are? Of course Homeworld sent us! Don't all good Gems serve the might and glory of our grand empire?"

Confusion wrinkled Milky's thick features. "But Flint, I thought we were sent here by—"

"Milky!" Flint snapped waringly, and the other Gem shut her mouth. Turning irritably back to her audience, Flint said, "Never you mind who sent us, my curious little kindling. The important thing of note here is that we are in search of a very specific, very special Gem, and have been for quite an exhaustive while."

Smiling nervously, Steven said, "Well, there's no Gems here. Nothing but us simple human farmers."

Lumbering forward a step, Milky Quartz hefted her oversized arm, lifting her palm to face Steven. A rough-hewn white gemstone sealed in her palm began to glow softly as she aimed it at the boy. "Nuh-uh! There's four Gems here. See? One...two...three...four!" With each count, Milky shifted her manhole cover of a palm first to Steven, then to Connie, to Lapis, and finally to the overturned wheelbarrow behind them.

"Ah, there we are," Flint said of the wheelbarrow. "Milky, if you would?"

As the giant white Gem rumbled forward, walking with her huge arm as a makeshift third leg, Lapis threw out her arms and tried to block Milky from advancing. "Hey!" Lapis cried. "This is our farm. You don't get to just land in our crops and walk around doing whatever you want!"

Pumpkin, free from Lapis's grasp, ran forward and started snuffling at Flint's foot, her whole body quivering in a soft growl. Flint grimaced at the gourd, then up at Steven. "Ugh, are you a hundred percent on this one, Milky? They certainly don't all look like Gems."

"I'm sure!" Milky chirped. When she reached Lapis, she grabbed the graceful Gem by the face and tossed her aside with a casual gesture, throwing Lapis into the dirt. "Pardon," she said in passing.

"Hey!" Steven snapped.

"I am right here!" Jade howled. "Human, tell them where I am!"

Lip curling, Flint glanced down at Pumpkin. "Disgusting. Does Earth make everything on it so... soft?" Then she flicked her toe, flinging Pumpkin into an arc high enough to shatter the gourd on impact.

With a cry of alarm, Steven launched himself into the air and caught the yelping Pumpkin with his whole body. As soon as she was safe in his grasp, he floated into a soft landing, leaving him plenty of time to glare at the newcomers from the air. "Hey! That is not okay!" he shouted.

Lapis picked herself out of the dirt, wiping a smudge from her cheek. "You," she said darkly, "need to leave." Her eyes flashed, and her wings emerged, spreading to their full span.

The pool of water at the center of the yard leapt straight up, pouring its contents into the sky. Connie stumbled backwards as the deep little pond shaped itself into a tremendous arm, the hand of which flexed into a fist as big as the barn. Lapis's construct blotted out the midday sun as she gestured, ready to bring it down on the strange Gems, their parked saucer, and anyone unfortunate enough to be standing in the same neighborhood.
But Flint simply looked bemused as she stared up at the skyscraper punch looming above her. "Oho, you're a Gem after all. And a Lazuli, too? Milky, do you know how many Agates I've heard yammer on and on since the war about how we should have used diggers like her to wash out the rebellion?"

Milky stopped with her enormous hand atop the wheelbarrow, her thick features straining in thought. "Three?" she guessed.

"At least," Flint complained. "But those topsoil nuggets never seemed to realize the crucial truth that makes a Lazuli useless in our line of work."

Her eyes narrowing, Lapis swung her arm, and her titanic construct reacted in kind, hurling the barn-sized fist down at Flint. Its shadow swallowed Connie and Steven, who scrambled to clear the impact zone. Flint, though, merely lifted her hands in reply.

A geyser of white flame exploded out of Flint's cupped palms. The sight of it burned into Connie's retinas as she watched the torrent tear apart Lapis's construct, the water boiling off before the fire could even touch it. Shimmering heat swamped the air, which became a farm-wide sauna, the steam so thick that it swallowed the barn, the field, and everything around them.

When Flint closed her hands, capping the flames, only a puddle remained of Lapis's construct. "Take away the water, and you're left with a pretty bauble," Flint said, leering at the horrified blue Gem.

Lapis toppled backwards, her feet scrambling against the loose dirt as she shrank back from the fiery Gem. Steam rushed beneath her at the frantic beat of her wings as she threw herself into the air.

In one smooth motion, Flint spun and reached for the gemstone at her shoulder. A glowing haft emerged into her hand, which she drew forth into a blazing javelin. Completing her spin, Flint threw the javelin with blinding speed and caught Lapis in the wing, shearing it off the graceful Gem. With only one wing remaining, Lapis spiraled hard into the dirt, tumbling into an unmoving heap.

"Lapis!" Connie cried. She started forward, but her thoughts became a kaleidoscope of pain that drove her onto her knees.

"Human, do not interfere," Jade commanded through the migraine. "We cannot impede Homeworld affairs. If your rebel friends stop resisting, this will all be resolved shortly."

"Jade… Stop…" Connie groaned, trying to push through the thought-noise.

Across the yard, Milky Quartz knocked aside the overturned wheelbarrow and plucked Peridot out of her hiding spot. The massive warrior dangled Peridot by the leg from her smaller hand, watching the little engineer twist and struggle. "Is this her?" Milky called, holding up her catch for Flint to see.

After a moment's consideration, Flint shook her head. "No, 'fraid not. Suppose we'll have to keep looking, then." A sudden realization crept across her face, the thought shaping into a manic grin. "Of course, if our quarry at all cares about this motley bunch, mayhap a little wanton destruction will convince her to show up on their behalf."

Brightening, Milky asked, "Then I should crush the little green one, Flint?"

"May as well, chum. Make it quick, though," Flint said, and began stalking matter-of-factly toward Lapis. "We'll still need to suss out a welcome for the rest of them after this place is flinders."

Steven shooed Pumpkin toward the barn, and then threw himself into Milky's eyeline, floating before her with his arms and legs waving frantically. "Wait! The other Gems are at the temple. There's no need to fight! We can go get them for you!"
"What, and let you come back with superior numbers?" Flint scoffed. "Milky, does that strike you as being mathemalogically advantageous?"

Milky shook her head, her wild hair swishing with the gesture. "Nope!" she said. Then, using Peridot as a club, she batted Steven out of the air, sending him bouncing across the ground to land against the wheel of the yard's derelict tractor.

Falling forward onto her hands, Connie pushed back against Jade's resistance, meeting noise with noise in the scape of their thoughts. She concentrated, pushing so hard that spots began to swim in her vision, making her…

No. The spots were not swimming in her vision. They pooled in her skin, swirling little brown lesions that crawled across her hands and up her arms, and her body began to itch and burn.

"That's it! Now you're gonna get it!" Peridot snarled, still upside-down in Milky's grasp. Putting fingers to lips, Peridot whistled three sharp, distinct notes.

The air buzzed again, this new sound tinnier than the saucer's engine, and the dissipating steam burst with three small, darting shapes that surrounded Milky Quartz. They were roughly the size and shape of basketballs, each split down the equator by light and dark green hues, and held aloft by a small bank of whirling rotors. Tiny ports opened on the undersides of the drones to reveal apertures that spat blazing bright rays into the hulking Gem warrior.

Milky cried, dropping Peridot to shield her face from the drones' assault. As Peridot scrambled away, Milky's enormous hand flashed, manifesting a thick hammerhead over her fist. She swung the hammerhead in a high arc, smashing one of the drones into scattering parts. Another drone landed its beam straight into Milky's eye, making her howl in pain and clutch her face. The offending drone became scrap under her hammer as its only remaining counterpart climbed evasively.

Looking back at her dwindling armada, Peridot cried, "Pierre! Percy! No!" She pointed at Steven, then toward the steam-shrouded barn door. "Steven, you and Paulette keep her busy!" she shouted.

Still struggling to his feet, Steven watched Peridot sprint for the barn. Then he saw Milky hop and slap the remaining drone out of the air. An uneasy expression creased his face as his shield flashed into being across his arm.

Connie fought for her limbs, even as they swirled with dark brown spots that were rapidly overtaking her skin. She trembled in outrage as Flint strode past her, ignoring her entirely to prey upon Lapis instead. The graceful blue Gem was only beginning to stir as the light from Flint's burgeoning fires danced around her in the steam.

"Bad luck for you, luvvie," Flint sneered at Lapis, gathering flames around her clenched hands. "If Homeworld actually had sent me, they'd probably want you harvested. Me? I'm content to bake you until you crack."

Suddenly the pressure against Connie's thoughts vanished. She collapsed forward onto her face as Jade cried, "What did she say?"

Connie shoved herself onto her feet and charged Flint at a dead run. Her body acted on instinct, snatching up the stick from Lapis's and Pumpkin's game of fetch. "Hey!" she screamed at the burning Gem.

Flint turned, mildly curious, and took the stick fully across her cheek. The blow snapped her face to one side, more startling than painful. Staggering upright, Flint cried, "What in the—?"
Diving, Connie slid between the Gem's gangly legs, rolling back onto her feet and whirling her next strike into the back of Flint's knee. Flint yowled and spun, twisting onto one knee with the surprising blow. That's when Connie jammed the end of the stick directly into the kneeling Gem's eye.

"Argh! Jank me, that smarts!" Flint roared. Her hands snuffed and clapped over the offended eye as she doubled over, cursing furiously.

Clutching her stick in both hands, Connie stood in front of Lapis, brandishing the paltry weapon. "Get back in your cheesy cliché and get off our planet!" Connie snapped, her voice shaking.

"*Human, what are you doing? We are extremely inflammable! Run!*" Jade cried. Her resistant thought-noise began anew, but Connie was steeled for it this time, and refused to move.

Lowering her hands, Flint tested her puffy eye, then aimed it at Connie in a scowl. "Don't completely understand your sentiment, meat stick," she growled, summoning fresh flames to her palms, "but in a tick, both it and you will be nothing but ashes."

Lapis had stirred enough to lift her head at the crackling fires. Their light glinted in her wide, terrified eyes. Reflexively, Connie tossed away her stick and threw herself atop Lapis, burying her face in the Gem's neck as she shielded her as best she could.

"Jade!" Connie cried.

Flint brought her hands together and loosed a column of fire as vicious as the first. It was devastating enough to burn through Connie without a moment's pause on its way to blasting apart Lapis's form and making her gemstone a briquette. Instead, the inferno never reached either of them.

The air exploded sideways between Flint and Connie. Vicious wind formed a tunnel that consumed the heat and flames. Fire jetted deep into the corn field to leave a swath of blackened destruction over a hundred yards long, cutting the flattened circle left by the gem's saucer in half. Every wisp of steam lingering in the yard vanished into the wind tunnel to crackle in the fire. Connie felt her hair and clothes jerk at the force of the wind, but she held onto Lapis, shielding her face from the heat.

As soon as Flint ended her torrent, the wind tunnel vanished. She stared, baffled by the ninety-degree turn her flames had made. "What in the…?"

A blade of air hammered Flint in the chest, blowing her back across the yard. The lanky Gem tumbled and rolled past Milky Quartz, who pounded with her piledriver fist at Steven's shield with such force that the young boy had curled up underneath his barrier entirely, its edges sinking into the dirt around him with each blow. The sight of her partner flying by made Milky stop. "Flint? Where are you going?" she said.

Steven kicked his shield off of him and into Milky's chest, knocking the giant Gem back a step. Then he jumped backwards, clearing Milky's reach and summoning a new shield to his hand to square off against her once more. "If you're not going to be nice," he said, "I'm going to have to ask you to… huh?"

Both Milky and Steven paused at a sudden cacophony of noises arising from the barn. The keening whine of a truck horn lit the air, followed shortly by a *hum-clatter-wonk*. Then Peridot came running out of the barn, screaming wildly. Her hands were held aloft to guide a twisted shape of metal that hovered above her in a ferrokinetic grasp. Connie recognized the shape immediately: it was the makeshift Kindergarten-grade Gemological Dissipation Inducer, torn free from its armchair with bits of upholstery still clinging to the struts, and trailing a thick cable behind it.
"We're going baked potato!" Peridot bellowed, and flung her hands forward.

The Inducer's tines plunged into Milky's bewildered face. Yellow energies crackled across her form, drawing thick golden lines that split the Gem apart. Convulsing, she exploded into white smoke, her lumpy gemstone thudding onto the ground.

"Milky!" Flint cried, already barreling back into the fray.

She flung a javelin through the hovering Inducer, shattering the device into junk. As she ran through the scattering debris with her hands alighted, Steven tackled Peridot and wrapped them both in a protective sphere.

But Flint ignored them, and instead scooped Milky's gem out of the dirt. "You lot of rubble!" Flint shouted, glaring around at all of them with tears in her eyes. She leapt in a dizzying arc that put her atop the landed saucer, her weight making the craft shudder in its crater. "You just wait! We'll be back, and then we'll see who gets the last laugh!"

Nobody laughed as the black cockpit reassembled itself, swallowing Flint within its bubble. Buzzing out of a cloud of dirt and broken stalks, the saucer took to the air, disappearing toward the horizon until it vanished into the distance.

Connie collapsed into the dirt next to Lapis. The blue Gem looked as frightened and confused as Connie felt, but when Connie's gaze fell to her, Lapis nodded silently. Exhaling, Connie clenched her fists, trying to quell the trembling while her heartbeat finally began to slow.

"Of all the irresponsible..." Jade fumed silently. "Human, you could have gotten extremely, irreparably damaged! My gemstone cannot withstand temperatures that intense, to say nothing of your fragile body. What were you thinking?"

Without answering, Connie looked up from her shaking hands and back to Lapis.

"...yes, well," Jade grumbled, "it was still foolish."

Stepping out of Steven's dissipating pink bubble, Peridot tossed up her hands at the state of the yard. "Typical. And I'd finally almost gotten the place exactly the way I liked it," she groused. Then she looked around at the frightened, worn, worried faces around her, and she said, "Well, don't everybody thank me all at once."

A gust of wind knocked Peridot onto her face.

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE

A talented artist named huntingdog put together this amazing art of Flint and Milky arriving at the farm. Be sure to check out their linked gallery and leave likes and comments!
If anyone else would like to illustrate or write anything based on this story, be sure to let me know so I can provide links!
"Well," Amethyst said, staring down from the edge of the empty pool, "you're gonna need a really good rainstorm before you can go swimming around here. But at least you're still just one warp pad away from the ocean."

She, Pearl, and Garnet had warped to the farm half an hour after the saucer's departure, arriving as Peridot and Steven were putting out the last of the fires in the field. Lapis and Connie had piled the scrap in the yard for the green Gem to sort through later. It hadn't taken long to explain the attack, but finding any understanding behind it was proving to be another matter.

The tip of Pearl's spear stirred the burnt stalks at the edge of the long, blackened scar in the field. "If they did all this in just a few minutes, then you're all extremely lucky none of you were hurt. Or worse."

Connie remained silent as she tossed a broken rotor atop the scrap pile. She couldn't help but notice that, despite the departed threat, Pearl still had not put away her weapon.

Emerging through the corn stalks, Garnet said, "Whoever they were, there's no trace of them left here. They didn't leave behind any surprises either."

Peridot swiped at her nose, grinning. "They didn't have a chance to. Lapis and I routed them quite handily, with a tiny bit of help from Steven and Connie Jade."

Looking pointedly at the destruction still scarring the barnyard, Pearl lifted an eyebrow and said, "It certainly doesn't seem that way."

"Hey, a win's a win," Amethyst said, cartwheeling around the edge of the empty pool. "If whoever-they-are is smart, they'll take their little spaceship and scoot off of Earth. This is our house, yo!"

"If they do," Peridot said, "it won't be in the craft they arrived here in. That was a short range scouting craft designed for atmospheric flight. Take it out of orbit and it wouldn't get far."

"You recognized the craft? Then they really were from Homeworld?" Pearl said. Her grip on the spear visibly tightened.

Peridot shrugged. "Maybe? It was definitely Homeworld equipment. Fresh off the assembler, from the looks of it. But they didn't act like Homeworld soldiers."

"These guys seemed less focused than the Rubies did," Steven agreed. "It actually might have been a nice visit if it wasn't for all the fire and punching."

"Besides, it's hard to believe Homeworld would send a couple of Quartzes like that unsupervised. I mean, that's why Yellow Diamond sent me along with Jasper," Peridot scoffed. "You'd have to be cracked to send a Flint and a Milky Quartz without anyone to keep them in line."

Connie shivered at the memory of the intense heat pouring out of Flint's hands. It had evaporated thousands of gallons of water too fast to believe. Her body, itself made mostly of water, would have evaporated just as quickly. "What kind of Gems were they? Besides terrifying, I mean," she said.

"Milky Quartzes are Gem hunters. Homeworld made them exclusively during the war to hunt rebels," Peridot explained. "They can douse for Gems anywhere regardless of distance or obstruction. But their production was rushed, and...well, you saw the result. The design might've
worked with a little refinement, but nobody needed them after the war ended."

"We met a few before, a long time ago," Garnet said. The look she shared with Pearl told a heavy story left unsaid. "They can be relentless once they're on your trail. And a Flint paired with it is bad news for the entire planet."

"Flints are demolition Quartzes" Pearl explained a half-second before Peridot could, earning her a glare from the Kindergartner. "Just one can deforest an entire continent in a matter of days. Do you remember that joke Crazy Lace used to tell?" she asked Garnet.

Her voice flat, Garnet recited, "Never send a Flint anyplace you might need later. It won't be there anymore."

Steven frowned. "That's not a very funny joke," he said.

"It wasn't a very funny war," Garnet replied.

"The vile little engineer is astonishingly correct," Jade sub-vocalized to Connie. "No Homeworld soldier would come so ill-prepared, nor abandon her mission for recreational destruction so readily."

"They were definitely hunting for a Gem," Connie said. Looking to Pearl, she asked, "do you think they were after one of you?"

"It's likely," Pearl admitted, "unless they're trying to locate one of the corrupted Gems still loose on Earth. But I can't imagine why they would."

"Yeah," Amethyst agreed, standing on her hands at the pool's edge. "Who would need some dumb corrupted Gem? Whoa!" She lost her balance, tumbling over the edge and down the steep, muddy side of the capped dig shaft. Connie could have imagined it, but she thought she saw a particularly stiff breeze ruffling Amethyst's hair just before the Gem had fallen.

"It doesn't matter who they're looking for," Garnet said. "Now that we know who and what we've been hunting, we can start being smarter about it."

Pearl frowned. "Yes, but if their movement isn't restricted to warp pads, we still might not be able to catch them."

"We won't need to," Garnet said. "They'll come to us. So from now on, no one goes anywhere alone. We'll stay close together and keep each other safe."

Purple hands clawed up over the edge of the pool, and then Amethyst's face appeared, smudged with thick mud. "Aw, what? Just because this place gets wrecked, I gotta be grounded? No fair!"

"Nobody's grounded," Pearl insisted. Smirking, she added, "You just need a babysitter now, that's all. And that goes for all of us," she said before Amethyst could protest. "We need to take this seriously."

Turning to Peridot and Lapis, Garnet said, "If you two don't feel safe here, you should stay at the temple, at least until we come up with a better plan."

Lapis cast her eyes to the ground, shaking her head. "Thanks, but...no." Her wings snapped out, and she darted into the air, settling out of sight on the roof of the barn before Garnet could reply.

Harrumphing, Peridot said, "Your concern is appreciated, but completely unnecessary. I designed
our previous defenses to deal with unwanted human interaction and the vicious masked rodents who keep burgling our trash cans. Now that I know what we're facing, I can adapt our security accordingly. When I'm done with this place, you'll all be asking to move in with us!"

"No, we won't," Pearl said.

Realization struck Steven's face, lifting his eyebrows with alarm. "What about Connie?" he said, looking to her questioningly.

"Protection and companionship with rebels? Just put a hammer to me now," Jade groused. "It would be more merciful."

Connie stiffened in irritation at the thought. "Whatever those Gems are looking for, it wasn't me, or Jade. Otherwise they would have just taken us earlier," she said. Then she tapped the gemstone in her chest and added, "Besides, Jade and I can't exactly split up. We'll watch out for each other."

"Splendid. Two mighty warriors with one set of eyes," Jade sniped. Connie clenched her fist and bit down on her retort.

Nodding, Garnet said, "Alright. Let's get back to the temple and figure out our next move."

As the Gems turned toward the distant warp pad, Connie cast her gaze back at the roof of the barn. "Um, sorry, but could I get a minute?" she asked them.

With Steven's help, she hauled a rickety ladder out of the barn and propped it against the roof's edge. There were a few rungs missing along its length, but with a careful hop, she could manage the ascent.

As she tested its steadiness, she caught sight of a silent question on Steven's face. She smiled, trying to look more at ease than she felt. "It's okay. I'll meet you at the warp pad in a minute," she told him.

He looked unconvinced, but nodded and started back for the other Gems as Connie climbed. Each rung of the ladder coughed a little cloud of dust as her weight settled onto them, and the top wobbled and creaked, but it put her on the roof of the barn without collapsing. Once she stepped off the last rung, she let go of the breath she'd been holding in a relieved sigh.

Lapis sat at the top edge of the angled roof, looking back in surprise as Connie clambered up to her. "Oh! Hi," she said.

Her strained smile widened, and Connie said, "Hey. Are you okay? I know it's been crazy today."

Confusion knitted Lapis's brows together. "Me? You're asking if I'm okay?"

Connie hesitated a step. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you. You took a bad hit back there, and…"

"No," Lapis said, reaching out as Connie started to turn back. "No, I'm okay. Sorry, I just…it's been a while since anyone… I mean, Steven and Peridot are the only people on the planet I really talk to, and I was kind of in a weird place when I met them."

Her smile softening, Connie said, "I know what you mean. For a long time, Steven was the only friend I had. I have a few more now, but the talking-with-new-people thing is…yeah."

Lapis sobered suddenly. "Thank you. Both of you," she said in a small voice. "I've never had anyone take my water away like that before. If it hadn't been for you two…"
"I'm just glad nobody got hurt," Connie said. "Anyway, Jade's the real hero. I don't think my stick was doing much to that creep."

"Your false modesty hardly excuses the gross, mind-bogglingly enormous stupidity you demonstrated in attacking a Flint with a rod of cellulose," Jade snapped at her.

The biting thought spurred Connie's hand to her pocket, where she drew the pad and pen she'd collected from their cleanup. "Oh, there was one other thing. I wanted to give you Jade's email."

"Her what?" Lapis asked.

"My what?" Jade exclaimed.

"It's a way to write to each other on the internet when you can't talk in person," Connie explained to them both, writing a long string of letters and numbers across the pad before tearing out the page and offering it to Lapis. "I'm pretty sure Peridot can show you how it works."

Taking the paper, Lapis read aloud, "Greenmeanie-two-ay-gee…some kind of swirly letter… This will let me talk to Jade?"

"And only to Jade," Connie said, nodding. "I'll show her how it works, and she can set up her password and check it when I'm asleep."

"Human, what in the Empty Sky are you plotting?" Jade said tiredly.

"She'd never admit it," Connie continued, ignoring her passenger, "but I think it did Jade some good to talk to someone she doesn't completely hate. And this way you guys can complain about humans, or talk about Gem stuff, just between you. If you want to, I mean."

The paper crinkled in her delicate fingers as Lapis clutched carefully around the address. When she looked up, her smile was a sunrise of warmth. "It's a really good idea. I'll ask Peridot how as soon as she has a free minute," she said.

"Thank you," Connie said sincerely. "I'll mean a lot to both of us. But I'd better get going before they warp out of here without me."

With a little wave, Lapis called, "Bye, Jade!" Then, just as amiably, she added, "Bye, Connie!"

Connie's smile didn't last to the edge of the roof. "This little matchmaker game of yours is patronizing, human. I neither want nor need a 'pen-pal,' and am perfectly content to wallow in isolation until such time as more suitable… What is happening? Your heart rate has increased dramatically," Jade said as Connie reached the roof's lip. "Are you unwell, human?"

In answer, Connie closed her eyes and jumped off the roof.

Above the rush in her stomach and the air crackling in her ears, Connie heard Jade yelp as a second panic leapt up to mirror her own. A gust of wind barreled up into her feet, making the legs of her shorts billow and pushing her tank top's hem up her stomach as it fought back against her descent. She rolled in midair, then landed on the ground, her teeth rattling at the impact. The fall still hurt, but only as much as if she'd tripped over a shoelace instead of throwing herself off a barn.

Steven's distant cry of alarm made her sit up from the dirt. She forced a smile through her ache and waved to him, calling back, "I'm okay!"

Hip-deep in the scrap pile, Peridot cheered, "Nice one, Connie Jade! Though your landing might
need a little work. Come back soon! I can't wait to show you our new security protocols!" The green Gem waved, and then stumbled backwards as the pile at her feet burst open to reveal Pumpkin burrowing through the flotsam. The little gourd barked at Connie, her lithe vine tail lashing back and forth in excitement.

As Connie stood, dusting herself off and taming her hair back over her shoulders, Jade yowled in her head, "Are you cracked? Even if your bones survived the sudden deceleration of such a fall, the rest of your body is composed almost exclusively of water sacs of varying size just waiting to rupture at the slightest provocation! What possessed you to make such a stupid decision when there was a perfectly serviceable manual elevation adjuster two feet to your left?"

A host of aches and scrapes revealed themselves as Connie began the long walk to the warp pad. Grimacing, Connie murmured, "I wanted to make sure you remembered our truce."

Dangerous silence echoed inside Connie. "Have a care with your insinuations, human," Jade warned her. "I am not the one of us who lies by omission and obfuscates loyalties for convenience."

The memory of a long, cold walk off a dreamed beach arose in Connie's mind. "Sure you don't," Connie said snidely. "You just paralyze me in the middle of a fight because you think the guys beating on my friends play for your team."

"They never harmed you," Jade retorted. "You're only alive because I intervened. And once I discovered the truth, I was the one who—"

"Lapis and Steven could have died!" Connie hissed. They were growing within earshot of the others waiting on the pad, forcing her to blank her face even as her tone burned hotter.

Jade's reply crackled like ice. "I do not care. They are not my friends, human. Quite the opposite. My words bind me to your protection despite your suicidal lack of cooperation therein. But do not mistake my good faith for conversion to this cult of perversion you worship. I am not a Crystal Gem."

Gritting her teeth, Connie growled, "Then find a middle ground where you aren't a heartless jerk. No one's asking you to join. No one wants you to. But stop fighting us."

"I am heartless, human," Jade said pointedly. "And believe me when I say my actions have been significantly curbed in regards to the rebels. I am forced to wonder, however, if I should expect such aggressive betrayal on your part when the rebels turn on us. Will you attack them as you expect me to attack my own people?"

"That won't happen," Connie insisted.

"And what of when it comes time for me to return home?" Jade pressed. "When the rebels try to stop me, to shatter me, will you help me as you promised? Will you fight them then?"

Connie's voice caught in her throat. She was almost glad to find the Gems' curious stares upon her as she climbed atop the warp pad. Steven's brow was crinkled in concern as he said, "That looked like a nasty fall. Are you okay?"

Nodding, Connie said, "Yeah, we're okay."

"Are we?" Jade insisted.

Connie held her smile until she turned away, refusing to let the Gems see her worry. The warp pad swallowed her out of the world, carrying Jade's question with her.
"Our enemies are powerful and dangerous," Pearl lectured, pacing the white flagstones with precise, measured steps. "But they've revealed themselves, and what's more, they have withdrawn. That gives us a chance to prepare, and that makes 'us' dangerous to them."

Steven and Connie nodded. They stood in the Sky Arena, both glowing from their warmup exercises. The crisp, thin air tingled in Connie's lungs. She was breathing harder than usual after warmups, but just felt glad to finally be back in training, and doubly glad that Pearl had chosen to train them together that Monday afternoon. The anticipation had nearly driven her mad as she had waited all through the school day.

Or rather, that anticipation had been one of two things on her mind driving her mad. The other frustration made a snorting noise of disbelief inside her thoughts and said, "This is ridiculous. You are learning combat doctrine from an accessory."

Connie's face twitched, but she held her tongue. Pearl, though, seemed to notice and sense the thoughts behind the expression. With a knowing smile, she said, "I understand our silent guest helped out quite a bit in the last encounter. But I don't think we can reliably count on her to do her part. That's why we're going to practice dealing with our foes using only our skills and wits."

"Yes," Jade said sarcastically, "perhaps the key to defeating your enemy will be opening doors for them. Pay close attention, human."

"Yes, ma'am!" Connie said a little too loudly, keeping her face blank.

"Given the threats that have been emerging, I've been working on a new training tool for you two," Pearl said. She pirouetted, bending gracefully with her leg extended in an arabesque bow. Her gemstone flared, and from its light she manifested a holographic doppelganger. The translucent blue Holo-Pearl stood poised and mirroring the original, but held a spear at the ready. As the hologram settled into an attentive stance, Pearl stepped back from it and commanded, "Holo-Pearl: begin emulation."

Steven frowned, confused. "What's emulation?" he asked.

Looking pleased at the question, Pearl said, "This particular hologram of mine can mimic the abilities of other Gems we've encountered, as well as a few I hope we'll never see. If—"

His excited gasp broke Pearl's thought in mid-sentence. "You mean it can pretend to be other Gems? Like Garnet?" asked Steven.

Before Pearl could answer, her blue double exclaimed, "Emulation: Garnet!" The hologram bulged and grew, stretching itself taller as its legs thickened into powerful trunks. Its spear coiled itself around its fist into a crude approximation of a gauntlet, looking more like a boxing glove made of thick cable. Its pointed coiffure ballooned into a blocky afro that tapered at the back into a blunted, shallow pyramid. "Words are just talk! Action speaks!" the transformed hologram declared.

Connie couldn't help but giggle with Steven at the straight-faced Holo-Pearl's mimicry, even as Pearl flushed blue. "What about Amethyst?" asked Connie.

"Emulation: Amethyst!" Just as quickly, the Holo-Pearl compacted its form into a stocky approximation of the Quartz in question. The coiled spear fell limp from its hand, becoming instead something akin to a triangle-tipped whip. Its afro melted into a long sheet of pale hair. As the
hologram shrank and widened, its mouth blinked in a bold monotone, "Now I will eat, after which I shall fall asleep in the exact spot where I run out of food!"

Their laughter turned Pearl's cheeks bright with embarrassment as she squeaked, "Yes, well, not 'every' emulation is—"

"Oh! Oh!" Steven exclaimed. "Can it do me?"

"Emulation: Steven!" the Holo-Pearl declared, and became shorter still, its stocky build rounding and softening until a stout, see-through Pearl with hair that was somehow curly and pointed at the same time. The spear leapt into the hologram's arm, twisting itself into a spiraled mimicry of a shield. A cat-shaped ice cream sandwich manifested in its opposite hand. "My carefree attitude and frequent crying belie the potential of a great Gem in the making!" the little Holo-Pearl announced.

Connie laughed hard enough to make her ribs ache, while Steven grasped his cheeks and squealed, "She even has her own Cookie Cat!"

Clearing her throat loudly, Pearl drew their laughter to an end with a stern glance and the barest hint of a smirk. "Alright, alright," she said. "Today we're going to practice against our new threats. We can save appreciating my talent for impersonations later. Holo-Pearl? Flint."

"Emulation: Flint!" The squat Holo-Pearl stretched itself to proportions even lankier than when it first emerged from the light. The spear straightened and slimmed into a javelin as Holo-Pearl exclaimed, "My fighting spirit burns with determination, and my fire burns with fire!"

Pacing a line in front of her hologram, Pearl lectured, "You've seen firsthand how dangerous a Flint can be. The flames they produce can dissipate almost any Gem's form, to say nothing of your human bodies. Your best strategy is avoidance, proximity, elusiveness, and confusion."

"Or barring that, polite acquiescence and offering to perform menial chores," Jade jeered.

"Keep moving and keep aware of where your partner is. Coordinating to create openings and keeping each other safe is paramount," Pearl told them. "Are you ready?"

Connie drew the sword from her back, her hands settling into the familiar grip. The tip of the blade quivered slightly as she reacquainted herself with its weight. Beside her, Steven manifested his shield to his arm. "Ready, ma'am!" they chanted together.

Grinning, Pearl cried, "Begin!" Then she leapt from the flagstones, clearing the field of combat.

Connie and Steven split apart at a dead run to avoid the river of holographic fire that poured forth from the Holo-Pearl's clenched fist. The false flames produced no heat, but they blazed with a white light as intense as the real thing had been, sending Connie's shadow sprawling dozens of feet ahead of her across the pale ground.

The memory of the prickling heat from the other day made Connie's instincts scream for retreat, but that would give the fire room to spread and engulf her faster than she could evade them. Instead she dove and rolled closer to the faux Flint, ducking under its blazing arm to swipe at its long legs. Her sword forced the hologram to jump, which left it vulnerable to the back of Steven's shield as he leapt into its back and bowled it out of the air.

As Connie rolled back onto her feet, the momentum of her swing dragged her forward an extra step. She cursed inwardly at her footing, and then staggered to one side to avoid a bluish javelin that flashed by, missing her by inches to crack the stone floor behind her. Wobbling, she began to run to catch the Holo-Pearl's attention as Steven set up for another attack.
"Switch roles!" Pearl called from the arena stands. "Steven, you have a stronger defense, and Connie, your sword gives you better reach!"

Even as Pearl shouted, her misshapen doppelganger spun and unleashed a blast of flames at Steven. He sealed himself in a bubble shield to weather the ghostly fire, rolling across the flagstones, strafing like a giant hamster ball to draw the attack.

Connie saw her opening and darted forward, her sword already in motion. Her body throbbed with the effort. Her lungs burned, and her sweaty palms squirmed on the sword's grip. She pushed aside her body's weakness with a war cry that ran across the arena. Every ounce of her gathered behind her sword's edge for one mighty swing.

The Holo-Pearl's javelin caught the sword, stopping the blade cold. The grip bounced out of Connie's hands and the sword went spinning across the floor. The block twisted Connie's momentum and threw her to the ground. She landed hard, her cheek pressed to cold stone, her breath knocked loose by the fall. Before she could even gasp, the Holo-Pearl loomed above her, its palm turned flat and burgeoning with silent flame.

"And now for something wholly predictable," Jade said smugly.

Silent fire poured over Connie, turning the world white. She curled into a ball, shutting her eyes against the glare. As the flames billowed in her ears, she could hear Steven's anguished cry keening above everything, his despair echoing across the arena.

Then the flames faded, leaving Connie perfectly intact. Steven's desperate charge too late to save her became a stumbling walk, and his scream dwindled into a confused grunt. "Huh? Oh, right. Hologram," he said, tilting his head at their translucent foe.

Holo-Pearl whirled upon Steven and poked him hard in the belly with its javelin. Then it drew upright, standing at attention, as it announced, "The children are dead! Victory: accepted!"

Rising from the stands, Pearl clapped her hands twice. Her misshapen doppelganger dissipated into motes of fading light as she made her way back to the arena floor. A strained smile split the Gem's features. "Now, it's important not to get discouraged," she said, "but let's go over a few opportunities I noticed in your initial attempt. Can you think of anywhere to start?"

Gleefully, Jade suggested, "Perhaps the root problem is that they are base anthropoids made of flammable materials being tutored by a Pearl?"

Steven grimaced, rubbing his arm. "I should have stayed closer. I wasn't there with my shield."

"No," Connie wheezed, finally catching her breath. She pushed herself off the ground, rising on shaky legs. "It was me. My form was completely off, and I was too slow."

He collected her sword and handed it back to her. "You are breathing kind of hard," Steven admitted.

Pearl's brow creased as she bent and examined Connie. Then, with a light touch to Connie's shoulder, Pearl led her student toward the seating at the bottom of the stands. "Let's sit down for a few minutes. Steven, why don't you go get waters for the both of you?" she said.

"Aye-aye!" Steven chirped, and then scampered for the warp pad outside the arena.

"A Pearl sending a Quartz on an errand? That sounds like the beginning of a bad joke," Jade cackled in Connie's head.
Connie groaned as she settled onto the bench, her huff more out of disappointment than actual ache. "I'm sorry, Pearl. I'll try harder next time," she promised.

The Gem rubbed at the back of Connie's training outfit, which was soaked through with sweat and still heaving with deep breaths. Her face lined with worry, Pearl said, "I don't think effort is the issue. You're clearly trying your best."

Crestfallen, Connie stared down at her feet. "I don't know what's wrong," she said, her voice thick with frustration.

With a gentle hand, Pearl took Connie by the chin and turned the girl's face from side to side. "I think it's your food. Steven's energy levels seem to vary quite a bit depending on what he's eating. And maybe I'm no expert, and I know humans place a high value on reducing excess mass, but I'm not sure you had any excess to spare in the first place."

"And now she is an authority on organic nutrition as well as a battle master?" Jade guffawed. "I can see why you chose her as your mentor, human. She truly is a polymath."

Her face souring, Connie drew away from Pearl's touch. "I don't think Jade will renegotiate our deal about what we eat anytime soon," she said. But now that the idea had been broached, she could feel her hunger gnawing even harder than usual at her stomach. She hadn't noticed, but she perhaps had been a little quicker to tire lately, and her sword felt as heavy as it had the day she had begun her training. The short fight on Saturday had left her asleep for most of the Sunday after.

Seeing Connie's distress, Pearl softened her features into a smile. "I take it Jade disagrees with me?" she guessed.

"She's been spouting nasty comments since I got here," Connie grumbled. "Mostly about you, although there's still plenty about me too."

Pearl chuckled, surprising Connie out of her funk. "About how we're not 'built for fighting,' right? And plenty worse, I'll bet. Believe me, I've heard it all from Gems like her. They never have the imagination or the courage to see what might exist outside their own narrow little world. Not like Rose Quartz could."

"And thus we reach the root of her twisted insanity," Jade said. "The worship of the walking defect that destroyed our colony here."

"Rose looked at a Gem and saw whole new possibilities. The way she looked at me made me feel like I could do anything," Pearl said, and sighed fondly. "It's like how Steven looks at me. And you too," she added, her smile widening.

Connie tried to smile back, but a wave of prickling smugness from inside her killed the expression. "What a sad self-delusion. This poor wretch rebelled against her rightful place only to slave herself to a new master. If I had a mouth, I would be laughing," Jade said, proving her point by filling Connie's thoughts with bitter, mocking laughter.

Quirking an eyebrow at Connie's flinching, Pearl said, "Oh, she must really be letting me have it in there. Anything especially creative?" she asked teasingly.

"You," Jade said to Pearl, seemingly unconcerned with Connie's refusal to relay the thought, "are a Pearl. And a Pearl is a Pearl is a Pearl, no matter how far afield she might wander. And if I could speak, I could prove it."

As Connie squirmed, Pearl smirked and said, "Ooh, it must be really bad. Now I'm curious. What
does Homeworld's biggest fan think of me? It couldn't be worse than anything Amethyst's called me."

"Um, I don’t—" Connie began.

Jade cut her off with a vicious thought. "No, human, by all means. Do you want to see the true form of your 'free' Pearl? Ask her this."

Connie listened to Jade's question for Pearl. The blood drained out of her face, and her eyes went wide. She clutched her mouth in horror.

Frowning, Pearl rested a hand on Connie's knee. "Connie? Are you alright? What is she saying in there?"

As she shook her head profusely, Connie heard Jade say, "Go ahead, human. Ask her."

"I can't say it," Connie told them both.

"Connie, it's okay," Pearl murmured, squeezing Connie's leg. "I'm not afraid of anything she has to say to me."

"Then perhaps it is you who are afraid, human? Afraid of discovering a fundamental truth about your mentor?" Jade taunted.

Tears threatened the corners of Connie's eyes. She believed in Pearl, and she knew what the answer to Jade's question would be. She never doubted it for a second. And she couldn't bear to let either Gem think that she was afraid. But her voice caught in her throat as she gave in, speaking Jade's question aloud.

"She wants me to ask...if you could poof the hybrid…" Squeezing her eyes shut, Connie choked, "If you could p-poof Steven to get Rose Quartz back in his place, would you?"

Cracking one blurry eye, Connie watched the life drain out of her teacher's face. The hand on her knee fell limply to Pearl's side, the Gem's whole body sagging. Pearl's gaze dwindled into a haunted distance, staring somewhere far away and long ago. And all the while, Connie tried to think of anything she might say without bursting into tears.

"I'm back!" Steven called from the top of the arena stairs. He ran to them with two bottles of water held overhead in triumph, their plastic cool and dripping with condensation. As soon as he saw their faces, his smile evaporated. "Hey, what happened? Is everything okay?"

Pearl rested a hand atop Steven's hair. A smile cut across her face like a knife. "Of course not," she murmured to Connie. Then, as Steven tried to ask again, she drew him to her in a tight hug, pressing her face through his hair to kiss the top of his head.

"Pearl," Connie said, her voice wobbling, "I…I'm so sorry…"

Without looking, Pearl wrapped her other arm around Connie and drew her into the hug. Folded in Pearl's embrace, Connie pressed her face to the Gem's soft blue tunic and hugged back as hard as she could. Pearl didn't make a sound, but Connie could feel the Gem shuddering softly, and it burst the dam holding back Connie's tears.

When at last Pearl pulled away from the teens, her smile softened, and she wiped at Connie's cheek with a gentle thumb. "We're stronger than anything she can say to us, Connie. Remember that," she said.
"Who?" Steven insisted, his tone alarmed. "What happened?"

"We're done training for today, Steven. You and Connie should go enjoy this beautiful day together," Pearl told him. "Why don't you take her back to the house? I'll...catch up later." The barest crack broke through her voice as she urged the teens back toward the stairs.

Baffled, Steven took a few uncertain steps, looking to Connie with questions crowding his features. But she couldn't bring herself to tell him with Pearl still there. Shaking her head, she all but ran for the warp pad, stumbling through thick tears that cut her face.

"Connie?" Pearl called.

Connie froze, certain of the worst. Pearl wouldn't train her anymore, couldn't stand to look at her anymore, not with such a hateful passenger lurking in her thoughts. Nor could Connie blame the Gem. She deserved Pearl's hate, and anguish, and retribution, and—

"Tell that thing in your chest that you need to eat more," Pearl said. Then she leapt up to one of the arena's floating pillars, landing gracefully atop its point, her face turned toward the cloudy horizon.

"Ha! Consider me impressed," Jade harrumphed as Connie lurched up and down the stairs toward the warp pad, Steven trailing behind her with questions. "I do not believe I have ever seen a Gem so effectively delude herself. Perhaps she has something to teach you after all. Eh, human?"

Steven's gentle hand rested on Connie's shoulder. "Connie? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Human?" Jade said, confusion arising in her sub-vocalization.

"Connie?"

"Human? Did you hear me?"

Connie poured her face into her hands and sobbed, collapsing onto her knees atop the warp pad, her tears spilling through her fingers and across her cheeks as her hair curtained her face.
Rain drummed against the bedroom window. It wasn't the excited hammering of a coastal deluge backed with lightning and thunder. Nor was it a light, dappled, late-spring shower that would pass soon enough to leave the world smelling fresh. This was the dull, steady, cold rain that came to stay for days at a time, casting mud and grime and dead sidewalk worms in its wake.

The weather hardly registered with Connie. She lay on her bed, having done nothing all Saturday, and felt exhausted for it. Having paid closer attention to her body since the revelation at training, she had noticed her limbs growing heavier little by little, and watched as the skin of her face grew just a little tighter in her reflection. Her ribs were more pronounced than ever, and just running up a flight of stairs was enough to make her tired.

But it didn't matter anymore. She wanted to wither away like the wick of a burning candle until there was nothing left of her but a twisted little stump. Maybe then she could forget the look of utter despair her words had put on Pearl's face.

"Human?"

The sub-vocalized word from Jade asked a number of questions at once. Connie ignored them all. She hadn't spoken to the Gem since stepping off the warp pad. Every question, every complaint, and every snide condescension passed through Connie without touching her. Eventually, Jade had gotten the hint and stopped talking to her altogether. This was the first attempt Jade had made in nearly three days.

It had been the quietest two weeks of Connie's life, and there didn't seem to be any end to the silence in sight.

"Please understand that I am aware of the comedic underpinnings in what I am about to tell you," Jade said, "but you need to eat. You did not consume your breakfast this morning, and you are now in the process of missing another meal. I suppose, etymologically speaking, that whenever you next choose to eat, that particular meal will be your 'breakfast.' But for your wellness, you should choose to do so soon."

Connie rolled onto her side, curling her arms around her stomach, which hurt worse than ever. Breakfast that morning hadn't been the only meal she'd missed lately. It was hard to convince herself to open each new ¡Soy Delicioso! bar knowing that she was still starving in spite of them.

"The Beta Male prepared several meals for you in the refrigeration unit before departing for his supplementary work period," Jade reminded her. "At some point we will need to dispose of the food to prevent any new suspicion."

Her mood hadn't escaped her parents' notice either. She'd had to pretend that the Gems' schedule was the reason she hadn't gone back to Beach City. It was one more lie heaped atop the growing mountain of lies.

Maybe it was finally time to tell them.

The phone her nightstand chimed with the short ukulele riff that announced a new text from Steven. It had been playing off and on all morning with new messages, but Connie had long since exhausted her will to text back with I'm fine. More lies.

She closed her tired eyes, fighting back the same old tears. It wasn't that she wanted Steven or her
parents to worry. It wasn't that she wanted to be dramatic. She just didn't know how to pretend anymore.

Raindrops knocked against the windowpane with staccato rhythm. The sound always drew Connie back in time to a half-remembered room from years ago, when her family had lived on the opposite coast. Those storms had been her lullaby on nights when her father still worked regular overnights, when her mother came home from a double shift too tired to do anything but feed her before falling asleep on the couch.

"May we go outside, human?" asked Jade.

Connie tried to lose herself in the sound of the rain. Those had been lonely nights, long before she had ever made any friends that weren't bound and shelved. Her teachers hadn't known what to do with her while she breezed through their lessons. Neither of her parents had a minute to spare between vying for private security accounts and finishing a medical residency.

"Please, may we go outside?" Jade said plaintively. "If we do, I will not raise the issue of food for the remainder of the day, barring any violation of our nonaggression pact, of course."

The sound of the rain lulled Connie toward a soft doze. If she concentrated on it, she could almost transport herself back into that dark little room in their tiny apartment so many miles away and years ago. It was the only escape she had left, and it was nearly enough.

With no answer coming, Jade gave a breathless sigh. "Very well. I did not wish it to come to this, human, but you have given me no other recourse. If you take us outside, I will cease the following."

A beat of silence followed. For the barest instant, Connie's interest almost piqued. But when nothing came of it, she drifted back into the sound of the rain.

And then a soft, surprisingly melodious voice arose in her mind. "Friday night! We're going to party till dawn," Jade sang. "Don't worry, Daddy, I've got my favorite dress on!"

It only took Connie two full renditions of T8king Over Midnight to don her purple slicker and matching galoshes, and then she was outside before Jade could start another encore.

As she stepped off the stoop, the downpour rattled against the hood of her slicker. She splashed across the old sidewalk to stand at the curb, staring at the muddy, lumpy sky above the neighborhood rooftops. An odd raindrop nipped at the end of her nose every few seconds while a dull chill wafted up around her.

"Exquisite," Jade declared warmly.

The sentiment coming from the Gem struck Connie as odd, but not wrong. Though she loved sunny summer days, she had never understood the idea that rain made the world feel gloomy. Some of her favorite memories were of being curled up with a good book and a rainstorm knocking at her window. The world felt peaceful under a thick blanket of cloud, quiet despite the noise of the rain, calm and steady and slumbering.

A long, languid moment passed with only the patter of the storm between them. Then, almost casually, Jade said, "Did you know I was the first Gem to ever see natural precipitation like this? At least, I think I was. There were so many of us sent out in the beginning, and not everyone..."

As Jade trailed off, Connie reached out from her pocket, letting the droplets pelt against her hand. She didn't want to admit to being curious, not when her anger and misery felt so much more righteous.
"Regardless," Jade continued, shaking off the bubble of melancholy, "I had seen other types of precipitation in my surveys, of course: ammonia, sulfuric acid, liquid methane. One gas giant even had aggregated graphite in its storms. A rain of diamonds! That made for an amusing report.

"But liquid water? That is a true rarity. I had never seen such a thing when I first landed here to begin my survey," Jade said. Her tone grew wry as she added, "The first time it happened, I nearly dissipated my form out of fright, thinking that some lethal hazard I had not detected would tear apart my gemstone."

Had Jade been the Gem to discover Earth? Not just a soldier fighting to claim it, but the first visitor to reach its surface? Well, if so, that only made her worse than she already was. Jade could have prevented six thousand years of heartache and loss by checking NO on some dumb Gem report filed away on Homeworld. Earth could have been just another rejected planet in a cosmos full of them. Instead, everything was Jade's fault, and that suited Connie perfectly.

"I had already surveyed scores of worlds before I came here," Jade said. "Hundreds, actually. One space rock looked largely like another, and I was content in my tedium. But this place? Everywhere I looked, there was something new to discover. Every single moment brought new adventure and knowledge."

Connie could only imagine the stirring wonders that filled Jade's report. What Gem could resist such a promising and wet ball of minerals? All they had to do was brush all of those icky organic creatures off the surface, and it would be perfect.

As if reading Connie's thoughts, Jade laughed and added, "And the life forms? Everywhere I looked, there they were: in the sky, underground, underwater, and even in the water falling from the sky! You would not believe how long it took me to differentiate everything here that was alive or not alive."

As if that mattered to Homeworld or any Gem before Steven's mother had come along. Organic life was one big squishy inconvenience to the likes of Jade. They were just a wet, sloppy problem with an unforgiveable addiction to food.

"A long, long time," Jade said, answering herself. The laughter in her silent voice dwindled. It was another long moment before she said, "Most of my surveys lasted a matter of months, perhaps upwards of a year for larger planets. But I spent two hundred years surveying Earth."

Two hundred years?

"I am not sure your language possesses metaphor enough to describe the kind of revelation Earth was after millennia of wandering through dusty, dead worlds. Certainly Homeworld did not have words for it," Jade said wistfully. "I violated my orders, skipping my next ten scheduled surveys, because I knew Earth was what I had been seeking all along. What we had been seeking, I mean. I stayed to uncover every wonder the planet held, and when they became too numerous to fathom, I returned home, glad to face whatever punishment the Diamonds saw fit to mete out for my defiance, because I knew, absolutely, that I had found Pink Diamond's first colony."

Two hundred years. Connie couldn't fathom the Gem in her head choosing to remain on Earth for two more minutes, let alone two centuries.

"But I was not punished. I was to become Pink Diamond's personal Chronicler. No Jade before me had ever been granted the honor of serving a Diamond directly. I would join her court, witnessing the next step in our culture's ascendance toward the pinnacle of civilization."
"And then the Crystal Gems stole my world from me."

The words stewed in deep, bitter misery. It was the kind of bitterness that could never be summoned, the kind that only came from years and years of festering. Connie knew only because she could feel her own bitterness at Jade withering in comparison.

Through the pelting rain and the whistle of the wind in her hood, Connie heard the crackle of cold fury in Jade's voice. "I hate the Crystal Gems, human. I hate them for what they did to me, and to my colony, and to my Diamonds, and to my future. I hate them for making me feel afraid. And despite your denials, I hate them for the five thousand years I am all but certain they stole from me. I need you to understand this, human..."

Connie rolled her eyes and braced herself for the sanctimonious tirade to follow.

"...so that when I apologize, you possess the proper context to understand me."

Her eyebrows quirked.

"I broke our pact," admitted Jade. "Without intending to, I caused you great harm, and I am not ignorant of that fact. My opinions of the rebels are my own, but I used you as a tool for my enmity, and in doing so I crossed a figurative line.

"If anyone had spoken to my mentor the way I spoke to yours, I would have shattered them. Not that I would have had a chance to before she did so herself, but even so. My justified hatred of the Pearl nevertheless gave me no right to disrespect her in front of her student," Jade said. "What's more, my question about the hybrid...about your friend caused both you and her extreme distress, for which I also apologize to you."

The rain pattered against Connie's hood, the only sound of response to Jade's silent apology.

As the wordless moment stretched into minutes, Jade's tone became wistful again. "You know, our time together has reminded me of that first survey of this planet. Much of it began as a series of discomfiting, alarming strangeness. But as I grew to know the planet, I became familiar with its eccentricities. Perhaps even fond of them. Most worlds reveal their natures with an orbital pass, but this world...it has surprising depth. It has beauty to it I never would have found without taking the time to get to know it."

A whispering breeze stirred the hem of Connie's slicker. She shifted to put her back to the wind, keeping her eyes on the horizon. Her lips whitened as she pressed them together.

"Perhaps I have been ungrateful for this place I find myself. This planet never asked me to return, after all. It did not allow the rebels to win and persevere. Perhaps I have been unkind toward it," admitted Jade.

The familiar ukulele riff emerged from her pocket, announcing another text from Steven. Seconds later, it played again, and then again. Evidently her silence wasn't sitting well with him either. Connie's hand twitched back toward her pocket on reflex, but she stopped herself.

"You should answer the hybrid's communiqué," Jade said. "You should resume your previous routine with the...with your compatriots. Not to speak out of turn but I..."

Connie closed her eyes. Something inside of her broke, and she didn't know if it belonged to her or to Jade.

"...I believe that spending any additional time in this place without meaningful contact or a means to
leave is a singularly unpleasant experience. In fact, I think it must be quite lonely. And that is coming from someone who, by design, spent centuries at a time alone on alien worlds."

Slowly, silently, Connie drew out her phone and typed a reply to Steven: *Not fine, but working on it. Will call later.*

As she stuffed her phone back in her pocket, her stomach rumbled with a stuttering, keening growl. A particularly vicious pang wracked the empty pit inside her. "I'm hungry," she muttered.

Soft mirth bubbled up around Jade's reply as Connie splashed listlessly back toward the front door. "Then by all means, we should adjourn inside for sustenance. Perhaps you should have two bars for this meal, if only to correct this morning’s caloric deficit."

A groan rose out of Connie to harmonize with her growling stomach at the thought of the ¡Soy Delicioso! bar waiting for her upstairs in her backpack.

"Your noise of culinary anticipation is appreciated, but unnecessary," said Jade. "Consider it gratitude for your bringing us outside. With so much constant change in this world, it is nice to be reminded that some comforts still remain."
Connie squinted at her laptop, trying to make sense out of the nightmare of dotted lines on the screen. The delicate piece of cherry red paper draped over the keyboard was marred with creases from all of her false starts and backtracking. What was supposed to be an elegant, long-necked swan was quickly becoming another crumpled failure to add to the pile in her wastebasket.

"People have done this for hundreds of years," she told the paper sharply. "They didn't even have online instructions back then. So why can't you just work? Swishy and Kyoko cooperated!"

She glanced over at her two origami successes, the first a large fish with mismatched triangular fins, and the second a collection of folded triangles that supposedly resembled a woman in a kimono, but in reality just looked like a bunch of triangles. Their edges were blunted with clumsy refolding, and they only looked like their intended shapes by the most generous of margins, but they were more or less correct. Kirby the Crane, on the other hand, refused to take shape, even after Connie had given him his name ahead of time to encourage him.

As she grew more frustrated, her latest attempt finally tore across one of its many creases. She sighed in defeat and crumpled poor Kirby, consigning him to the trash. Then she reached for a fresh sheet from the package of the surprisingly expensive specialty paper her parents had bought for her. "Guess I'm glad I didn't start with the dragon," she muttered.

Confusion seeped into her frustration. "Human," Jade said, "you know my opinions on your more common recreational pursuits. So please understand the scope of the word when I tell you that I am 'baffled' by this latest undertaking of yours."

Connie's fingers tensed atop the package. Her first reaction was a heated one, flush with anger, a temptation to return to the bitter silence that had dominated weeks of her life already. But then she forced herself to take a breath.

"It's called origami," Connie said, carefully drawing a new sheet. "You make shapes by folding paper."

"I have read of the term and its practice," Jade said. "I suppose I can accept it as another form of indirect human expression no more outlandish and inefficient than any of your species other pastimes. Specifically, though, I am asking why you in particular have chosen to take up origami. Nothing in our shared experiences suggests your interest in the subject previously."

Dividing her attention between her laptop and the paper, Connie began to fold a new crane. "Well, for one thing, it's supposed to be—ouch!" The paper's edge sliced at her fingertip. She popped the stinging cut in her mouth, and mumbled around it, "—relaxing."

"Clearly," Jade drawled.

With a grumble, Connie lowered her finger from her mouth. "Give me a break, will you? It's my first time trying this. And anyway, my fish came out pretty well."

"Oh!" Jade exclaimed. "That simulacrum is meant to resemble a fish! Now I see it…possibly. Is it currently upside-down?"
Connie groaned and let the paper flutter onto the laptop keyboard. She rubbed at the bridge of her nose, her eyes clenched shut.

A moment passed in inner silence. Then, in a softer voice, Jade said, "It is not my intention to exacerbate your frustrations."

The irritation in Connie began to subside. Jade actually sounded sincere. Maybe a little afraid at the silence returning? "I'm just trying something new," said Connie.

"Why?"

Connie's mind flashed to a gritty battle in the sand against a nightmare of billowing, chitinous folding sheets that wanted to cut her in half. It hadn't been the hardest or scariest fight of Connie's life, but she thought now that perhaps it had been the most devastating one.

Picking up the paper again, Connie bent its edges toward one another, watching the sheet bend and roll in the middle. "Someone I met once used to do origami. They were good at it, too. Scarily good. I think it was really important to them, even though I'm not sure they knew it back then."

"That seems unusual," Jade said slowly.

"That's an understatement," Connie said, choking back a humorless laugh. "I don't know. Maybe it's dumb."

"I did not say it was dumb," Jade said, her silent tone suggesting that she still thought as much. "But it remains, as I said before, baffling."

"I just..." Connie rolled the paper back and forth. "I want to understand them. They were so angry. All they did when I met them was lash out at everybody who wanted to help. I think they were really hurting, but they didn't know how to tell anybody. They couldn't."

"So they performed origami?" asked Jade.

Connie sighed and set the paper aside. "Yeah. 'Baffling' is right."

"The individual in question, perhaps," Jade agreed, "but your attempt to understand them certainly is not. It is admirable and sensible."

Blinking, Connie said, "Wait. What?"

"What?" Jade said, equally confused. "When confronted with the unknown, the duty of the inquisitive mind is to seek understanding, to make certainty of the uncertain, thereby expanding themselves and their understanding of the universe."

"Wow. That is actually pretty profound, Jade," Connie said, leaning back in her seat. "It's beautiful. That kind of makes it so much weirder when you're the one saying it. Where is all of this junk coming from?"

Mild protest flitted up from Connie's chest. "Human, I was an explorer. I was tasked with exploring stars and planets far beyond our original ken. Such an undertaking requires the willingness to decipher the unknown. Of all Gems, I comprehend this concept perhaps better than any."

Connie's mouth hung agape. "No, you don't!" she said.

"Yes, I do!" Jade protested.
"No, you don't!" Connie insisted. "You don't try to understand anything! You act like you know everything about everything! You don't listen to me, you don't try to understand anything about me, or humans, or the Crystal Gems, or anything about Earth!"

"I retract my earlier compliment, you presumptuous biped," Jade snapped, harrumphing. "I told you of my extensive survey of this eclectic rock. My study of this world lasted longer than any paltry construct or achievement your species has accomplished."

"Pyramids," Connie retorted.

"Yes, fine, congratulations," Jade sneered, "your people stacked large rocks atop equally large rocks. Astonishing. I would suggest you build a monument to your ingenuity, but such a thing would likely become yet another stack of rocks, rendering itself redundant."

Rolling her eyes, Connie said, "And here come the insults. Never mind the fact that you're wrong, as long as you can make fun of humans and remind me for the zillionth time about how superior Gems are."

Scoffs of indignation echoed in Connie's mind. "Speaking the truth should not be treated like an inconvenience, human! It is not my fault your species has not bothered to do more than fire glorified mechanical curios wildly into space in some pale facsimile of galactic exploration."

Connie stiffened her voice, drawing upon years of watching the stuffy TV aristocrats of the historical drama, Highclere Ministry. "Ooh, look at me, I'm Jade. My species invented sunlight and gravity, and because I'm a mega-historian I get to take credit for all of it."

"I do not sound like that!" Jade protested. "Nobody sounds like that! NOTHING sounds like that!"

"You're like a book who pats itself on the spine for all the things its heroes do!" Connie sneered.

"Oh, typical human reaction, regressing into metaphor. Why bother having a point when you can make one up?"

"That was a simile!" bellowed Connie.

"They're functionally synonymous!" Jade roared back.

A soft knocking on the closed bedroom door made Connie choke on her reply. Her father's voice filtered through the wood. "Connie? Is everything okay in there?"

Connie closed her eyes. There was an undeniable note of concern in her father's voice he was trying to suppress. It was the kind of concern parents failed to hide when they knew there was something wrong they couldn't fix. The last time he had used that voice was right after their last move, after one of her teachers had called home with concerns about her social habits at school. That conversation had been particularly miserable for the both of them.

Forcing a smile onto her face, Connie called back, "Yeah! Sorry about the noise. There's a...really interesting web series about grammar in...young adult fiction?" Her smile collapsed into a grimace at the sheer, pathetic transparency of this latest lie. With all of the practice she had been getting, she thought she would be getting better at it, not worse.

There was a terrible pause on the other side of the door. Then, as bullets of sweat gathered on Connie's brow, her father's muffled voice answered, "Okay. Dinner's in an hour. We'll have your plate ready for you. Unless you want to eat at the table with us. That would be good too. Either is fine."
Footsteps faded down the stairs. Seconds later, Connie let go of the breath she'd been holding and sagged in her chair. She rubbed at her eyes and groaned.

"Perhaps volume is not the factor that will alleviate our mutual issues," Jade stated dryly.

Connie squeezed her eyes shut. A furious retort ballooned in her chest, spreading to every part of her until she shook furiously. Then she took another deep breath and stilled. The rage cooled into lead, dragging at her limbs and sinking deep into her bones. In a soft voice, she asked Jade, "What do you miss about Homeworld?"

"Er, everything? I do not understand the nature of—"

"What do you miss?" Connie insisted. Her eyes grew hot and wet behind their lids. "And don't say 'chronicling,' or 'serving the Diamonds,' or anything like that. What did you love about Homeworld? What did you do to make you feel good? What did you do for fun, or entertainment, or to blow off steam, or to share with someone else?"

"Steam?"

Tears cut down Connie's cheeks. She could feel the hot lines rolling down past her chin to vanish into the collar of her shirt. "Jade, please," she murmured, barely holding her voice in check. "Please give me something. Anything. Sometimes you say or do something that makes me think you might be a person. But then you make me so scared that I have this monster just waiting to explode out of me and hurt my parents and my friends, and I just...I don't know what to do. It makes me so scared. So please, give me one thing, anything that you miss, something you love about your home that didn't revolve around destroying my home."

Her breath quickened, and she clutched her mouth, clenching her eyes shut as she tried and failed to stem her tears. She was tired, and frightened, and hungry, and frayed.

"I like it when you play music."

Sniffling, Connie swiped at her face with the back of her hand. "What?" she grunted.

Softly, barely audible even in the choppy silence of Connie's mind, Jade said, "I like it when you practice with your instrument. Your violin. It reminds me, just a little, of the performances my mentor and I would attend on Homeworld."

"You have musical performances on Homeworld?" asked Connie. A hint of teasing worked through her rough tone. "But that sounds so creative and frivolous."

"We are not automatons, human," Jade chided her gently. "When I tell you of our rich culture, that does also include creative endeavors as well as our unparalleled triumphs of science, architecture, government, cartography—"

"Right, right," Connie said, waving off the familiar lecture. She sniffed loudly, wiping at her nose, and said, "But music?"

Hesitant at first, Jade began, "When I was a surveyor of new worlds, I dreaded my returns to Homeworld. My real life was out in the Sky finding new stars. But when I became a Chronicler, my days of wandering ended. I initially found the new direction...confining. And my mentor quickly grew frustrated with my lack of focus to the new task. So she sought to entice my more enthusiastic cooperation by showing me the privileges of a courtesan, chief among them being performances."

Connie frowned. "You didn't hear music until you became a courtesan? There wasn't any music
outside of the Diamonds' courts?" She tried to imagine such a silent world. "That sounds sad."

A new feeling arose, one that Connie could only equate to a shrug without shoulders. "Of course there were other songs. The Rubies in my division had some rather rude ditties they would indulge in between engagements. And before that, I would sometimes spend entire days listening to the songs of your planet's avian population, or those of the larger cetacean mammals in your oceans. But music as a production is a prodigious luxury on Homeworld."

"Did it work?" Connie asked. "I mean, did music make it easier to stay on Homeworld?"

Something different entered Jade's voice, a reverence Connie had never heard from the Gem before. "It haunted me from its first note. Iridescent Gems swirled upon their stage, their gossamer forms alight with the glow of their audience as they sang songs that took me places no ship or windstorm ever could."

The image of a concert hall filled Connie's mind, an open structure much like the Sky Arena, but with a stage in place of a battle floor. She imagined Gems like Pearl, graceful things made for beauty, gliding in a weightless dance as their voices found harmonies that no human voice could hope to reproduce, harmony that could move a curmudgeon like Jade to tears. It was only when Connie felt new teardrops rolling down her cheek again that she wondered if the image in her mind was her imagination or Jade's.

"Did you ever sing?" Connie asked in a hush.

Jade actually laughed at that. "Me? I may be green, human, but I am no Emerald. I would not know where to begin. Actually, your ability to…"

Connie felt a surge of something else. Bitterness? Jealousy? Admiration? Perhaps all of them and many more. She glanced at the violin sitting on its stand in the corner, where it had remained untouched for weeks. The feeling inside of her intensified as her eyes ran up the still strings of the instrument.

Carefully, Connie asked, "Do you like any music on Earth?"

"My experience with such matters is limited," Jade admitted. "As I said, I enjoy your practices, despite such performances being limited by its single instrument. The only other experience of significance with human music I can cite is the song you used to incapacitate me."

Connie winced as the infectious lyrics of &dra tried to worm their way back into her head. "Oh. Right," she said.

"I have no means of sampling Earth music on your communication device without the risk of alerting your parents to my nocturnal activities. To my almost immediate regret, I did watch several video productions on mute with text translations of the spoken portions."

The last time Connie had asked for headphones, she'd gotten instead a reading list from her mother of medical articles correlating teen hearing loss to the proliferation of headphone use. She picked up her phone and started to type a new message to Steven, but then stopped. "Would you like to?" she asked Jade. "I mean, would you even be interested in human music?"

Jade hesitated again. "I suppose," she said. "Frankly, I am close to exhausting your data network's useful archives, and your livestream news is nearly or equally as trivial as your fiction."

Connie sent the text and then leaned back toward her laptop. She pulled the abandoned origami aside, letting the sheet flutter to the floor, and pulled up a search engine instead.
"Are you abandoning your empathetic paper folding?" Jade said.

"Putting it on hold," said Connie. "I think maybe I can find something a little better than crumpled birds and fish anyway."

"That last attempt was supposed to be a bird?" Jade said incredulously.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the break in the schedule, everyone. I'm hoping to be back on track as of this chapter.
"Here you go, dude," Sour Cream said, pulling a small satchel out of a dusty old cardboard box. He dangled the vinyl bag by its drawstring, offering it to Connie with a grin tilted across his face. "They're a little old, but I think they'll do the trick."

Connie frowned quizzically as she accepted the bag. She had felt vaguely uncomfortable ever since Steven had brought her over to visit the DJ in his garage. Part of the discomfort came from not knowing Sour Cream very well, mostly having met him as half of someone else. Perhaps a larger part was the collection of portraits and paintings featuring a nearly naked Amethyst that filled a considerable amount of floor space inside the garage. It could have been any number of things.

Drawing open the bag, Connie pulled out two tremendous ear cups bridged by a long, curved, sliding metal tine. It was the largest set of headphones she had ever seen, and it packed a considerable heft. "Wow, really? You're okay with just giving these away?" she said, tugging the thick, trailing cable out from the bag.

Shrugging, Sour Cream said, "Totally. Those are your basic Soundwave Blastmasters. They have pretty decent fidelity, but the drivers are a little small, and the cable's impedance isn't high enough for serious mixing. Yellow-Dad got them for me after I brought my first mixing board home." With a chuckle and a shake of his head, he said, "I used to try juicing my weak beats back then by playing them louder. It got so bad that whenever he came upstairs to chew me out, all I could hear was 'Muh-muh-muh!' Pretty funny."

Drawing the ear cups apart, Connie settled the headphones over her head. The instant the cups pressed over her ears, the sounds in the room became a muffled, distant whisper. Above the rumble of her own pulse, she heard Jade say with perfect clarity, "These are the devices that will allow me to access music at night? They seem rudimentary. Though they are not uncomfortable."

Removing the headphones, Connie grinned and said, "They're perfect! My friend is going to love these. Thanks, Sour Cream!"

He shrugged again. "Spreading the joy of music is my life's bliss. One day it's my dream to take it on the road. I'd be like Johnny Appleseed, but for sick beats instead of fruit. Though I guess I'd share my fruit too if I had any."

Steven and Connie waved goodbye as they left the garage and started along the street back toward the boardwalk. Puddles and mud blotted the sidewalk, the leftovers from the long spring showers the week before. There were still heavy clouds perched on the horizon, threatening to crowd the skies again if the mood struck them. A cool, damp breeze drifted between houses as a reminder of their threat.

With the headphone cord tied around one ear cup, Connie wore her gift draped around her neck, savoring their weight. Though she had never owned a pair herself, she had done research on them, and knew these were an impressive set despite Sour Cream's indifference. She knew they couldn't have come cheaply, and wished she could do something to repay his generosity in kind.

Steven caught her tapping at the headphones, and he smiled. "You're lucky he didn't try to give you anything fancier. As his part-time roadie, I've seen some of the gear he has. I think he could launch a
"I think we're down to the last case of ¡Soy Delicioso! Will that be enough to make it through the week?"

Connie did the math in her head, her stomach twinging. "Yeah, that would get me through to Saturday when I'm back here," she said, careful to keep her features positive as she avoided mentioning the meal she'd be skipping at the end.

Looking relieved, Steven promised, "I'll ask Dad to order more. How, uh…how is everything else going?"

His squirming made Connie smirk. "You mean how is dealing with Jade being a colossal jerk and me being a needy, moody human?"

"Humph! Colossal," Jade groused. "Comparing mass or volume, I think we both know which of the two of us better fits that hyperbolic descriptor."

"We're working on that too," Connie admitted. "I don't think either of us expected to be stuck together for so long. That first deal, or truce, or whatever it was we made, it worked okay to start. But we're going to have to find a way to live with each other."

"Refreshingly literal of you, human," Jade noted dryly.

Smirking, Connie patted the headphones around her neck. "I think these will help to give Miss Smarty Gem something to do at night besides read Ficklepedia. Maybe being stuck inside me is making her old explorer's itch act up."

"Explorer's itch?" Steven echoed, confused.

"Oh, yeah!" Connie exclaimed, and slapped her palm to her forehead. "I forgot to tell you. Our super-special Chronicler used to be an explorer. She was the first Gem on Earth."
Steven's eyes ballooned. "Wow! Peridot said Jades did that kind of stuff, but who knew our Jade was the Jade who Jaded Earth? That's amazing!"

"I take umbrage at being labeled 'your Jade,' 'hybrid,'" sneered Jade, "but your awe is appropriate at least."

"Ooh! Jade! What's your favorite thing about Earth?" Steven asked, directing the question at Connie's shirt.

The question seemed to take the snide Gem aback, wiping away the foreign irritation inside Connie. "My favorite thing? Well...such vagaries are reductive by nature, to say nothing of subjective, and so inevitably fail to capture the richness of these matters."

Connie snickered. "It's a little wordy, but I think she's saying her favorite part is sounding smarter than everybody even though I'm the only one who can hear her."

That irritation returned inside Connie. "At the moment I now believe my favorite aspect of Earth was formerly its drastically limited human population. It is a shame that agriculture and medical advancements ruined that," Jade grumbled.

Then Steven gasped, stopping in his tracks. "Wait a minute. We should take Jade exploring!" he exclaimed, pounding his fist into his open palm.

"What?" Connie said.

"What?" Jade sub-vocalized.

"Yeah!" insisted Steven. "If we're, um, taking a break from training until you feel better, maybe we should spend some time showing Jade all of the places and stuff she's missed out on in the last five thousand years. We're supposed to stick together anyway, so we could do it together!"

A wave of exasperation rippled inside Connie wholly separate from her smile. "Human, kindly inform the hybrid of how I spent more than your two combined expected lifespans diligently cataloguing the topography, geology, meteorology, biology, and viability of this planet. If there is a subject matter expert on this planet present among us, it is I. Any cursory examination two juveniles could offer would—"

"Sorry, Steven," Connie said loudly, twisting her mouth into an exaggerated pout. "It sounds like Jade isn't interested in doing what she was actually made to do. But it's cool if she's satisfied with crowdsourced articles. That's probably just as good as getting dirt on your photons and seeing things with your own eyes."

Stony silence echoed in Connie's mind while Steven stared at her with confusion thick in his features. Then Jade uttered, "You, human, are a pathetically transparent, clumsy manipulator incapable of even understanding the concept of subtlety, much less employing it in your rhetoric."

Sighing, Connie tapped the gemstone under her shirt and gave Steven a frustrated look as explanation. She could admit she might have pushed a little too hard, but she was sick of Jade's pride and arrogance and her seemingly limitless commitment to being miserable. There had to be some compromise that wouldn't leave one or both of them hating their existence.

Steven lifted a hand to touch her arm, but then he hesitated. "Jade?" he said softly. "I want to show you something. Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do not," Jade said incredulously. "You are half a traitor and half an irrational organic
"Jade," Connie admonished the Gem, all while Steven waited with puppy-dog eyes and the patience of a saint.

Huffing, Jade replied, "I trust that this creature means me no immediate or specific harm, particularly while I am conjoined with his paramour."

"Okay. Wait, his what?" Connie quickly shook her head, chasing away that snarl of a concept to focus on the moment. Looking back at Steven, she said, "Jade says yes. But it's not a really enthusiastic yes."

Grinning, Steven exclaimed, "I'll take it!" Then he frowned at a new thought chasing the first. "You trust me too, right?" he asked.

Feeling a little heat return to her smiling cheeks, Connie answered, "The fact that you still ask me that is the reason you never have to ask me that."

Confusion rumpled his brow, but then he smiled. "I didn't completely follow that, but your face is telling me 'yes.' So let's take Jade on a field trip right here." He turned and knelt one knee, looking back over his shoulder with his arms held low. "Climb aboard, ladies."

Now it was Connie's turn to frown. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had given her a piggyback ride. But she did trust him, and so wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stepped up, letting him slip his hands under her knees to lift her to his back. He felt soft and warm, with a surprisingly firm strength shifting under his shirt. It made her glad that he couldn't see her stupid blushing grin as he stood and started jogging forward.

"Where is the hybrid taking us? And why?" Jade said amidst a rush of confusion. "We are more than capable of conveying ours—"

Sensing what was coming, Connie clenched tight around Steven when she felt his pace tense. An instant later, he jumped, rocketing skyward with Connie clinging to him for dear life, her face pressed into his neck to shield her eyes from the rushing air. Her stomach trailed a hundred yards behind them, and her hair cracked in their wake like a whip. Connie felt terrified, and she loved every exhilarating second of it.

"—EEEEEEEEELLLLVVESSSSSSSSS!" Jade's scream rattled inside Connie with enough force to make her temples ache.

Their dizzying ascent slowed to a gradual stop as Steven's floating powers caught them in midair. They drifted gently with the cool, stiff breeze, the gentle whistle of the wind the only sound around them. It was as if Steven had jumped out of the world itself, and as Connie cracked her eye, she looked below to their new reality.

"Everybody okay?" Steven called back over his shoulder, shifting his grip under Connie's legs to firm his hold on her. "We're here!"

The scream in Connie's head transformed into a toothy snarl. "Tell that duplicitous mishmash of traitor and hominid that everything is not okay, and that he will rue..."

Jade's tirade fizzled as Connie cast her eyes to the world below. Beach City lay in the distance, a tiny ship made from pavement grids, weatherworn houses, with the white cliffs forming the bow of the ship and the ancient temple as its figurehead. The city bobbed stillly in a sea of green that kissed the sapphire ocean, the line between them twisting in a long, playful line.
As she looked around, Connie watched the clouds drifting around them like cotton icebergs. She squeezed Steven tighter in a makeshift hug, resting her chin on his shoulder as she looked out at the sprawling landscape. The fact that Steven would whisk her into the clouds without fully explaining it was just another of the dozens upon dozens of things she loved about him.

Then she realized that there was probably a lot more to Jade's paramour jibe than she had first thought. But that was a warehouse of emotions to unpack for another time.

Craning his neck downward, Steven stared out at the town. "See, Jade? Connie told me about how you've been catching up on Earth stuff on the Internet. And that's great for some of the big stuff, like history, or music videos that use clips of cartoon shows instead of people to tell the song's emotional story. Those are great! But it's definitely not the best way to explore the world."

Connie started to chime in, but then bit back her words. She wanted to agree and add her own thoughts, the same thoughts she had been trying to voice between arguments with the Gem. Nothing she had said to Jade had made enough of an impression thus far. Maybe it was time to let the diplomat take over for the ambassador. And besides which, she never got tired of watching Steven do what he did best.

"Reading up on everything that's changed will give you a thousand little pictures about this planet," Steven said, staring down at the sleepy town. "But when you look too closely at something, all you can see are the details. You can't see how it all fits together anymore. All of those little details are buzzing around in front of you like a bunch of bugs. You can't see the forest for the bees."


"Exactly. You can't see the trees because of all the bees," agreed Steven.

Waiting with bated breath, Connie did not hear her passenger condescending to Steven. She didn't hear Jade dismissing their new world. Instead, she heard silence, and felt a murmuring wave of exhaustion ripple out from deep in her chest.

"Very well, meddlesome Earthlings," Jade groaned. "If you feel the need to celebrate your connection to this planet, and I happen to come along, I shall not raise any greater than a reasonable number of objections."

A sigh of relief whistled through Connie's nose. She pressed her smile into Steven's shoulder and murmured, "Again, not a lot of enthusiasm, but I think you got another 'yes.' I hope you have some adventures in mind, because I don't know if Funland is really Jade's thing."

His head leaned against hers as they stared at the landscape drifting below them. "I can probably think of a couple of things worth doing around here besides Funland." A few blissful, cloud-dappled moments later, he added, "Did your parents ever set a maximum altitude for when we hang out?"

"They did used to tell me to keep my head out of the clouds," Connie said, and giggled. Craning her face perhaps a little closer to his, she added, "But I'm not in any hurry to go anywhere."

---

Connie awoke the next morning to the familiar rectangular glow of her laptop screen and the crick in her back that came from a long night of sitting at her desk with inhumanly straight posture. But as she slouched back to her self, she felt a warm ring of vinyl pressing around each ear and heard the soft sound of horns and drums while a woman's grainy voice sang to her.
You're really swell! I have to admit you
Deserve expressions that really fit you!
And so I've wracked my brain,
Hoping to explain
All the things that you do to me!

As she stretched and blinked, Connie felt a small glimmer of surprise in her chest. "Good morning, human," Jade said. "Did the music wake you? I felt you stirring periodically throughout the night until I discovered the optimal volume on this headpiece."

The TubeTube browser window playing the song jumped to the fore with a brush of the touchpad. Connie grinned at the black and white cover of the Big Band song. "So it worked like a charm?" she asked.

"Better, even, being that charms are fictitious," Jade said wryly. "My only grievance with the endeavor is ending the night's musical survey with this song. Something about this particular genre fills me with… anger."

Grimacing, Connie hurriedly lifted the headphones away from her ears, pulling them out of her hair. "Oh. Sorry," she said, wincing.

A surprising warmth came back at her. "Not at all. Its provocative nature intrigues me, particularly because I find my reaction inexplicable. I also found several instances of human music that were positively stimulating. The pale human who provided this apparatus possesses an online portfolio of something called 'chiptunes,' which I find delightfully intricate. And I found other samples of rhythmic poetry—rap?—that was reliant on basso percussion and possessed a braggadocios nature while remaining raw and sincere."

Blinking away the last of her sleep, Connie said, "Oh. Really?" Then, as she set the headphones on her desk, she saw three delicate shapes perched at the edge atop a stack of books. "Hey, what are these?" she said, and gently lifted one of the three perfect paper cranes.

"Ah, yes, well," Jade said, burbling in embarrassment, "after your assistance with this latest endeavor, I felt I owed you a courtesy. So I thought perhaps I could assist in your attempts at constructing paper facsimiles of Earth fauna."

The paper crane was flawless. Its edges were crisp, its proportions, exact. "Thanks, Jade," Connie said, her smile lopsided as she set the origami back with its flock, "but the point was sort of to do it for myself."

With a mental snort, Jade replied, "Well, obviously. So when I realized I could open multiple video sources on your device, I started searching for supplemental origami instructional materials as I played music. If you look at your notepad, you will find the virtual location codes for three different videos that I deemed to provide the most benefit-to-length ratio, judging by clarity of instruction, video quality, and vocabulary employed by the instructor."

Connie checked the legal pad next to the laptop. Half the page was filled with lines of TubeTube addresses that had been transcribed in lettering precise enough to have been typed. She ran her fingers over the addresses, her smile straightening at the care put into the text. "That's… Wow. Thank you."
"Think nothing of it. I hope it helps your search for understanding," Jade said. "Ah, tangentially, the Lazuli sent me another electronic missive last night and asked me to convey her salutations to you. She also inquired after your wellbeing. How shall I answer her tonight?"

Unable to stop herself, Connie felt her smile break into a wide grin. "Tell her 'hi' from me," she said, "and that I'm doing better."

Chapter End Notes

The song at the end is Bei Mir Bis Du Schön, a Big Band song choice courtesy of my pals over at ConnieSwap. Jade here is specifically listening to The Andrews Sisters' version.
"What is it like to grow?" asked Jade.

Connie stopped in the hallway, her knuckles poised against the row of lockers. They had been enjoying a companionable silence since finishing their ¡Soy Delicioso! bar, with no inkling that such a question was brewing in the Gem. She searched the feelings bouncing around inside of her, but besides her own confusion, she couldn't feel anything out of place.

Tapping her fist against the locker, Connie said, "That's a really big question, Jade. Can you be more specific?"

"Unfortunately, no," Jade lamented. "The question revolves around such an alien concept that I do not know where to begin. I have tried researching the query on my own, but the answers are so mired in romanticism and metaphor, and individual accounts vary so wildly, that I find myself at a loss for how to proceed."

The mental image of Jade trawling the internet for anecdotes about the adolescent human experience rushed through Connie's mind. It was pretty funny, and it made Connie hope dearly that her parents weren't still checking her browser history. "If you're asking me, you must really be desperate for context," Connie said with gentle teasing.

"Indeed," Jade replied earnestly, "but given your familiarity with Gem-kind, it is perhaps not as preposterous as it initially sounds."

"Okay, I had that coming," Connie muttered, smirking. "Seriously, where is any of this coming from? Usually when you even say the word 'human,' I can imagine you sneering and sitting on a big, pointy throne, petting a white cat. Why the change of heart?"

Derision bubbled up through Jade's retort. "Your clumsy, ill-conceived, baffling metaphor aside, nothing has changed per se. But it may have been posited to me following recent events that, while my exhaustive survey took into account your species' place in the larger biosphere, I perhaps have made certain assumptions and broad generalizations about the finer intricacies of biologicals," she admitted.

Tapping the locker door, Connie suggested, "So you were wrong about humans."

"Imprecise," Jade said quickly. "I was imprecise. But I am seeking to correct any minor gaps in my knowledge, particularly while I am forced to inhabit one of those gaps. So I would like you to... That is, I had hoped you might agree to contextualize parts of your experience."

Connie ran her finger along the locker's dial, rotating the numbers idly as she focused on the calming techniques Garnet had taught her. This exact inquiry had been one of the conversations she had imagined back when the stone in her chest had still been a slumbering mystery. Now that she knew her passenger, she was no less excited, but afraid that too much enthusiasm would spoil the delicate moment.

"Okay," Connie said, feigning reluctance, "I guess I could do that. But if I do, you can't make fun of me or any humans, or yammer on about Gem superiority, for a whole month."

"Outrageous!" snapped Jade. "I will refrain from any of my harsher truths about you and your species for the remainder of this meal period."
"One whole week of all that stuff I said, plus you have to use your powers to go kite-flying with me and Steven," Connie insisted.

"I would sooner dissipate our collective form. I will grant you instead acquiescence to your initial terms until the beginning of the next morning, and will additionally transcribe the equations necessary for your species to achieve faster-than-light propulsion using your current level of technological development," Jade said.

"You have to be nice through the entire weekend," countered Connie, "and you have to say one nice thing to Steven when we see him tomorrow."

"Curses! Very well, you conniving anthropoid," Jade snarled. "I will accede to your terms starting—you and your kind are an embarrassment to the concept of 'dominant species'—now."

Her mouth puckering in amusement, Connie remarked, "You missed your calling as a lawyer."

"Zircon-like my capacity for reasoning may be, human," bragged Jade, "but my wisdom truly exceeds the scope and history of anything on Earth."

"Pyramids," Connie retorted.

"Win one argument without your precious pyramids!" Jade snapped. "I dare you!"

"Be nice," Connie said waringly. She listened for a moment, but the only response she got was a seeping feeling of defeat she remembered experiencing back when her parents had forced her into swimming classes. "Okay. So where do you want to start?" she asked.

Excitement arose in place of Jade's misery, bursting forth with the force of a head-on car collision. " Everywhere? You are so confounding! You start as one thing, and then constantly become something else. There is not a moment of certainty or stability at any point in your existence. How do you cope with that?"

Connie began to pace the halls again, thinking back to all the imagined conversations she had shared with the version of Jade she had invented months ago. There were all kinds of romantic notions about humanity she had shared with that imaginary Gem. But as little as she wanted to admit it, she knew those notions were as fictional as the Jade she had told them to.

"To be honest? We just don't think about it," Connie admitted. "I mean, I can't speak for anybody else, but everything feels like it happens too fast and too slow all at the same time. When you're waiting for something to change, it feels like it never will. But then, when you think about how things used to be, you realize how much everything changed without you even noticing."

Irritation and confusion twisted inside Connie as Jade protested, "There must be more to it than communal obliviousness. Something so profound cannot be inconsequential to your immediate experience. You are in constant flux, yet never aware of it? How can you exist like that? How can you ever know what you are?"

"We don't know any other way to be. It can't be any weirder than coming out of the ground completely grown up and knowing that you're exactly the way you're supposed to be, forever," Connie said.

"It is weirder by several orders of magnitude!" exclaimed Jade. "Gems are created for a purpose and go on to serve that purpose. Biologicals instead produce offspring based on impulses—chemical suggestions!—who then go on do to the same as seemingly their only purpose, except even that is not always the case. And along the way, sapient biologicals try to fill their time creating ancillary
purpose, much of which is counterintuitive to their very survival."

"Okay, now you're just exaggerating," Connie said.


"Huh. Giving you free access to TubeTube might have been a mistake," Connie mused. "No reneging!"

"But see, all that momentary stuff, that dumb stuff we do to make ourselves happy or excited," Connie insisted, "that's what we live for. It's like we're trying to find our purpose somewhere in all that silliness, and when we do, we feel most like ourselves."

"It reflects poorly on your species that you find purpose in frivolous pursuits," Jade said smugly. Then, evidently remembering her promise, she added, "But of course, if it is humanity's preferred means of development, I suppose that is fine."

Rolling her eyes, Connie stopped in front of a bulletin board posted in the school's front corridor. The corkboard featured dozens of colorful papers layered over each other with printed announcements for things like clubs, activities, and even one flyer for a school dance from ages ago that Connie hadn't been brave enough to attend.

"It's not just the frivolous stuff, you know-it-all pyroxene," she teased Jade.

"How do you—?"

"You're not the only one in this body who reads," said Connie. "And all that silly and awesome stuff you listed is just a little slice of everything humans do. And all of this stuff is so important, especially for humans my age. Chess club, and math club, and anime club, and…hmm. We actually have a lot of cool clubs," she said, and tugged at the bottom row of flyers.

"And the purpose of these supplementary activities is to find your primary purpose? And then once you discover it, you perform that function for the remainder of your existence?"

"Maybe," Connie said. Her eyes flitted back to the faded school dance announcement that lay half-buried on the corkboard. Even though she hadn't gone, it had still changed her life forever, and had made her a part of something much more special. "But that's the tricky thing about always changing: we're always changing. We grow, and our purpose grows with us. I used to be way into stuffed animals and mashed carrots, but now I'm not. Now I like playing music, and reading, and sword-fighting, and school. And someday soon it might be something else."

Her mind panged with sadness that wasn't hers. "What a tormented existence you humans lead. To be created purposeless, and find your purpose by chance, only to lose it by chance? To be forced to constantly discover yourself? I cannot imagine anything so empty."

Connie's eyes found a more recent flyer, this one for a book club. She looked at the Clipart picture of the open book, its pages splayed out and ruffled by some imaginary breeze. "That's what I don't get about you, Jade: you already became so many different things before I met you. You were an explorer, and then they made you a Chronicler, and then you were a scout in the war. How can you think you could do all of that without changing?"

A long silence answered Connie at first. She was starting to do some mental scheduling to see if she could possibly fit a club into her jammed schedule when Jade finally said, "You truly remind me of
myself sometimes, human. Yours was one of the first questions I asked my mentor. Back then I believed it impossible that a Jade could take on such a markedly different function." A tiny laugh tumbled up through a rush of emotions. "She insisted that every Gem is created with versatility and expertise enough for any function tasked to her by a Diamond. We do not change; we simply strip away doubt until we know we can do what is asked of us."

Stepping back from the board, Connie looked at the wallpaper of flyers for all of the things she loved, and wanted to try, and had never even thought to try. "It kind of works that way with humans too. Our parents don't get to pick what we're good at, but we're all born good at certain things. Humans can be strong, or fast, or smart, or clever. We figure out what we can do and then try to build our lives around those things, if we can."

Intrigue nibbled in the wake of Connie's words. "I suppose for such incomplete creatures, assigning a function to yourself based on a self-evaluation of your natural aptitude is not the worst way to construct your sloppy hierarchy," said Jade. After a beat, she asked, "So what are you good at, human?"

The question didn't have any of the sarcasm Connie would have expected. As she looked across the board, she said, "I guess I don't know yet. Like I said before, I like school, and books, and sword-fighting. Maybe if I keep trying, I'll be good at one of them one day."

"Humph. Well," Jade mused, "if any Gem should suffer the ignoble torment of being interred within an organic prison, it may only be fitting that my prison would be a studious warrior polymath. Perhaps it is the best of such abysmal circumstances."

Connie straightened, blinking in surprise. "Was that a compliment? Did you just say something nice?" she said.

"Given our recent agreement regarding your contextual assistance, my choice for discourse is limited. I can either converse thusly or I can remain in utter silence." Jade said. Then, after a moment, she added, "Thank you. I may have additional questions later, should you be willing, but I believe you have given me something to consider."

Connie smiled. "I'd be happy to. And you're welcome."

The school bell toned through the intercom, ending their walkabout lunch and cutting off Jade's reply. Doors opened down the hallways and students flooded out, smothering the quiet with a roar of conversations and laughter. Pressing her lips together, Connie waded into the foot traffic and was jostled back to her locker so she could collect her books for the next class.

Jade's conversation circled her thoughts as she twisted the combination into her locker. Ages ago, she had once imagined her best years in the distant future, laying at the end of a very long road of constant work: she would study hard, apply herself to all of the correct activities, meet all the right people and say all the right things, and then she would finally be happy.

Part of her still wanted to achieve all of those things, to be the astronaut scientist who cured diseases on her whirlwind campaign trail to being elected President, with perhaps a few years' sabbatical in between so she could perform with a philharmonic orchestra. But a different part of her was excited for the next day, when she would see her best friend again, or maybe pick up the sword again, or teleport off to some crazy new location. She was looking forward to the next morning when she and Jade could discuss the new music the Gem would discover overnight. She even looked forward to finishing her homework so she could try again at folding a paper orchid.

Once upon a time, Connie had lived in books and waited for happiness. But now, despite all of the
troubles in her life, she had happiness now and hope for the future. She had changed so much that she could hardly recognize the person she had once been.

Who would she be after she and Jade were finally separated?

"Hey, Connie!" The cheerful voice knocked Connie out of her reverie. She turned and found Jeff staring behind her, waiting with a loose page in hand and a smile on his face. "How's it going?"

She returned the smile in kind. "Hey, Jeff. What's that?"

"It's a flyer for that sci fi club idea I told you about. What do you think?" He presented the flyer, grinning. "Do you think the flying saucer is too retro?"

Hardening her smile, Connie assured him, "Flying saucers never go out of style."

His cheeks pinked, and he said, "We're still looking for members to meet the minimum number for using a classroom after school. Are you sure you're not interested?"

"I'm crazy-interested, but I don't think I have enough time for it right now. Sorry," she said, and grimaced. Then her face sobered, and she began ticking off her fingers as she told him, "Ursula Le Guin. John Scalzi. The Ice Pirates. You have to cover all of those, Jeff. I'm serious."

"Pretty sure you need to be a member of the club to tell us what to read and watch," he teased her. "Ooh, planning your next date?"

Their smiles collapsed as Connie and Jeff turned back to see Mandy Petti leaning against a nearby locker. Her entourage stood close at hand to play sneering audience while Mandy smirked.

Summoning the last sliver of her patience, Connie said, "Go away, Mandy."

The blonde just grinned and said, "Looking for some privacy? Kissing in the hallway still lands you in detention, Big Nose. Not that you would ever get detention, not even for your little boyfriend's fish lips."

Other students around them dropped the pretense of not listening and watched the faceoff openly. Connie bristled at the swarm of prying eyes, but she kept her gaze locked in Mandy's. "What do you care what we're doing? Why does it even matter to you?" Connie demanded.

"If I were you, I'd be grateful if anybody cared about my nerdy little love life," Mandy retorted.

Jeff blushed, trembling as though he wanted to bolt from the scene. Fists curling at her sides, Connie forced herself to take a deep breath. She emptied her face, making it smooth. "If you were me," she told Mandy calmly, "you'd actually be smart enough think of something better to do with your time instead of prancing around making people feel bad."

Murder sparked in Mandy's eyes, fanning into a blaze as muted chuckling trickled around their audience. "You think you're so smart, don't you?" she growled, her smugness gone. "You think being smart makes you better than everybody. But you're just a big-nosed, ugly, sad, pathetic—"

The locker behind Mandy exploded open, its door hammering Mandy in the back of her head. She staggered onto one knee with a yelp, her hand cradling her scalp as the force of the blow bounced the locker door closed again. Connie stared in mute shock as Mandy winced and moaned, and then waved off her cronies' help.

"Ugh! What did you…?" Mandy pulled herself back to her feet and swung her glare at the
mysterious locker. "What happened?"

The locker door burst open again, bashing Mandy squarely in the face. She squalled and reeled backwards, her hands clapping over her mouth and nose as she glared at the door with tears in her eyes. Then she cast her hateful glare back at Connie. A red smear crept out from under her palms. Without another word, she stormed off, trailed by her panicked entourage.

Wide eyes stared from all around Connie, and no one's were wider and more shocked than Jeff's. "Was that you?" he asked in a hush. "Do you have psychic powers?"

"What? No! No, Jeff, I…” Connie hurriedly stuffed her books into her backpack and shut her locker. Then she shut the attacking locker as well, and said, "I need to get to class. I'll see you later."

As she pushed her way down the hall, Jade's voice lilted, "Oh, dear. Some form of localized air pressure differential inside that storage chamber triggered its security seal, resulting in its rather dramatic opening. Twice."

"You shouldn't have done that," Connie murmured under her breath.

Imperiously, Jade retorted, "That preening, lackluster specimen's buffoonery required immediate and percussive rebuttal. At this moment you unfortunately represent my only physical attributes, and I will not suffer insults to any aspect of myself, knowingly or otherwise."

Connie knew that Jade's intervention had been wrong, and that she would regret it later. But it did feel a little good to see the school's prima donna knocked to the ground by the last creature in the world Connie ever thought would defend her honor. And didn't Mandy have a little karma due her way regardless?

Maybe it would be okay.
When the glow of the warp pad faded, Connie had to wonder if they had somehow ended up at the wrong farm. It had only been a few weeks since her last visit. She had expected some change, but she had not expected a full tactical makeover.

The crooked silo was gone. Its metal had been harvested to cover the barn in irregular plates, their weight supported by makeshift braces that lined the exterior. Thick ceramic tiles made from what looked like local mud had replaced the tar paper and shingles on the roof. If the entire structure wasn't perfectly fireproof, Connie still wouldn't have bet against it in a wildfire.

A large section of the cornfield had been cleared and smoothed to accommodate the thick struts of a freestanding satellite dish as big as a backyard swimming pool. The device had been cobbled from scrap and was held together by bailing wire, and appeared to be powered by the rusty truck husk that had previously run Peridot's experiment. Several cables trailed from the base of the dish into a device that might have been a computer if it had been crafted by Victorian steampunk supervillains.

Then a cylindrical garbage can riding on a tiny set of caterpillar treads rolled up to the warp pad. An antenna punched through its lid swiveled around to examine Connie, Steven, and Pearl before they could take a single step. "Intruders detected. Commencing with dissipation," the can informed them in a synthetic replication of Peridot's voice. "Please remain still and do not blink."

Pearl lifted an eyebrow at the can as its lid cracked open to reveal a long, tined instrument that extended toward them menacingly. "She can't be serious," the pale Gem deadpanned.

"Wait!" a shout from the open barn commanded. Peridot sprinted out, waving her arms overhead. "Stand down! Authorization code: Ottawa! Poutine! Pound sign zero-one!"

The garbage can lid swallowed its forked tine and backed away, allowing the three arrivals to step into the yard, who waited with varying degrees of patience for Peridot to reach them, all while the can's antenna followed their every movement with suspicion. Connie had a brief impulse to dart back and forth to watch the antenna wiggle, but she didn't want to find out the hard way what else the can could do if it became annoyed with her.

Finally reaching them, Peridot slapped the side of the can. "Take it easy, Pierre. These are our new recruits. Let's register them before they get themselves shattered."

"Registration mode activated, Brilliant Commander Peridot," the can replied.

Pearl's other eyebrow rose to join the first. "Commander Peridot?" she echoed. "This is ridiculous. How do you expect this thing to stand any chance of stopping anyone?"

"For the first time, I find myself in agreeance with the Pearl," Jade muttered silently to Connie, who clenched her face to keep from smirking.

Rather than offended, though, Peridot looked pleased by the question. She gestured with her chin back behind the warp pad and said, "Well, if Pierre here wasn't enough for you, her sisters would have stepped in before things got rough."

Connie twisted her head, then jumped at the sight of five more roving garbage cans identical to the first, all of them spread in a semicircle, watching the warp pad with the bulbous antennae swinging atop their lids. As ridiculous as the cans looked, they had still surrounded the new arrivals without giving themselves away. Even Pearl seemed surprised at their presence, her hand twitching as if to
draw a spear from her gemstone.

"Allow me to introduce the campers," Peridot announced, and then pointed to each of her identical creations. "Versions Two of Pierre and Percy, and their new sisters, Max, Nikki, and Neil. They'll be protecting you from wayward Quartzes while you're here."

Steven waved awkwardly, smiling as he said, "Hi! Please don't shoot us."

"Campers, connect visual recognition to the following existing ID files," Peridot instructed her cans. Then, pointing to each of them in turn, she said, "Steven Quartz. Connie Jade. And Renegade Ownerless Pearl."

"Ownerless?" Pearl barked, her cheeks blue with anger. Then, with a second thought, she cooled and added, "Though I do like the sound of 'Renegade.'"

"Being descriptive helps the campers avoid misunderstandings. Resume patrol!" Peridot commanded. Her garbage can legion lurched to obey, rolling toward different corners of the barnyard. Only the soft sound of dirt crunching under their treads and the nigh-inaudible whine of electric motors gave them away.

Twisting ribbons of bemusement and begrudging admiration fluttered in Connie's chest. As she looked around the farm, she heard Jade sub-vocalize, "Well, no one can question the Peridot's work ethic, if nothing else."

At Peridot's insistence, they ventured into the barnyard along a twisting path. A few times, the green Gem stopped them to stare at the ground and mutter to herself in thought.

"Is everything okay, Peridot?" Steven asked. "You're talking to yourself more than usual."

"It's fine, Steven. I just don't want anyone to get accidentally glooped," said Peridot.

"Glooped?" Connie heard herself say in unison with Steven and Pearl, and with the confused voice in her head.

Peridot couldn't answer before the ground in front of them erupted with a spray of mud. The brown slurry coalesced into a lithe, graceful shape that spread its wings and arms. Two glimmering blue eyes opened in the mud and brightened at the sight of the three newcomers. With a gesture, she compelled the mud to slither off her body and into the soup at her bare feet. "Steven! Jade! Connie!" Lapis said, stepping delicately out of the burbling slurry without a speck on her. "It's nice to see you again!"

Connie grinned at the sight of the blue Gem, so surprised that she didn't fully hear the sharp *ptff* sound hissing out of the ground behind her. "You too, Lapis! You're looking very subterranean today."

Smirking back at the mud hole, Lapis said, "It's Peridot's idea. I found a lake nearby that nobody was using, and we made an underground reservoir with it."

With a cocky swipe at her nose, Peridot bragged, "We also deepened the central pond. The next time some Flint walks into our barn and tries to dehydrate Lapis, she's in for a rude awakening. And that's if we don't gloop her first."

"But what is 'glooping?'" Steven insisted. "It sounds bad, but it also sounds like something that happens on kids' game shows."
Peridot's gaze flickered behind them, and her eyes went wide. A braying laugh doubled her over as she pointed and shouted, "You should ask Pearl!"

When Connie turned, she backpedaled in surprise. Pearl stood frozen, petrified in a thick, crystalizing layer of golden translucent sludge. The last of its wet surface hardened, immobilizing the graceful Gem. Pearl's flickering eyes were the only thing able to move within the sludge. They zeroed on Peridot's laughter and narrowed, and the statuesque trap began to shake.

"Whoops," Lapis said, abashed. "Hang on, Pearl." She reached back toward the pool in the yard and pulled a large globule of water from its surface. Then she arced the water to Pearl, swallowing the immobilized Gem in a whirlpool.

In seconds, the crystal sludge dissolved, and Pearl collapsed out of the churning water. The yellow residue splashed into the dirt behind her, leaving a sticky pool. "What," Pearl heaved, sputtering out flecks of amber crystal, "was that?"

Peridot picked up a stone. "They're my own invention: a concealed underground delivery system for an organic concoction of quick-drying petrification gel." By way of demonstration, she chucked her stone across the yard. It had barely touched the ground when more amber sludge burst from the ground with an explosive ptff. The sludge hardened itself into a frozen moment, its spray standing seven feet tall with Peridot's rock frozen at the center.

Gesturing to the field, Lapis added, "We made it out of corn! That's why you can clean it off with water. After we saw it work, we named it 'gloop!'"

"Lapis's idea," Peridot said, nodding deferentially. "And she handles the cleanup. Speaking of…" She cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted out toward the field. "Hey, Max! Swap the modules on Gloop Zee-Nineteen and Vee-Thirteen!"

Combing flecks of gloop from her hair, Pearl said, "These are all fascinating innovations, Peridot, but we came here because you said you had something new to separate Jade from Connie."

"No, please, by all means. Let us continue this showcase of cobbled defenses. It may waylay a few clumsy Rubies for a moment," Jade said, snickering inside Connie's head. "Though in fairness, I do applaud the use of local resources. In all my travels, I had yet to see weaponized agriculture, so at least that one is new."

Peridot led them into the barn. Glancing around, Connie noticed another set of tines mounted above the doors' interior, looking exactly like the ones built into the new can campers, and all too similar to the one from Peridot's makeshift Destabilizer. Cables stapled to the wood led from the tines to a large stack of daisy-chained car batteries peering out from under a tarp in the corner.

Most of the barn's scrap had been cleared or probably scavenged. Even the meep morps were gone, leaving the barn looking stark and barren. A work table remained with tools and half-finished projects. The far corner still had its hammock and a short bookshelf laden with comics and novels. And in the other corner, a television remained as the only piece of machinery not devoted to protecting the farm, with boxed DVD sets featuring pine trees on the cover stacked lovingly atop the set.

"This place looks…clean?" Steven said, looking around the sparse barn interior.

Her delicate face creased with regret, Lapis said, "We had to recycle all of our fun stuff to make Peridot's safety stuff." Then, brightening, she added, "But we can always find more, I guess. Jade told me in one of her emails that humans are making junk faster than they can get rid of it, so there
must be plenty more out there for us."

"It is humanity's most plentiful, highest-quality product." Jade agreed inside Connie.

Smiling, Connie said, "I'm glad the emailing is working out. Jade won't admit it, but she likes having a pen pal."

Lapis brushed a lock of her hair back behind her ear. Her eyes grew a little distant as she said, "Sometimes when you're feeling trapped, what you need most is for somebody to just talk to you, even if you're not nice enough to deserve it."

"The Lazuli is too hard on herself. I find her demeanor more than pleasant enough to deserve my correspondence," said Jade.

Loud, pointed clattering from the worktable drew attention back to Peridot, who cleared space on the tabletop with little regard for her projects. When she was done, all that remained at the end of the table was a loose collection of plush, oblong green shapes, each one with wispy trails of stuffing at their ends, and with a bow tie and top hat stacked next to them.

"Aw, Peridot," Steven said, his eyes glistening at the sight of the dismembered toy. "Is that your little buddy from Funland? You worked so hard to cheat to win him!"

A knowing smirk crossed Peridot's face. She gestured to the table and said, "Yes, it didn't fare too well in my last experiment. Perhaps you'd like to use your healing powers to put it back together for me?"

"Would I!" Steven exclaimed, brightening instantly. He bounced to the table and began to sort the jumbled pieces. With each pair he matched, he put the torn end into his mouth, coating it in saliva before jamming it into the torso, where the fabric knitted itself whole again.

"I am at a complete loss," Jade said, sounding dazed as Connie grimaced at the drooling repair. "What is this? What is happening?"

Rubbing at the bridge of her nose, Pearl said, "Steven, don't put that in your mouth. You have no idea what she did to it." Her frustrated glare swung on the smug Peridot, and she asked, "Was this why you told us to come? I thought you said you had a new solution for our Jade dilemma."

"How dare she downgrade my presence to a 'dilemma'? To any rebel on this planet I insist on being, at bare minimum, a menace," Jade huffed.

As Steven finished, revealing the completed shape of a little green man in a top hat and bow tie, Peridot gestured to them both as if presenting an accomplishment of her own. "I do. And it's Steven," she said.

"Meh?" Steven said, his words slurred by dry-tongue.

"Yeh," Peridot agreed. She held out her hands expectantly, and Steven handed her the freshly assembled plush alien. "Connie Jade's predicament started when Steven tried to heal them both at the same time without realizing it. His mouth mucus, instead of healing them as their individual selves, combined them into an amalgamation not unlike Steven himself."

Cupping the gemstone under her T-shirt, Connie said dryly, "We're pretty familiar with that part."

"Indeed."
"But what we haven't asked is why," Peridot insisted. "Why did Steven's power combine them? He's never combined a healed Gem with any particulate matter in contact with her form or gemstone. I also assume he's never healed any clothes into a human."

Connie suddenly had the funny, incredibly disturbing vision of Steven's backwash juice box fusing her old glasses to her eyes instead of healing the eyes alone. She might have ended up looking like an owl, and getting fitted for new lenses would have been an even worse ordeal than usual.

Scratching his head, Steven said, "Maybe it's because the clothes were okay?"

"No, Steven," Peridot said. "It's because of what you are. You're a human and a Gem."

"Yeah. Half-human, half-Gem," Steven said.

"But what if you're not?" Peridot said. "You possess a fully human body, but you have all the abilities inherent to your gemstone. What if you're not half of anything, but two wholes coexisting in one body?"

Frowning in thought, Pearl said, "Let's assume you're not just quibbling over terminology here. What are you getting at, Peridot?"

In reply, Peridot tore the head off her plushy, then plunged her hand deep into the neck hole, her tongue protruding as she rooted inside the body. Steven gasped in horror and cried, "No! I've never lost a patient before!"

Then Peridot pulled a large, smooth river stone out of the stuffing. The word Jade had been painted on the stone's face in green lettering. Holding the stone aloft, Peridot said, "Steven healed our two subjects together into what he is: a human and a Gem. So if he healed them together, I believe he can heal them apart."

Stunned silence rang through the barn as Peridot huffed excitedly. Then, tilting his head, Steven said, "I can?"

Lowering her hands, Peridot shrugged and said, "Maybe? Since Steven was the one to put them together, I figure Steven is our best option to get them apart."

"More educated speculation?" said Pearl.

"Now you're getting it," Peridot said, and winked.

Connie took the stone from Peridot and ran her hands over its face. The freshly dried name on its face felt bumpy under her thumb. "Steven? Jade? What do you think?" she asked.

"Any new attempt will mean progress in some form," Jade admitted.

Steven smacked his lips. "I might need a glass of water first, but let's do it!"

But Peridot shoved herself between them, cradling her decapitated plushy. "Not so fast! Steven's reckless impulse to heal every pathetic creature in need is exactly what got Connie Jade into this mess in the first place."

"Pathetic?" Connie echoed, scowling.

"Before you go smearing your face drippings all over them, you need practice." She snatched back the stone from Connie and plunged it into the plushy's neck hole, then shoved the plush halves into
Steven's hands. "If you can heal this practice model without sealing the dummy gemstone inside it, then we'll be ready for a trial run."

Steven clutched the pieces to his chest, giving Connie and Peridot both a solemn look. "I'll practice every day until I can fix this. I promise." Then he licked the plushy's head and pressed it back onto the neck, knitting it whole again.

"Thanks, Steven. That's really sweet…and a little weird," Connie said, grinning.

"That's exactly my style," Steven boasted. Then he frowned and tucked the plushy under his arm. "Peridot, is it okay if I wait a little while to start practicing? We're supposed to take Jade on her first Earth adventure after we're done here."

Lapis brightened. "Oh, that's today? She mentioned that in her last letter. Where are you going?"

Smirking, Connie said, "We're letting Jade decide, even though she keeps telling us that it's 'beneath her.' Would you like to come with? I'm sure Jade would like a little non-human support on her forced death march toward fun."

"You are relentless in your testing of my promise to remain cordial, human," Jade groused. "Though you are also correct. I would be glad to have the Lazuli accompany us."

The invitation made Lapis smile. Then her expression darkened with concern as she glanced down at Peridot. "I don't want to leave Peridot by herself in case that saucer comes back," she said.

Peridot scoffed and waved off the notion. "Are you joking me? As long as I'm here, I'm the safest Gem on the planet. Just let those clods try to come back. They'll gloop themselves before they set one photon inside this barn."

Lapis didn't look convinced until Pearl spoke up, adding, "I'll stay here for a while. I'd like to see more of these security measures. At least then maybe I won't step in any more of them."

"Woohoo!" cheered Steven. "That means it's adventure time! So how about it, Jade? We've got a whole world full of warp pads to explore."

Bouncing on her toes, Lapis added, "Or I can fly us somewhere! I mean, if Steven and Connie don't mind riding in a bubble of water. I promise I'll even leave some air in there so you can breathe."

Connie touched the gemstone at her throat, giving in to her friends' excitement. "Where to, Jade?" she asked.
What Happened

Connie's feet touched down on the warp pad, and she staggered back into the beach house with Steven and Lapis close behind her. Late morning sunlight peered through windows, the fresh sea breeze cool and gentle through the screen door. The pall of a possible surprise attack that might come at any moment had done nothing to dampen the sense of peace that always surrounded the house. Life with the Gems could be dangerous and exciting, but the house itself always felt like a sanctuary.

Anticipation wormed around inside of Connie. She usually felt a smoldering sense of outrage from Jade whenever they set food in the house, but never nervousness, at least not since their first disaster of a visit. But when offered the choice of going anywhere on Earth, Jade had insisted on returning to the house, and Connie had only agreed once Jade promised it wasn't simply so they could go home early.

Sitting upside-down on the couch with her ankles hooked over the back, Amethyst dropped colorful glass marbles from an old satchel into her mouth. She snorted in surprise at the glow of the warp pad, shooting marbles out of her nose as she flipped over. "Hey, guys. Didn't think you'd be back until way later. And you traded Pearl for Lapis? Nice! Did Peridot run out of nerd stuff to do to the Gruesome Twosome? Is she experimenting on Pearl now instead?"

"She gave Steven some homework," Connie said, pointing to the alien plushy under his arm.

Amethyst rolled off the couch, then stretched her arms across the room like glowing lassos to snatch the plushy from Steven. "Oh, I remember this little dude. Is he supposed to help you build a new home or something? Weird," she said, and drew her arms back to examine the toy.

The temple door behind them glowed and opened, and Garnet stepped out, seeming to already expect the crowd in the room. "Make sure you don't lose that, Amethyst. Steven will need if after they're done with their trip," said Garnet.

Tossing the doll aside, Amethyst exclaimed, "Finally, we get to go somewhere! I've been cooped up here or at the barn for what feels like forever! Where are we going?"

Jade's protest was already bubbling up in Connie's chest, but then Garnet saved Connie from having to negotiate by resting a hand on Amethyst's shoulder. "You weren't invited," Garnet told Amethyst. With a smirk, she added, "Besides, no one goes anywhere alone, which means you need to stay here to protect me."

"Psh. As if you're ever alone," Amethyst grumbled. She upturned her bag of marbles into her mouth, rolling them angrily between her teeth.

Garnet leveled her visor at the two teens, then nodded toward the door, which was all the encouragement Connie needed to lead the rest of them out the door. Lapis ignored the stairs and snapped her wings out, jumping straight across the beach and into the surf with a single bound. The water played at her feet as she spun and laughed in the spray.

Connie left her shoes on the porch and dug her toes into the sand, grinning at Steven shucking his sandals next to her. It was hard not to feel Lapis's infectious laughter, but a single sour note in her chest kept her from laughing too. She touched the warm gemstone through her T-shirt and said, "Okay, Jade. We're here, just like you said. What did you want to do now?"

"Maybe we could collect seashells," Steven suggested. "We could organize them by size and type,
and then catalogue them. And there's starfish and crabs and all sorts of other things we can survey too."

Drawing a wave up around her like a great curtain, Lapis said, "We could go looking for sunken treasure, just like in that episode of Camp Pining Hearts where they find a pirate ship at the bottom of the lake."

"There were pirates in the lake?" Connie said.

Spinning her veil of water, Lapis remarked, "The only treasures the campers found there were the friendships they brought with them. I'm not sure the pirates were very smart. Maybe that's why their boat sank."

Connie's giggle was cut short as Jade said, "I want to go up to the top of the cliff, please. Up near that defunct human beacon structure will be fine."

When Connie repeated the request, Steven squinted up at the cliff's edge and said, "Really? Out of the whole planet, you really want to just hang out here?"

"It's not that weird," Connie told him, the corner of her mouth quirking. "There are plenty of days when this is right where I want to be too."

Warmth glowed in Steven's cheeks. Grinning, he struck his fist in his palm and declared, "Okay! Let's walk up to the top of the cliff and give Jade her adventure!"

Lapis let her veil splash back into the surf. "Nah, walking is too boring for an adventure," she said.

Connie was about to offer Lapis her old Tolkien paperbacks for rebuttal when an unnatural wave leapt up the shore and swallowed Connie's and Steven's feet. Then the wet sensation turned to jelly, and Connie felt the world underneath her lurch into the sky. Lapis darted ahead of them on her liquid wings, skimming the temple's edge as a sheet of solid water lifted the teens into the air. It only took Connie a second to regain her bearings, and then she whooped at the sensation of being carried through the air.

Lapis carried her passengers to the park at the base of the lighthouse and held the water steady, shaping it into a set of stairs for them to descend. Once they were safely back on the ground, the Gem tossed the water back into the ocean with a gesture. With the grass wiggling between their toes, the three of them leaned against the white picket fence at the cliff's edge and stared out toward the horizon.

"It was a long and dangerous journey," Steven said solemnly, "but we've made it at last."

"Yes," Connie agree, her expression and voice grave. "And now that our quest has reached its end, we can finally rest.

She and Steven managed to keep straight faces until their eyes met. Then they dissolved into giggles.

Smirking, Lapis shook her head. "You two are weird," she said with more affection than teasing. "So, Jade, why this spot? It's nice and all, I guess."

Connie's giggling stopped as she remembered a lunch with Jade many weeks ago. She had shown Jade her favorite spot at the school, and wondered if Jade was finally sharing her favorite spot as well. But there was no warmth or comfort rising up from the Gem, just a whorl of dark, thick anxiety.
"Jade? Is something wrong?" Connie said.

A moment passed in silence. Then the feelings began to numb, and Jade answered, "It is nothing, human. Everything is as it should be. Unfortunately."

Looks of concern flashed at her from Steven and Lapis, but the two of them said nothing, waiting at either side of Connie. "Jade, why did you want us to bring you here? Why didn't you tell me before? We could have come here ages ago," Connie said.

"It would take too long to explain," Jade grumbled, "and I am not inclined to listen to you make my words into something that suits you better."

Connie started to protest, but caught herself. Jade was being surly about it, but she wasn't completely wrong. Something about the cliff was important to her, too important to be said secondhand. And Connie didn't have a pad and pen this time.

Maybe she had something else instead.

Closing her eyes, Connie stilled herself. She brought back the image of the cold river with the trees at its bank. The water ran over her thoughts, turning them to smooth stones that vanished beneath the current. Strong and powerful, the river was uncannily quiet. It flowed with a certainty that Connie seldom believed she actually possessed.

When the river was completed, Connie changed its shape. Its banks became her body, and its trees and grass became her hair, her clothes. The cool waters were flesh and blood. Once the river sat perfect and calm in Connie's mind, it reached up and grasped the currents that formed its mouth. Then it held the mouth out in silent offering.

Bafflement tried to pierce the waters of the river. "Human, what are you doing?"

The river could not answer. Its mouth was still in its hand, waiting to be accepted. The river waited for what might have been an eternity. At last, though, another hand took the proffered mouth.

"It happened here."

The cold words made Steven turn in surprise. He tried to catch her gaze, but Connie's eyes were locked on the beach below. "What happened, Connie?" he asked.

Connie had never given much thought to the sound of her own voice. She hadn't given much thought to Jade's voice in her head, either. The sub-vocalizations had seemed so distinct from her own thoughts that it never occurred to her that Jade would use the voice of her body for her silent words. So to hear Jade speak out loud with her throat, her lips, in a voice that was so familiar and so alien, almost made Connie lose her grip on the river.

"My battalion was sent deep into enemy lines. We were meant to wait for the appointed hour before engaging the rebels at the door of their base here." Small, calloused hands tightened around the top of the fence. "The Rubies were miserable. A clandestine mission meant they had to forego their favorite pre-battle songs. A blessing, really: one more rendition of Grind the Stone might have made me dissipate my form in protest."

Realization spread wide in Lapis's eyes. "Jade?" she whispered.

Jade took slow, even breaths, and her tone was flat. But even deep in the river, Connie could hear her own heartbeat racing, and she felt a storm of emotions raging under that voice. "We were not given the full scope of the new campaign, of course. We never were. But soldiers always talk, and
we saw the broad shape of what would happen. Every important Gem was being evacuated from the planet, and each remaining battalion would engage the enemy at their various bases. We no longer had the numerical assets on-planet to beat them, so the objective must have been to draw them out of their defenses."

Steven started to reach for her—for them—but his hand hesitated. He pulled back, murmuring, "I'm sure you... did your best?"

The corners of Jade's mouth twitched. "We knew there was something big coming. Perhaps the Diamonds were finally committing their Elite Guard to the campaign, or emptying the gladiator arenas upon the rebels as so many of us wished they would. They had to be sending a second wave to flank the enemy and crush the rebellion once and for all."

Lapis put a hand over her mouth. Tears spilled from her eyes.

Craning her neck over the edge of the fence, Jade said, "I was right here. I waited for three days, hiding in the tall grass above the temple until it was finally time. I pushed the clouds to signal my battalion when the time came, and then I watched the rebels pour out onto the shore to tear apart my comrades."

Despair threaded through the river, black ribbons of it that moved like oil.

"Then I heard it coming from the sky." Jade's voice shrank. "It was... beautiful. Terrible. I did not hear it in my ears, but in my very stone. It was inside of me. And..." The sight of the beach disappeared behind a blur that stung in her eyes and trickled down Jade's unfamiliar face, dripping from her chin onto the painted fence.

The shadowy oil choked the river, wilting the trees and grass at its banks. It was all Connie could do to keep submerged.

Her voice cracking, Jade whispered, "And suddenly I was not a Jade anymore. My memory, my purpose, was gone. I could not even remember my shape anymore, could not find my hands. I couldn't speak, couldn't cry out, couldn't..." Sniffling, she turned her face up toward the warm spring sky. "And then a star above us crackled and burned, and the sky turned white. I have seen supernovas with my naked eye, but I have never seen anything so bright. Never before, and never since. That light was the last thing I knew before I woke up inside this body."

"It was the last battle," Steven said in a hush. "The one that ended the war." He looked up at Lapis, but the graceful blue Gem could only cry in silence.

With an empty laugh, Jade said, "The rebels must have had intelligence on our attack. They levied some unknown orbital asset against us before the Diamonds' second wave arrived. Their weapon wiped out friend and foe alike in a despicable act of cowardice. They must have. Somehow..."

Stones began to surface from the black river. If the Diamonds had evacuated their favored lackeys and sent their foot soldiers to occupy the Crystal Gems, then they had ordered Jade and thousands like her straight into the corruption knowing full well what would happen.

Steven's hand rested atop Jade's. The touch startled Jade, and she jerked her hand out from under his like it was fire. Her other hand rose instinctively in a fist as she narrowed her teary eyes upon him.

Tears filled Steven's eyes as well. He lifted his hands in a gesture of peace, but did not flinch. "I wasn't there," he said, his voice wobbling. "I'll never know what happened, not like you do. But I'm sorry. I'm sorry about all of it."
Slowly, Jade lowered her fist. She placed her hands back on the fence. And when Steven rested his hand on hers again, she did not pull back from him.

"It isn't fair that you lost so much time. It isn't right. And I know that this Earth isn't exactly the Earth you wanted to see when you woke up," Steven said. "But it isn't so bad, even with all of these humans running around."

Lapis grinned through her own tears, adding, "It's definitely not boring here."

"Even if this planet isn't what you want it to be, it could still be a home for you," Steven said, and squeezed her hand. "But if it can't be that, then…then once you're out of Connie, the Crystal Gems will take you home. I don't know how, but we will. And until then, I'll keep practicing until I can free you both."

The tears dried from Jade's eyes as she stared at the boy holding her hand. Her heart raced despite the cold curiosity in her. The blackened waters of the river began to clear, and the green returned to its banks.

"You are a mystery to me, hybrid," Jade admitted, "but one thing is clear: you are not Rose Quartz. You do not possess her strength or ruthlessness. But I think you are far kinder than any Quartz who has ever been made. Perhaps that is more important on your new Earth."

Steven's eyes brimmed again. "Wow. Thanks, Jade," he said.

Her unfamiliar face soured. "Temper your reaction. The human bid that I say something nice to you in exchange for her assistance with another matter. That I could fulfill my bargain with her and still speak the truth is a great convenience to me."

He grinned in reply. "At least you still mean it," he said.

Jade searched his face for teasing or sarcasm. When she found none, she said, "You possess a rampant, unchecked optimism that is a direct counterpoint to my human's pragmatism and doubt. I am beginning to understand why your presence triggers the beginnings of her biological imperative to procre—"

Connie exploded out of the river, tearing apart its embankments and the trees as she yanked back her proffered mouth. The sudden convulsion threw Steven and Lapis back from her as Connie cried, "WHOA! Whoa! Whoa. Okay, that's plenty of niceness, Jade. Good job."

Sub-vocalizations wry, Jade answered, "Did the embargo on harsh truths also include uncomfortable ones, human? I will adjust my communication accordingly." Then her thoughts and emotions cooled. "I believe today's adventure has come to its conclusion. I grant the remainder of the day entirely to you."

Connie frowned as she answered Steven's and Lapis's confused looks with one of her own. "Are you sure you don't want to do anything else, Jade? We could still have plenty more adventure."

"Standing here again is adventure enough for one outing. Go make your own adventure, and leave me be for a while."

Shrugging, Connie said to Lapis and Steven, "I guess Jade's had enough for one day. What should we do now?"

Lapis looked up at the clouds drifting high across the spring sky. "Steven, didn't you tell me about a game where we make the clouds into shapes? We could play that!"
"Well, you actually just find shapes in the… You know what? We'll show you," Steven said. He took her by the hand and led her back toward the lighthouse, looking for the soft patch of grass for cloud-watching he and Connie had used so often before. But when he saw that Connie wasn't following, he paused and waited for her with a questioning look.

Connie smiled back at him. "In a minute," she promised. Once he and Lapis were out of earshot, she leaned back on the fence, looking down across the temple's head at the beach and the surf below them, and listened for Jade's distant, dolorous mood. "You could play too, you know," she said. "With your winds, I bet you'd be even better than Lapis at shaping the clouds."

"Undoubtedly so," Jade said, "but nonetheless I would like to pretend to be alone for a time. I suggest you do the same with your friends."

The specter of that ancient battle cast a long shadow on the beach. Connie had always thought of the temple as a silent guardian, but it had once been something very different from what it was today. "Okay. But let me know if you see any good shapes in the clouds. Lapis is going to cheat, so we should too," she said.

"I will," Jade promised, bubbling with soft amusement. "Now go."

As Connie pushed away from the fence, she felt a light pinching inside her elbow. She looked down and saw a small brown spot on the inside of her arm. When she touched it, the spot stung like a bruise. Flexing her arm, Connie watched the spot crinkle with the rest of her skin, the pain of it quickly becoming familiar.

"Connie?" Steven called.

She looked up, forgetting the little bruise, or whatever it was. "Coming!" she called, and ran to join the game.
Emotional Snacking

The rumble of an engine on the beach climbed up the cliffs, yanking Steven off the grass and onto his feet with a cry of, "Dad's here!" He scrambled across the park to the fence and leaned over, kicking his feet in excitement.

Connie gave up on trying to see the Camp Pining Hearts activity van in the cloud embankment Lapis was pulling at from the ground. The two of them followed Steven to the cliff’s edge and saw a familiar van trundling across the beach. Another rumble arose from Connie's stomach to harmonize with the sound of the motor as she remembered what was waiting for her in the van, as well as the meal she had skipped that morning.

Flicking out her wings, Lapis said, "Wanna race?"

Steven grinned as he held out his hand to Connie. "I bet we can beat her! Right, Connie?"

She started reaching for Steven's hand, but then had another thought. "I know we can," she said, her smile turning sly as she gripped the top of the fence. "Right, Jade?"

Without another word, Connie jumped and pushed off the cliff, barely clearing the temple's aquiline nose as she plummeted toward the sand. Steven's cry of alarm dwindled into the sound the rushing air, which billowed through her clothes and threw her hair back into a crackling banner. She saw the ground rushing up at her, and she whooped in excitement.

The instant before she splattered on the beach, a whirlwind arose into a gritty cushion of air that deposited Connie onto the ground with little more than a bump. She pushed herself up to her hands and knees and brushed away the sand as the old white van pulled to a stop behind her.

Inside her own still-lurching head, she heard Jade say, "At least you had the good sense this time to give me some semblance of warning before flinging yourself from a precipice. Are you testing my intentions again, human?"

As Jade snarked, Lapis touched down by the van to take second in their race, with Steven floating quickly after into a respectable third. Connie waved at them both and rose on slightly shaky legs. "I don't need to," she murmured to Jade. "I just knew you'd catch me. Besides, I had to wake you up from all that brooding somehow."

"Oh, Well, do not get into the habit of base-jumping without appropriate accoutrements. With luck, I will soon not be there to assist," Jade said. With an irritated afterthought, the Gem added, "And I do not 'brood.' I am contemplative."

The back of the van opened, and Greg Universe emerged, dropping a dolly cart and an enormous cardboard box onto the sand. "Hey, gang!" the older man said, and ruffled Steven's hair. "The weatherman didn't say anything about it raining people today. Maybe I should have brought a reinforced umbrella on my delivery route."

"So the rebels actually do have human servitors culled from the local populace? They appear to be allowed a scandalous amount of familiarity with their masters," Jade said dryly. A sensation accompanied the words that Connie could only interpret as a wink.

Connie had to bite back a laugh. Her snort drew the old rocker's eye to her choking smirk, and his expression wobbled. "It's been a while, Connie. You're looking, uh…skinny," Greg said, and rubbed at the sunburnt nape of his neck. "Are you sure you want this stuff?"
Her eye drifted down to the familiar horse-masked logo printed on the cardboard box. Anticipation and dread trembled inside her stomach. "Yeah," she said, her smile evaporating. Then she quickly added, "Thank you very much for ordering it."

He started to say something else, but then staggered as Steven jumped onto the dolly-driven box. "Connie's probably starving, Dad. Let's get this stuff upstairs and get those nutramites in her belly!" Steven said, and kicked the sides of the box to spur it forward.

His father nudged at him to dismount. "No free rides, pal. This box is bigger than the last one, and I'm not the deliveryman I used to be," he said.

"Oh. Okay!" Steven said.

Then, with a surprisingly graceful leap, Steven pulled his father to sit on the box in his place, then grasped the dolly handle and proceeded to drag the whole affair behind him. Greg yelped and laughed, and grabbed at the sides of the box to keep his cardboard steed underneath him as they bumped up the porch steps with Connie and Lapis trailing after them.

As they all pushed through the screen door, the warp pad on the far side of the house flashed and dimmed. Pearl stepped off the pad ahead of Peridot, who carried a large metal cube in her arms. "I didn't say it won't work," Pearl insisted. "I said it 'needs' work. Is she even getting any air in there?"

It was then that Connie noticed four stubby orange limbs sticking out from the bottom of the cube, which began to shake and bark in Peridot's hands. "I'll admit," the engineer said, "Pumpkin's battle armor still has a few mobility issues. But I think the baseline concept is solid."

Lapis gasped and scowled. She gestured to the sink, where the morning's dishes soaked, and drew a long tendril of soapy water out to pool into the metal cube's edge and pry it open. Pumpkin squirmed out of the leg holes and jumped down, running into Lapis's open arms. "Peridot, you said you were going to cut face holes in it before you stuck her in there!" the graceful Gem cried.

"I was going to after the fitting! I wanted to see if Amethyst had any better tools in her room for drilling through steel," insisted Peridot.

Pearl's eyes narrowed quizzically. "You were going to remove her from the box first, weren't you?" she said.

An uncomfortable silence accompanied Peridot's bewildered expression. "Well...now I don't have to," she said, gesturing to Pumpkin in Lapis's arms.

The temple doors split apart, depositing Amethyst and Garnet into the already-crowded house. "You didn't lose them, you ate them. There's a difference," Garnet told the stocky Quartz.

"All I know is, humans have this whole saying about marbles. Maybe I should find some more just to be safe," Amethyst insisted. Then, seeing the box freshly arrived in their kitchen, she bowled through Peridot and Pearl and cried, "Food! And it brought Greg with it!"

Steven worked with the purple Gem to claw at the tape on the cardboard box. "It's Connie's new supply of ¡Soy Delicioso! You must have ordered even more than last time, Dad. This box is twice as big as the last one."

"Oh, yeah," his father said, brightening. "When I called in, the rep said that no one had ever ordered a second box before, so they threw in a bunch of free merch to say thanks!"

Connie watched Amethyst pull a large gray sweatshirt out of the box. The front of it featured the
company's mascot framed by the words, "Texto Aprobación Pendiente." Squealing in delight, Amethyst stuffed the sweatshirt into her mouth, slurping up the sleeves like thick pasta.

Steven pulled out a T-shirt with the same design on it and held it up to his chest. "Can I keep this one?" he asked Connie. "I think it makes me look tough."

Greg dropped onto one knee beside Connie as the rest of the gems gathered at the box to examine the various shirts, posters, fanny packs, and promotional dolls inside. His voice low, he said to Connie, "So this is really the only thing your, ah, close friend will eat? I've tried this stuff before, and I think Amethyst has the right idea of what's edible in that box."

She heard the silent question, the real question, behind his words. Grimacing, she hooked a finger into her collar and tugged it down enough to reveal the top edge of the gemstone just below the hollow of her throat. "Yeah, Jade is…picky," she said.

His eyes widened as she let go of her collar. "Wow. I mean, I believed it, but… H-Hello, Jade," he said, flicking his eyes uncertainly between Connie's throat and her face. "I'm Greg. I'm Steven's father."

"I had gathered that from the hybrid's initial excitement. Do express my felicitations to him so we may resume our unfortunate nutritional necessities, human," Jade sighed.

"She's a little grouchy right now because we have to start eating again," Connie confided to him.

That only made Greg furrow his brow harder. Touching her shoulder, he said, "As a community college dropout and former rock star, I'm probably not the one to say this, but do your parents know about all of this? You're looking a little rougher than usual, and I don't think this stuff is very good for you. When I put in the order, the rep on the phone kept asking me if I had called the wrong place by mistake."

Connie started to answer, but fell silent as she watched Pearl exhuming a fresh package of ¡Soy Delicioso! from under the layer of swag. The sight of the shrink-wrapped product made Connie's stomach twinge harder. Already she could taste that sticky fake carob that would squish until the vitamin chalk underneath snapped and crumbled on her tongue. The whole mess would turn to paste in her mouth and slide down her throat, and its taste would linger until another bar came along to refresh it. Then another, and then another. And then another.

"Oh, look!" Pearl said, reading the box. "Greg ordered a variety of flavors this time, like raspberry and blueberry. Oh, wait. No. No, it's actually 'razzberry' and 'blooberry.' They've spelled it differently for legal reasons…which they explain on the box. What kind of company is this?" She turned the box over in her hands, bewildered.

Garnet split another package in half and shook out a bar, which she offered to Connie. Taking the bar, Connie cradled it, staring blankly at its wrapper. The logo stared blankly back at her. Her stomach twisted into knots as she tried to unwrap her late lunch. But her hands wouldn't move.

"Human, are you not hungry? We need to eat." Jade said.

Biting her lip, Connie tried to make her hands work. The bar grew blurry in her grasp, her eyes overflowing to spill hotly down her cheeks.

"…Connie?" she heard Steven say.

"Human?"
The blooberry bar tumbled from Connie's hands and struck the floor with the appetizing weight of a lead ingot. Clutching at her hair, Connie sobbed, "I can't! I just can't do it!"

"Of course you can," Jade insisted, confused. "It is quite literally what your body does best."

"I'm sorry, Jade," Connie whimpered, collapsing to her knees. Then, finding the Steven-shaped blur nearby, she pleaded with tears in her eyes, "Steven, I need food."

Steven gasped. "Really?" he exclaimed.

"What? No!" Jade howled in silence.

"I'll eat anything," Connie cried. "Please…"

The delight in Steven's features drained away, leaving behind a cold solemnity carved from apple-cheeked marble. "I knew this day would come. Everybody, clear a path. Connie: to the refrigerator!"

He grabbed Connie by the hand and yanked her into motion, running through the kitchen with such determination that he bounced them both off of the fridge door.

Panic swelled underneath Connie's despair. "Human, do not do this! We were each having an amenable day adjacent to one another. Do not violate our very first rule!"

Steven jumped, floating up at the top of the refrigerator, and threw open the freezer door. His frantic hands flung boxed meals and frozen bags of vegetables as he quested for some unseen prize. Then, cheering victoriously, he drew a small package out of the freezer and floated back down to Connie's side. "I didn't know what I was saving this for, but I knew that I would know when I knew when it was needed. And that's now," Steven told her.

Gasping, Amethyst spat out the half a tank top she'd been chewing and cried, "Whoa! Is that Cookie Cat?"

"The last Cookie Cat," Steven agreed, "maybe anywhere, forever."

"No way! How did you hide ice cream in the house without me finding and eating it?" demanded the purple Gem.

"I hid it under the frozen bag of Brussels sprouts Pearl bought way back when I first moved in," Steven said.

Pearl grimaced in disapproval while Amethyst nodded, impressed. "Pretty diabolical, little man," she said.

Steven sat down on the floor next to Connie. He carefully unwrapped the ice cream sandwich and pressed it into her hands, closing her fingers around the cold treasure. "Here," he said.

She managed a weak smile despite the storm of nausea gathering inside of her. Trembling, Connie brought the treat to her tear-stained lips. But she had to clamp her mouth shut when her stomach tried to jump up her throat. "Human, don't you dare!" Jade snarled.

"I'm sorry," Connie said, burping hotly around the words. She tightened her throat and chest until her stomach had no more room for the vomit to rise. Then she bit into Cookie Cat's adorable head so hard that her teeth clacked together in the middle.

The cookie halves had gone stale a long time ago. The cheap vanilla ice cream had accrued a layer of frost that made it crunchy and hard. Her teeth ached at the cold, and the sudden sweetness was
shocking.

It was heaven in her mouth.

Connie held her breath, clutching her whole body around the bite to hold onto it for as long as she could, committing every single detail of it to memory. A gallery of shocked faces watched her savor the cold, and the flavor, and the feel of the treat melting on her tongue. But when her lungs threatened to burst, begging for air, she finally let go and resigned herself to the violent sickness Jade would force upon her for her betrayal.

"This is bovine lactate... Processed wheat... Syrup from corn..." Jade said, her voice drifting in shock. "Proteins and carbohydrates... Solar energy trickled through dirt and flesh, and...it tastes like this?"

No wave of bile exploded up Connie's throat. Carefully, tearfully, she chewed at the bite.

"It's inside me. This is disgusting. Depraved. Perverted. Revolting!" Jade spoke in a hush. It wasn't clear if she was talking to Connie or to herself. "Is this food? Is this what food is?"

Connie chewed until there was nothing left. Swallowing, she waited for the tirade to follow while the remains of the Cookie Cat dripped impatiently in her grasp. "Jade?" she whispered.

"Take... T-Take another bite," Jade said shakily.

Fresh tears spilled from Connie's eyes as she took another massive bite, chewing so quickly that the cold made her teeth hurt. She wanted to eat as much as she could before Jade overcame her shock and forcibly ejected the treat from her body.

A hundred different feelings tumbled through Connie's chest, trailing after her second swallow. Jade's amazement lingered around the flavors, the attention practically tingling in Connie's mouth. "I never imagined... I mean, it should be abhorrent, but it..." Jade could hardly form a single thought. "Does it all taste like this?"

Connie couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying anymore. She shook and clutched at her face, and said, "You like it? You've done nothing but hate on food since before you could talk!"

"I do hate it! I mean, I thought I did! It's so disgusting!" Jade insisted.

Amethyst swallowed the soggy tank top and sucked at her fingers. "I keep telling you guys," she said, "eating is the best!"

Rubbing at her chin, Peridot said, "Hmm. Connie Jade's Gem component must be reacting to her advanced human palate."

"Advanced?" Steven said, unknowingly echoing Jade inside Connie's head.

"Well, sure," the diminutive Kindergartener said. "Humans had to develop a more sensitive ability to experience flavor so they could tell the difference between sustenance and poison. Gems don't eat, so—"

She had to pause as Amethyst picked up the discarded Cookie Cat wrapper and stuffed it into her mouth, chewing vigorously.

"Gems aren't meant to eat," Peridot amended, "so there's little reason for our bodies to be able to distinguish much flavor. Those, er, unique individuals who choose to eat experience more of a tactile
sensation than anything else. Or so I'm told."

Amethyst belched in agreement, and a marble clattered out of her mouth.

"*Human,*" Jade said, ignoring Peridot entirely, "*is this what you've been denying yourself? Is this what we've both been missing? In all my millennia, I've never... I mean, these sensations are... Why does the meal replacement bar make us so miserable?*" she demanded.

Connie just laughed, and sobbed, and stuffed the rest of the sandwich into her mouth. She felt too deliriously happy to be mad as she wolfed down the now-extinct frozen delight.

As Greg and the Gems stared in confusion at the emotional snacking, Steven rose and folded the ¡*Soy Delicioso!* box closed, and then pushed it across the floor. "*Back behind the couch you go,*" he declared, and shoved it back into the spot where its predecessor had been gathering dust.

---

When Connie came downstairs that night for dinner, her parents became instantly, suspiciously quiet as she entered the kitchen. The soft murmurings Connie had caught on her way down made her certain that they had been talking about her. But she just smiled at them and waited patiently for them to say something.

Hesitantly, her mother took a plate from the stack at the table to the pressure cooker on the counter. She was still dressed in her rumpled work clothes, her white lab coat tossed over the back of her chair at the table. "Hello, dear. I was just about to call you. Did you, er, come down for your plate?"

Her father cleared his throat loudly and pointedly, shooting her mother an impatient look that she returned in kind. "*It's chicken biryani tonight, kiddo. You like that, right?*" he said, pretending not to remember that it was one of her favorite dishes in the whole world. "*I made it extra-special tonight.*"

"*I prepped it in the fridge,*" her mother reassured her, "*and texted your father to remind him to start it in the cooker.*"

"*Which I did, extra-specialy,*" her father insisted. Leaning toward Connie, he whispered loudly, "*I pressed the button with my nose.*"

When the lid came off the cooker, Connie was swept away in a spicy, savory wave of delight that tingled in her nose. Her mouth watered at the sight of the seasoned rice her mother was piling high on the plate. A daub of thick raita joined it on the side, garnished with an extra mint leaf just the way Connie liked.

As she offered the plate of food, her mother seemed to be trying to gather her words for something important and, judging by the furrow of her brow, exceedingly parental. But Connie beat her to the punch, grasping the plate as she said, "*Actually, would it be okay if I ate downstairs tonight?*"

Her parents blinked in surprise, exchanging another look. But her mother said, "*Of course, dear. Make sure you're washed up.*"

Already scrubbed, Connie eagerly climbed into her seat at the table. As her parents dished their plates, she surveyed her own. A voice inside her shuddered in anticipation as the first taste burned on her lips. "*Oh!*" Jade exclaimed. "*This food contains some form of defense mechanism. How invigorating!*"

Connie grinned, her cheeks ballooning with food. Her plate was almost empty by the time her parents sat down to join her. For the first time in almost two months, she felt a heavy sensation in her stomach, a sudden relief made even better by the fascination radiating from Jade.
"That good, huh?" her father said wryly. "There's plenty for seconds if you want it."

She was out of her chair before he'd even finished speaking. As she sat down with a second heaping plateful, her father cleared his throat again, and tapped his fork on the table.

"Oh. Er," her mother said, setting aside her own fork. "Connie, I've been doing some reading on the subject, and I've found some rather unsettling articles regarding academic habits in teenage students."

"Mmm?" Connie said, her lips unable to fully close for the spicy biryani stuffed in her mouth.

Nodding somberly, her mother said, "A recent study found a marked increase in health issues for students who try to eat and study at the same time. Test scores showed a temporary spike before entering a steady decline, and it increased risks for stress disorders and digestive issues. I know you want to work hard, and we appreciate how seriously you're taking your studies, but it would be for the best if you ate your meals down here from now on, like before."

Connie swallowed and gave her mother's stony face a searching look. "That sounds like a really interesting article. Where'd you read it?" she said.

Jerking in surprise, her mother said, "What? Oh, I, um, think it might be a little too technical for you to fully understand."

She tried to appear stern, but as Connie smirked at her, she couldn't help but smile in kind.

"Okay, Mom," Connie said. "No more study meals."

"Will breakfast be spicy like this?" Jade asked excitedly, "or will it be sweet like the cooked cat? May we ask what we're having now, or would that be inappropriate? I'll need to research flavor combinations tonight to best catalogue the experience. I don't even know where to begin!"

"Connie?" her father said, tilting his head at her soft chuckle. "Are you okay?"

Sighing contentedly at the half-empty plate and the two concerned parents staring at her, Connie said, "Yeah. Yeah, I think I am."
"Such an exquisite marriage of flavors and textures. Something savory, salty, and smooth, yet subtle enough that it highlights the explosive sweetness and tartness of its counterpart, cool and slick, all between rich softness that becomes the perfect vehicle for a sublime combination. Its simplicity is elegant, with an endless array of possibilities in the thickness or thinness of either primary ingredient. I have only learned the words for it, and yet they seem to pale to the task of describing the experience!" gushed Jade.

Connie stuffed the plastic bag that had contained her peanut butter and jelly sandwich back into her backpack. She sat at the top of the back stairwell at school, kicking her feet through the lonely sunbeam shining on the tile. "I'm glad you liked it. I'll be sure to pass the compliment to my Mom."

As she dug around in her bag for this week's old paperback reread, she heard Jade scoff amidst a swell of indignation. "You are being sarcastic! I can feel the disingenuousness inside of you, human. Mock me if you will, but I think your necessitated relationship with food has left you indifferent to the everyday wonders gracing your mouth. And you should indeed compliment your matron for the meal."

Grinning, Connie said, "You're right. I should. But I feel like I need to remind you that, four days ago, you were ready to 'forcibly evacuate' any unapproved food out of our body. Now you're turning into a regular foodie. You're going to make me take you to one of those gourmet bistros that charge a hundred dollars for the same sandwich we just ate."

"I did happen to note the location of several such establishments that are conveniently located on our same continent," admitted Jade. Then, as Connie’s hand closed around the spine of her book, the Gem said, "Aha! Leave that transcribed nonsense where it lies, human. I have taken the liberty of preparing our luncheon's entertainment. Please refer to the music-playing application on your communicator."

A swipe of her thumb opened the uTūnz app on Connie's phone, where she found a slew of new playlists. Each list contained dozens of songs with names and artists she didn't recognize. "Whoa! You made all of these? There must be hundreds of songs here!"

Pride shone inside Connie's chest, twisting through ribbons of anticipation. "There are three hundred and forty-two new songs, and I've prepared compilations according to genre, thematic content, and mood. I had hoped you might listen to them with me to gauge your reaction. My own exploration of human music has been enlightening, but it would please me to know their effect on you as well. For contextual reasons, of course," Jade said.

Connie's own mirth turned to ash as a realization struck her. "Jade, how did you get all these songs? My parents would have noticed if there were charges for all of them."

"Yes, I saw that there were monetary expectations for in-application usage. Luckily I discovered a plethora of means by which to acquire the recordings of these songs without requiring any such exchange. There were helpful informational diatribes made by humans providing instruction on the process."

The delectable sandwich inside of Connie began to lurch. Queasily, she looked down at the playlist and did some rough math. At ninety-nine cents per song, there was easily music enough to eclipse several months' worth of her allowance. She imagined the police battering down their front door and arresting her, parading her in front of a mob of cameras and reporters while her parents watched in
tears. An imaginary judge sentenced her to lifetimes in prison, where the only music to be had would be the percussive stamp of the machines that made license plates. Her family name would be tarnished forever. Her parents would be forced to flee the country and change their name while their daughter grew old and gray behind bars.

"You stole all this music?" Connie whimpered.

Jade scoffed in silence. "What a ridiculous notion. You cannot 'steal' music any more than you could steal the words spoken by another."

Swallowing hard, Connie clenched her hands to quell their shaking. If the police hadn't contacted them yet, it was possible that the crime hadn't been discovered. She heard classmates talking about downloading music all the time, and none of them had gone to prison yet as far as Connie knew. Perhaps if she were discovered, she could get away with just probation and community service. "You have to promise me not to download any more music, Jade. We could get in big trouble if you do," she said. Then, with another thought, she added, "Besides, Steven's dad is a music expert. He used to make music for a living, and he has all kinds of different music in his collection."

Reverent awe swallowed Jade's arrogance. "The hybrid's patriarch makes music too?" she whispered.

Her heart rate easing, Connie said, "Besides, I can't exactly play music here. We're not supposed to be here during lunch, and everyone will be able to hear."

The arrogance returned. "Check the very bottom of your tome receptacle, human," she instructed Connie.

When Connie did so, she found another surprise in the form of a vinyl bag that contained their Blastmaster headphones. As distraught as she was at being made an accessory to digital grand larceny, Connie couldn't help but smirk. "Did you put these in here last night? You're becoming quite the sneak, Jade," she said.

"Any scout or explorer knows the value of discretion," said Jade.

As Connie tugged at the drawstrings of the bag, her phone buzzed with a new message. Curious, she checked the phone's face. Steven knew not to text her during school for anything less than an emergency, and her parents wouldn't text her unless they had suddenly and drastically changed their opinion on the practice. So she was doubly surprised to find a text from Jeff waiting for her on the screen:

*found sumthng awsome 4 syfy club check it out bb cort?*

She grimaced at the spelling in the message and made a mental note to mock Jeff mercilessly for it. He kept showing her the comics he doodled in class, all of them with clever dialogue for their thinly-veiled caricatures of the teachers and staff at the school. Evidently he couldn't muster any remaining editing for his texts. "Let's save the ill-gotten music for later. My friend Jeff wants to show me something downstairs."

"Your friend? We have always required a lengthy journey to visit the hybrid," Jade protested as Connie clambered to her feet.

"What? No, not Steven. Jeff, my friend here at school. I talk to him all the time," Connie said, and hoisted her backpack. "Do you seriously not know the difference between them?"

"I cannot be bothered with names. Besides, you anthropoids look more or less alike, human. The
"differences between you all are largely semantical," Jade said dismissively. "The hybrid's gemstone is not even readily visible in most instances. He may as well be human too."

"Jeff didn't tell me that he switched his lunch period," Connie grumbled, though with little genuine annoyance. "It'd be nice to have someone to eat with for a change."

"I take exception to your sentiment," Jade huffed.

Rolling her eyes, Connie retorted, "Again, you hated food until four days ago. So you can eat your hurt feelings with the next sandwich, because I don't want to hear it."

Wry bemusement rippled up where Connie had expected to feel betrayal. "Your species' proclivity for cruelty overrides even as generous a nature as yours, I see. Even the human who denied herself the joys of food for so many weeks has her limits."

"And here I thought the real cruelty was what happened to the food on the other end of the process," Connie teased.

Silence thundered as they descended the stairs, a silence so long that Connie wondered if she had crossed a line with her words. But just as she was about to apologize, Jade's voice arose in her mind as scant more than a whisper. "May I confess something to you, human? I...have come to enjoy our various ablutions."

Connie missed a step, staggering so badly that she had to grab the railing. "Was that a joke?" she said.

"I do not refer to the acts themselves," Jade said quickly, "and especially not your waste management rituals, the volume and frequency of which has increased dramatically and disgustingly since your return to a regular diet."

"Food doesn't stay food once it gets inside," Connie agreed.

"Quite. But the results of the ‘act,’ and the teeth-brushing, and daily showering, leave me feeling cleaner. They make me closer to my best self. Our best selves, rather."

A tiny ache panged in Connie's sock. She thought back to the morning shower, where she'd discovered a second little brown bruise, or spot, or whatever it was, marring her ankle. The one in her elbow had yet to fade, and this new mark worried her. Connie didn't know how to explain it to Jade because she didn't understand it herself. Nothing like it had ever happened before. And the one doctor she could think to ask couldn't know because of her secret passenger.

Maybe it was finally time to stop lying to her parents. Maybe, after dinner, when Jade was feeling full and pleased and distracted, she could explain to the Gem why her parents deserved to know the truth. Because even if these odd bruises didn't make her feel uneasy, her parents still deserved to know.

Connie pushed the thought to the back of her mind for later as they reached the bottom floor. As with eating outside of the cafeteria, students were disallowed from leaving the building, but the rule was only sporadically enforced. Students could play a pickup game of basketball or sit outside and enjoy the sunshine as long as they didn't cause trouble. It made the court behind the school a popular spot during lunch.

But as Connie left the back door of the school, the concrete court stood empty. A light breeze whistled through the chain link fence surrounding the property, with cars mumbling by on the street beyond. Connie looked to either side but saw no one. Curious, she checked her phone again, and
then sent a message back asking Jeff where he was.

The concrete by the basketball hoop post chimed, turning Connie's head. She saw a black rectangle laying on the ground and went to investigate it. The shape was a phone lying abandoned on the ground with her message to Jeff still glowing in its face.

Two bad feelings rose up inside of her. Jade gave voice to one, saying, "Human, this is wrong. Withdraw."

Then Connie heard footfalls crunching softly behind her, and knew too late that Jade was right. Three girls stood behind her, spread apart to form a line between Connie and the school's back door. They all wore gym shorts and T-shirts, garments with the school's mascot and seal on them that were sold at every school function. One of the girls wore a baseball cap over her chestnut hair and a store-bought Guy Fawkes mask. Another wore an unseasonable ski mask pulled over her head. Both of them carried heavy, drooping book bags in one hand, half-dragging them across the ground.

The girl in the middle wore a designer scarf wrapped around her head so that only her sparkling blue eyes peered out from the folds. She held up an expensive phone, aiming its lens at Connie, as she sneered, "Time for a makeover, Big Nose."

Guy Fawkes and Ski Mask scooped bulbous shapes out from their bags and flung them at Connie. Instinct made Connie spin out of the shapes' way, where they burst and splashed against the concrete, spraying liquid color that splattered into a long, wide shape across the court, red and blue. She could smell the liquid even from several paces away. The balloons had been filled with paint.

Connie moved quickly, but these projectiles were no dodgeballs she could deflect, and her two attackers spread to either side of her to box her in while their ringleader filmed the attack. A near shot splashed up over Connie's shoe, soaking the cuff of her slacks and her sock in yellow. She slipped in the puddle even as another balloon careened at her stomach.

The wind exploded in front of her, carrying her hair forward as it caught the balloon in mid-flight and reversed its course. Guy Fawkes yawped as her own balloon hammered her in the mask, throwing her back onto the court, where she lay groaning.

Blinded by her own hair, Connie listened to the other girl moaning and felt a stab of real fear. Even as she reeled with confusion for the attack, she knew what the Gem inside of her could really do if she got carried away protecting them. "Jade, don't—" she started to say.

Ski Mask hurled a balloon into the back of Connie's head. Her eyes were pasted shut with hair and burning paint. She lurched at the impact of another balloon that soaked her shirt, the tang of it acrid in her mouth. When Connie clawed her eyes open again, she saw Guy Fawkes back on her feet with her arm extended before the sight of a green balloon careening at Connie eclipsed the rest of the world.

The balloon exploded across Connie's face. Paint shot up her nose, burning in her sinuses. It pasted her eyes shut again and choked her windpipe. As she lost her footing, she heard cackles of glee coming from all around her.

Then her head struck concrete. A blast of cold pain radiated through her skull. The world spun with colors, and her body tingled, nerves shooting with something that felt like music.

"Get away from me!" Jade screamed.

Her arms and legs left. Weak things. Unneeded. Her eyes were imprecise. She forgot them too.
Sheets. Sheets were better. They were the first thing she had learned to summon. She made her sheets, tearing through the woven plant matter despoiling her form, casting it aside. Her sheets folded themselves into legs, and she surged forward, their ends carving precise little craters into the processed stone beneath her.

The attackers screamed. Their discipline broke. Pathetic. The two with the strange artillery broke ranks to run. Their commander stood frozen, the communicator dropping from its pink touch stubs.

Folded sheets broke the ground as she skittered forward and overtook the commander. More sheets on her back folded into pincers that grabbed the commander, who screamed and fell. Its head-covering caught on the claw and tore away to reveal a perfect, pretty face that was wet and twisted in fear, with waves of golden hair framing it.

One snap of the claws would tear that pretty head from its shoulders. Then she could hunt down the artillery soldiers and dispose of them as well.

Except some part of her screamed at the notion. NO! She shouldn't. She couldn't. An image arose with the scream inside of her: it was a gray cliff and an old temple carved in the shape of a guardian. It was important. It could save her.

No, not save. It did not hold salvation. It was danger. It was the true threat! It would be destroyed. Wind and claw would tear it to the ground, toss it into the surf, bury it, crush it, kill it!

Tossing aside the squalling pink thing in her claw, she folded her sheets into wings and summoned a wind to carry her into the sky. She didn't know where she was, but she knew where she was going, and it was close by.

NO, the scream inside her begged.

But the song vibrating through her drowned out the voice: three beautiful notes in perfect harmony that told her she was right.
Harmony Unraveled

Connie floated in music.

The notes crossed between her limbs and tangled her in harmony, three repeating notes that held her fast in their web. She could feel the notes trying to plunge into her, but something stopped them at her skin, the song burning and freezing her with their touch. When she tried to cry out, the notes overwhelmed her, their volume swelling until her whole body vibrated.

She screamed at the music until her throat turned numb. Then she sagged against the notes, their touch biting her wrists as her hair spilled around her face. The music thrummed, digging into her skin, swirling against her with a sense of victory.

Then the world outside of the music rumbled, shaking Connie awake. The notes rose in reply to surge against the force. Above the distant sounds of battle and the harmony's crescendo, Connie heard a scream, and her head snapped as the wail faded back into the noise. The voice, as brief and faint as it had been, was as familiar to her as her own.

"Hang on!" Connie yelled back at the cry. She began thrashing anew against the music, which thrashed against something on the outside. When the music bit at her, she bit back, catching one of the notes between her teeth and shaking it furiously until the other notes forced it from her mouth.

Nothing she tried could overpower the harmony. She fought and snarled, but the notes were too strong where they had woven together. But then she heard her name called from the outside battle, and a wave of liquid light trickled down the lengths of the harmony to seep into her skin. It felt warm, familiar, and it made her strong again.

With a roar, Connie reached out and grasped the harmony holding her, filling each hand with a different note in its weave. The light seeping into her gave her strength enough to pry at the notes despite how they burned and chilled her hands. She screamed and pulled until the harmony tore apart, its three notes spinning away to dwindle into a silent, blank distance.

As the harmony unraveled, Connie found her other self lying collapsed inside the song's remains. Curled up, the self's green skin trembled, its dark hair obscuring its face. It shrank back as Connie knelt at its side. "It's okay," Connie whispered. "You're safe now."

She rested her hand on the other's quivering back. The light touch jolted them both like electricity.

---

Connie bolted upright, heaving, her heart thundering in her chest. Something soft and warm cradled her, damp with the same sweat that matted her hair to her forehead. Every inch of her skin ached like a continuous bruise, and her innards felt like hot coals. An impulse to run shot through her nerves, begging her to run and find somewhere to hide.

A strong hand pressed on her chest, easing her back into her plush surroundings. Her eyes darted across the hand, up the arm, and found Garnet's solemn features hovering over her. "Don't be afraid," the fusion said gently. "You're safe."

As her breathing steadied, Connie recognized the interior of the beach house. Twilight colors filtered in through windows amidst the sounds of low tide. She lay in Steven's bed with Garnet kneeling at her bedside. Pearl and Amethyst waited at the end of the bed and watched her with concerned. And behind them, Steven stood with his back to her, his fists curled at his sides.
When she looked at them again, she gasped. Garnet's visor featured a long crack through one side, and her formed clothing was torn to ribbons. Pearl's hair sat in a wild splay and her long nose had a kink at the tip. Deep, dark bruising mottled Amethyst's face, making it into a lumpy, swollen shadow of its former self. Even her best friend looked like he had been tossed through a rock tumbler, his hair glistening with wet sand and his shirt and jeans tattered at the edges.

Connie tried sitting up again, but Garnet's firm hand held her fast. "What happened? Are you okay?" asked Connie. Her eyes drifted back to Steven, who still would not look at her. The color creeping up his neck made Connie's burning stomach plummet. Was he mad at her? Had she said or done something terrible to him? To all of them? She couldn't remember.

"We're fine," Garnet told her. "Don't get up yet."

"What? Why?" Connie said, panic rising in her voice as she flexed her body under the bedsheets, testing her limbs, fingers, and toes.

Grimacing, Pearl said, "I'm, er, afraid your clothes didn't survive your trip here."

Suddenly Connie noticed the silky kiss of immaculately laundered sheets against her bare skin, all of her bare skin, everywhere. Her face blazed with embarrassment and she yanked the edge of the sheets up to her chin.

Steven's voice drifted back, nervous and miniscule. "Is it safe to turn around now?"

With a nod from Connie, Garnet said, "You're cleared." Then she sat at the edge of the mattress, resting her hand on Connie's knee as the teen sat up against the pillows. "Move slowly. You've been through a lot today."

"Me? What about you guys?" Connie said, grimacing at their battered visages. As she watched Steven turn around, she winced at a black shiner that covered almost half his face, so swollen that it left his eye half-lidded.

Crossing her arms in a huff, Amethyst said, "For the record, we would have won in three seconds flat if we weren't taking it easy on you. We still won even though we didn't put a scratch on you… mostly," she groused.

"You were fighting me?" Connie murmured, clutching at her face, careful to keep the sheet up around her shoulders. Hazy memories trickled back to her, crawling like ants across the backs of her eyes. She remembered masks, and balloons, and paint, and wind. Something had frightened her. "When did I get here? How did I get here?" she asked.

Steven looked down guiltily. "You flew here," he said, his voice wobbling. "You landed on the beach about an hour ago and attacked us. When we figured out what you were, everybody worked together to pin you down, and I tried to heal you. Something happened, and…"

Amethyst spread her hands to the bed. "Bam. Naked Connie."

More pieces returned to Connie in slinking bits and pieces. She couldn't remember the fight with the Gems, but she was remembering the fight before it, the one at the school's basketball court. "Did…" she started to say, but choked on the question. "Was I…?"

"You looked like Jade did," Steven answered, still unable to look up at her, "the day we met her."

The hot coals inside Connie lurched upwards, trying to crawl into her throat. She looked down at her hands and tried to imagine them as a collection of billowing sheets wrapped around her core, with
chitinous skin, their shapes folding themselves into claws and tendrils and pincers. Her throat burned harder, and she had to swallow to keep the coals down, as she saw dozens of tiny brown spots mottling her arms.

The spots ached under her thumb as she pressed down on them. She kept pressing, harder and harder, until her eyes watered with the pain. The tiny spots hurt, but no matter how hard she pushed, her arms remained arms. She dug her nail into a spot instead, biting her lip, trying to find the green chitin underneath. How deep down was it? How deep down would she have to dig until she couldn’t find anything human anymore?

Steven's hand wrapped around hers, pulling her thumb from her arm.

Her eyes snapped up to find him in silent tears. She felt his hand shaking as he looked down at her spots, and clasped his hand in both of her own. When he tried to speak, she could read his guilt like a towering billboard looming before her, and so she squeezed his hand and shook her head, silencing him. Whatever breakdown she found herself in the middle of, she refused to let Steven blame himself for what had happened. She latched onto that thought, using it to steady herself as she felt the rest of her world, and even her own body, spinning out of her control.

One by one, the other Crystal Gems knelt around Steven to rest a hand atop the blankets, touching Connie's leg or arm. Her tears overflowed at the silent message in their touch. She was corrupted, and was a clear danger to them all, and they were not afraid. They would not abandon her.

But there were still a million unanswered questions, and the biggest of them all had been completely silent. As the moment came to an end, Connie withdrew her hands and cupped them over the gemstone at her throat. "Jade?" she whispered.

She listened intently to the silence inside of her. At first she could only hear the sounds of the ocean. But as she listened, straining for the voice that had become an everyday part of her thoughts, she heard the barest edge of a sob coming from someplace far away.

Then the noise from a motor outside broke Connie from her concentration. A car door slammed, and footsteps pounded up the porch steps. "Connie?" a familiar voice exclaimed, turning the hot coals inside Connie into ice.

Her eyes widening, Connie looked to the Gems and said, "You called her?"

Desperate hands fumbled at the screen door handle outside as Pearl murmured, "We had to."

The door flew open, hammering the wall, and Connie's mother burst inside. She still wore her pantsuit and lab coat from work, and her hair was a frazzled nest of black and gray. As she spun in a circle at the doorway, her gaze found Connie, her eyes wild and glistening with panic that threatened to spill down her cheeks. "Connie!" she cried, and flew up the stairs, pushing through the Gems at the bedside as though they weren't there.

Connie tried to surreptitiously dry her own eyes with the edge of the sheet, but the deep fear being uncorked inside of her kept them overflowing. "Mom," she croaked, holding the bedcovers beneath her chin.

Her mother wrapped Connie in a crushing embrace. "You're safe! You're safe!" she moaned the words over and over, clutching Connie to her chest. Then she pulled away, holding the teen at arm's length as she demanded, "What happened? The school called about some kind of fight, and they couldn't find you, nobody could find you, and your father went out looking everywhere, and then Steven called, and—"
"Mom, I'm okay," Connie started to say.

But her mother steamrolled over her words. "We've been so worried about you. I mean, we knew you weren't eating, and you were keeping something from us, and we see your light on after midnight all the time now, but I thought it was just you asserting your independence as a teenager, at least that's what the attending psychiatrist at the hospital kept saying, but what does that hack know, his kids all live with his ex, so I—"

Connie closed her eyes. The moment she had been dreading since that fight on the beach had finally come. Taking a deep breath, she lowered the sheet's edge enough to reveal the green gemstone. "Mom," she said forcefully, breaking through the verbal spray of parental concern.

The sight of the stone stopped her mother mid-tirade. She gaped, her mouth trying to form new words, but only pieces of sound emerged. With shaking hand, she reached out and touched the stone. Connie waited patiently, clutching the sheet to her chest while the nimble fingers prodded and pulled at the smooth edges of the boxy, flat stone.

At last her mother's gaze broke from the gemstone and swung back to the Gems. All of them, save for a quivering Steven, watched on in guilty silence. She pulled at the gemstone again, and when it wouldn't budge, her mother said, "Connie, what is this?"

Connie told her everything. Voice trembling, she started with the battle on the beach, and the Gem's stirring inside of her that made her sleepwalk. She revealed the long, hungry war against food, and Jade's emergent voice, and the truth about the late nights. The story went on for minutes or hours. It was hard for Connie to know how long it took to tell, for her voice was hoarse and choked from the first word.

"—and then we were attacked at school," Connie said, her story catching up to the present. "Three girls were throwing balloons filled with paint at us, and then I hit my head. I don't remember much after that, but… I turned into the thing Jade was when we found her that first day on the beach."

Her mother stared wordlessly. As Connie's story had unraveled, the woman's expression had slackened, and hollowed, until it had become the inscrutable mask it was now.

Squirming, Connie glanced back at the Gems again. They shared the same look of concern among them, but Pearl gave her a silent nod of encouragement.

"Jade's sick," Connie explained to her mother. "There's something inside of her that keeps her from looking and thinking like she's supposed to, like the other Gems can. It wasn't affecting her while she was stuck inside of me. At least, we didn't think it was. But today, I…when I changed, I came back here. I…I attacked the Gems. But they helped me! And now I'm…better."

Utter silence choked the room. Connie watched her mother staring through her, waiting for some kind of reaction. She thought, in some distant, dreamy fantasy, that confessing everything might have made her feel better. Instead her insides were twisting and cramping, and her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

At long last her mother lifted a hand, pointing back at the Crystal Gems. "Something like them," she said, and swung her finger around to rest on the green gemstone, "lives in that. It talks to you."

Connie sighed, releasing the breath she'd been holding for months. "Yes," she said, smiling. Her mother didn't smile back. "That thing was starving you. It was attacking people. It changed your body. And you didn't tell me."
The smile in Connie's face imploded. "Mom, I—" she started to say.

Rising stiffly, her mother stepped down the loft's stairs. "Come with me," she told Connie sharply.

Connie sucked in a breath to protest, but caught herself. The set of her mother's shoulders, the white knuckles of her fists clenched at her sides, and her sharp, even breathing all heralded a raging storm waiting to be unleashed. Connie hadn't seen those signs of warning since her father had accidentally overwatered every plant in the house during one of her mother's weeklong out-of-town conferences.

That storm only needed a spark to ignite, and Garnet unknowingly provided it. "We have a friend who should look at Connie before she goes anywhere. The corruption in Jade—"

The prim and precise doctor whirled, casting a look of fury up at the Gems in the loft. "You were supposed to protect her! You promised to keep her safe!" she bellowed, and hammered the floor with the heel of her shoe. "Instead you leave the children alone to fight monsters, and one of them just crawls inside of Connie, and starves her, and frightens her! And what? That's okay? That's normal for you?" she demanded.

A tense beat passed before Amethyst mumbled, "It's mostly un-normal."

The words sparked pure rage in her mother's eyes. Stabbing a finger at the bed, she snarled, "That is my daughter. Against my better judgment, I let her come here and train with that, that…sword! I did that because you promised me you would take care of her. But you didn't. And now she's infected with something you can't explain, that you're doing nothing about. And you all hid it from me!"

"Yes." The answer came from Pearl, who stepped forward to the loft's edge. Her lithe, pale frame tensed, but her battered face was calm. "We failed you. We failed Connie. We failed the Gem inside of Connie. But we're trying everything we can think of to fix things. So far nothing has worked, but we won't stop trying until we make this right for Connie and Jade."

A new outburst gathered behind her mother's scowl, but broke when Connie exclaimed, "Mom, I asked them not to say anything. Steven said I should tell you, but I…I wanted to wait until we knew more."

Connie had watched her mother go through a lot of hard times. Stress from cross-country relocations had made her mother irritable, and fights with her father could make the woman as hard-edged as the swords she hated. She had seen her mother disappointed, and furious, and jealous, and even sad.

But until that very moment, Connie had never seen her mother heartbroken. The woman's face seemed to age ten years as she gazed back at Connie. Eyes glistening, she sobbed, "Connie, you promised me!"

Connie's mouth flapped as she tried to explain the secrecy. A thousand reasons arose from her memory, every one of them a brick in the palace of lies she had built to keep the truth from her mother. Staring at her mother's face now, that palace crumbled, leaving her with nothing but rubble for words.

The silence galvanized her mother's face into something hard and ugly. "Get up, Connie. We're leaving," she said, and turned to the door.

Her voice a paltry squeak, Connie protested, "I don't have any clothes."

"Wrap yourself in the sheet," her mother said. "We're going straight to the hospital. You'll change into a gown when we check you in."
Steven lifted his hand as if he were asking a question in class. "Um, w-we can lend Connie some—"

Garnet rested a hand on Steven's back, silencing him with a shake of her head. Then, wordlessly, she helped Connie wrap the bedsheets into a makeshift toga. She and Pearl helped Connie down the stairs with Steven trailing uncertainly behind them. When they reached the bottom, her mother snatched Connie's hand from the Gem's, then threw open the door again.

"We won't stop trying," Pearl said suddenly, stopping Connie and her mother in the doorway. "We'll find a way to remove Jade from Connie no matter what it takes."

When her mother turned around, Connie saw something dangerous sparking in those dark eyes fixing the pale Gem with a glare. In a low voice, her mother said, "If you knew for certain that smashing that gemstone would free Connie without hurting her, even if it killed that thing inside of her, would you do it?"

Connie felt her heart stop. The question slapped a look of horror across Pearl's face. She looked to Garnet, then Steven, but the other two were too horrified to answer.

"That's what I thought," her mother said, glowering. "That's why you're never coming near my daughter again. That's why none of you are real parents."

Connie looked back, but none of the Gems could meet her wobbly gaze. Steven looked close to tears too, squeezing his eyes shut. Connie wanted to say something comforting, to promise them all that she would find a way to make things right again. But with the truth revealed at last, Connie had run out of lies to tell anyone.

Her mother suddenly stopped again, forcing Connie to stumble. Half-turning, the stern woman said, "We will launder the sheet and mail it back to you."

Then she resumed their march out to the car, dragging Connie in tow. And no matter how Connie pleaded, or cried, or shouted, her mother never once looked back at her. Not out to the car. Not on the long drive to the hospital. And even after they checked her in and traded her sheet for a hospital gown, her mother still couldn't look her in the eye.
Gray Skies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The beach stretched in front of Connie forever. Cool gray skies swirled overhead, stirred by a fearsome tempest out in the ocean that threatened to consume the very world. Lightning painted the sand white in flashes, making a flickering giant of Connie's shadow on the cliff side next to her. Thunder chimed, not rumbled, and its notes echoed against the cold, distant wall of the horizon.

Shivering, Connie hugged her arms around her stomach. The skin inside her elbows and wrist still hurt from an evening of biopsies, needles, and prodding. When she looked down, though, she found pristine skin without mark or bruise. The scars of her transformation weren't there, even though she could still feel them throbbing. Had they disappeared before she had gotten to the beach?

When had she gotten to the beach, anyway?

"Connie!"

The shout of her name drew Connie's eyes back to the sky, where she saw a tiny pink dot growing closer against the gray sky. A thwpping sound faded in, belonging to a set of rotors that protruded from the back of a bright-eyed dachshund, who carried his payload by the collar of a starry pink shirt.

As the familiar fictional dog dropped him off, Steven waved and called, "Thanks, Dogcopter!" Then he ran forward and all but tackled Connie in a hug. "I'm so glad I found you! I wasn't even sure I'd be able to find your dream tonight. I barely got to sleep after everything that happened, and I wasn't sure if you could either," he said, burying his face in her shoulder.

She wrapped him tightly in her arms, just relieved to see a friendly face again. But as they pulled apart, she processed his words again, and said, "I'm dreaming?"

"Mm-hmm," he said, nodding, as Dogcopter disappeared toward the stormy horizon. Then, seeing her frown, Steven hurried to add, "But I'm real. Or, I guess, dream-real. I mean, my brain is really here. My mind, not my brain. I can't send my brain outside of my body. Or if I can, I don't know how to do that yet."

That stream of Steven-ese alone would have convinced Connie that the new arrival was the real dream-walking Steven and not a conjuration of her own lonely mind, but there were other reassurances. He felt more solid than even the ground beneath her, and his features were sharper, more distinct than the cresting ocean waves or the craggy stone looming over them. He sounded more real, and smelled more real, that sweet concoction of sea spray and powdered sugar.

Once she knew the difference between real and dream, she looked around her and recognized the stark shoreline. "I've been here before," she murmured.

"Well, sure. It's like Beach City, except without the city, or the temple," Steven said, looking in either direction.

"I mean I've been in this dream before. And it wasn't just my dream," she said. The memory of that night from months ago made Connie shiver. "This is where I met Jade. I think we made this place together to find each other. Which means..."
Connie looked out into the tempest raging over the ocean. The wind swept across the choppy, cold waters, carrying a spray into the air too thick for any eye to pierce. As the lightning chimed, though, Connie saw a silhouette flash in the heart of the storm. Distance and spray couldn't stop her from recognizing the shape.

"She's in there," Connie said to Steven. "She needs help."

"I can fly us out there," Steven said at once. The soles of his sandals coughed with flames, then lifted him several inches into the air on compact jets of blue-white fire.

But Connie shook her head, grounding his enthusiasm. "It has to be me. Jade won't hurt me, but her feelings for you are a little more complicated, and she doesn't seem very…stable. I don't know how dream rules work, but I do know that I definitely don't want to see you blown apart by hurricane winds."

Steven blanched at the thought. A new question gathered in his features, but Connie answered it by stepping onto the surf. The frothing surface of the water rolled over her feet, but a hard plane of it underneath held her aloft on something more or less stable. "Whoa," he gasped, watching her pace unevenly toward the storm.

Looking back, Connie called, "I'm sorry about what my mom said. It wasn't right."

"It's okay," Steven called back, cupping his hands to his mouth as the howl of the wind rose between them. "I won't stop trying until we make this right. I promise!"

She smiled. "You don't have to promise. I always knew you would," she shouted.

The wind tugged at his hair and shirt, making him stagger. "Well, I'm promising anyway!" He waved with both arms as his body collapsed into the sand, crumbling seamlessly into the beach beneath him. His sad smile was the last to disappear into the shoreline.

Connie grimaced uncertainly. Steven's promise burned inside of her like a lamp, making the dream world feel a little less dark. The gesture would have helped even more if he hadn't chosen to melt out of the dream in such an unsettling way. But then, he wouldn't be Steven if he weren't sweet and weird at the same time.

Then she marched into the storm, leaning forward against its cutting winds. The water surged and dipped beneath her feet as she walked, forcing Connie to climb steep hills and then switch her footing or risk tumbling down a slick, wet embankment. Her dress's hem hung sodden, dragging in the chop. Her aching skin grew numb as the air chilled, making her labored breath into fog. Her hair soaked every droplet of rain that came near her until it flopped like a lead flag in the wind, yanking at her scalp with each gust. But she pushed onward, unwilling to turn back.

After an eternity of minutes, Connie leaned against the inner edge of the storm. The wind felt as solid against her upraised hands as a stone wall. She squinted against the icy spray, trying to see the heart of the storm ahead of her, but the stinging air hurt too much to look.

"Jade!" she shouted, pushing back against the wind. "Jade, I'm coming in! I know you won't hurt me! Even though this is a dream, I know you won't..."

Suddenly Connie stumbled forward. The wind and spray were still there, and still just as powerful, but they could no longer touch her. She staggered blindly through the wall and into the haunting quiet of the storm's eye, where the wind was but a distant whisper and the sea became a perfect circle of smooth, motionless water. The clouds above had broken around the eye, and the night sky
reflected beneath Connie's feet like a platform of stars.

A green figure knelt at the circle's center, her knees drawn up to her chest, arms encircling her shins, her face buried in the folds of her soggy dress. Clumps of dark green hair sat atop her shaking shoulders. As Connie crept forward, her footfalls rippled in the starscape beneath them, passing underneath the figure unnoticed.

Connie knelt at her doppelganger's side. Hesitantly she touched the figure's back and murmured, "Jade?"

Her voice, Jade's voice, trembled back at her from the folds of the dress. "Come to gloat, human?"

"Gloat? No!" Connie said, recoiling.

Jade didn't budge, refusing to look up from her knees. Her muffled voice dripped with hatred. "You and the traitors were right all along. You were right about everything. The corruption that poisoned me, that poisoned everyone, came from… It came from…"

Connie reached for the Gem again, and felt the muffled sobs that shook her. Drenched skin puckered with cold under Connie's touch. "Jade," Connie murmured, trying to rub some warmth into the icy Gem's arm.

"I heard them." Green fists wrapped into the folds of the dress. "I heard their voices singing to me. They told me to unravel. They told me not to be."

"When did you hear them?" Connie asked softly.

"…when we changed," Jade said. A laugh jerked her whole body between muffled sobs. "I heard them during the battle, too. I must have known then who it was. They ordered us out, throwing us into the maw of the rebellion, and then they…"

She choked, unable to finish the thought.

Biting her lip, Connie tried to think of what to say. The magnitude of faith it had taken for Jade to veil the truth from herself had been staggering. It was a belief that had beggared words. Now that her faith had collapsed, words were even more inadequate. For so long, Connie's whole life had been words, the books and songs she had lived in. Words had been her faith, and now hers were just as empty as any story from a Diamond.

"Your engineer was correct all along, human: I am a relic. A fossil. Homeworld wouldn't need me or want me even if I could go home. This world has become a shadow of the place I knew. There is nothing left of me."

The storm intensified. Rippling, the edge of the starry circle began to contract around them, bringing the walls of the terrible storm closer and closer. Connie shrank at the clouds closing in on them from above, their shadow turning the waters beneath them black.

"You should have left me in pieces on the beach where you found me," Jade whispered.

Warm arms circled around Jade from behind. Jade jerked at the sensation, trying to pull away, but her effort was too feeble to escape the embrace as Connie rested her chin on Jade's shoulder, holding her tightly.

"Please, just go away," Jade pleaded tearfully. "Just…leave me alone."
But Connie wouldn't budge, and Jade had no energy left to argue. They sat intertwined, their eyes closed against the raging storm, and stayed warm together as the clouds swallowed the last of the sky, plunging their circle into total darkness.

Bleary, aching eyes opened to a dark room. Connie blinked away the residue of her fitful dreams as her surroundings came into focus.

She was back in the hospital. Or, more accurately, she was still in the hospital. The strange bed felt thin underneath her, the sheet rough and stiff over her hospital gown. Sterile white walls were gray with shadow, broken only by the dark TV in the upper corner of the room and a piece of bland motel art nailed into place. There was a murmur of activity through the closed door, distant pages over the PA for doctors, and gurneys being wheeled from one place to another.

The only illumination in the room came from a small book light clipped to a hardcover beside her bed. Her father held the book loosely against his chest, his head tilted forward in a doze in his chair at her bedside. His glasses had slipped down his nose, and his thinning hair was splayed across his brow. He still wore his rumpled security uniform from the day before. A shadow of stubble clung to his slackened mouth.

Connie jerked fully awake, surprised at her father's vigil. He hadn't been there last she remembered, when the tests had finally ended and her mother had left her wordlessly with a tray of hospital food.

But when Connie tried to reach for him, she discovered a set of Velcro restraints around her arms that bound her to the bed's railing. The rattle of the bed pulled her father upright, and he snorted, his eyes snapping open as he fumbled with his copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. "Wuzzuh?" he mumbled.

She pulled at the restraints until they bit her arms, but they held her fast. "Dad?" she said, fighting against the rising panic in her voice.

Her tone pierced his haze, and he rested his hand atop hers on the rail. "I'm here, sweetie. It's okay," he murmured. "You kept trying to leave while you were asleep. We couldn't wake you, so...so the nurses had to put the restraints on you."

"Can you take them off?" Connie asked. The rough bands pressed against bandages where biopsied skin had been scooped out of the tiny brown lesions that covered her. Worse, being strapped to the bed made her feel like some kind of sick medical experiment even more than all of the testing and sampling had.

Her father hesitated. His hand pulled away, leaving hers cold. "I don't think I should."

The panic in her voice won. "Please?" she whispered.

His gaze fell into his lap, the book collapsing from his grasp. "Why didn't you tell us, Connie?"

The question froze her. She stared at him, trying to speak, but her vocal cords were steel rods in her throat.

"You promised you would talk to us," he said, choking. The light from his book cast deep worry lines into his brow. "You were supposed to let us know when this whole whatever-it-is got to be too much. Now you've got a rock stuck inside of you with an alien living in it. How is that not too much?"

"No, Dad, it isn't like that," Connie insisted weakly.
"Then what is it like? I'm trying to understand, Connie. I want to understand," he said. "But all I can figure is that you didn't want to get in trouble."

Connie blinked back stinging tears. "Dad!" she whimpered.

"There's some video online. Some girls are being horrible to you, and then you turn into some… thing. You attack them. Now the principal is calling me about suspensions, and your mother is calling me about body-snatchers, and…" He wove his fingers into his hair, clutching at his head. "We knew something was wrong. I thought if it was just trouble at school, you would tell me, but this? You…transformed! Has that happened before? Your mother told me this has been going on for months!"

"I didn't—"

"I thought we could trust you, Connie! I thought you trusted us!" he cried, voice breaking.

"Dad!" she sobbed. "Dad, I didn't want to keep anything from you or Mom, I swear. I just… I didn't know how to explain it. I didn't know what to do. The Gems didn't know what to do either. I tried to handle it on my own because I didn't… I didn't want you to worry."

He stared at her as both of them saw through her half-truth. "You didn't think we would understand," he said.

Heart dropping, Connie said, "Could you have? I mean, really?"

Her father's features collapsed. Grimly he pulled them back together into a wall. "I suppose we'll never know," he said.

The room around her turned blurry in her tired, burning eyes. "Dad," she started.

But he opened his book, fixing his eyes upon the page. "Please try to get some sleep, Connie. We have more tests in the morning, and your mother is calling in some consultations after that. Nobody is leaving the hospital until we figure out how to fix this."

Connie wanted to protest or plead with him, but she couldn't. His hurtful words were every bit as true as hers had been. She hadn't trusted her parents to understand what she couldn't explain. Now both sides were out of chances.

Watching him now, Connie saw his eyes fixed on the page, his face mottled with long shadows from the reading light. He refused to look up, but the page never turned. So as he pretended to read, Connie pretended to sleep. And she twisted her face away from him so they could both pretend that she wasn't crying.

Chapter End Notes

The good folks over at ConnieSwap let me write another Omake for their collection. Check it out HERE and leave a comment letting me know what you think. Then go read the rest of their story if you haven't already!
Help Her

The intercom clicked loudly, and the room filled with her mother’s voice. “You need to stay absolutely still, Connie. The machine will start in a moment.”

Connie lay on the bed of the CT scanner, waiting for the large, doughnut-shaped apparatus attached to the table to pass over her with its cascading waves of science so it could compile a picture of her miserable insides. Posters of similarly miserable insides decorated the maddeningly white walls alongside warning and instructional notices. Every time Connie found a new set of the same white walls, they seemed to be a little closer than the last set, trying to crush her with each different examination room her parents wheeled her into for the next test.

She could see the scanner room’s observation window out of the corner of her eye. Her mother sat on the other side of the glass behind an ancient PC monitor, the thick and bulky kind, pulling her hand away from the intercom button to hammer at an equally ancient keyboard. At the back of the tiny observation room, her father paced back and forth, phone pressed to his ear as he yelled loudly enough to register through the lead-lined glass.

“Making an unauthorized viral video?” her father bellowed at volumes Connie had never before heard from him. “My daughter was attacked by delinquents on school grounds on your watch! My daughter, who brings home straight As on her report card. A report card that consistently misspells her name! So I suggest you drop this suspension nonsense, start doing your job, and practice spelling ‘Maheswaran,’ because when my lawyers are done with you, our name will be on the school!”

Connie bit back a sigh. The biopsies and blood tests her mother had bulldozed through the lab had been thus far unhelpful, as the CT scan was about to be. The dermatologist’s consultation had left the dermatologist in tears after he’d discovered nothing useful in his examination, which had earned him a tirade from her primary physician that called into question his credentials, his chosen specialty, and his choice in hair replacement system. Even the veteran hospital staff had been giving a wide berth to “Hurricane Maheswaran”—evidently not a new nickname—which left her mother to perform most of the tests herself. and every fruitless test result left her mother that much closer to the edge.

The tests wouldn’t reveal anything new. And every time Connie said as much, her mother thought of three new tests to run. Only one person had a chance of removing the gemstone from Connie’s chest now, and her mother wasn’t accepting his calls.

As if on cue, Connie watched through the window as her mother scowled and snatched up her phone from the desk. “Steven,” her mother snapped into the phone, “I swear, if you keep calling this number, I will get a restraining order! If you think I won’t take a child to court, you are wildly mistaken!” Then she slammed the cell phone back down, shot her glare through the glass, and hammered through the intercom, “Connie! Head on the table!”

Twisting her head back, Connie stared at the ceiling. Steven was trying to keep his promise, and his efforts were going as well as Connie’s explanations. Her parents weren’t going to listen to either of them. The useless tests would continue until more of Connie occupied beakers and microscope slides than her actual body. Nobody was left who could help.

The machinery around Connie began to hum, and the large doughnut apparatus began sliding up the length of the table, swallowing her feet-first through its hole. As the doughnut passed over the gemstone beneath her hospital gown, Connie felt her own misery echo back at her.

Then she jerked, struck by a desperate thought. There was nobody left to help, but that didn’t mean
there was no one left to help.

“There was no one left to help. Connie, you have to hold still or we’ll need to start the test over!”

Relaxing her body, Connie closed her eyes and began to imagine a familiar landscape. It was harder than ever to conjure the green, forested embankments and the cool waters running through them, but after several minutes she had created the river in her mind.

As she submerged her thoughts into the cold current, she sent one last handful of words spilling out of her mouth, which emerged so softly that she could hardly hear her own whisper. “Jade, please talk to them. Make them understand.”

Then she sank into the water, holding her self aloft so it broke the surface, easy to grab if someone knew where to reach.

It might have been years of silence under the current before the Gem finally answered. It was the first time she had bothered to speak since their encounter the night before. “What do you expect me to say, human? What could I possibly say that you have not?”

Connie didn’t answer her. She just held her self aloft and hoped.

Eons ticked by without answer. The water grew murky around her with ribbons of her own anxiety. Her thoughts numbed in the cold. But she focused on the proffered self she held just above the babbling current.

Then her self vanished from her hands. Far above, in a different world, her body stirred.

As mottled limbs pushed Connie’s body off the table, swinging around the slow path of the plastic doughnut, her mother’s voice snapped through the intercom, “Connie! The scan wasn’t done. Now get back on the table!”

Body beyond her ability to comply, Connie watched distantly as her mother rose from her chair like a tsunami gathering on the horizon. Her father, sensing the impending natural disaster, ended his call to watch his daughter approach the window with seemingly no concern for the apoplectic parental fury threatening to melt the glass.

“You are not speaking to your progeny right now,” Jade said, leveling her cool brown gaze through the observation window. “The human has asked me to speak to you on her behalf. To what end, not even the stars know. But then, many motivations of your species elude me.”

Both of her parents stared, dumbfounded by the alien cadence of their daughter’s words. They approached the inside of the window, expressions numb. Her father’s phone buzzed, and he lifted it to his ear and said tonelessly, “Not now, Steven,” before ending the call.

Jade squirmed under their attentions. “Er, felicitations. We have never had the chance to converse directly. I am Jade Facet One-Bee-Two-Jay, Cut—”

Slamming her hand against the observation window, her mother snarled, “Get OUT of my DAUGHTER!”

Her sheer volume made Jade flinch. The human-clad Gem collected herself, straightening, and replied evenly, “You are operating under the misapprehension that I have chosen this human in some act of malice. Let me explain—”

“What do you want with her?” her father demanded. “We’ll do whatever you want, but give us back
Pinching the bridge of her loaner nose between thumb and forefinger, Jade groaned, “If you would please allow me to clarify: there is nothing I want from you at this time save for a cessation of these interminable tests—”

“Tell us how to take you out,” her mother snapped.

The air in front of Jade burst, rattling the observation window in its housing. Gown flaring, hair billowing, Jade roared through the gale, “Stop prattling and listen!”

Her resonant words brought silence in the settling air.

Emptying herself with a sigh, Jade said, “Allow me to address several points of your contention with our lamentable situation. Firstly, I am not co-occupying your progeny by choice. Though your species’ grotesque entertainment media has conditioned you to perceive extraterrestrials as invaders and so-called ‘body snatchers,’ I assure you that I am more a prisoner than a conqueror. Even now, the human is laboring intently to grant me agency enough to address you directly. Were her concentration to falter, she would reassume control of our body. When she is awake I possess almost no control of our primary functions.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed slowly. Resting a hand against the glass, she said, “How did this happen? Why are you inside Connie?”

“I was not, erm, awake for the event that bonded us,” Jade admitted. “But the details relayed to me coincide with everything the human has told you. I was…corrupted. She and the hybrid dissipated my form in battle. Then, as the hybrid healed the wounds she had sustained in our altercation, she and I became physically combined.”

His fists clenching at his sides, Connie’s father said, “So you are trying to hurt Connie!”

“NO!” Jade bellowed, and the word became a tempest. The posters on the walls tore free from their masking tape to cascade through the maelstrom in the room, countertops emptied as their contents were swept away. Her borrowed hair crackled into a halo that framed her dangerous expression. Even the CT scanner rocked in its housing, straining against the bolts securing it to the floor. Connie nearly lost her grip on the river at the sight of her parents cowering behind the observation window, which rattled in its frame nearly to the point of shattering.

Then Jade caught herself, smoothing her unfamiliar face. The air stilled, and the loose flotsam in the room clattered to the floor. Pushing her frazzled hair back, Jade said, “My apologies. The human’s safety is a sensitive subject. But that lands me to my next point: I am suffering these primitive examinations voluntarily. Even when the human controls this form, I am still capable of summoning a gale that could tear this structure from its foundation. I could leave right now, and no one in this building could stop me.”

Slowly her parents edged back from the window, eyes wide at the dark words coming from their daughter’s mouth.

Her tone softening, Jade said, “But I will never do such a thing. Harm to any denizen of this structure would cause this human extreme duress. And I have sworn that I will allow no harm to come to this human through any action or inaction on my part. And to that end, I am compelled to point out that your actions now are counterproductive to the human’s well-being and my ultimate removal from her body.”
Stiffening, a spark of defiance returned to her mother’s features. “We are trying to figure out how to remove you! You’re what’s counterproductive to her well-being!”

“Correct,” Jade said patiently. “And after you have finished bombarding her with mostly benign radiation and carving out pieces of her, you will discover no physiological abnormality aside from the un-diagnosable lesions in her epidermis and the large mineral deposit anchored to the anterior of her sternum.”

“How can you be so sure?” her father asked, laying a hand on his wife’s arm to quell her retort.

“Because a Gem’s body is normally a conscious manifestation of her mind, and while this body is not, it is still just as known to me. I am aware of every function happening in here, often to my regret. I am also aware, thanks to the efforts of the reb…the ‘Crystal Gems,’ that the human’s mind and mine are coexisting across our respective centers: she exists as much in my gemstone as I do in her mind. She told you this working theory, but you are willfully disregarding it.”

Her mother bristled. “Connie is just a child! She doesn’t understand conventional neuroscience, let alone whatever you are! Besides which, how…” She choked, stumbling over the words. “How can we believe what she says if she’s hiding the truth from us?”

“Priyanka!” her father said, shocked.

“She would do anything to keep her lessons with Pearl,” her mother exclaimed, eyes glimmering as she pressed fiercely toward the glass. “She knew we would be upset if something happened to her in those little patrols, or wargames, or whatever it is they do. So she hid it from us. She hid ‘you’ from us! And look at her!” she sobbed.

It was all Connie could do to stay submerged at the sight of her mother’s tears. In the reflection of the glass she could see her own tired face mottled with brown spots. More spots covered her hands and arms as Jade raised them in a placating gesture.

“She hid my presence from you,” Jade agreed, “and you are right to be upset. The decision was partially a selfish one. Her allegiance to the Crystal Gems is a profound one, and she did not want to risk you forcing her to break it.”

Her mother’s tearful gaze fell to the floor.

“But there was a significant concern for self-preservation motivating her silence as well. She feared you would hear her without understanding, and that you would remove her from the care of the only Gems on the planet, the only ones who might be able to help her,” Jade said. “And so you have. Were her fears invalid?”

“I…It’s more complicated than that,” her mother protested weakly.

Glaring, Jade told them, “If you believe my removal will restore this human, let us simply shatter me right now. I have no great love for this existence. Surely you can procure a hammer from one of the many shamans in the building. Quickly, if you would please. I would rather not linger...
unnecessarily.”

Both of her parents hesitated, trading an uncertain look between them.

“You will not shatter me because you believe your progeny, and you understand that it could be
dangerous for her,” Jade told them. “What you are refusing to understand is that the nature of my
connection to the human means there is nothing you can do for her in the matter. To acknowledge
this point would be to admit to yourselves that you cannot help her. And since that is too painful a
reality for you to confront, you all remain here, caught in an impasse of your collective making.”

Tears flowed freely down her mother’s face. The ironclad doctor pressed a hand to her mouth,
shaking. Her father braced his wife by the shoulders, seemingly as much to keep himself upright as
to comfort her.

Her strange features softened from their scowl, and Jade gazed solemnly through the window. “Your
daughter loves you with everything she is. Your daughter lied to you. These two facts are wholly
unrelated in this matter. The sooner you accept the truth of your own powerlessness to cure her
malady, the sooner you will be able to actually help her. It is a bitter truth, I know. But the longer
you refute it, the more it will hurt you when you are forced to confront it.”

Even deep in the river, Connie could feel their shared eyes stinging in sympathy. It wasn’t her
family’s schism that brought Jade to the brink of tears, Connie knew.

Then Connie felt a presence stirring the waters. The edge of her self broke the current as, far above,
Jade said, “Human, I believe you should resume control of our form. Your parents appear to be in
great distress and require your assistance.” Nodding to the window, Jade added, “I was glad for the
opportunity to address you directly at last. Please do not take my observations as condemnation of
your overall caregiving abilities.”

And with that, Connie felt herself lifted gently out of the waters, which ceased to be. The
embankments, the trees, and all the other constructs of her mind were wiped away like a word being
cleared from a chalkboard. She twitched at the sudden transition, blinking at her parents with eyes
that were hers again.

“Mom, Dad, I…” she said, fumbling for a place to pick up Jade’s conversation. “I never meant…”

Her father, still grasping his wife’s shoulder, turned and jerked at the door to the tiny observation
room. They were both gone in the hallway beyond before Connie could think of what to say. The
door clunked shut in their wake, the sound of it slapping Connie’s mouth shut.

For the space of a few heartbeats, Connie couldn’t breathe. The walls began to spin around her
waking nightmare. She pictured her parents piling into the car outside and just driving away, both of
them too horrified by the calamity Connie had brought upon their family to deal with her anymore.
They would keep driving until they outran the very memory of their weird, thoughtless, selfish,
awful daughter. How much easier would their lives be without her? How much better?

Then the door to the room slammed open and her parents pushed through. Her father and mother fell
at either side of her, kneeling as they wrapped her between them in a fearsome hug.

Her breath left her in a shudder as Connie melted into their embrace. She cried great, silent, ugly
tears, feeling globs of snot and spit soaking into her mother’s lab coat. Her mother didn’t even seem
to notice, which only made Connie cry harder. “I’m sorry,” Connie wheezed with every breath. “I’m
sorry. I’m sorry.”
“We love you, Connie,” her father murmured into her hair, and kissed the top of her head. “We’re going to figure this out. We love you.”

As her own crying began to ease, Connie felt her mother shaking just as hard as she was. The fierce, fearsome doctor whimpered, “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I love you, Connie.”

“I’m sorry,” Connie whimpered back.

Her father squeezed both of them tighter and shushed them with a thick voice. “We’ll figure this out. It’s okay,” he said.

As they fell messily into one another, knees aching on the cool tile, the PA system crackled at them from the wall: “Doctor Maheswaran, there’s a Doctor Esteban Universidad on line five calling for your consultation. Doctor Universidad for Doctor Maheswaran, line five.”

A breathless laugh slipped through her mother’s soft sobs. “Tell Steven to thank Jade,” she murmured, “because if that kid calls me one more time, he’ll be deaf in one ear.”

“And tell Jade that we’re grateful to her too,” her father added.

Deep inside the cloud looming inside her chest, Connie felt a kernel of something else. Gratitude? Relief?

“She knows,” Connie told them, smiling through her tears.
Not Enough

Every step they took across the beach, plodding closer to the house nestled beneath the leviathan form of the temple, made Connie's stomach churn harder. Her father looked little better, his brow heavy in the late afternoon shadow of the cliff, though he managed a tight-lipped smile when he caught Connie looking at him. Her mother seemed mostly composed, but the white knuckles peering out from the sleeves of her lab coat betrayed her unease.

The perfunctory bites Connie had taken from the drive-thru meal they'd gotten on the way out to Beach City tried to jump up her throat. That her parents had actually stopped for fast food, refusing to delay their trip from the hospital long enough for leftovers and a change of clothes at home, told her how serious they were taking Jade's words. It usually took their entire lives being packed into a moving truck to warrant any meal assembled in under three minutes.

A few outsider reactions to fast food might have distracted Connie from her anxiety, but Jade had been silent since their departure from the hospital. The faint inklings that rattled around in the back of her mind gave Connie little insight into how Jade would react to seeing the Crystal Gems again. But like offering Jade her voice in the hospital, Connie could only wait and hope for the best.

As they drew closer to the house, Steven threw himself over the porch railing and almost tackled Connie into a hug. The embrace was warm and welcome, but it quickly ended under the cool gazes of Connie's parents. Lined up along the porch rail, the rest of the Crystal Gems watched, their expressions likewise unreadable. Connie had expecting the temple Gems to be waiting for them, but she was surprised to see Lapis waiting with them. The lithe blue sprite stood a noticeable distance from the others, her body tensed and aimed away from the looming form of the temple.

Pulling back from Connie, Steven turned his awkward smile up at her parents. "Hey, Doctor and Mister Maheswaran. I, um… Thank you for answering my fifty-seventh call. I know it was a little rude of me to—"

Her mother lifted a hand to stop him. "Steven, we will talk about what you did shortly," she said, her voice pointedly flat, "but first there are some things we need to discuss with your…with the rest of your family."

"Oh. Sure," he said. Smile dimming, Steven led them up the steps. The creaking wood beneath them sounded like screams in the silence that came to grip them. Pearl kept her hands folded before her, brow furrowed with concern, while Amethyst rubbed at the back of her neck, glancing back over her shoulder as if considering her best escape route out of the uncomfortable moment. Only Garnet and her implacable poker face weathered the silence unscathed.

Connie started for the door, but her mother's hand on her shoulder gave her pause. "Connie, would you please wait outside with Steven? Your father and I would like to speak with Pearl and the others first. Alone."

"But—" Connie started to protest, and then bit back her words. Her parents had promised to hear out everything before deciding what to do next, and that she would be part of that decision. But if thinking about her own lies of omission still made her feel queasy, she could only imagine how her parents felt. She would need to earn back their trust, and she knew that letting the Gems speak on her behalf could go a long way toward winning back that trust. "Okay," she said, and bottled her frustrated sigh.

Pearl opened the door, gesturing her guests inside. "Of course. Would you, um, like some tea? Or
"Tea would be very nice, thank you," Connie's mother said stiffly, nodding as she and her husband disappeared into the house. Pearl and Garnet followed, both corralling Amethyst inside with them so the Quartz couldn't bolt.

Lapis, though, stayed outside. As soon as the screen door shut, she knelt and rested a hand on Connie's shoulder. "How are you both doing?" she asked, eyes bright with concern. "When Jade didn't answer my last message, I went to Steven, and he told me some of what happened."

Connie's skin still ached, the pain even deeper than the white bandages over her biopsy sites. She caught Steven staring at her bandaged arms and forced a smile for him. "It's not so bad," she said, which wasn't technically a lie. The tests hadn't hurt nearly as much as hitting her head on the basketball court or waking up from the aftermath of her transformation had.

"Let me help with those," Steven said, and then licked his palm.

Thinking twice, Connie pulled back from his sticky touch and said, "Wait. My parents are still wrapping their heads around a lot of new stuff today. Even if Mom knows you can heal people, maybe we should minimize the, um... 'not-normalness' for now."

There was a flash of despair in Steven's features before he managed to plaster over it with a smile. Connie had to hide her own cringe. She knew better than anyone how much harm the word normal could do to Steven, especially coming from someone who cared about him. But as she heard her mother's hushed, intense murmurings through the screen door, she didn't know what else to do.

The awkwardness hidden in their words made Lapis squirm. Her voice thinned as she asked, "What about Jade?"

Connie waited a beat, but Jade didn't feed her any response to relay. "She's quiet," admitted Connie. "Since we changed, she's been having a hard time dealing with..."

"...her corruption," Steven finished, his mouth tightening.

Nodding, Connie touched at her rumpled T-shirt, feeling the warm gemstone underneath. "I want to talk to her, but I don't even know where to start. She managed to say just the right things to get my parents to come here. What can I say to her that'll even begin to help her with something like this?"

"Nothing." The word fell from Lapis like a hammer, startling Connie. Lapis stared down at her feet, shuffling her toes across the patio boards, letting her hair fall across her face. "There aren't words for what happened. You can't say anything or do anything to make it better. I don't think there is a 'better' after something like that. There's nothing."

Lapis swiped at her eyes, grimacing. But then she jolted in surprise when Steven took her hand in his, curling his fingers around the glistening streak in her palm. Reaching out for Connie with his other hand, he said to them both, "We can do this. I know it's not enough. But it's not nothing."

With a shaky breath, Connie took Lapis's and Steven's hands. The Gem who had once threatened to end her life in a cracked fit of rage squeezed back, offering Connie a small, sad smile.

They stayed in their circle for a long spell, just holding on to one another, until Connie heard her father calling from inside the house. "Connie, would you come in here, please?"

"You too, Steven," Garnet called after.
Both teens gave Lapis a look as their circle separated. In reply, Lapis stepped back from the screen
door, her liquid wings flexing out of her teardrop gemstone. "You guys go ahead. Peridot will want
to know about all of this. She'll probably think of five new tests before I'm done telling her."

Connie couldn't begrudge Lapis her hasty exit from the scene, and nodded. The Gem took to the air
and disappeared over the cliff's edge faster than Connie could reach for the door's handle. Treading
meekly, Connie and Steven entered the house and found the Gems and adults waiting for them
gathered around the kitchen island counter, with two cups of lukewarm tea sitting untouched
between them.

Then Connie stopped in her tracks, frozen by the sight of the long, broad pink sheath and hilt cradled
in her mother's arms.

Her features hardened, Connie's mother held the sheath out expectantly. "Your father and I have
spoken with the Gems, and we've agreed that, before we decide anything else, we need to see
everything."

Taking the sword on autopilot, Connie tried to process the words that accompanied the return of her
sword. "Everything?" she repeated. "As in…?"

"Everything," Garnet answered, crossing her arms.

Twilight painted the stones of the Sky Arena in warm pink hues. The colors belied the chill of the
wind, cold and cutting in the thin air. Connie hadn't remembered the arena being so cold, but she
rarely trained so late, and she was still a good deal skinnier than the days when she had been training
in earnest. Her sneakers gripped the flagstone beneath her as she shifted in place, waiting at the
center of what remained of the floor.

Unlike most days, the stands of the arena this time were veritably packed. Steven sat with her parents
in the first row of the spectator benches. Her mother and father still looked shaken by their screaming
trip through the glowing tunnel between warp pads. Amethyst and Garnet sat one row behind them,
the latter still inscrutable and the former looking miserable for having been dragged along, a feeling
Connie understood too well.

It hadn't just been the trip across warp pads that had left her parents so distraught. The cloud cover
beneath them was breaking, revealing glimpses of the pastoral land that lay far, far below them.
Those slivers of distant landscape, along with the floating pillars and rubble, made it abundantly clear
to Connie's parents how high they had come, how little was supporting the arena from underneath,
and how much they didn't understand about what kept the structure aloft.

Her teacher stood before Connie, pale skin painted the same color as the arena in the late sun. Brows
knitted with concern, Pearl said, "Don't worry. Your parents just want to see what you've been doing
with us. So we'll show them."

Connie glanced back at her parents, trying to see past their confused, slightly queasy expressions.
"Yes, ma'am," she said reflexively. Then, her voice cracking, she added, "I just wish I knew what
they were expecting."

The creases in Pearl's brow deepened. "So do I. And to be perfectly honest, I think they do too," she
admitted. Then she banished the worry from her features, and said, "It's been a while since you've
trained, and you're still recovering from…well, a lot. Perhaps we should take a step back with a
Level Two sparring partner? Or, if you'd prefer, you and I could run through some drills together."
From the corner of her eye, Connie watched her parents watching her. They had always been extremely, sometimes obsessively supportive of her pursuits. Though they didn't share her enthusiasm for fiction, they made sure she was never wanting for books, and they had taken her to the first two Dogcopter movies without complaint. They clapped at her first violin recital even after she had missed a note. Extracurriculars were a must to make her future collegiate dreams a reality, which is why they never stopped pushing her to learn.

Her relationship with the sword wasn't about learning something for the love of learning it, or for the chance to add another line to some college application in some nebulous future. Connie knew that her parents probably couldn't understand that, and it was because she had never given them the chance to understand. And that had been her mistake. They needed to understand, because there was no room left for obfuscation or half-truths between them.

From behind her parents, Garnet adjusted the heavy visor over her eyes. The motion caught Connie's attention as Garnet tilted her expansive hair in a slow, deliberate nod. Connie herself wasn't sure what she was about to do, but perhaps Garnet did, and the forward-thinking Gem would support her.

"I think we should use a Level Four, ma'am," Connie told Pearl.

Her teacher's eyebrows rose. "Connie, you were doing well against Level Threes, but—"

"Please," Connie pleaded gently. "Trust me?"

With a beat of hesitation, Pearl nodded. Closing her eyes, the Gem pirouetted, her gemstone tracing bright lines through the air as she conjured a translucent blue likeness of herself. The hologram stood motionless, its outline faintly luminous against the red sky, as Pearl cleared the field. Its eyes blank, the Holo-Pearl stared back at Connie with an emptiness that Connie's twisting, squirming insides envied.

"I'm pretty sure you're awake in there, Jade," Connie murmured too softly even for the oblivious Holo-Pearl to hear. "No helping me on this one. Okay?"

The cold wind whistled through the ruins, the only reply Connie received before Pearl's shout began the match.

Connie rolled backwards, gritting her teeth as her bony shoulder grinded against the stone floor. The tumble kept her inches ahead of the Holo-Pearl's spear, which it manifested and swung in one blindingly fast motion. It took Connie's hand two tries to find the hilt behind her before she could draw her sword in reply. Her feet faltered as she tried to catch her balance.

The Holo-Pearl struck just as Connie found her center. Connie's sneakers squeaked for purchase as she slid, catching the blue spear with the flat of her blade braced against her off hand. Spinning, the hologram struck again, and again, forcing Connie to retreat. The spiraled spearhead arced in flashes so fast that Connie only saw the blur that followed the strikes.

Jaw clenched, Connie tried to time her blocks to wedge an opening into the hologram's assault. Her arms burned like fire, and her sword grew heavier under each block, the hilt slipping in her grasp. But the Holo-Pearl was only growing faster.

At the hologram's downward blow, Connie shifted her stance. The spearhead glanced along Connie's blade and buried itself in a flagstone. Jagged chips sprayed from the spear's tip as Connie whirled, throwing her whole body into a riposte that brought her sword around in a swing that would cleave Holo-Pearl at the waist.
Holo-Pearl flipped lightly over Connie's swing, landing on the opposite side of its wedged spear. With nothing to catch it, Connie's sword dragged its wielder behind its arc, staggering Connie as the hologram jerked its spear out of the stone. A swift blue kick knocked the hilt from Connie's sweaty hand, and a sweep of the spear threw Connie's feet over her head, tossing her to the ground in a flat heap.

Shouts of alarm broke through the ringing in Connie's ears. Her eyes darted to the stands, where her parents were trying to leap from their seats to come charging at the empty doppelganger attacking their daughter. But Garnet held Connie's parents with one hand each, grasping their shoulders to keep them seated. No matter how they twisted and screamed, the Gem would not let them onto the arena floor.

Connie tried to roll back toward her sword, but Holo-Pearl was too fast again. A translucent foot landed on Connie's chest, crushing the breath out of her. The glowing spear descended for the final blow. With nothing left in her body, Connie could only close her eyes and listen to her parents' terrified cries.

The spear tip touched lightly against Connie's nose. In its bright, flat voice, the Holo-Pearl announced, "The child is dead! Victory: accepted!" Then it evaporated into dwindling motes, disappearing into the breeze.

As Connie shambled back to her feet, Garnet let go of her parents, who exploded out from the stands and charging across the arena. They were next to Connie faster than the Holo-Pearl could dissipate, and ran through the errant pixels to kneel at Connie's side, their eyes wide and voices hoarse.

"Are you hurt?" her father cried, propping up Connie with an arm around her waist.

"You could have died!" her mother snapped. The frantic doctor fixed Pearl with a glare fearsome enough to force the ancient Gem warrior back a step. "What was that horror show supposed to be?" she demanded.

"I… I, um…" Pearl stammered, lifting her hands in a calming gesture.

"It was practice," Connie groaned, and leaned into her father. Her chest heaved, her lungs working to take back what the Holo-Pearl had stomped out of her. "I'm okay, I swear. Pearl and the other Gems won't let anything happen to me while I'm here with them."

Smiling nervously, Pearl said, "She's actually becoming quite good. She's a natural, really. It took me decades to make the kind of progress Connie has made in just a year."

Shaking her head, Connie said, "But I'm still not good enough yet. I need to get a lot better."

Her mother gaped, and then clasped a hand over her mouth, her eyes glimmering. "Why?" she said through her hand, the word all but a sob.

Connie watched Amethyst, Garnet, and Steven approaching slowly, taking up with Pearl in a quiet show of support. The pale Gem looked shaken by the horrified reaction from her student's parents. Breaking gently from her parents, Connie collected her sword from the ground, and then sheathed it as she stopped before Pearl. She offered her teacher a bow, and then took her place at Pearl's side.

"All those fights I've told you about," Connie explained, struggling to keep the guilt out of her voice, "against Jasper, and the corrupted Gems, like Jade… It's a lot scarier than I made it sound. It's a million times scarier than practicing against a Holo-Pearl here."

"Then don't fight!" her mother demanded, trembling. "You don't have to do any of this! If the Gems
are really these amazing immortal warriors, then let them fight! They don't need you! Please, just… just stop!"

Hearing the fear in her mother's voice nearly broke Connie. Then she felt Steven's arm brush against hers as he stepped up to stand with her. "I know the Gems don't need me, Mom," Connie said, her gaze growing heavy for just a moment. Then she looked up and added, "But I can't not fight. Not now that I know what's really out there. I can't pretend like none of this is real."

"None of what?" her father insisted. "What is any of this for?"

Connie didn't know where to begin. But Garnet laid a hand on her shoulder, and said, "If you still want to see, we can show you." The Gem looked down at Connie, and added, "We can show all of you. But you have to understand, it won't bring you any peace."

Through the gentle squeeze at her arm, Connie understood that Garnet's final words were meant for her. It was Garnet's way of warning her, or offering her a choice. Perhaps the Gem thought Connie might still turn back, might take her parents home to try and rebuild what their relationship had been. The Gems would still help Connie and Jade separate, if they could, but they would understand if Connie thought she couldn't continue deeper into their world.

Only it wasn't just their world anymore. And Connie hadn't lied to her parents. Knowing what little she did, she knew she could never ignore the threats that Homeworld's war had left to fester on their world.

Connie nodded. "Show us," she said.
The stories Steven had told her, and the time she had spent with the other Gems, and the images conjured from her own imagination had left Connie feeling prepared. She had been certain she already knew what to expect.

Her first sight of the Prime Kindergarten shattered that certainty.

When the glow of the warp pad faded, Connie found herself deep within a pair of dusky jaws that were threatening to snap closed around them all. A sliver of cloudy sky hung above them like a thin, winding ribbon. It took Connie another panicked second to realize that the jaws around her were cliff faces, high and straight and uncomfortably close. It as fewer than a dozen paces between the walls, and even as Connie stared, she thought she could see them closing in like the walls of a detention-level garbage compactor.

A whistling sound stirred in the breeze. Connie looked upward and, through the haze of dust permeating the air, saw endless rows and columns of holes that perforated the cliff face to either side. The openings were exactly as Steven had described, too orderly and deep to possibly be natural, making the canyon appear as a split honeycomb that had been drilled into solid rock. Each hole was as big as or bigger than Connie, and it made her hind brain shiver to imagine the legions of Gem soldiers who had crawled from the very ground to threaten the Earth.

The worst of it, though, was the way the place felt. Connie's nostrils cracked and dried at her first breath, as if the Kindergarten were sucking the moisture out of the air, the land, and everything standing in it. Dirt crunched underfoot like gravel that had been ground into a fine dust. Despite the honeycombed walls, there wasn't a single bug in sight, and no sign that anything larger might possibly live among the stone. There wasn't a scrap of lichen clinging to the walls or a single weed rooted stubbornly to the canyon floor. The Kindergarten wasn't simply empty. It was desiccated.

Bouncing off of the crowded warp pad, Amethyst spread her arms and grinned full circle. "Ahh," she sighed wistfully, "it's good to be back!"

Connie turned, surveying the area like Amethyst did. Her stomach dropped at the sight of the multi-legged leviathan devices strewn about the Kindergarten. They were each as tall as a house, held upright by spidery struts, and tipped with drills that could chew through rock as though it were paper. It was one thing to hear Steven tell her about the injectors, the machines that planted gemstones into the ground to incubate into fully realized Gems. It was another thing to see those ancient machines in person, and to imagine them scuttling up vertical rock, impregnating the Earth by the dozens, their drills screaming through living stone.

The rest of the Gems stepped away, leaving Connie and her parents to gape from the dusty warp pad. Her parents' mirrored expressions of horror told Connie that they had been even less prepared than she had been, despite the Gems' hesitant explanations before leaving the Sky Arena.

"It's…dead," her father said hoarsely.

Amethyst nodded as she finished surveying each direction of the canyon. "Yeah, the place has been pretty quiet since I moved out, give or take a giant goopy robot ball. You guys are probably the first plain ol' humans to come here in a long time." She ruffled Steven's hair, laughing as he playfully waved off her hand.

Connie caught her mother's hand, steadying her as they staggered off the pad, their senses consumed.
by the high walls enclosing them. She felt her mother's hand shaking in her own. It was impossible to blame her, as Connie felt her own skin crawling. The Sky Arena was a marvel left over from a lost era, a place of beauty and mystery. This place was a scar, almost still an open wound carved into the very ground. Every aspect of the Kindergarten screamed at them with its emptiness.

After two tries, her mother found her voice again. "This place is where you make new Gems?" she asked.

"This is where Homeworld made Gems," Garnet clarified. "One of two places on Earth built for the purposes of making new Gems. And if Homeworld had gotten its way, there would have been many more like this Kindergarten in locations all across the planet."

Connie saw a familiar look of concern from Steven, but this one was aimed toward Amethyst. The stocky purple Quartz was frowning in the wake of Garnet's ominous words, but not for the same reason as Connie's parents. An uncomfortable story arose in Connie's memory, one Steven had told her of his first time in the Kindergarten. The desolation here meant something different to Amethyst, a meaning that her parents' reactions were inadvertently threatening to offend.

But Pearl stepped in, laying a hand on Amethyst's shoulder in a reassuring touch. "A lot of good Gems came out of this place," Pearl told the elder Maheswarans, "many of whom fought to protect this planet. But you can see what kind of toll it has taken on the area as a result. That's why we made sure it couldn't be used to do any further harm to the Earth."

Folding her arms across her broad chest, Garnet added, "And it isn't just the Kindergartens. There are dozens of places like this all over the world. Places where the war left its mark. Places still dangerous for humans."

Slowly, the tension drained from Amethyst's shoulders, and she sighed. "Yeah," she agreed begrudgingly. "That's why we never brought Connie here or any of those other places. So she'd be safe. Isn't that what you wanted?" she said to the newcomers.

"It's not the only reason," Pearl said quickly, her gaze darting to Connie's face. "...but it's the best reason."

Standing in the Kindergarten at last, Connie thought she finally understood. The Gems were still as magical, as brave, as selfless, as powerful, and as caring as she had always known them to be. But they were also this place. Connie knew she would never have the courage to bring someone she cared about to a physical manifestation of the worst parts of her. She could never blame Pearl for being reluctant to do the same.

Edging closer to the cliff wall, her father peered into the depths of a hole proportioned for an Olympic weightlifter. He ran his hand along the weathered inner lip of the hole, tracing the rough outline of what must have been a massive soldier who had emerged prior to the start of recorded history. Then his gaze turned up to the myriad rows of openings above them, many of which were even larger than the one he touched. As she watched his face, Connie saw her father make the same connection she had made from Steven's stories. Maybe he even imaged the same faceless, fearsome legions Connie herself had imagined.

Motion at the back of the hole sent her father scrambling backwards with a yelp. He stumbled away in time to avoid the curved, backwards claws of the creature that leapt from the opening.

It was the size of a large dog, its skin chitinous and glistening red in the dull light. The creature hopped aggressively, rising up on chicken-like legs to claw at the air between it and Connie's father. When it saw the small crowd staring at it in surprise, its bulbous head split open into four toothy
petals, and it shrieked at them. A tentacular tongue fluttered from its maw, a red gemstone glittering at the tip.

Connie was in front of her father in an instant. Pink light flashed in the corner of her vision, and she could feel Steven at her side, his shield manifested at the ready.

The aggressive motion silenced the corrupted Gem. Slurping back its bejeweled tongue, the creature scampered backwards, then twisted and sank its claws into the walls. It sprinted straight up the vertical face of the cliff, swerving around holes as it moved with preternatural assuredness on the smooth rock.

Amethyst ran mere steps behind it. "Get back here, squatter!" she cried. Rolling into a ball, Amethyst became a blur of white motion, spin-dashing up the cliff side in pursuit of the creature.

"Amethyst, don't—" were the only words Pearl could manage before the Quartz disappeared over the high edge of the cliff. The rest of her warning came out as a frustrated groan. Reaching to the stone on her forehead, she withdrew a fresh spear in a flash. She was so intent on the spot where Amethyst had vanished that she missed the startled jolt her motion had given the elder Maheswarans. Connie, though, did not miss their discomfit.

Hands aglow, Garnet said, "Steven, stay here with Connie and watch over her parents. We'll be back as quickly as we can." Her thick gauntlets manifested, clenched into fists. Then she blurred into the air with an effortless jump, clearing the high edge of the cliff too quickly for the eye to follow.

"If anything else comes along, take the warp pad back to the temple immediately," Pearl instructed the teens. Her expression apologetic, she nodded to Connie's hands and added, "You, er, hopefully won't need that, Connie. But keep it close anyway."

Connie looked down, surprised at the sight of the sword held in her steady hands, its edge challenging the empty air where the corrupted Gem had stood. She couldn’t remember the conscious decision to draw her blade, only the frightened sound her father had made. "Yes, ma'am," Connie said, and sheathed the blade.

Pearl leapt, arcing between the two rock faces, her feet kicking off of the openings to carry her upward until she flipped over the edge of the cliff and vanished. In the booming silence that followed the Gems' departure, Connie suddenly envied the corrupted creature. Maybe it was tormented with the loss of its shape and being hunted, soon to be dissipated, but at least it wasn't stuck in a canyon with its own shell-shocked parents.

Blinking slowly, her father lowered his gaze from the dizzying height of the cliff, which the Gems had cleared as easily as any hurdle. "Does this sort of thing happen often?" he stammered.

"Not really often," Steven insisted quickly. Then, cringing with mild guilt, he admitted, "But not really not-often. A lot of what the Crystal Gems do is finding and taking care of corrupted Gems like those."

A twinge made Connie's innards clench, the strongest reaction she had felt from Jade since their leaving the hospital.

"Take care of them," her mother repeated, weighing each syllable carefully. "You mean that creature is like the ones that attacked us in the hospital."

Connie traded a shrug with Steven. "Kind of," she admitted. That moment wasn't the best time to explain the difference between a corrupted Gem and the forcibly combined fragments of the Gem
mutants. It was distinction without difference, anyway. All of those twisted creatures were victims of the Diamonds.

Her father suddenly twitched at a new thought. "Do they leave you two alone like this a lot?" he demanded.

Once more, Steven was quick to reassure, "Not a lot! I mean, not when we're out on missions or patrols, anyway. They'll leave us alone at the house sometimes if they think it's too dangerous to bring us along on a mission."

"But the house is where Jade attacked you," her father insisted, his face clenching around the ugly thought. "If they had been with you then, Connie wouldn't have a Gem stuck inside of her!"

A surge of anger rose to shatter through the guilt stuck in her throat. "Dad, that wasn't their fault! No one could have known that this would happen. It's never happened before, and they've been here for thousands of years!" she snapped.

"But you were attacked at the house, weren't you?" her father pressed, his voice rising to fill the canyon. "You're not even safe at their home, are you?"

Steven wilted at the accusation, but Connie stepped up with volume to match her father's. "I don't go there to be safe! The Crystal Gems are doing something important! They aren't the only ones living in Beach City, and if they aren't there to deal with threats like these, then someone has to!"

"Connie," her mother barked reflexively, "do not take that tone with your father! You will maintain a civil indoor voice if you want to be treated like an adult in this discussion."

Throwing up her hands, Connie cried, "We are not indoors! We are really, really outdoors right now, and we're all shouting! You said you wanted to discuss what to do about me, about Jade, and about the Gems! So if I have to shout for you to hear my side, then I'm gonna shout too!"

"We're shouting because we're terrified for you!" her father cried, throwing up his own hands in reply. "What do you expect us to think? This is monsters, and aliens, and sky battles, and death canyons! When you said you were protecting people, I thought you meant from other people, or…or whatever the Gems are!"

Swinging her wild eyes upon her mother, Connie said, "Mom, you saw those things at the hospital. You already knew what was out there. Right?"

The question made her mother fumble for words. "I thought I did. But then you got hurt, and you hid it from us! Everything I was afraid of suddenly came true, and you kept it a secret, and all I can think about is what happens when you get hurt again, or worse! If the Gems can't do anything about Jade being stuck inside of you, what else will happen to you that they don't understand? What else can't they protect you from?"

"Nobody can protect me from random chance!" Connie yowled. "You can't expect that from the Gems! That's not fair!"

"I don't care about fair!" her mother screamed. "I can't expect that from the Gems? That's exactly what I expect from myself! Your father and I are trying to keep you alive, and if we have to lock you in your room until we're all old and gray to make that happen, then I'll do it!"

The words echoed back from the towering cliffs, slapping Connie silent. She stared at her huffing mother, her jaw slowly dropping as she listened to her mother's cry over and over again.
Shifting awkwardly, Steven rubbed at his elbow and muttered, "Seems like that would be a tough living situation, bathroom-wise."

Eyes wide, her mother lifted a hand to her mouth, her anger broken by the shock on Connie's face. "Connie," she squeaked, her voice a ghost of its former shout, "I…I didn't mean…"

"You did mean it," Connie said. Heat poured into her features, hardening them into a scowl. "You want me to just forget about all of this, pretend like everything's okay. You want me to sit at home and study all alone, to go back to having books instead of a life. You want the old rules back on steroids. Grounded forever, no abacus required."

"Connie," her father said, "that isn't fair—"

"I don't care about fair!" Connie snapped, startling both her parents backwards. "You look at the Gems and just see a bunch of danger, but you don't see all the good they do! Human beings wouldn't even be around if it weren't for them! They're the only ones dealing with these huge problems that most people never even see. The world was going to explode last year, but it didn't, because the Gems saved us! Again!"

As her parents gaped, trying to process the idea of the planet exploding underneath them, Steven chuckled awkwardly to fill the silence. "That's a pretty good story, actually. We built this drill…"

Loathe though she was to interrupt him, Connie bowled apart Steven's story with a calm, bright, brittle voice. "You're my parents. I love you both so, so much. And I'm just a kid right now. If you tell me I have to stop being around the Gems, I will. I'll stay home, just like you want." Expressions of relief settled into her parents faces, until she bowled apart those as well. "But the second I turn eighteen, I'll pack my things, drop out of school, and go straight to the Gems to train again."

"Connie!" her father exclaimed, horrified.

Steven seemed shocked by the promise as well, but Connie simply nodded. "It isn't because I don't love you enough, or because I want to get hurt or put myself in danger. I do love you, and this stuff scares me as much as it does you, I promise. It isn't just because Steven is the best friend I could ever have, or because I like fighting. He is, and…and I do," she admitted. Then, straightening, she told them, "It's because the Crystal Gems save the world, and if I can help with that even a little—if I can do anything to keep you both the way you want to keep me safe—then I have to."

Connie felt her words grab hold of the guilt sitting pendulously in her stomach and drag the weight from her as she spoke them. She wasn't absolved of the lies she had told, and she knew it. But the whole truth was finally out for her family to know. Standing in the Kindergarten, with whispered echoes of her confession reverberating around them, Connie felt a small modicum of peace at knowing that, whatever else happened, she had finally said what she should have said from the beginning.

Her parents stood in mute shock, both of them utterly, unnaturally still. Something huge was happening behind their wide, blank eyes. Connie could feel it like the pressure of an oncoming storm, and braced herself.

But before that storm could break, a chiming noise activating drew Connie's attention to the warp pad behind her. The pad filled with a column of light, and she wondered if the Gems had actually chased their corrupted quarry all the way to another pad, or if Lapis or Peridot had decided to join their expedition for some reason.

Neither possibility was the case. Instead, as the light on the pad faded, Connie saw two figures, one
pale and mountainous, the other wiry and slate gray. With a shock of dread, Connie watched the warp pad deposit Milky Quartz and Flint into the Kindergarten less than a dozen feet from where she, Steven, and her family stood.
The act of fighting drew a lot of complicated feelings out of Connie. She loved to fight. Swordplay was precision, calculation, improvisation, anticipation, perspiration, dedication, courage, and timing. The sword demanded the rhythm of music, and the grace of dance, and an exhilarating propensity for bruises and cuts. It made her mind and body work together at maximum capacity, and she adored it for pushing her past her old limits.

But for all the excitement she felt whenever she drew her blade, she hated to see people hurt. Her own training scrapes only bothered her because she knew they would worry her parents. The sight of Steven hurt and overwhelmed after his abduction had been one of the scariest things she had ever seen at the time, and so many things she learned afterward were scarier by entire orders of magnitude. She couldn't stand the thought of people hurting because of something she did or failed to do.

And beneath that tangled web, Connie felt terrified that she would never be enough. Gems weren't infallible, but compared to her sweaty teenage body, they were made of shock and awe. They would always be stronger and faster than her, and their superpowers would always give them innumerable advantages against her. The corrupted victims and the new Homeworld invaders would always have the power to hurt everyone she cared about no matter how well she learned the blade.

All of those feelings crashed together at the sight of Milky Quartz and Flint freshly arrived on the Prime Kindergarten warp pad. Her heart thundered into overdrive, her hand wrapping into the grip of her sword as she slid back into a practiced stance. Dust cut down her throat with her short, shallow breathing. She would only have a word, maybe two, to tell her parents to run and hide, and that she was sorry, and that she loved them.

Then Steven held out his hand, stopping Connie from leaping into action. The barest hint of a sound came from her mother behind them, but Steven twisted around and put a finger to his lips, his eyes huge as he silently shushed both her parents.

Flint and Milky had arrived on the warp pad facing the opposite direction. As Connie watched the pair meander off the pad, she wondered if they weren't enacting some joke of super-villainish confidence. Did Homeworld Gems work like deathtrap-wielding fictional overlords? Maybe when Jade was talking to her again she could ask her passenger.

"Well, isn't this a lovely bit of reminiscence?" Flint snarked. Her puff of wiry red hair tilted back as the lanky Gem looked up at the openings honeycombing the cliff walls.

Ambling forward, her tremendously oversized arm acting like a third leg, Milky Quartz followed Flint's gaze with her own. The reconstituted Gem hunter had traded in her gold doublet for a stony gray bodysuit, but her lopsided proportions remained, complete with craggy growths from her joints and a wild mane of white hair framing her head. Her new clothing still featured the cracked diamond sigil to match the one on Flint's.

"I like it here," said Milky. Her smile shone clearly through her voice.

As the two off-world Gems gazed into the opposite distance, Connie twisted around to look back at her parents. Her father stood absolutely motionless with one of his hands poised on the empty spot
where he usually kept the radio on his belt. Her mother wasn't poised, but paralyzed, her eyes huge and mouth agape. Connie caught Steven's gaze and motioned it toward the nearest cliff wall, where a large opening waited just a few incredibly dangerous steps away. He nodded.

Holding her breath, Connie took her parents' hands and moved as quickly and quietly as she could. Her parents crept after her, mimicking her careful steps, but each footfall on the dusty canyon floor sounded like an asteroid strike in Connie's ears. Steven backed after them with his shield raised, and their combined loud footsteps made Connie certain that they would be caught at any second.

"It's pretty," Milky added.

After eons and a million thunderous footsteps, Connie dragged her parents into the empty opening in the wall, stuffing them inside and dragging Steven after her before either Flint or Milky could turn around. She flattened herself against the inner edge of the hole and held her breath, listening above the roar of her own heartbeat for the Gems outside to discover them and destroy them.

"It's a load of flotsam," Flint groused. "How do we get stuck doing Zircon's junk jobs?"

"Because Zircon told us to?" Milky said.

"Bah!" snapped Flint.

A column of fire bellowed past the opening where Connie crouched, chasing her further back from the edge. Even as it missed her by a dozen feet, the glow of the fire made Connie's mottled skin prickle with heat. Steven caught her from falling while she put her feet back under her, certain that they were about to be discovered.

But the burst of fire was just a brief tantrum, and it dwindled as quickly as it had come. "Miserable bureaucrat sends a couple of peak-performance soldiers to take stock of a bunch of derelict sites on some dumpy failed colony. My stars, but I liked this place better when I got to burn it. What is there even here that anyone with one working facet would want? A single measly channel carved into the rock? A bunch of injectors older than half the gravel back on Homeworld?"

"And two Gems!" Milky added.

Flint's surprise carried through her voice. "How's that now?"

Connie sucked a breath in through her nose and grasped her sword hilt. Next to her, Steven fidgeted, his face betraying the same thought that ran through Connie's mind: if they were found out, it would only take the Quartzes seconds to corner them in their hiding spot. After that, their life expectancy would be about a quarter-second longer than the time it took for Steven's bubble shield to collapse.

"There's two Gems right here in the Kindergarten!" Milky's voice sounded much clearer, as if she were looking right at the opening where Steven, Connie, and her family hid.

Clenching the muscles in her neck, Connie refused to let herself look back at her parents. She thought if she looked back and saw fear in their faces, saw the terror she could hear in their shallow breathing, then she might succumb to her own fear. And then Steven would be left alone to protect all of them.

"Milky," said Flint, her tone long-suffering, "are you certain you aren't including you and I in your assessment? Again?"

"Oh. Um..." Milky grunted.
"Why don't you verify your numbers and get back to me with a full count, eh?" Flint snapped.

"Okay, Flint!" Milky chirped, earning four hidden sighs of reprieve.

Flint snarled, "Wholly ridiculous that some castoff Zircon should send us on a survey mission when she has a perfectly good Beryl at her disposal. But where might said Beryl be?"

"Flying the ship?" Milky asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"Flying the cracking ship! And who does that leave to do the real work? You, me, Zircon, and that thick-headed rock she has following her around. Tremendous surprise who she decided to stick with the ground work while she 'strategizes.' Strategizes what? What's the grand prize for all our glorious work?" Flint said.

"Flint…"

"A dump of a planet nobody wants and some traitorous Gem that even Homeworld doesn't give two blips about anymore, all to appease the ego of some Zircon who's already mentally decorating the court she thinks she's already won!"

The Kindergarten glared red again, and ripples of heat reached all the way to the back of the hidey-hole, giving Connie's nervous sweat a real purpose.

When the glow faded, a moment passed in silence. Then, in a small voice, Milky Quartz said, "Shard said that Earth is important."

Flat shock replaced the outrage in Flint's tone. "What? Milky—"

"Shard said that Earth is important," Milky insisted, growing louder. "She said we need Earth. So she sent Zircon, and me, and you, and Pyrite. And Zircon told us to look at these places because Shard wants us to."

Connie frowned as she heard Flint's voice pitch upwards an entire octave. "Milky, I was just spitting rubble. Stars, don't tell Shard any of that! You wouldn't, would you?"

"No."

"Good," Flint sighed, her tenor bottoming into relief.

"Earth isn't a dump, Flint," Milky said.

"Hey, now, you said you wouldn't—"

"Earth isn't a dump," Milky insisted. "I was made on Earth. I came from the Beta Kindergarten. That's where Jasper was made too. And if Jasper came from it, then it can't be a dump!"

"Milky—"

"It's not!" Milky shouted.

A beat of silence passed, and then Flint said, "Milky, come on. I didn't mean anything by it. You know how I get when I gotta keep my furnace capped for too long. I know you didn't come from a dump."

"Okay…" Milky said sullenly.
"I mean it! It's just a little bluster being knocked back and forth between a couple of chums. Right? No harm."

Confusion tilted Milky's voice. "But Flint, there are four Gems here in the Kindergarten. What about the other two?"

The growing investment Connie felt in the Quartzes' conversation plummeted into dread as she heard Flint utter, "What?"

Milky's voice perked up as she said, "You told me to count again, and you were right! I counted wrong earlier. There's four Gems in the Kindergarten. Two over here—that's you and me—and two over there in that hole!"

Connie only needed to glance at Steven to know what they would do next. Looking back at her parents, she hardened herself against her own fear, refusing to let them see it in her face. "Stay here," she whispered.

"No!" her parents hissed in unison.

"Please," she begged softly. Then, before they could protest again, she walked out of the hole with Steven beside her. She felt her mother's fingertips grasping for the edge of her clothes as she stepped out into the full shadow of the cliff.

Flint and Milky Quartz stood a dozen feet away, directly blocking the path to the warp pad. Milky's enormous hand was lifted in their direction and the jagged stone in her palm was aglow as it followed them out of the opening.

Giving the off-world Gems an awkward wave, Steven called, "Hi again."

Milky waved back with her dousing hand. "Hello!"

With a shake of her head, Flint tossed the shock off of her face. Her red brows crashed into a scowl as she said, "Well, well. Look who we have here, Milky."

"Yeah," Milky said. Then, glancing at Flint, she added, "Wait. Who?"

"Lest my memory beguile me, I do believe these are the two squishy Gems from that human agriculture site we visited. Remember? With the Lazuli and that Peridot?"

Milky's smile collapsed. "That's the Peridot who poofed me!" she rumbled.

"The very same," Flint agreed. "And these are the little abnormalities she was keeping in her workshop. I think they must be experiments, or mutants. Or maybe they're corrupted."

Dust swirled around Connie's feet. She felt the breeze stiffen, rustling the hem of her T-shirt, brushing through her hair. Her hand ached for the hilt at her shoulder, but she clenched it at her side instead. The longer they delayed the fighting, the better their chances for survival would be.

"So," Steven drawled, scratching his head, "this is a little awkward. We got off on the wrong foot."

"Your Peridot poofed my foot!" Milky roared. A glow surrounded her bigger fist, manifesting into a hammerhead the size of a wrecking ball. The dead earth plumed with dust as Milky slammed her hammer fist into the ground.

Steven's shield materialized, and Connie drew her sword. The delay was evidently done. "I'm sure
Peridot would apologize if she knew you were upset. She could make you a card!" Steven suggested, even as he shifted his feet into a defensive stance.

Flames snapped around Flint's hands. "I don't know what that means," the lanky gray Gem sneered, "but as soon as we're done with you lot, and your friends at the temple, we'll be sure to visit your Peridot for her apology. I'll pull it out of her stone myself."

Connie could already read the shape of the fight. The placement of Steven's feet would have him crossing ahead of her as they charged at the Quartzes. That would put him in front of Flint to soak up any fire with his shield while Connie and her sword met Milky Quartz. The hulking white Gem was leaning forward, suggesting she would meet the charge with force. And after that... Well, as Pearl had lectured her many times, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. Guts would take over from there.

And then, before the clash could begin, a scuffed black shoe flew overhead from behind Connie and landed in front of Flint, tumbling to a stop sole-down in the dust. All eyes went back to the source of the shoe and found Connie's father with his arm still extended from the throw and a stockinged foot planted on the ground. His wife stood stiffly next to him with her face pulled back in a tight expression of alarm.

"Did you just..." Flint snuffed her fists and toed the shoe in front of her. "Did you just throw your limb enhancer at me?"

Pulling his hand back sharply, her father straightened and said, "Yes. Sorry. I wanted to get your attention, and I thought shouting would be too aggressive given the circumstances, and I'm just now realizing that throwing something might have been considered even more aggressive, and I'm sorry about that."

"What are you doing?" Connie hissed at him.

"I don't know," he hissed back at her. Then, smiling nervously at the Quartzes, he called, "Look, I don't fully understand what's happening right now, but I don't believe it means anyone has to come to blows. A lot of tempers are running hot right now...literally in some cases, but that doesn't mean we need to give into our baser instincts. As rational beings, I think we can all agree that a peaceful resolution would benefit everybody involved."

Dead silence and blinking, bewildered confusion radiated from the hostile Gems. They shared a look, and then gaped at Connie's father. "Flint," Milky said, "do we have to squash these two too?"

Connie felt her legs tense to carry her into a change at the white leviathan, but her mother acted quicker, stepping forward stiffly with her fiercest motherly-doctorial expression sharpening her features. "Hold it! I don't know if you realize this, but you're about to make an egregious mistake and start a fight you can't possibly hope to win."

"What are you doing?" Connie hissed again, grinding her hands around the hilt of her sword.

Ignoring Connie, her mother said, "I work at a hospital. It's a, erm, 'human healing center.' And every day I see humans come in with injuries they sustained from other humans. From human weapons. We invent endless athletic competitors, entertainments, and contests to hurt ourselves and each other. I spent my childhood practicing how to take cover under my desk at school because we point our most powerful weapons at ourselves, weapons that could end us as a species."

"What in the Empty Sky is a school?" Flint said.
"My point," her mother said, "is that humanity is the wrong species to mess with, because we spend almost all of our time practicing ways to hurt each other, and we've gotten very good at it, and would be more than happy to hurt something else instead. And if, by the way, you so much as touch these children, you are going to be dealing with the most dangerous human being on the planet right here, right now," she declared, and pointed down at where she stood, trembling.

Connie gaped in open awe. She had seen that fury levied against herself only a handful of times in her life, most of them in the last few days. But never before had she seen her mother direct that kind of anger at anyone else, and certainly never anything so dangerous as a renegade Quartz.

In the wake of her mother's words, Connie saw Flint clenched her baffled expression back into a scowl. "Milky, I don't believe we need to squash them as much as we 'get' to squash them. It's a linguistical distinction, to be certain, but it highlights one of the tiny pleasures that come from being stuck on such a mundane assignment." The Gem's fists lit once more, flickering with menace.

Connie side-stepped carefully, never letting her feet cross, never spoiling her balance, until she stood between her parents and the Quartzes. She had never, in her life, felt as angry at anything so much as she felt at the creatures threatening her family. She didn't need words. Her sword rose, its edge readied against the threat, and she scowled.

Three streaks descended from straight overhead and landed in front of Connie. The moment they touched down, Connie recognized the backs of Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst. Their own weapons raised, the Crystal Gems formed a wall that stood against the invaders. It only took a few seconds for Steven to scamper to them and join their line.

"S'up?" Amethyst said. The spiked ends of her whip drew Zen garden lines in the dust.

Flint's eyes narrowed, and she raised her flames. "Milky, old chum, it's five against two. I believe we're about to reenact the last battle for this planet, only the two of us will actually be planetside this time. Let's at least leave an impression on our way to the bubble, shall we?"

At the light of the flickering fire, Garnet and Pearl stepped back, tightening the line in front of Connie's family. With a little nudging from Steven, Amethyst followed suit until the four of them stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking Connie and her parents entirely.

Through a gap under Pearl's elbow, Connie saw Flint furrow her brow at the slight withdrawal. Those ember red eyes met Connie's, and then they widened. A slow smile crawled across the Gem's long face.

"Flint?" Milky said.

The fiery Gem began backing away slowly, drawing Milky back with her. "Actually, it would appear as though I was wrong. We'll live to fight again, my companion. And what an interesting fight it will be. Let's leave this motley batch of gravel to get reacquainted whilst we continue with our vital mission."

Connie didn't realize that the two Quartzes had backed onto the warp pad until a column of light swallowed the pair, whisking them away to parts unknown. She stared at the pad for what felt like eons, waiting, fearing that the pair would change their minds and return for the fight in earnest. She wouldn't let them hurt her parents, no matter what. She wouldn't let them hurt Steven or the Gems. She wouldn't let them.

Gentle white hands rested on top of Connie's easing the hilt down from her readied position. The touch startled Connie into looking up, where she found Pearl standing over her with concern.
"Connie," Pearl murmured, "it's okay."

The words made Connie's hands shake again as she sheathed her blade. She drew her first full breath in what felt like the decade since they arrived. The Kindergarten air still ached all the way to her lungs, but she savored it all the same.

Her father hobbled toward her on one shoe, accepting his wife's helping hand. "Connie?" he said, making the sound of her name into something heavy.

"Connie?" her mother said, doubling the weight.

Connie threw herself into her parents, wrapping her arms around them both and pressing her face between them. She still couldn't trust herself to speak. The way their arms shook as they folded her into a shared embrace, she thought that they might feel the same. But at least for the moment, as long as she could feel them safe and sound, Connie didn't need any words.

"Ha!" Amethyst crowed behind them. "They were so busy running away that they left a perfectly good shoe behind. Anybody gonna eat that?"

Chapter End Notes

Just in time for their return, an extremely talented artist going by huntingdog has created this depiction of Milky Quartz and Flint arriving at the barn back in Chapter Nineteen. I swear I should be checking for holes in my head, because it feels like they took the image straight from my brain. Check out their gallery here and leave comments/likes!

If anyone would like to put together a piece of fan art or other connected work, let me know in the comments, and I'll be sure to provide links!
Steven pulled the steaming, reheated tea out of the microwave and brought it over to the couch, placing the cups in front of Connie's parents. Connie's mother took the cup from the coffee table with shaking hands, wincing at the clatter her mug made. Her father didn't seem to register the cup, or the couch, or anyone in the room. His attention wandered somewhere distant from the beach house, his eyes faraway and his features heavy.

Connie squirmed on the couch cushion between her parents, waiting for one of them to speak. The adrenaline had left her body in the last hour, but the jitters remained. Live wires buzzed where her veins used to be. With no enemy in sight, and her sword sheathed and leaning in the far corner, she felt like she was stuck in a fight that didn't exist. Words hadn't been needed in the moments after the battle when she needed to know that her parents were safe. But now that they were safe, she desperately needed them to say something. Anything.

"So," Pearl said to Steven, breaking the silence. Her expression was calm, but the way she tapped her foot on the sand-scratched floorboards betrayed the worry Connie could see she still felt. "You're certain that's everything they said before we made it back to the Kindergarten?"

Steven glanced at Connie, and she nodded. Then he said, "I'm pretty sure. There was a lot of stuff about Earth, and gravel, but I guess that's everything."

Amethyst lay curled up on the floor next to the couch. Having been deprived of the shoe she'd found in the Kindergarten—which was once more on its proper foot—she'd contented herself with stealing one of Steven's sandals and flipping it idly against her nose. "So those bums aren't the only ones on the planet? Maybe they can go get their little buddies to help them find their stones the next time we—"

"Amethyst, please!" Pearl admonished her, scandalized. "We have guests!"

"It's happening again, isn't it?" Steven murmured, drawing all eyes in the room to him. His hands wove together, fingers twisting and knotting. "Like when Jasper and Peridot came here."

"Maybe." Garnet stood at the front window, staring out at the night. The ocean was blue-black as it lapped against the beach, its waters dwindling into the sky where the two met in a starless expanse at the horizon.

Steven's brow furrowed. "Maybe?" he said, his voice tightening in a way that made Connie's heart ache. "What does that mean?"

Garnet didn't flinch at his tone. Her voice came back like the beat of a metronome. "It means 'maybe.'"

The answer made Steven scowl. Without warning, he stomped his bare foot back into the sandal Amethyst held, and then marched up to Garnet's back, his fists curled at his sides. "You guys can't do this again. You have to tell me," he said.

"Steven…" Pearl tried to start.

"No!" Steven snapped. "You can't not tell me things anymore because you're afraid. First there were two Gems running around, and now there are more of them somewhere on Earth. They tried to hurt Lapis and Peridot! They tried to hurt Connie and her family!"
His words, as if conjuring the memory from thin air, slammed through Connie's parents. She saw her father clench his hand until his knuckles turned white. Her mother jolted hard enough to tip a long, blotchy stain of tea down the front of her lab coat.

It pained Connie to see her parents so afraid of anything when, for so long, they had been the ones to protect her. She looked to the Gems for some kind of reassurance from Steven's accusation, but she saw something else instead. She saw Amethyst frowning down at her empty hands, lost without any sandal to distract her anymore. She saw Pearl weaving her fingers together just as Steven had with his. She saw Garnet turn her head a fraction of a degree away from Steven, which may as well have been a hair-pulling scream coming from the inscrutable Gem.

When they didn't answer him, Steven shouted, "Guys, please! Tell me!"

"They don't know, Steven," Connie said, startling the room. Now everyone looked to her, and their fear and surprise piled onto her own, making her shake. "These Gems aren't from Homeworld, are they? You really don't know who they are, or why they're here, or what they're doing."

Pearl froze in mid-fidget. Slowly, her lithe body sagged, her hands falling to her sides. "No," she admitted.

"You don't know who or what Shard is?" Connie asked the Gems in the room, but she tried to focus just as much of the question into her chest, trying to imagine the words pouring into the gemstone beneath her shirt.

Amethyst scoffed. "She's a real freak from the sound of it. A Gem calling herself 'Shard' would be like a human calling herself 'torn-off dead arm.' Eugh."

"Maybe this Shard person is working for the Diamonds?" Steven suggested.

With a humorless smile, Pearl said, "Amethyst is right. No sane Gem would call themselves that, and Diamonds have no patience for insane Gems."

Snorting, Amethyst said, "Uh, what about Peridot?"

"I'm pretty sure Earth made Peridot crazy," Garnet retorted, turning at last. Her shades tilted down at Steven, and her lips tugged upwards. "With a little help."

Pearl began to pace the floor, grasping her chin in thought. "Their actions so far make sense if they weren't sent from Homeworld. Yellow Diamond wants Earth destroyed. She wouldn't bother taking stock of planetary resources, and I doubt the other Diamonds would care enough to interfere with her plans." She stopped in mid-step, scowling. "Unfortunately, that only tells us what they aren't doing. Not terribly helpful…"

"We're being invaded."

Connie jumped at the sound of her mother's voice. Looking up, she stammered, "Mom?"

The mug of tea rattled back onto the coffee table, and then her mother leaned forward to grasp the edge of the couch cushion, steadying her hands. "They're space invaders. Actual, real-life space invaders. And just like us, you don't know why they're here or what they want," she said, looking to the Gems. A tiny laugh rattled through her, and she wiped at her eyes. "You're as lost as we are."

Garnet nodded. "Basically."

Her mother laughed harder at that, burying her face in her palms. Shoulders shaking, she laughed
softly, her cheeks growing wet beneath her hands. "And you're the only ones who can do anything about it," she added, laughter whistling through her nose.

Connie bit her lip, realizing that when her mother had said the last part, it had included Connie.

Steven stood on the other side of the coffee table, holding his hands up in a calming gesture. "We won't let them do whatever it is they're here to do," he promised. "We'll find a way. I know you think we're dangerous and weird, and...well, I guess we are sometimes."

"Stop," Connie's father said, interrupting Steven. Her father's clenched fists shook in his lap as he fixed Steven with a piercing look. "All of this, the sheer scope of this... It terrifies us. We're afraid. And being afraid makes us angry."

"Dad," Connie started to protest, watching Steven's expression collapse.

He ignored her, continuing in a firm, even tone. "But that fear? That's not because of you. And that's not because of your family. Steven, you've been a good friend to our daughter, aside from an occasional lapse in phone etiquette. Maybe even because of it." A tiny smirk cracked his stern features. "We aren't blind to how much you and Connie care about each other. Believe me, we know."

Lowering her hands, Connie's mother smiled weakly through her tears. "You're a wonderful kid, Steven. And that didn't happen by accident." Her features paling, she looked across the room to the other Gems, and said, "I was wrong earlier. And unkind. And out of line. What I said to you was inexcusable, and worse, it couldn't have been further from the truth. And I knew it. I'm sorry."

Her tone was proud and clear, and it made the older Gems glance amongst themselves. It was Amethyst who answered for them, rising back to her feet to shrug one shoulder and say, "Eh. S'cool."

If the stakes had been a tiny bit lower, Connie might have enjoyed the look of bafflement on her mother's face. "Beg pardon?" she squeaked.

"Don't worry about it," Amethyst said easily, earning firm nods from Pearl and Garnet. "If anyone ever threatened Steven, we'd break them into a million pieces, then mash all the pieces back together the wrong way, then break them again, mash whatever's left into a ball, and shoot the ball into the sun. You were just looking out for Connie. She's worth looking out for," she added, and grinned.

Connie grinned back, but then sobered as she felt her father wrap his arm around her shoulder. "Thank you for protecting us today. And for helping us understand what it is you do. And for everything you've done for our daughter," he told the Gems.

Heavy dread sank in Connie's stomach as she heard the impending but in her father's tone.

"...but," he said, and looked across Connie to catch her mother's eye, "I think we can all agree that it would be best if Connie not continue her studies with you—"

"Dad!" Connie exclaimed, lurching in her seat.

"...right now," her father continued firmly. He looked down at her, his eyes glistening, as he said, "Connie, you're sick. None of us know exactly what's happening to you. You have someth...someone else inside of you. If you can't trust your own body in a fight, you shouldn't be fighting. And if I'm smart enough to know that, then I know you must have figured it out ages ago."

"We still want Connie to see you all," her mother added quickly. Balking, she said more softly,
"That is, as long as she's still welcome—"

"She is!" Steven cried.

Resting a hand atop Steven's hair, Pearl smiled and affirmed, "She is."

Sounding relieved, her mother said, "We want Connie to see her friends. And we're proud of her for wanting to do good in the world. We'd probably be more comfortable with some kind of after-school volunteering, but...what you're all doing is important. We know that." Fixing Connie with a sorrowful look, she said, "But as long as Jade is inside Connie, she can't fight."

Connie opened her mouth to protest, lifting her fists to slam against her knees in a decisive and mature gesture that wouldn't in any way resemble a tantrum. But then she saw the spots in her skin. The little dark lesions covered every inch of her, even ringing one of her eyes like a shiner. It wasn't that long ago that Jade's corruption had turned them into something dangerous and out of control. Whatever had happened, it hadn't completely left her yet. Maybe it would get worse.

"Okay. You're right," Connie admitted, sagging back against the couch. "No more fighting until Jade is free."

Grimacing, her father said, "About that. There's one more thing, and I don't really..." He frowned, struggling for the right words. "We haven't heard from Jade about any of this. Not since the hospital. Now that we know about her, we should...I don't even know, really. But she deserves to be heard. Is she saying anything?"

Connie opened her mouth to explain Jade's silence when her passenger spoke up at last. "Just tell the traitors to say it already and be done, human," Jade uttered.

"Hang on," Connie told the room. "Jade?"

The Gem explained it to her in short, clipped sentences, and as Connie listened, she felt the blood drain from her face. All eyes fell upon her as Jade finished.

For a moment, just a moment, Connie felt tempted to soften Jade's words. She was the Crystal Gems' ambassador to Jade, after all. But somewhere along the way, Connie realized, she had become Jade's ambassador as well, not just her passenger's mouthpiece. "Jade wants you...all of you," Connie said, looking to Pearl, Amethyst, and Garnet, "to say 'I told you so.' About the corruption. She wants you to admit that you were right all along."

The Gems glanced among each other, looking to Steven as well, as they carried on a silent conversation. One by one, their collective gaze fell past the warp pad to rest on the temple door.

"Come with us," Garnet said, motioning for Connie and her parents to follow. "There's one last thing you all need to see."

For the second time that day, Connie was speechless. Again she had thought that Steven's tales would prepared her, and again, she was wrong. The Burning Room was so much more than his stories could make it.

The light in the room came from the ornate lava pool and the channels of liquid heat that ran through the floor, and the throbbing veins of light lining the walls, pulsing in a way that made the room feel alive. Their orange-red glow reminded her of the catacombs of the Underworld as she had imagined them from the pages of The Spirit Morph Saga, an ancient place with secrets that were older than entire civilizations. Some corner of Connie's mind understood that being able to see lava with her
naked eye meant that she should have been cooked already, which in turn meant that something in
the room was making the principle of convection stand with its nose in the corner. For the moment,
though, she was overwhelmed by the menagerie that loomed above them.

Dozens and dozens of basketball-sized bubbles floated overhead. The bubbles came in a variety of
shades to match their originators, and each bubble held within its center a motionless gemstone.
Connie tried counting the bubbles first individually, and then in rough batches, but there were too
many to estimate. They blotted out the ceiling with their number.

Standing behind Connie, her parents gaped up at the sea of bubbles above them. "They're beautiful,"
her father whispered.

Pearl glanced to either side, trading looks with Amethyst and Garnet. Connie saw a flash of an old,
old pain in her teacher. "They are," Pearl agreed, her voice carefully measured. "But that's not why
they're here. These are all of the Gems we've encountered since the end of the war."

A moment of distress twisted Steven's features. Connie followed his gaze up to a pink bubble that
was nearer to the floor than most of the others. The gemstone inside the bubble was a large one,
squared and stepped like a miniature ziggurat.

"You had to fight each of these? Like the creature you chased earlier in that canyon?" Connie heard
her mother say.

Shrugging, Amethyst said, "Not all at once. But we've had a lot of good scraps collecting these
guys."

"We keep them in here so they don't accidentally harm any humans," Garnet said, her shades
reflecting the colors of the ceiling. "We keep them in the bubbles so they don't suffer."

As she looked up at the Gems' millennia worth of work, Connie felt a disconnected ache in her
thoughts. "So this is where the rebels have buried the dead." Jade intoned, her voice dull in Connie's
mind. "What is the human term for it? A mausoleum?"

Connie drew a breath to repeat the thought aloud, but then held it. Garnet was looking directly at her,
the psychedelic colors of the room reflected in her gaze. The fusion adjusted her shades, and then
nodded solemnly.

Had Garnet guessed at Jade's reaction, or did she already see a future where the question had been
answered? Connie wasn't sure she had the words to say what Jade needed to hear. Evidently,
though, Garnet was sure. And that was good enough for Connie.

"They aren't dead, Jade," Connie said, her voice hushed by the room. "They're still alive in there.
Homeworld Gems and Crystal Gems, all waiting for the day when we figure out how to reverse the
corruption. And when we do, they'll all be free. They can stay on Earth, or they can go home,
whichever they choose. We won't give up until we find a way to save all of them."

Her thoughts stilled for a long moment as she stared across the sea of colors. Then Jade murmured,
"It is a nice dream, human. I'm sure that you and the rebels even believe it. But it amounts to
nothing."

Connie glanced at Steven, and the cold misery seeping outward in her chest warmed just a little. "It's
not enough," Connie admitted. "But it's not nothing."

Garnet nodded firmly. "She's right. We won't stop doing everything we can to help them." A smirk
tilted in the fusion's lips, and she added, "But she was wrong earlier, in the arena. We do need
"Yo, I would be glitter stuck to the bottom of Jasper's feet if she and Steven hadn't gotten their Stevonnie on and saved my butt," Amethyst agreed.

"She's the finest human swordswoman I've seen in centuries," Pearl said. "You should both be very proud."

A gentle touch fell upon Connie's shoulders. She looked up and saw her mother looming above her. "We already are," her mother said.

The expression on her mother's face could easily have been mistaken for a smile. But it didn't touch her mother's eyes, which glimmered darkly. It was the same expression her mother had worn every time her father had announced a new move that would uproot their lives. It was a show of support that masked a deep uncertainty. When those dark eyes met Connie's, her mother squeezed Connie's shoulder and tried to smile harder.

Connie tried to smile back, and was just as successful. Her parents' understanding of why Connie had to help the Gems, why it meant so much to her, had cost them their peace of mind, maybe forever. And deep in her chest, she could feel the distant sense of misery that was Jade's renewed silence. Garnet had been right when she'd spoken in the arena: knowing the full scope of the truth hadn't given anyone any measure of peace. She knew it was the price for giving Jade and her parents the whole truth they all deserved. She just wished she could pay that price for them.

"Hang on," her father said, frowning. "What's a 'Stevonnie'?"

Her stomach plummeted as Connie suddenly remembered that she might have forgotten to reveal one or two pieces of the whole truth in her confessions. As she watched Steven's face grow cherry red, feeling her own face heat in response, she felt a little solace in realizing that she too had her own price to pay for the new honesty they all shared.

"Um," she stammered, "don't be mad..."
As Connie lay in her bed, trying to move her eyes past the first line of an old paperback novel, a gentle knocking came at her bedroom door. She looked over the top of the book and found her father standing in the open doorway. "Hi, Dad," she murmured.

He tried to smile at her, but the expression came as more of a grimace. The punishingly long day lingered in his features, hanging deep bags under his eyes and digging furrows into his brow. "Hey, sweetie. Not breaking our Pause Accord, I swear. I just wanted to come up and say goodnight."

Connie set her book aside and mirrored his grimace. After their long talk in the Burning Room, and their long talk in the car on the drive home, and the long talk they’d said over reheated leftovers in the kitchen, the only thing the Maheswarans knew for certain was that they were done talking for the day, and had agreed to pause for the sake of their collective sanity. Connie still had plenty left to tell them, and she knew they had even more to say, but she was grateful for the break. It had been less than two days since she and Jade had transformed, but it felt more like two months.

"Are you and Mom going to bed early? I feel like I'll be facedown in my quilt any second now," she said.

His grimace curdled. "Yes, your mother's laying down right now, and I'm calling it quits. Hectic day…"

She bit her lip. In spite of their mutual accord, she had heard their conversations drifting up through her floorboards after the late dinner. None of the specific words had made it upstairs, but Connie had heard enough in their tones to know how worried they still were. "Right," she grunted.

Hardening his features back into fatherly confidence, he continued, "I spoke with your principal, and we both agreed that you should get back to school as soon as you're ready."

"Yeah, I heard you 'speaking' with him at the hospital," Connie said coyly.

Looking abashed, her father said, "You did, huh?"

Smirking, she mused, "Maheswaran Middle School has a nice ring to it, but I'm not sure I need the extra attention."

He chuckled, but then quickly sobered. "Will tomorrow be okay? If you think you need more time…"

The spots in Connie's arms loomed starkly. Looking at her hands, she knew her new condition would be impossible to hide, unlike Jade's gemstone. Being different in middle school was guaranteed social leprosy, and she knew she was different enough to begin with. But the lesions weren't going away, and her parents deserved some kind of normalcy after accepting so much weirdness into their lives. "I think I can handle school tomorrow," she told her father.

His smile became real. "Okay," he said, and started back into the hallway. But then he hesitated, his expression fraught with some weighty matter as he lingered. "So, when you and Steven 'fuse,'" he began.

Connie moaned and rubbed at her temples. "Dad," she said, "the Pause Accord?"

"I know, I just—"
Summoning up the same words for what seemed like the millionth time, Connie droned, "When we fuse, Steven and I physically disappear into a new person whose personality and intelligence is made from our combined, concurrent awareness. There is no touching involved because neither of us has an individual body anymore."

"Right, right," her father said reluctantly. A beat later, he continued, "But if you were going to try, um, 'human fusing…'

A mighty sigh withered Connie's whole body. She buried her face in her hands and moaned, "You've already given me The Talk. My mother, the doctor, gave me The Talk. I had a semester of health class at school that was nothing but The Talk. Please, please, please stop."

"Hey, it's important that you know some things before…well…" he protested, trailing off weakly.

Yanking the pillow out from under her head, Connie pressed it to her face, turning her world dark with clean linens. "I can't hear you," Connie howled through the pillow. "I'm too busy suffocating myself!"

When she heard him laughing, she peeked out from under the pillow to see him with his palms raised in surrender. "Okay, okay," he pleaded. "I give! Just keep breathing."


"Love you. And…goodnight, Jade," he said. Then, still lingering, he added, "I just don't think your poor mother is emotionally prepared to be a grandmother yet—"

He retreated back into the hallway, laughing at the pillow Connie flung after him.

Connie retrieved her pillow and tossed it back onto the bed. Her smile didn't survive long enough for it to land. The silence in her room was bad, and the silence permeating the house was worse, even more than the muffled arguing. But the silence in her chest had become unbearable. It would have been easy to mistake her neck's bauble for an inert green rock if not for the distant thrum of misery lurking behind her thoughts.

"Nothing to say about going back to school, Jade? Being forced back into that palace of misinformation and base mammalian ponderings? That's gotta get your goat."

No answer came.

"Nothing about goats either? Really?" said Connie. "Come on, you love to hate colloquialisms!"

Silence. Sighing, Connie rubbed at her tired face, wondering if there was time left in the day for one more rescue, or if she was even up to such a task, or if she knew how to save someone from the collapse of their entire worldview. Her heart ached with the barest thought of it.

Feeling her eyes start to well up, Connie cast her gaze about the room, where it came to rest upon her violin case propped against the music stand in the corner. Flashes of a ukulele jangled in her thoughts, and she remembered the one thing Jade missed most about home, and the first thing the Gem hadn't hated about Earth.

Connie took her violin and bow from the case and set about tightening the bowstring. As she tested the strings, tuning them carefully, she felt a pang in her chest at each wobbly note. It only took a few minutes and a ripple of uncertainty that wasn't hers before the instrument was ready. Then she took a deep breath and began to play the song. Her song.
It came back to her as an elegy, the first form it had taken when she'd written it years ago. The violin sang Lisa's travails, calling out from the Underworld to where Archimicarus looked for her in the overneath. Alone, hurt, afraid, and lost, Lisa cried for the only friend she had ever known. No one answered, no matter how she sang. The notes grew piercing through the refrain, desperate and scared, but there was no reply.

Tears rimmed Connie's eyes as she drew the last note. "Human," Jade subvocalized, her thoughts coming thickly, "what song is that? Where did you hear it?"

Wiping at her eyes, Connie answered, "I wrote it."

"That song, I...I remember it from before. I heard it before I awoke inside of you." Her words were hushed in reverence.

"I played it for you the night before you started talking to me," Connie said. "It was the only way I could think to reach you at the time. I'm glad it worked again."

Confounded awe washed up through Connie's body. "I did not know you made your own music. I had only heard you replicating the music of others. Have you made many of these songs?"

Shaking her head, Connie set down the instrument. "That's the only one so far. And it's not even finished yet." She lifted her bow as if saluting an enemy, glowering at the violin. "I'm not sure it will ever be finished," she said.

"How do you do that? How do you just make your own music?" Jade asked. The way she spoke, the Gem might have been asking Connie for nuclear launch codes.

"Oh, come on. Gems sing all the time. You never once made your own song?" said Connie.

"I already told you, human, I am no Emerald. Composing a song for one's Diamond was considered a grand gesture, but I never exactly got the chance," Jade said crossly. "My mentor focused our studies on archival and presentational technique. It took me decades to learn enough basic courtly manner to ensure I would not shame my mentor in our Diamond's presence."

Connie couldn't help smirking. "It took decades for her to teach you manners?"

A stab of irritation spiked up through Jade's awe. "Spend thousands of years wandering the stars alone. Then tell me if you can differentiate a curtsey from a bow."

The irritation quickly cooled into melancholy, and Connie realized her mistake. "I'm not the courtly type either. But you don't have to be highfalutin to make music. Everyone can do it," Connie said.

"As many Rubies have insisted on proving at every opportunity. But not every Gem is capable of making music well. It is not a gift to take lightly. Nor is my compliment." Jade's anger flashed hotly, but was gone before she'd finished her thought. Her voice in Connie's head became a hush one once more as she said, "How do you do it?"

Lowering her bow, Connie glanced at a row of well-worn books on her shelf, the hardbacks she had invested months' of allowance into, and had reread at least a dozen times. Lisa's journey through The Spirit Morph Saga wasn't perfect, but it had meant everything to Connie when she had no one else.

"I was inspired by someone else," Connie said, careful not to mention the song's fictitious subject. "I thought someone else understood what I was feeling. So I tried to write something about how we both felt. And from there, it just...sort of happened."
"How illuminating. You have answered all of my questions," Jade snarked. "Truly, anyone can create."

"Don't be snotty," Connie told her. "I'm not trying to say that everyone can create anything. Mozart was composing at four years old, and I couldn't make anything like he did if I lived to be four hundred. But everyone can make something."

Jade answered with the sensation of rolling her nonexistent eyes. "Creation is not an intrinsically worthwhile process in and of itself, human. Look at what your species has made of this planet."

The frustration in Connie began to mount again. She pushed back against it, fighting to keep her voice calm. "Your Ruby pals," she said. "They liked to sing, right? What were their songs like?"

After a moment to consider, Jade said, "Boisterous. Rude. Humans might even have called them 'bawdy.'" Her voice dawdled around the last word, letting it drag into thoughtful silence. Then she added, "They were enthusiastic. Excited. Their songs celebrated their being together in fusion and camaraderie alike."

"Being together made them feel happy, so they sang happy songs to each other. I felt sad, so I wrote a song that made me feel sad," Connie said.

"Yes, thank you. I am aware that music elicits an emotional response from its audience. Having experienced music before, that notion was not lost upon me," Jade snapped.

"You're missing the point," Connie insisted. "People listen to music to find an emotion in themselves. They make music to share an emotion with others. A musician wants someone else to understand how they feel, even if the listener doesn't consciously realize it. Everybody wants somebody to understand them, so everybody can make something that matters. It might not all sound good to you, but that's not really why we do it."

"Your supposition is quite poetic, human," Jade said. Gradually the frustration in Connie began to abate, making her realize that it didn't entirely belong to her. "But I doubt every musician would agree with you."

Connie sighed and began to pack up her violin. "Well, it's what I think. If another musician can explain it better, maybe you can find the song for me while I'm asleep."

As Connie loosened the bowstring, she felt another wave of uncertainty from Jade. "This person who inspired you to compose: what did they think of your song?" asked the Gem.

Smirking tiredly, Connie latched the case shut. "She'll never hear it. And anyway, it's not the same song anymore. After I met Steven, the song started to change."

"Why?"

Her smirk blossomed into a full smile. "Because I didn't feel so lonely anymore."

"Has he heard it?"

"What? No!" Connie's smile collapsed, her face catching aflame at the mere thought of playing her song for Steven, embarrassing lyrics and all. "No. I wrote it for me. Or, at least, I've never played it for anyone else."

"Ever?"
"Well, Mom and Dad have probably heard me play it lots of times, but I don't think they know I wrote it. I've only ever played it by myself," Connie admitted.

"So you wrote a song, the purpose of which is to elicit an emotional response in others, to end up with an audience of yourself, the originator of said emotion?" Jade reasoned. "You do see why I am confused, yes? Or must I compose a song to explain?"

"Ha, ha. Point taken. But that's also why the song changed. I played you the old version tonight because I thought you might feel lonely. But before, when you were waking up, I played the newer version."

"But that newer version is not its final version?"

Connie ran her hand across the violin case as she placed it back against the stand. The fray at the case's edge tickled her palm. "I don't think it'll ever have a final version. I can just keep rewriting it whenever I think it needs to change."

"But then how will you ever share it?" Jade asked.

Lifting her hand away, Connie shied back from the instrument. She rubbed at her elbow and said, "I don't think I ever will. It's silly. It's not good enough. It's...complicated."

Jade scoffed, radiating with disappointment. "Your species truly is a cosmic oddity. You speak of inheriting purpose through genetic lottery, through trial and error, through dedicated effort, and when you are fortunate enough for those variables to align, you still neglect that purpose. If a Gem could do what you do, she would shatter herself rather than rejecting such a talent."

Connie's gaze dropped into the creaky floorboards. She'd worked up the courage to record and post the song on TubeTube any number of times only to chicken out immediately. Jade had a point behind all of her speciesism. If a girl played a song in the woods and no one was around to hear it, was it really a song?

"You know," Connie hedged, "the Crystal Gems sing all the time, and none of them were built for music."

"Clearly you're unfamiliar with conventional Pearl function," Jade retorted, taking the bait for Connie's subject change.

"Okay, but she taught herself fighting, so we'll count that instead," Connie insisted. "And Amethyst definitely wasn't made for music. And Garnet wasn't supposed to exist at all on Homeworld, but she's a music pro. Even Peridot's made a song or two. Surely if Peridot can do it..." she said wryly.

Buzzing with exasperation, Jade said, "I will not rise to such base manipulation, human. Why has this captured your attention so? What does it matter if I believe your theory of universal compositional ability?"

It mattered, Connie knew, because Jade was so much more than the disposable resource Homeworld had made her. Jade was brilliant, and fierce, and in the wake of realizing the truth about her corruption, the Gem deserved to feel something more than alone and abandoned. She deserved a way to speak with the outside world, to be heard and understood.

"Because I'm right and you're wrong," Connie said matter-of-factly. "And once I figure out how, I'm gonna prove it to you."

"Consider my metaphorical breath abated and waiting," Jade said.
As Connie pushed through the door, ready to brush her teeth so she could finally rest in her own bed, she managed a tired smirk. "I got you to use colloquialisms on your own, didn't I?" she countered.

Wordless grumbling followed Connie down the hall.
New Normal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Connie wobbled to her closet, stretching the kinks out of each limb. Golden morning sunlight peered through her blinds, framed with birdsong and the rustle of leaves in a gentle breeze. It would have been a perfect day for reading on the stoop or hopping the nearest magical lion to Beach City for a lazy day on the boardwalk. But she couldn't wait for a day that felt right to back to school covered in corruption spots. The sun might burn out before that happened.

"I spent your sleep cycle consuming the efforts of amateur human musicians," Jade mentioned. "TubeTube had no shortage of their original works and reproductions of other artists' efforts."

Scratching her exposed belly under the hem of her yellow-starred pink nightshirt, Connie yawned back, "Oh, yeah?" She slid the closet door aside and reached for the nearest hanger, and she squinted through her lingering sleepiness at the outfits she had assembled ahead of her day.

"You should be proud of your musical acumen. Of my survey, I would rate you among the top forty-five percent of amateur performers."

"Mmn. Better than average," Connie grunted, and plucked a hanger from the closet. "Careful you don't go crazy with the praise, Jade. I might get full of myself."

A tingle of pride chased after Jade's sub-vocalized words. "Of course, when you factor your relative age, your rating increases dramatically. Why, in another century, you would be talented enough to seek apprenticeship with a Diamond court musician. Human standards are even lower, so you could surely find great success as a songstress among your own people."

A retort tripped sluggishly up to Connie's lips, brimming with the wit and poignancy of a teenage human who was very nearly awake. But she swallowed the rude word when her eyes focused on the outfit in hand. It was one of the six shirts remaining in her wardrobe with a high enough collar to hide the gemstone at her neck without cooking her in the spring warmth. With summer close on the horizon, even those few outfits remaining would be too hot for comfort in a matter of weeks. Just looking at them made Connie prickle with sweat.

She tossed the outfit onto the floor and then climbed into a pair of shorts and a short-sleeved cotton blouse. The blouse's shallow V-neck left Jade's stone on display, its boxy shape pressing up through the material. She watched the light dapple in the stone's surface, its color vibrant against the speckled lesions in the skin around it.

As Connie dragged a brush through her bedhead, Jade grumbled, "Are you nearly finished preening? Stars, but you humans cultivate the dead portions of your bodies almost as diligently as you do the living portions. Imagine the wealth of time we might save if you shaved your head."

"Do all Jades complain just to hear themselves talk?" Connie asked idly as she fought through a snarl. "It's definitely not a Quartz thing."

"Would that I could hear my own voice again instead of using the scattered remains of your inner dialogue for myself," Jade snarked. "There's precious little in here left for my use once your base physical needs have finished clamoring."
Connie grimaced at her reflection, settling her hair behind her shoulders. The black lesions were on full display in her legs, along her arms, and all around her face and neck, spilling together into a great black shiner around her left eye. "Just admiring the new us. Are you hungry?"

"And thus your physical needs howl anew. It is a wonder you can even hear me," Jade said, the teasing note obvious behind her voice.

Her senses awakened by the rumbling in her belly, Connie trundled down the stairs and into the kitchen. A glass of grapefruit juice and a plate of fruit and toast sat waiting for her at the table. Beads of condensation trickled down the cool glass, slick in Connie's hand as she downed half its contents in one gulp.

"And good morning to you too, dear," her mother said wryly. The older Maheswaran stood at the counter, packing apple slices into a plastic baggie. She wore an old T-shirt and yoga pants, with no lab coat in sight, which usually meant that she was bedridden with a life-threatening flu.

"Morning, Mom!" Connie slurred as she wiped her mouth. Her brow crinkled, and she set the glass aside. "Are you feeling okay?"

Glancing down at herself, her mother said, "I'm working from home today, catching up on paperwork. Doctor Crock is covering my patients through the weekend, so I'll be here when you get home from school. Now sit down and eat like a person, please. Animals eat standing up."

Half the toast was gone by the time Connie had settled into her seat. She made short work of the blackberries a minute later, smiling with cheeks stuffed as Jade made appreciative ripples between thoughts. "Dad already gone?" she asked, spraying crumbs.

"Swallow, then talk," her mother chided reflexively. "He had a meeting with his staff this morning and wanted to pick up bagels and coffee for them. Maybe he should have sent another dozen home first." Her mother took back the empty plate, seemingly afraid that Connie would lick it clean. It wasn't a completely unwarranted fear.

Finishing the rest of her juice, Connie ducked her head and said, "Sorry. I, um, didn't have much of an appetite the last couple of days. Guess it caught up with me."

"I noticed." Her mother swept a pile of baggies into a brown paper sack, rolling its top before presenting it to Connie. "I packed you an extra sandwich today. You've still got some catching up to do after that horse bar diet you were on."

Connie accepted the lunch, smiling brightly. "Thanks, Mom!"

But as Connie pulled at the brown sack, her mother's hand lingered, a look of uncertainty creasing her face. "Is there something I can make for Jade? I mean…sorry," she said, her cheeks flushing as she let go of the sack. "It feels odd talking about her in the third person. She can hear us, right? I mean, you said…"

"She is, at least, correct on the point of being referred to in absentia," Jade muttered. "Though it is nice to finally be considered at all, I suppose. Are the sandwiches of differing ingredients?"

Connie nodded, saying, "She can hear us. And she doesn't like me talking for her any more than I do, but until I sprout another mouth, I guess it's the best we can do. You can always talk to her directly. And she's still new to food, so she likes variety."

"Maybe I'll dust off a cookbook and be adventurous," her mother said. But her smile was disconnected. One of her hands had drifted up to rest on her chest just beneath the hollow of her
throat, and her gaze wandered up and down Connie's bare legs.

It wasn't hard to imagine what her mother was thinking about. "Mom?" Connie said plaintively.

"Hmm?" Her mother jerked out of her reverie.

"I'll be okay," Connie murmured. She mustered her own affected smile, and added, "And don't worry about Jade. She's still dazzled by peanut butter and jelly. We have lots of calories to go before she starts demanding gourmet cuisine."

"As if I hold any position from which to make demands," Jade scoffed. "My only bargaining chip is also my body pro tempore. Shall I cut my one tie to the outside world and cast myself into the Empty Sky for want of an artisanal meal? Not that it would be unwelcome…"

With a decisive nod, her mother grabbed the car keys off their hook on the wall. "Right. Go brush your teeth and pack up. Let's get you to school."

The tart taste of grapefruit turned sour at the notion, but Connie smiled harder to hide it. "Let's get me to school," she agreed, her voice too bright.

Whispers crept in Connie's wake through the school corridor. There was silence extending in a twenty-foot radius wherever she walked, but the murmurs were still there, still barely audible behind her. Even the teachers were trying to stare at her without staring at her. Other students weren't so discreet, gawking at her from their lockers and the clustered conversations that jerked to a halt at the sight of her.

The pre-class crowds' attentions weren't lost on her passenger. "We seem to be garnering an abnormally extreme degree of scrutiny," Jade noted. Irritation and curiosity twisted beneath the thought.

"Mmm-hmm," Connie hummed softly. The weight of the eyes around her made it harder to press through the wall of teenaged onlookers. She was grateful when she finally made it to her locker if only so she could focus on something besides pretending to ignore their rubbernecking.

Jade made a thoughtful sound and said, "This is a result of our changed appearance, yes? If so, then perhaps congratulations are in order."

"Hmm?" Connie hummed, and ignored the questioning look she drew from the student at the neighboring locker.

"If your appearance now makes you unfit for social integration, then we have truly become alike. I was made off-color the moment I awoke inside of you, becoming a living shatterable offense in addition to apparently being a redundancy fit only for harvesting. Will your authorities seek to dissipate our form as Homeworld's would? It could impede your education for the day."

Connie grimaced and muttered, "Ha, ha," as she stocked her backpack with textbooks. Even still, she felt a twinge at the joke. She had long since made peace with being off-color since moving to Delmarva. Not many people looked like her or her parents, and her father's complaint of her name being misspelled on report cards hadn't been an exaggeration, or even an issue unique to the school. Now it was like experiencing those first days all over again, only this time the feeling was magnified by the number of spots dotting her skin.

"Connie? Wow!"
A voice from behind yanked Connie out of her misery. She turned and saw a welcome face breaching the perimeter of voyeurism around her. Smiling faintly, she said, "Hey, Jeff."

He stood with mouth agape, slowly pressing his gawp into a smile. "You're back!" he exclaimed. For a second, he started forward with his arms open, but then stuttered and folded them, trying to make the hesitation into something cool and affected. It didn't work. "I wasn't sure what happened to you. Nobody was. Are you okay?"

Holding up her speckled hands, she said, "It's okay. I'm not contagious or anything. But I won't touch you if you don't want."

"Huh? Oh!" Guiltily, he brushed the hair out of his eyes. "No, it's not that. I just…I wasn't sure where we stood on hugging, that's all. I don't want to weird you out right when you get back."

Heat prickled in Connie's eyes, and she had to blink hard to keep her cheeks dry. "We're pro," Connie said, her voice thick. "We're very pro-hugging on this side."

When he spread his arms again, she didn't leave room for hesitation, catching him in a fierce embrace. Jeff's arms around her, awkward as they were, felt like an oasis. But she kept their first hug short, and Jeff cleared his throat loudly after, pretending to fix his hair so Connie had a moment to wipe at her eyes in peace. Then he said, "So, the spots: super chicken pox?"

"We can get diseases from livestock?" Jade cried, aghast.

Connie shook her head. "More like a really bad rash. Not contagious," she said, emphasizing the last part again. "Hurts a little, but otherwise it just makes me even more popular than ever."

Jeff cringed suddenly, and said, "Somebody stole my phone. Lifted it right out of my pocket. I didn't realize it until after the next class. I had no idea what was going on, I swear."

The corner of Connie's mouth quirked. "I never thought otherwise. Not for a second."

A wave of relief washed over him. Then his eyes brightened, and he began speaking a mile a minute. "Were you really in on Mandy's video? Everybody's talking about it. That was like some David Cronenberg stuff! Was it practical or CGI?"

She was glad he'd taken her suggestions for his sci fi club, but the comparison made her queasy. "Not exactly," she lilted. "I can't believe she actually posted it. Is… Um, is she okay?"

"Rumor is, it was Sara B. who posted the video. Or Sarah C. I get them confused." Seeing her stricken expression, Jeff's excitement cooled, and he continued, "The teachers are saying that Mandy's out on a suspension. Her friends are telling everyone that she was hurt in the fight, which was definitely not a fight somehow, and she's recuperating. But her InstaSnap is loaded with new selfies, so nobody knows what she's recuperating from. What really happened?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out myself," Connie admitted. A tiny sigh of relief whispered through her nose at knowing Mandy Petti would live to be horrible another day. She only remembered fragments of the fight, but a flash of familiar silky blond hair was one of them.

Jeff's attention had dipped wide-eyed to the gemstone at her collar. His mouth become a circle. "Whoa. That's not a necklace. Is that jewel, like, inside you?"

Touching the stone, Connie smirked and said, "Like you wouldn't believe."

"Whoa," Jeff breathed again. "My parents won't even listen to me about getting a tattoo, and here
you are getting your throat pierced. That's hardcore! How did they do it?"

As Connie chuckled, the warning bell for first period chimed over the loudspeakers. "I'll tell you some of it in gym class," she promised him. Then, as he began to pull away, she called after him, "What would you get for a tattoo?"

"An astronaut riding a flaming skeleton Utahraptor," Jeff answered instantly.

Connie grinned. Everyone else at school made her feel like a sideshow who had lost her ringmaster. But not Jeff. He just made her feel glad that she'd freaked out at being bumped in the hallway, then had the courage to apologize. "Now that's hardcore," she told him.

His beaming smile lifted a little bit of the weight she'd felt since walking into school.

By the time the school day was over, Connie was glad to leave. She had never experienced problems focusing on classroom lessons before. But then, she had never experienced teachers being distracted by her appearance in class before either. At least her double dose of homework would give her a chance to catch up on her lessons in earnest over the weekend.

Her father was there to pick her up in front of the school, and jerked against his seatbelt in surprise as Connie threw herself into the passenger seat. "Whoa! Rough day, sweetie?" he said, his voice too practiced to sound casual.

"Not at all," she said, throwing the buckle across her body and slamming it into place. "We even got a new school mascot today. A big ol' Dalmatian."

"A Dal…? Oh." Her father cringed and started the car. "Well, that stinks."

She sighed deeply, picturing the day's troubles leaving her with the breath. Then she shrugged. "It wasn't all bad. We got to start quadratic equations in math."

The car lurched forward, pulling clear of a pack of school buses and turning Connie's long day into a dwindling image in the rearview mirror. "Is that right? Maybe I'm just an old square," her father said, his eyes twinkling, "but all things being equal, I never felt like quadratics got to the root of real algebra."

Connie groaned, covering her face to hide her smile. "Jokes like that have a way of dividing families, Dad," she warned him.

They chatted about their respective days, comparing gripes and mundanities. There were three bagels left over from her father's morning meeting, two of which disappeared on the short drive home. But as the car pulled onto their street, Connie dropped the third bagel, distracted by the sight of something large and pink camped out on their front steps. She squinted, thinking that her eyes might be playing tricks on her, but as they drew closer she realized it was the pink shape itself that was fuzzy.

Her father smirked sidelong at her. "Whoops. Looks like the cat's out of the bag."

She would have glowered at the return of his punning, but she was too excited, and hardly waited for the car to stop in the driveway before she threw open her door and pounded up to the front steps of the house. "Lion!" she cried.

The great pink cat opened one eye, his only compromise to the nap he was taking on the Maheswarans' stoop. Connie ran her fingers through his thick mane, paying the guardian his toll with
the requisite scritches, and watched his tail lash with approval.

Edging carefully behind her with her abandoned backpack in hand, her father said, "Are we going to need a whip and a chair to get inside?"

Connie chuckled and used the stair railing to climb around Lion without treading on him, fitting her toes between the slats of the rail. "As long as you watch your feet and aren't hoarding any tuna for yourself, we'll be fine," she assured him.

Her father followed carefully, wincing at the creak of the rail as it accepted his weight. "Glad I went with pastrami for lunch," he half-joked.

Once inside, Connie didn't make it three steps before another pink guardian, this one wearing a yellow star on his belly, slammed into her and picked her up in a giant hug. "Connie!" Steven exclaimed. "I've missed you so much! How was school? Did you get an A today?"

She laughed and squeezed him back. "We just saw each other yesterday, Steven," she said, even though she was just as glad to see him. "What on Earth are you doing here?"

"If the hybrid is moving into this domicile, I refuse to cohabitate with him. His direct optimism is insufferable for any period exceeding eleven minutes," Jade groused.

"Your mom called and asked us to come over," Steven said.

Connie frowned. "Us? You and Lion?"

A timely clattering resounded from the kitchen. Metal clashed on tile, and behind the sound, something rang melodically. Connie looked at her father, then at Steven, but they would only answer with Cheshire grins. Her curiosity burning, Connie dashed into the kitchen.

"Well," her mother said, leaning against the kitchen counter and lifting an eyebrow at Connie's entrance, "the guest of honor arrives. Both of her, in fact. How was school?" She had changed into a blouse and slacks, likely because of the company in the house.

Connie gaped. "It was the opposite of this. Which is…?"

Half of the kitchen's cookware lay scattered across the floor. Two of the larger pot lids had been pressganged into service, and were hovering in midair just a few feet shy of the ceiling. Peridot stood with a foot planted in each upside-down lid, her stance wobbling in the air as she worked at the ceiling with a pair of rusty pliers. "This," the tiny engineer declared, her tongue stuck through her teeth in concentration, "is a little renovation-slash-genius to make your life a little better, Connie Jade."

"Get ready to duck," Jade warned Connie flatly.

"Connie Jade?" her father echoed, pushing into the crowded, cluttered kitchen. "I thought we were separating those two, not giving them their own Kansas City couples' name."

"I was thinking about what you said this morning," her mother explained to Connie, "about how Jade doesn't like to play telephone through you. And since Steven didn't seem shy about being telephoned, I called and asked if there was anything we could do to help make Jade more comfortable here."

Nodding, Steven said, "It was all Peridot's idea. Lion and I just provided transportation and on-site morale."
As Peridot pulled her pliers back, Connie saw the fruits of the work, a large eyehook suspended from the ceiling. The engineer wobbled atop her lids as she held out her hand. "The device, if you please," she commanded.

Steven collected something that lay amidst the scattered pots on the floor, and then jumped, nearly cracking his head as he suspended himself in the air long enough to pass the object to Peridot. The levitating Gem strung the object from her eyehook, and then pulled back, unveiling her handiwork.

"Tada!" Peridot cried with a flourish.

The object hanging from the ceiling was a wind chime. It had been stripped of all but three of its chimes, which hung about the clapper in the middle, equidistant from each other. Each individual chime had a three-by-five notecard glued to it. As Peridot pulled away, the array chimed softly with its tripartite notes until quieting again.

"Now the Jade personality in Connie Jade can express herself separately from the human personality! Or, at least, answer rudimentary inquiries. Since she retains control of their gestalt's atmospheric manipulation capabilities," Peridot explained. Tapping each of the notecards in turn, she said at each individual note, "This tone is for positive responses. This tone is for negative responses. And this third tone indicates a need for further context before providing an answer."

Each note rang sweetly, easily distinguishable from its neighbors. Connie realized that the jury-rigged note cards were sails meant to catch a gentler wind in the still air of the kitchen. "Can Jade blow one chime without knocking the other two around?" she asked.

Peridot didn't get a chance to answer before the yes chime puffed into the clapper, ringing once.

Spinning back to the ground atop her pot lids, Peridot crowed, "Ha! Simplistic, perhaps, but most genius is."

"The little cretin should form a third arm with which to pat herself on the back," Jade complained. Then, reluctantly, she added, "Please convey my gratitude to her for this ludicrously simple and obvious convenience. My 'slight' gratitude."

But Connie wasn't thinking about Peridot's cleverness or Jade's begrudging appreciation. She was staring at the modified wind chime, reveling at the idea that was taking shape. Peridot didn't know it yet, but she had just solved a different, even larger problem.

"Would you and Peridot like to stay for dinner, Steven?" Connie distantly heard her mother ask.

Steven rubbed at the back of his neck. "We don't want to impose," he said.

"We're already spending a small fortune to feed one teenager. Might as well feed two," her father told him. "It's the least we can do for the home renovations. Right, Jade?"

As he looked expectantly to the chimes in the corner of the ceiling, the air puffed, answering him with a no chime.

He smirked, tilting his head. "Okay, that's technically true. But we will anyway. Steven, you and Connie go wash up while we figure out seating," he said. "And, um, Peridot? Do you eat?"

"Hmm? Oh, no," Peridot said. As Steven elbowed her sharply, she jerked and hastened to add, "But wow, thanks for the invitation! Perhaps I could tinker with some of your appliances instead? Your radiation food cooker is operating hilariously below maximum efficiency."
Connie watched her mother struggle for a way to politely decline the engineer's offer to supercharge their microwave while the clutter of pots and pans levitated themselves into a neat pile in the sink. Her father, meanwhile, idly asked Steven if Lion might want table scraps, or if the beast might snack on a neighborhood pet instead if left to his own devices. The moment was far outside anything Connie had ever imagined for her home. And the sight of it made her cheeks hurt as she grinned.

This abnormality was her new normal. It was everything she loved about life in Beach City—the uncertainty, the magic, the community and harmony in chaos—but in a place that was hers and her family's. This was her home now.

"Human? You seem quite pleased with yourself," Jade noted amidst the background chatter.

Connie hummed in perfect tune with the yes chime.

Chapter End Notes

Note from 10/22/17: There will be a week's delay for the next chapter. Apologies for the gap, everybody. Look for the next chapter coming on 10/30/17. I hope you like what's to come!
I debated on whether or not to talk about this at the beginning of the next chapter, but given that I've been dark for two weeks, I thought at least some explanation would be appropriate. Sorry to everyone who was waiting for the next chapter. I wanted to get it out as soon as possible, but I couldn't, and for a lousy reason.

I suffer from clinical depression. It's a bastard of a mental illness, and despite medication and a wonderful, supportive network of family and friends, it still gets the better of me. There are plenty of good days when I feel perfectly fine, and many other days where I struggle, but push through to accomplish what I need to do. But the hardest thing about dealing with the illness is coming to terms with the idea that, sometimes, depression wins. Never forever, never even for long, but sometimes depression wins.

Those of you who are similarly afflicted, or know someone who is, can probably relate. For those of you who have only experienced depression secondhand or not at all, bear with me a few more lines. We'll get back to Connie quickly, I promise.

This is not a cry for help. There is no danger of my harming myself, or worse. I've never experienced depression as overwhelming sadness, not as a loss of the will to live, but instead a general malaise. There will be days when simply getting out of bed becomes a tremendous accomplishment. It's not laziness. I know laziness well. Depression, at least for me, is not the aversion to activity. It is a deep certainty that you cannot do anything, and even if you could, it would not matter in the slightest. You cannot concentrate. You cannot focus. So you do nothing. Which makes you mad as hell when all you want to do is sit down and write about a girl, a boy, and their rocks.

Other people experience depression differently and with varying degrees of severity. Some people experience it as a temporary condition, while others (like me) live with it constantly. I've clocked in, clinically speaking, around the middle of the scale, which I can manage with fairly benign medication and careful awareness of my mental state. Depression can't be willed away with positivity. It can't be negotiated with or combatted. It isn't an enemy. It's a piece of you that you can't put down, a weight around your neck that decides on its own how heavy it's going to be from one day to the next. Maybe I'm wrong, and some forms of it can be beaten, but I don't think I'll ever be rid of mine.

To everyone who made it through this rambling diatribe, which I write in the wee hours of the morning after about two hours of sleep: I'm sorry, and I hate talking about it as much as you must hate reading about it. But I promised myself a long time ago to talk about my depression whenever it affected my life or the lives around me. Mental illness still carries too much stigma, is still grossly misunderstood and misrepresented, and needs to be
spoken with candor so that it becomes normalized. When we as a global culture can talk about mental illness without cringing, without judgment, then there will be no need for meanderings like this one. But until then, we unfortunately have to read and write these together.

I desperately wanted to write the next chapter. I couldn't. And I hated the part of myself that kept me from writing. I love putting this story out, and I love seeing other people enjoy it. To anyone reading this story, and especially to my long-time readers and commenters: you're the freaking best. I hope you stick around, because I intend to do everything in my power to do this story justice.

Thanks for bearing with me, both over the last few weeks of silence and through the above. Now let's get to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I find this activity to be maddeningly ill-defined."

Connie grinned at Jade's grumping, and then kicked the spinning beach ball high into the air. The ball hung there, bright yellow against the clear blue sky, its skin adorned with the licensed features of Pining Grapefruit, the obvious choice of Crying Breakfast Friends to market in ball form. "Keep it going!" she cheered to Steven.

Backpedaling wildly, Steven tracked the novelty ball, chasing its shadow, and then kicked it high and far over Connie's head. "Go for it!" he cried.

With no training and no barnyard tests to occupy their time, the two of them had gravitated to the beach and concocted a game while they decided what to actually do with their Saturday. And like all great time-wasters, the game itself had become the point, seeing how long they could keep Pining Grapefruit in the air using only their feet. And when that had proved too easy, they'd issued unspoken challenges to each other, kicking it farther out each time to force the other to scramble after the ball lest it touch sand.

The practical side of Connie leapt to justify their silliness. Their game was a great substitution for Pearl's footwork drills, forcing Connie to consider her balance on the fly. It was also an excellent way to build back her endurance after a month of inactive malnutrition. But Connie's laughter drowned out that tiny practical voice. It felt too good to just be running and playing again.

"What's the longest you think anyone's done this?" she said, and kicked a crooked lob back in Steven's general direction. "Maybe we're setting some kind of record."

"Dunno," he said, kicking a line drive at Connie and forcing her to tap the ball high back at him. "I could look it up, but then we'd have to start o—Whoops!"

His sandal flopped, spiraling the ball toward the porch. Connie was already sprinting after it as it left his foot. She leapt, catching the porch's edge with the balls of her feet, then leapt again, flipping backwards. The world spun upside-down, sea air billowing through her hair, and she saw Pining Grapefruit float into view. The woeful plastic fruit bounced off the top of her foot with a satisfying twonk, then went flying back toward the ocean as Connie shifted her focus to the oncoming ground.
She landed hard, stumbling a little, but managed to stay upright. Steven's shout met her as she spun around. "Nice move!" he called, his feet splashing into the surf to kick the ball back to her amidst a spray of froth.

"If the only point is to keep the object aloft, you are being most inefficient," Jade groused as Connie kicked a high, easy lob to Steven, giving him a chance to climb out of the wet sand. "And if the point is to not be the one to fail, then you should be making the hybrid work harder instead of working with him."

Steven returned the kind kick, setting Connie up for an easy return. But instead, Connie dropped to her knees and thrust her arms behind her back, grinning at the pining plastic face descending lazily toward her. "Take it, Jade!" she shouted.

Sand billowed up from the beach with a fearsome gale that caught Pining Grapefruit and threw it high into the air. Connie squinted at the dwindling ball, and then flinched as the air above them cracked. A concussive blast of air resounded beneath the ball, rocketing it higher still. Then another blast resounded, and another, as a series of distant invisible explosions thrust the ball deep into the sky, where it vanished from sight.

Steven gaped with Connie at the disappearing ball. The sound of the exploding air became a distant crackle. "Uh, nice one?" he drawled.

"The object is now caught in a high-altitude current heading out to sea," Jade announced proudly. "Its relatively low density should keep it aloft there for several hours at the least. Does that mean I win the contest?"

"Yeah, that's not coming back," Connie muttered. "Sorry, Steven."

"Aw, that's okay. Dad always says that beach stuff really belongs to the beach, and that we're just using it until it decides to take it back," Steven said. "Though he might have been trying to make me feel better about all the sandals I lost in the ocean when I was littler."

Connie giggled, but the sound was suddenly overwhelmed by a loud gurgling from her stomach. Her cheeks burned as she clutched her midsection. "I, uh, don't suppose it's too early for lunch, is it?" she asked.

Grinning, Steven declared, "It's never too early for lunch. Today feels like a pizza day, don't you think?"

"Pizza?" The anticipation and hunger inside of Connie suddenly doubled.

Connie thrust her arms into the air, declaring, "You've got two more votes over here. Pizza!"

Steven led the way up the beach, circling the cliff side toward the boardwalk. The warm weather had already filled a great deal of the sand with blankets and parasols. Children ran barefoot through the surf, which was still a little too cold for swimming, but was just right for splashing. There were sunbathers, volleyball games, joggers, charcoal barbecues, and even a few beach readers. That last variety of tourist Connie noted warmly, thinking of them in particular as her people.

A noise of disgust filled Connie's thoughts. "Splendid. More boundless frivolity," Jade sneered at the people on the beach. "Every time you convince me that you may be even slightly redeemable, human, your species unites to form one grand counterpoint to that notion."

Connie tried to smother her grimace, but Steven caught the edge of her expression. His eyebrows rose in silent question. "Jade's just complaining again," Connie admitted. "She doesn't like people..."
having fun unless it has a point. Or maybe not even then."

Bewildered, Steven cried, "But pointless fun is the best kind of fun! Like seeing how many cashews you can throw into your dad's mouth, or guessing if that thing you see sticking out of the sand is a seashell or garbage."

"Human, you once argued that leisure activities aid your species' existential quest for purpose. How does actively making nourishment intake difficult or differentiating natural and manufactured detritus possibly accomplish such a thing?" Jade insisted.

"Sure, some activities have a purpose," Connie admitted, "but for a lot of them, the pointlessness is the point."

"Sometimes it's fun to do stuff just because you can," Steven added. "Like that!"

Connie's gaze followed to where Steven pointed, and she saw a short, pale boy in kitsch sailor's garb kneeling over something on the boardwalk. She recognized Onion, who was still something of a mystery to her, working a line of rough brown twine around the base of a remote controlled car. Carefully, Onion took a cardboard box featuring the Big Donut's logo and lashed it to the top of the toy car. Then he tore the top of the box away and retreated to shelter behind a nearby bench.

The reaction was immediate. A swarm of gulls descended from the sky, cawing at the sight of a dozen pristine doughnuts unveiled and abandoned. But before the swarm touched down, the toy car leapt forward, escaping with an electric whine down the length of the boardwalk. Undeterred, the cloud of seagulls gave chase, becoming a feathery contrail behind the car and its box.

"See? That couldn't possibly have a purpose," Steven said.

As they watched, the car drove past a noisy group of weekend tourists. The tourists howled in alarm as their world became screaming beaks and flapping wings, and they scattered from the gull storm.

"Not a good purpose, anyway," Connie noted, cringing in sympathy.

They decided to circle the long way around the boardwalk to avoid Onion's mobile aviary. As they ducked behind the T-shirt shop, Jade insisted, "I acknowledge that pointlessness is intrinsic to the way your species lives, but its inescapability does not make it inherently laudable. When Homeworld controlled your planet, the Diamonds..."

Connie listened to the silence stretch onward as they made their way up the block. "Jade?" she said, garnering a look of concern from Steven.

"Nothing," Jade snapped back quickly. "I was merely distracted by the absurdity of your species."

Biting her lip, Connie swallowed the question she had wanted to ask since their time together in the hospital. The Gem had been her curmudgeonly self to a fault since then. Their moment in the tempest may as well have been as made up as any other dream. Connie worried for her passenger, but didn't know how to ask without doing more damage. There wasn't a segue in the world smooth enough to ask someone about how they were coping with the loss of their entire worldview.

As if sensing the two-sided silence in Connie, Steven chimed in brightly, "We should find something pointless and fun for Jade to try."

"She's already pretty invested in food. That's pointless for a Gem, right?" Connie said, grateful for a new distraction.
"Not if you ask Amethyst," Steven noted.

"My exploration of flavor is not pointless!" Jade huffed. "I am documenting an entirely new experience unknown to Gem-kind. Not even the rebel Amethyst can claim to know food as I now do. An once I complete and document my findings, it will add an entirely new context to our understanding of organics."

Smirking, Connie explained to Steven, "Jade is going to write the book on Gems and food. Really vital stuff."

"For example, I have been looking forward to sampling pizza. The dish holds a deep significance in your culture, particularly among your anthropomorphized reptilian warrior cults. Yet it varies so wildly in make that I hardly know where to begin."

A devious notion occurred to Connie, one that might help her with her long-term scheme. "How about a deal, Jade? You get to pick the pizza today, and in return I get to pick a 'pointless' activity that you have to do with me."

Beaming, Steven exclaimed, "That's a great idea! This'll be Jade's first pizza, so she should choose a special one."

"I would be a fool to decline," Jade said smugly. "I have no say in your other pointless pursuits. You are essentially offering me something in exchange for a prize you already hold."

"No, no," Connie said. "You have to actually try, not just sit there and be grouchy and snarky. Whatever I pick, you have to make a genuine effort. Deal?"

The Gem pondered in silence, weighing the possibilities. Connie could feel her suspicions battling her pizza-fueled curiosity. At last, Jade replied, "Very well. I accept your terms."

Smirking at Steven, Connie announced, "Looks like we get to see what kind of pizza comes out of endlessly researching the internet."

A look of concern squelched Steven's features. "I hope SafeSearch was on. I can't afford to be banned from any other places around here."

"I'm pretty sure my parents have an auto-alert set up to let them know the second I try to mess with the filters," Connie said, chagrinned. "Or my computer would probably just brick itself."

With the storm of feathers safely terrorizing people on the far side of the boardwalk, Steven and Connie slipped around to the door of Fish Stew Pizza. It was still early enough in the day and the season that most of the tables in the restaurant stood empty. The two teens settled at a table in the middle.

As they squeaked onto vinyl-covered chairs, the girl behind the counter looked up from her phone and brightened. "Oh, hey, Steven!" she said, and sauntered around the counter.

"Hi, Jenny!" Steven chirped.

Jenny leveled an appraising eye at Connie. It was a kind of look that Connie had seen coming from many other teenage girls, but Connie had never mastered that particular technique herself. The older girl was tall, and pretty, with big hoop earrings hanging out of her tight bob of dark hair. She wore a pristine apron over her summery blouse and shorts that were tight enough to have stretched where the corners of her phone would be in her pocket.
Her teenage appraisal evidently went well, because Jenny smiled at her and said, "Hey there! 'Bout
time Steven brought you around here. We see you two together all the time around town."

"Hello," Connie said, feeling her old shyness climbing up her throat. "I'm Connie."

"Jenny," the girl said. "And the sweaty mess lurking in the kitchen is my sister, Kiki."

Another teenage girl looking almost exactly like Jenny clamored in the back of the kitchen, swapping
a line of pizzas out of the old brick ovens. Her hair was piled high and tied back under a bandana,
and she wore jeans and a sweaty shirt underneath her stained apron. "Hey!" she called back between
pizzas. "Nice to finally meet you!"

Jenny dug a pad and pen out of her apron. "Let's get your order in before the lunch rush leaves you
starving. What'll you have?"

As Jenny's and Steven's expectant looks settled on Connie, the answer came from inside
her. "Pineapple and anchovy, if you please. On a standard crust."

"Pineapple anchovy?" she exclaimed aloud.

"Pineapple anchovy?" Steven echoed.

"Pineapple anchovy," Jenny repeated, her pen scratching on the pad. Then she frowned, her eyes
narrowing. "Wait. For real?"

"Pineapple anchovy," Jade insisted, nonplussed. "I have read little on such a combination and so
wish to explore it for myself. After all, it is important to try new experiences, is it not, human?" Her
sub-vocalization lilted in bemusement.

"Er…for real," Connie said.

Eyes narrowing, Jenny said, "Did y'all lose a bet? This sounds like Ronaldo nonsense. Seriously, I'll
just tell him you ate it if you wanna order real food."

The pomposity thundering in Connie's chest drew her mouth into a flat, grim line. "That's the pizza
we want," she declared solemnly.

"Um…good choice," Steven said.

"No, it's actually pretty bad," Jenny said, and started back for the counter. "And just so you know,
Daddy made us stop keeping antacids behind the counter. He said it showed 'a lack of faith in our
product,' whatever that means. One fish 'n' fruit, coming up."

Even Steven's smile faltered at the slow, inexorable wait for their pizza to arrive. His few attempts at
small talk couldn't overcome the gurgling dread in the pit of Connie's stomach. She had thought
Jade's war on her food had ended when they had defeated ¡Soy Delicioso! together. But the Gem's
enthusiasm for flavor swinging in the opposite direction was a disaster Connie never could have
foreseen. What would be next? Orange juice and toothpaste? Spoonfuls of cinnamon? Chocolate-
covered paperclips?

"Oh," Steven said. "About that…thing? Peridot says it'll be ready next week."

His conspiratorial tone jolted Connie out of her waking cibophobic nightmares. "Steven, shh!" she
hissed, clutching the stone at her neck as if to muffle the sound. Then she blinked. "Wait. That
soon?"
"Thing? What thing?" Jade demanded.

"That's great news!" Connie exclaimed. Then, forcing herself calm, she added, "I'm really glad that Peridot's latest unrelated project that Jade and I haven't heard about yet and doesn't involve us in any way is going so well."

"Human, are you even familiar with the concept of subterfuge? Honestly, were I not aware of your every conscious moment, I might actually be concerned at what that ludicrous pebble of a technician is concocting."

A platter found its way to the table, interrupting Connie's rebuttal with the overwhelming aroma of sweet pineapple and pungent, salty fish. Jenny set the tray between them, then laid a plate in front of each teen. "Order up!" she announced.

Steven blanched at the fragrant pie steaming on the table. "That was fast."

"Kiki got mad at me 'cause she thought I was putting in prank orders again. But when I told her it was for you two, she rushed it through," Jenny said. "Even then, I had to promise to clean it up if y'all chunder."

Behind the counter, Kiki stood with a tired smile on her face and a mop in hand. "I believe in you two!" she called to the table, ignoring the odd looks from the seasonal patrons. "But I also want to see Jenny have to mop it up. So, you know, bon appétit or express yourselves. You do you!"

Swallowing hard, Steven picked up a slice. "Maybe I can go first?" he suggested, his voice and face declaring different reactions to his own generosity.

Awash in Jade's anticipation, Connie shook her head. She seized a slice, snapping the long string of mozzarella from its neighbors to pull it free. The bizarre aroma of it slapped at her nose, and she knew if she set the slide on her plate that she'd never be able to pick it up again. So she closed her eyes and tore a third of the slice off with her teeth, trapping it behind her lips.

It felt like every eye in the restaurant was pressing down on her, making Connie's stomach try to squeeze up through her mouth and push through her clamped mouth. She chewed the bite furiously, clenching her own eyes so hard she could feel tears seeping in their corners. Her entire world became the wet lump mashing between her teeth.

"Oh!" Jade gushed amidst the rush of sensations. "What exquisite combinations! Nothing quite like this has ever occurred from our previous meals. Its comingling flavors are remarkable, are they not, human?"

As Connie chewed, she cracked a single, teary eye.

The pizza wasn't terrible.

"Huh," she grunted around her mouthful. The sweetness of the pineapple twined around the savory, salty flavor of the anchovies, which somehow didn't taste as fishy as they smelled. The balance of sauce and cheese kept both toppings in check, keeping the final product close enough to actual pizza for her to recognize.

Seeing her puzzlement, Steven braved a bite of his own slice. He looked as confused as Connie felt. "It's…okay?" he decided as he chewed.

She nodded slowly, passing the wad of pizza between her cheeks. "Yeah. Only, no? It's not very good," she admitted.
"'Good' is an arbitrary label used to reduce nuance to a glib, easily processed critique. Your ambivalence toward the dish should be celebrated and explored, not dismissed!" Jade exclaimed. Her own reactions, revulsion and delight alike, roiled behind the words.

Connie didn't quite buy into the idea of enjoying the unenjoyable for its own sake. It was a dangerous precedent to set with the explorer Gem. But at least the pizza wasn't nearly as gross as it had sounded.

A digital click tugged Connie's attention to Jenny, who was snapping a picture of Steven and Connie with their pie. "Y'all mind if I put this up? Kiki and I keep an album on InstaSnap of the worst orders."

Grimacing around his own regrettable bite, Steven said, "I guess you have a new number one, huh?"

As she set aside the mop, Kiki said, "Not even close. That honor still belongs to the iron belly who ordered jalapeños, artichoke hearts, and barbecue sauce."

"...human, I now wish to order a second pie," Jade said.

Connie groaned and sank in her chair, swallowing hard to keep her stomach down.

Chapter End Notes

If you're a champion of the pineapple anchovy pizza, or if you've even just tried it, let me know in the comments!
Something felt off as Connie drifted back into the waking world. She was sitting upright, which made sense, but instead of the bright rectangle of her laptop monitor, she squinted into a fully illuminated room. There was a faint bustling nearby, a clattering of ceramic and metal. A funky taste pervaded her mouth in lieu of the morning breath she was expecting.

She lurched in her seat at the kitchen table, still dressed in her pajama pants and the yellow-starred shirt she had borrowed from Steven's wardrobe and conveniently kept forgetting to return. The Fish Stew Pizza box she'd brought back with her from Beach City sat open on the tabletop, and a good portion of the leftovers that Steven had generously, enthusiastically given to her was gone. A glass of water and a plate with a couple of stripped pizza crusts were on a plate in front of her. The clock on the wall hung with its hands pointing to a terrible morning hour.

"Is something wrong?" The question came from the counter by the sink, where her mother stood with a mug in hand, stirring a generous daub of honey into her tea. Her lab coat hung draped across the back of a chair, and her clothes were still rumpled from her last double shift.

Rubbing at her eyes, Connie mumbled, "Mom? How did I get downstairs?"

Her mother set the mug aside and hurried to Connie's side, rubbing gently at her back. "Connie? Oh, sweetie, is that you? Did we wake you?"

As the last of her grogginess faded, Connie heard Jade's voice emerge in her thoughts. "My apologies, human. I did not mean to disturb your rest. I only meant to alleviate the persistent imbalance in our nutrient influx."

"I came home late and found 'you' rummaging around the fridge in the dark," her mother explained, and returned to her tea. "When I realized that it wasn't you, exactly, I helped Jade fix a plate."

"The matriarch's assistance was most opportune. I have not previously foraged for our nutrients, and the arbitrary organization of this domicile's foodstuffs is baffling. Items do not appear to be organized by size, caloric value, or even name. Chaos!" Jade insisted.

"Thanks for helping her, Mom. I guess we did skimp a little on lunch," Connie admitted, and grimaced at the tagalong pizza that had followed her home.

Sidling up to the table, her mother poked at the open box. "Nobody living under this roof should ever have to go to bed hungry. Besides, it let me introduce Jade to Earth's greatest delicacy." She plucked a slice from the box for herself. "Cold pizza."

"Its consistency when served below room temperature is completely different. It truly does taste better," Jade agreed.

Connie smirked. "Pizza at this hour, Mom? I thought you didn't approve of late-night junk food," she said teasingly.

Her mother paused in mid-bite to glance archly at Connie. "I hardly think an appreciation for good nutrition means I'm incapable of appreciating a little treat every once in a while. It's called 'sometimes food' for a reason," she said.

Flinching, Connie took her own slice. "Sorry," she said, and nibbled at the pizza's tip. Despite Jade's praises, the pizza didn't really taste any better cold.
A pained look creased her mother's brow. "No, Connie, I was trying to be…" She sighed. Tearing off a large bite, her mother chewed slowly, staring at the tabletop in deep, flavorful contemplation. Then she swallowed and said, "Every time I try to just talk to you, it comes out sounding like a lecture. I don't mean to. It just…does."

Guilt tugged at Connie's stomach. "Not always," she offered. But even she didn't think she sounded convincing.

She saw her mother's gaze drift listlessly across the table, her eyes dark and half-buried by her thick brows. It was deeply unsettling to see such uncertainty in the strong, unwavering, unstoppable motherly force of nature. "Connie," her mother murmured, setting her half-eaten slice back in the box, "I don't like always being the person who tells you 'no.' You've already got too much to deal with at school and with just being thirteen. And now you're an extraterrestrial embassy on top of that."

“For the record, I consider you more of an unwilling, affable prison," Jade confided in Connie.

"I just…" Her mother rubbed at her mouth. For just a moment, her eyes glistened. But then she blinked hard, straightening her features as she straightened in her chair. "Well, I've told you about your grandfather. I did everything I could to do better, and I ended up being exactly like him."

Connie frowned and fidgeted in her seat. "I don't think you're like grandfather," she mumbled into her chest.

A wan smile tugged at her mother's lips. She picked up her forgotten slice and stripped it to the crust. Swallowing, she said, "Sweetie, everybody eventually turns into their parents. It's the dirty little secret of life you don't believe until it's too late. The best we can hope for is being the best possible version of our parents."

Connie stared at the tabletop, trying desperately to think of what to say. This wasn't how conversations with her mother were supposed to go. In her experience, mothers were supposed to be implacable tablets made from iron and bone and writ with the law of the household. Mothers never doubted themselves, and even if they did, they would never admit it to their daughters. Both of them were in uncharted territory, and Connie felt completely lost.

The corner of the kitchen chimed softly, turning their heads. It was Jade's wind chime, which rang softly with its third note. Jade was asking the room for context.

"I'm sorry, Jade. I suppose that does sound a little cryptic if you're new to the family," her mother said. "Do you understand common human lineage? Extended families?"

The chime rang softly.

Nodding, tight-lipped, her mother continued, "Connie's grandfather—my father—had very traditional notions for his children. My brothers were supposed to go to school and find good careers and marry his friends' children. He wanted the same for me, but without the education or the career. I disagreed. Loudly. By the time I was eighteen years old, the only thing we could agree on was that I shouldn't live under his roof anymore."

"I will presume she is speaking colloquially, and does not mean she came to inhabit an uncovered portion of their shared domicile," Jade said to Connie.

"So I started living on a friend's couch. Finished high school, found a job, worked through college, and then put myself into grievous debt to finish med school," her mother said.
As glib as the words were, Connie could hear the weight of the events they described. Connie knew very little about those years of her mother's life, and she suspected her mother liked it that way. It had never occurred to Connie until just then that she might have inherited her tendency to bottle up her own worries. In a way, the realization was weirdly comforting, if only that it meant the self-destructive habit wasn't hers alone.

Her mother traced the grain of the table's wood with her fingernail. "I think the worst part was that he was sure he knew what was best for me. He was so certain I couldn't be happy without a pack of children and a husband to hold my hand and tell me what to do. I don't think he ever really got over my leaving him."

A hazy memory drifted back to Connie, the same memory that arose on the rare occasions that this subject came back. They live outside of Albuquerque, and Connie was standing in the river rock landscaping of their tiny house's front yard. It's still early in the day, so the air hadn't reached its usual boiling temperature yet. Her fingers wrap into the rough texture of her father's jeans as she cowers behind his leg, watching her mother shout at a strange older man dressed in a full suit. His balding pate gleams in the morning sun, and his wide face is drawn tight with silent anger. He speaks tersely, softly, and he glares at Connie's father and at Connie behind him.

"I spent so long being so angry," her mother said, her soft, sardonic chuckle pulling Connie from the memory. "I swore for years that I would never get married, just to spite him. Just to show him that I didn't need the life he planned for me."

The pizza inside Connie lurched violently. She tried to sound unconcerned, but her voice cracked as she said, "I never knew you didn't want to get married. That means you didn't want kids either, right?"

Her mother stilled for an instant, eyes widening in realization. Then her tired features softened. "That's right. I was looking forward to being on my own forever. I didn't want to take care of anybody, and I didn't want anybody taking care of me. But do you know what happened after that?" When Connie shook her head, her mother smiled and said, "Your father happened. And then you happened. And I learned the other secret to being a grown-up."

"What's that?" Connie asked.

Plucking up another slice of pizza, her mother said, "Adults don't know what they're doing or what they want any more than kids do. They just have more practice faking it."

Connie's innards unclenched, and she smiled in kind. Then she heard Jade's voice murmur a question for her to relay. Her own curiosity twined with Jade's as she realized it was a question she had never thought to ask. "Hey, Mom? Jade wants to know why you decided to become a doctor. Or how you knew you wanted to become one in the first place."

Eyebrows rising, her mother nibbled thoughtfully at her pizza slice. "Really? I didn't think she would be very interested in 'human shamans' and their primitive ways," she said teasingly.

"Maybe sarcasm doesn't translate across species," her mother mused.

Sensing a bubble of amusement inside her, Connie shook her head and said, "No, it does. Actually, sarcasm might be her first language."

The yes chime rang again.

"Sensing a bubble of amusement inside her, Connie shook her head and said, "No, it does. Actually, sarcasm might be her first language."

The no chime rang at the heels of Connie's smug words.
Snorting with quiet laughter, her mother leaned back in her chair, tossing her crust into the pizza box. Between smiling, the junk food, and the extreme hour, Connie hardly recognized the stern figure who her father had once fondly described as wearing all of the pants in their relationship, and maybe the world too. "I think I was a little younger than you are now, Connie. I became terribly sick one winter and ended up with pneumonia so bad that our father had no choice but to take me to the hospital. It was your Uncle Zarir who finally made him do it by threatening to call an ambulance, which would have cost even more money."

Connie tried to imagine her mother as a small child in a hospital bed, but the image just didn't fit. The image became one of herself instead, and she shivered at the too-recent memory of being trussed in a hospital gown and strapped to a bed. Maybe that's how her mother had felt too?

"My doctor ended up being this old battle axe of a woman named Goldstein. She was the meanest woman I had ever met up until then. Her hands were like sandpaper, and they were always cold. But she made me feel better for the first time in weeks. And when my father tried to tell her how to treat me, she shut him down in less than ten words." Connie watched her mother smile as her dark eyes grew faraway. "That's when I knew I wanted to help people the way she did."

A weak smile crossed Connie's lips, trying to mask the creeping sense of being overwhelmed that seemed to have become an everyday part of her life since turning thirteen. "It's pretty cool that you knew what you wanted to do right away," she said.

Her mother's gaze snapped back out of the past, growing warm as it found Connie again. "There's plenty I didn't have figured out even after I finished med school. Give yourself some time, Connie. You could be anything you put your mind to at this point."

Connie's smile melted into something genuine. "Thanks, Mom," she said.

"Even something that doesn't involve blades or aliens," her mother added, voice lilting innocently.

"Mom," Connie grumbled, rolling her eyes.

"Lawyers make great money. And they always need more lawyers in Kansas. That's a safe distance away from Beach City, right?"

A hot streak of defiance rose in Connie's throat, but she caught it when she saw the bemused little twinkle in her mother's eye. Sensing the same kind of teasing that she had misunderstood before, Connie toyed with a pizza crust and said, "Maybe. But I could always drop out and move straight to Beach City instead. Do you think Funland needs any ride operators this time of year?"

Her mother laughed and lifted her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. We'll let the future keep for tonight." Standing from the table, she pushed the pizza box and its last remaining slice toward Connie. "Here. Eat this, then get back to bed. Try not to sleep in too late, or you'll be up all night before school on Monday."

Acquiescing to the last slice's temptation, fishy smell and all, Connie picked it up. But she paused in mid-bite, struck with a thought. "Mom? Thanks for talking to Jade. And me. I never knew a lot of that stuff about you and grandfather."

Her mother paused at the kitchen door, letting her hand drift across the oak wood frame. "I guess it's Jade's family now too. No reason you both shouldn't know more about it."

As her mother turned again, Connie felt a new thought burst from her lips before she could stop it. "Hey, Mom? I, um… I don't really think everybody has to become their parents. Y'know?"
A tired, tight smile creased her mother's face. "You shouldn't believe it. Not just yet."

"But," Connie added quickly, "if I did? I think that'd still be pretty good."

Her mother's eyes glimmered in the shadow of the doorway. "Goodnight, Connie. I love you," she said, and pulled back into the hallway.

"Love you," Connie answered softly.

She made quick work of the final slice, crust and all, then cleared the plates from the table. The last of the pizza went in companionable silence, but as Connie wrestled to fold the pizza box in half so it would fit in the garbage, she heard Jade sub-vocalize, "I hope my venturing downstairs was not untoward, human. I was unaware of your matriarch's impending arrival from her nocturnal engagement, and it felt inappropriate to simply withdraw from her presence."

"It's like Mom said: nobody should go hungry. Not even superior Gems," Connie told her. "What did you guys talk about?"

"You, mostly," Jade admitted. "Though the conversation grew far more revealing once your consciousness emerged. The matriarch's recollections of the impetus for her choice of function provided noteworthy context for the confrontations that arose from the circumstances of our revealed coexistence. Their roles as caregivers are somewhat like those of a kindergartener, after a fashion. Ultimately their concern is for ensuring that you function according to your highest possible potential."

"I guess so," Connie admitted.

Puzzlement drifted up through Jade's continuing thought. "But with the additional context of her own parental dealings, the matriarch's actions seem contradictory. Why would she defy her patriarch's directives only to impose similar restrictions upon her own progeny in spite of your obvious natural talent for combat? It creates strife for all parties concerned even as it flies in the face of logic."

Connie smirked as she flicked off the kitchen light on her way out the door. "Welcome to the family, Jade. If you can figure out how we can all love each other and drive each other crazy, don't keep it to yourself."

"Perhaps such valuable knowledge would be worth another pizza of my choosing?" Jade suggested.

Grimacing around a mouthful of fishy aftertaste, Connie muttered, "I'm gonna go use some more mouthwash before bed. Try to stay out of the halibut before I wake up again."
"Keep up!" Peridot cried, hopping up and down ahead of her visitors. "Hurry! There's no time to waste!"

Stepping carefully along their predefined path across the barnyard, which Peridot promised would not gloop them so long as they followed her footsteps, Connie and Steven tried to keep pace with their excited guide. Connie kept her violin case aloft over her head like a soldier fording a river with her rifle, while Steven shouldered his ukulele by its strap. "What's the hurry, Peridot? We just got here," Steven said.

"Exactly! I've been waiting here all morning, wracked with anticipation for the unveiling of our surprise for Connie Jade. I can't wait any longer!" Peridot insisted.

Lapis floated beside them, her wings pushing through the air in a lazy backstroke. She held Pumpkin on her stomach, cradling the squirmy orange gourd. "It's true," she said, nodding upside-down. "We couldn't even get through two episodes in our *CPH* Season Four re-re-watch without Peridot running off to fiddle with her new invention."

Steven gasped. "The season with the inter-camp Olympics? But that's the best one!"

"Right? The part where Paulette takes herself out of the triathlon so Percy can go on to win the whole competition and save the camp from being bought out by Camp Golden Stone?" Lapis gushed, her hair swishing under her as she twisted and hugged Pumpkin with excitement. "I still cry every time it happens. So far, anyway. But I bet I will when we do our re-re-re-watch too!"

Connie felt herself pushed ever closer to that threshold at which point she would be forced to finally go back and binge *Camp Pining Hearts* in its entirety. She'd given up on the show ages ago, back in its first broadcast season, but if pushing through a Canadian tween soap opera made her able to understand the cultural lexicon of the farm, it might make such a slog worthwhile. At least until she could hook the rest of the Gems into *The Spirit Morph Saga* like she had Steven.

A familiar impatience rattled behind Connie's thoughts, one she had spent the whole week ignoring. "And still you persist with this notion of a 'surprise' for me, human. I had thought your capacity for reasoning made you one of the nigh-acceptable exceptions of your species. But you continue to refuse the simple truth that I am always with you, seeing what you see and hearing what you hear. Any surprise to me must therefore be a surprise to you."

 Connie smirked. The moment she had waited for was about to arrive. "Gee, Jade," she said, raising her voice as she cast a knowing smirk at Steven, "you're right. I could never keep a secret from you. It'd be impossible for me to sneak instructions for Peridot to make you a super-secret surprise."

"Certainly I could play no part in such sneakery," Steven added theatrically. "Not even with secret text messages full of the secret instructions that I secretly passed to Peridot."

"Stop that," Jade snapped at Connie, doubtlessly intending it for Steven as well.

Peridot frowned at them, her forehead crinkling under her visor. "What are you two talking about? That's exactly what happened," she said.
Jade's protest fizzled in Connie's thoughts as they rounded the corner to the field behind the barn. The grass had been recently mowed, softening the rusty shadows in the ground where old farm equipment had been cannibalized for the Gems' defenses. A lone maple tree stood in the ground, its greenery littered with blooming red flowers that swayed in the breeze. There were no signs of the homespun land mines that littered the rest of the farm. The tall weeds at the edge of the field and the high, creaky back wall of the barn behind them created a feeling of sanctuary that made Connie feel immediately at home. The space would have made an idyllic sanctum for reading a good book, but that wasn’t its purpose.

The true surprise stood in the center of the field. From Connie's instructions and suggestions, the surprise had taken shape as a pair of rough, square arches made from two-by-four planks, each archway planted in the ground opposite the other. The archways supported a multitude of slender, slightly rusty metal tubes, their lengths hanging suspended from a series of fixed hinges at the top of each arch. The tubes featured thin, flat panels welded on one side, the panels' shape broad but still allowing each tube to swing freely of its neighbor. An iron bar with a rubber bumper was suspended across the midpoint of each archway, pushed far enough back that the tubes would not strike it as their panels caught the gentle wind.

"Tada!" Peridot warbled, gesturing to the contraptions. "Hybrids and gentle-Gems, it is my pleasure to introduce to you today: the zephyrphone, by Peridot."

As Connie beamed at her notion given shape, she heard a perplexed silence inside of her. Then her passenger uttered, "What in the Empty Sky is this monument to splinters and tetanus that looms before us?"

"Peridot," Connie exclaimed, "it's perfect! It's even better than I imagined!"

Polishing her fingernails on her tunic, Peridot said, "Well, I do like to brag. But I think my handiwork speaks for itself, doesn't it?" Then she grinned and added, "But in case its obviousness isn't clear, allow me to elaborate: I started with some piping from the farm's defunct irrigation network…"

As Peridot continued, talking too quickly for Connie to follow, Jade said, "Human, I demand explanation. What is this doing, and how specifically is it 'your' doing?"

"As soon as I saw Peridot's chime in the kitchen, I got the idea that she could build a bigger, better one for you," Connie explained, speaking softly enough to keep from interrupting Peridot's bulldozer-like elaboration. "So I waited for a little privacy, and then I texted Steven my idea and suggestions. Then I deleted the texts right away so you wouldn't see them by accident."

"But you have no privacy!" Jade insisted. "The only time I even remotely withdraw from our shared senses is when you…when you…" Dawning realization squelched the thought. "You clever sack of liquids. You used my own aversion to your bodily waste management against me!"

Connie flushed with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. "Yup. I figured out pretty early on that you zoned out during the actual act of…yeah. Mom hates it when I use my phone in the bathroom, but I figured it was for a good cause."

"I deleted my text too," Steven added, squirming. "Not so much for secrecy, but just because it seemed polite based on where they were coming from." His cheeks pinked, which Connie might have thought adorable if her own face wasn't burning at the time.

"—thus ensuring that the bipartite instrument possessed perfect pitch!" Peridot concluded, and bowed with a flourish of her hand. Then she popped back up, all but vibrating in her excitement.
"But enough about my brilliance. For now, anyway. Give it a try, Connie Jade!"

Stepping forward, Connie took position between the two archways and their tubular curtains. She could see most of each arch in her periphery, standing an arm's length from either one, as she turned to face the barn wall and their impromptu audience. As she assessed the invention, she felt Jade's confusion rise. "Why would the Peridot overdesign her communications apparatus in such a manner? There are too many inputs for simple responses, but not enough for alphabetical coding. Even hexadecimal code would be easier."

"But it's not for talking, Jade. It's a musical instrument. Just for you!" Connie said.

"What?"

Connie began unpacking her violin, setting its case out of the way. "Remember our deal from last Saturday? You picked the pizza, and now you have to do an activity with me. Well, this is it. We're going to teach you how to play the zee…the zuh…"

"Zephyrphone," Peridot called. Next to her, Lapis settled on the ground, fluffing her dress into a cradle for Pumpkin to sprawl with the gourd's bumpy tummy presented for rubbing.

"That," Connie said. She pulled the bow across her violin, testing the strings. The instrument was still tuned from earlier that morning, and it sang a cheerful pair of notes under her fingers. "So, are you ready to give it a try? Let's test this thing out!"

"I…" Jade's voice wavered in Connie's thoughts. "Human, I do not…"

Peridot circled around Steven as he unslung his ukulele. "Yes, please do!" the diminutive Gem cheered. "I tried to make the chime sails wide enough to react to precise changes in air pressure individually, but I wasn't sure—"

Before the engineer could finish, her device began to move. Connie felt a puff of air precede each chime as the tubes swung forward to strike the clapper bars. Despite their rusty appearance, the tubes rang with pure, clear notes, pitched perfectly, their resonant tones bleeding together as each note rang in succession. Jade played the full scales of her new instrument, then waited patiently as the last note stilled.

"Nice!" Connie exclaimed. The instrument sounded even better than she'd hoped. Peridot's ethics might have been a little skewed when it came to her inventions, but her talent for crafting was undeniable. That her zephyrphone wouldn't stop Connie's heart was just a bonus. "It'll probably take you a while to remember the position of the notes. For me, the fingering was the hardest—"

"My memory is indelible, human. I will remember the configuration of this cumbersome noisemaker until my final moment," Jade snapped, her sub-vocalization hissing like a lake of acid.

Wincing, Connie said, "Right. Eidetic memory. Well, if you've got a feel for it, why don't we start with something simple?" She tried thinking back to her early days with the violin, searching for something that might translate from strings to percussion.

Steven stepped up, his ukulele tuned and ready. He began strumming the notes to Row, Row, Row Your Boat, filling the space with the instantly recognizable melody. Connie lifted her bow and accompanied him for the closing half, and then followed him into the song's endless reprise.

"Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream," she harmonized with him. "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."
A quizzical look tilted in Lapis's face. "That's pretty, but it doesn't make sense," she said as Steven and Connie continued to play through the instrumentals. "How can life be a dream? Gems don't even normally sleep."

"I guess it doesn't really fit the Gem life, does it?" Steven agreed, still strumming. "Why don't we change it?"

"Are we allowed to do that?" Peridot said, frowning. "I mean, it's a mathematical progression accompanied by metaphor. Changing any single component could drastically alter its effect. Who knows what could happen?"

"Row, row, row your boat, gently through the stars," Steven sang, answering her through the next reprise. "We'll drift and fly across the sky from Mercury to Mars." His song made Connie titter, and she saw Lapis do the same as the Gem teased Pumpkin's wriggling feet in her lap.

Peridot brightened in realization. "Oh, I see! We can leave the progression intact, but alter the metaphor to fit our own experiences. Clever!"

"Now you're getting it!" Steven cheered. Then he looked to Connie and called, "How about it, Jade? Are you feeling the rhythm yet?"

As the next reprise began, Connie felt her hair stir, and the zephyrphone began to move. The chimes were too bulky to keep up with the repetition of notes, so Jade let the chimes ring long while Steven and Connie filled in the gaps with their lighter instruments. Each note from the zephyrphone tolled with a rich texture that resonated beneath the teens' strings. Connie felt Jade's notes buzzing deeply in her bejeweled chest, and she smiled.

"Row, row, row your boat, high into the air. We'll have some fun and chase the sun and soar without a care," Connie sang, drawing a vibrato note across her violin at the end of the verse.

Lapis grinned, rocking from side to side at the simple rhythm. At the next reprise, she sang, "Row, row, row your boat, back across the bay! We'll pull the cord and blow the horn and laugh and dance all day!"

Bouncing eagerly, Peridot leapt into the next verse. "Row, row, row your boat, out across the lake! The rival camp will be quite damp when all their towels we take!"

As they giggled at each other's verses, the zephyrphone chimed in perfect time with Steven and Connie. "You're doing great, Jade!" Connie said. Her tapping foot turned her in a circle, becoming a spin and a flourish of her bow. "Now let's get a little off-book and make it our own."

At that, Connie let her bowstring wander a little, playing with the shape of the simple tune. Steven caught on immediately, and she found herself answering his improvisations with more of her own. The song danced between them like a winding, lilting ribbon, going every which way they could imagine, but always coming back in the end to a place familiar enough to start the reprise anew.

And then every chime on the zephyrphone's twin arches slammed against their clappers, blasting a cacophony of noise that staggered Connie. She clutched at her ears, nearly losing her bow and violin, and saw Steven and the other Gems tumble backwards from the noise. Pumpkin leapt from her nest atop Lapis and bolted for the front of the barn, disappearing from sight faster than her stubby legs should have been able to manage.

As Connie lowered her hands from her ringing ears, her eyes watering, she heard Jade speak in her mind with perfect clarity. "Human, I wish to go home. Let us depart immediately."
"Mahwp…" Peridot slurred, drilling at her ear with her pinkie finger. "Mahwp! Can anybody hear me?"

"Ow! Jade!" Connie snapped. "What are you—"

"We are done here," Jade snarled. "I want to leave. NOW."

Connie felt her innards bubble at Jade's heated tone. The Gem's anger resonated through her as the discordant chiming faded. Lapis had reluctantly unfurled herself and was staring at Connie with open concern, the Gem's delicate brows clenched in pain. Steven started to step toward Connie, but then stopped, watching her with a question etched into his features.

Lifting her hand to him in a reassuring gesture, Connie said, "Guys, could you give me and Jade a minute alone?"

Steven bit his lip, but nodded. "Come on, Lapis. We should probably get Peridot to lie down for a minute…"

"Mahwp!" the engineer bellowed, still digging into her own ear as she allowed Steven and Lapis to lead her gently around the side of the barn.

As soon as the others had vanished from sight, Connie spun and glared, keeping her eyes fixed away from the arches. Jade probably still knew where the chimes were positioned and could blow them anyway, but Connie was too irritated to care. Her ears still rang from the Gem's tantrum. "Jade, what's going on?" she demanded.

"You have wildly overstepped your bounds," Jade snapped, her silent words boiling inside Connie's skull. "You twisted an innocuous promise that was made as a show of camaraderie into a means by which to coerce me into this pageantry! You have ambushed me and humiliated me, and I will suffer it no longer!"

"I didn't—"

"How dare you mock me like this? I confided in you my abiding passion for music, and you use it as a means to publicly antagonize me in front of the Lazuli? And for what purpose? Entertainment for your rebel friends?"

As the force of the words drove Connie to her knees, she felt a mountain of pain behind their anger. Her passenger wasn't simply upset. Jade felt betrayed, and that feeling vibrated deep in Connie's bones. Connie lurched to her feet, spurred by her own sense of outrage. She, Steven, and Peridot had all conspired for more than a week to surprise Jade with the zephyrphone, all so Jade could pitch a hissy fit?

But as Connie drew a breath to bite back, she looked around herself again. The neck of her violin bit into her palm as her hand clenched, trembling at a sudden memory of her first recital. Her stomach had tried to slither up her throat back then, caught under the watchful eye of her father's camcorder and the thousand-million faces of the people in the audience. Tears had filled her eyes as she'd tried desperately to remember how to play Mary Had A Little Lamb, only for the notes to spill through her grasping thoughts.

Jade might consider Lapis a friend, but she certainly didn't feel that way about Steven or Peridot. Connie had dragged her passenger in front of an audience to play an instrument that had existed for less than a week. Just the thought of somebody forcing her to do something so performative immediately after she'd learned her violin fingering made Connie's innards twist.
"I... Wow, I am sorry, Jade," Connie said, deflating. "I really messed this up. I promise, I wasn't trying to trick you or embarrass you. This was supposed to be a fun surprise, but I should have told you ahead of time. I was just so excited about the idea that I actually could surprise you at all, and I hoped…"

"Hoped what?"

The question was a poisoned jab that made Connie flinch. "I really did want us to do something fun together," she admitted to Jade. "Music is the only thing we both love that my body doesn't absolutely need to keep living. So I thought we could learn to play together. I thought you could have another way to express yourself that didn't rely on me. That's all."

Gradually, the seething cauldron inside Connie eased into a dull, vaguely resentful simmer. Her reluctance palpable, Jade said, "I accept your apology, human. With that additional context, I can now discern that you were foolish rather than outright malicious. But I have told you many times that music lies far beyond the scope of my function. It is an enjoyable distraction, but it will never be within my purview."

After such a blowout, Connie could hardly argue with the Gem. Music was too far outside of Jade's comfort zone to ever be a real possibility. Already without a body, a home, a people, and a purpose, did Jade really deserve Connie deciding what was best for her?

"I'm sorry, Jade, but you're wrong," Connie heard herself say instead. "The Crystal Gems all sing. Peridot and Amethyst weren't made for music. Garnet wasn't even supposed to exist according to Homeworld, but she's a great singer. All your old Ruby squad mates sang too."

"Human..." Jade said dangerously.

"Even if you won't perform it for anybody but you and me," Connie said quickly, "please, just try. If you try it and don't like it, I'll never bring it up again. And either way, I promise never to surprise you like that again. But please. You love music, and I really think you would love making it as much as you love listening to it if you'd just give it a chance."

"Human—"

"And I know you could be great at it! Most of the hard part in the beginning is learning how to play notes and chords, but your mega-memory makes that a breeze. Literally!" Connie insisted. A flash of inspiration struck her, and she reached back, recalling Jade's own words from one of their other innumerable arguments. "Do you remember what you told me your Chronicler teacher said? Every Gem is made with versatility enough for any function tasked to her. You just strip away the doubt until you know you can do it. Right?"

There was a long pause. Then Jade murmured, "...by a Diamond."

"What?"

A deep well opened up beneath Connie's thoughts. Something inky and ugly swirled in its depths, something that hurt too deeply for words, too deeply to dare the light of Connie's attention. "The quote to which you refer. '...any function tasked to her by a Diamond.' That is what my mentor told me," Jade said.

"Oh," Connie murmured. Then she frowned, and straightened, and said, "Well, you're on Earth now. Everybody here is their own Diamond."

Seconds ticked by like eons. Then, slowly, the bottomless well inside Connie puckered shut. She
could still feel its presence, like a hollow inside of her, but Jade had closed it for the moment. With an airless sigh, Jade said, "I relent, human. If you promise no more command performances without my consent, I will explore the hopeless, fruitless possibility of creating music under your tutelage."

Connie allowed herself a tiny smile. It wasn't the *Kumbaya* singalong from her wildest hopes, but it was a start. "Deal. No more jam sessions unless you okay it first." She rubbed the back of her neck, looking around the empty space. "Um, we're alone right now. Would you like to play something while it's still just the two of us?"

"*May I select the composition this time?*"

"Of course!" Connie chirped.

But her smile vanished into the whispered gusts of air around her as the zephyrphone tilted into motion, tolling with its cumbersome chimes. Almost immediately, Connie recognized the chipper, mass-market, focus-grouped chorus of *T8king Over Midnight* as it rang all around her.

"That's... sounding great, Jade," Connie said, speaking above the toll of the chimes and the louder, painful headache that gathered between her temples. Beneath the ringing ache, she could feel a smug sense of satisfaction emanating from Jade. Once more, it wasn't the result Connie had hoped for, but it was a positive step nonetheless. That had to be worth a headache and an earworm. Wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

---

Edit: I'm a complete goon for not posting this earlier.

BR42, a co-author of the excellent ConnieSwap series, regular commenter on this li'l ol' story, and all-around good egg, has written a hilarious sendup of The Stranger In Me in the same vein as JelloApocalypse's equally hilarious video, So This Is Basically Steven Universe. BR and CoreyWW have put together an entire series riffing on different SU stories. If you're looking for a laugh riot that doubles as a list of some truly excellent other stories, absolutely check it out. And if you've never watched the video, click the link above and enjoy!
A Duet

Chapter Notes

Completely late, but still technically Monday from where I'm publishing. Blame the holiday weekend, the driving I did during it, and the delicious turkey dinner waiting for me a thousand miles away. Now, on with the show!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Connie had created a nightmare out of her own kindness, and there was no escape from it. Like noble Prometheus, who had cupped fire in his hands to bring as a light for all of mankind, she too now lay chained to a cliff of her own, pecked endlessly by eagles that took the form of tolling bells.

"I have prepared a new series of test notes for you when you are ready, human."

Biting back a groan, Connie dropped her pen onto her math homework and leaned back in her chair. The Archimicarus clock beside her bed warned her that she had precious little time left for quadratic equations before bedtime, even if they were just the optional questions Miss Gala had offered for extra credit. "Okay, Jade," she said, closing her eyes. "Go ahead."

Notes began to chime inside her head. Coming in pairs and threes, pure notes or chords, the clips of music stood isolated from each other by moments of silence. For days, Jade had experimented on Connie with these bite-sized pieces of music, filling her thoughts with a perfect replication of the zephyrphone's sound. In school, during meals, between turns of the page, as she was drifting off to sleep, and before she could even stretch in the morning, Connie heard Jade's endless mixing of her new instrument's range.

She had tried to be patient, to allow Jade the space to explore this new realm on her own. But space, especially inside their shared experience, was a premium commodity, and Connie was running out of patience to pay for it. After several minutes of this latest round of sampling, she couldn't help but sigh.

The mental chimes stilled. Faint annoyance whispered up around Jade's voice as she said, "I had more samples prepared, but perhaps we can work with this smaller set tonight. Do you have any pertinent feedback to offer on these latest attempts?"

Connie's eyes opened under her frown. "I thought 'verbal feedback' was unnecessary' to this whole thing," she said, sounding far more sarcastic than she'd meant to when parroting Jade's words back at her.

Equally sarcastic, Jade retorted, "Formerly, it was. I had assembled these sequences to gauge their isolated emotional effect, which I can feel in you. But since all I now feel is your impatience, I require a different means by which to gather feedback. Or is 'impatience' the sum total of your reaction to this chore you have foisted upon me?"

"It's only a chore if you treat it like a chore," Connie said, trying not to snap. "And I'm sorry if I'm getting a little tired of your sound bytes. I guess I was hoping you would move on to something a little more…complete."
"Fundamental theory is critical to ascertain! I must have a grasp on the foundational elements of music and their effect before I even consider attempting to formulate my own composition. Would you blithely mix sodium and chlorine in your hands with no forewarning of their combination's results?"

Connie cringed. "Maybe if I really wanted salt, and was tired of having hands," she said. "But you can't just play notes on their own and expect reactions. Music doesn't work like that."

Roiling with an implied scoff, Jade said, "Of course it does. Otherwise compositions belonging to a shared genre would not bear any likeness to one another. There would not even be such a concept as musical genre."

Pressing her lips together in consternation, Connie tried to order her thoughts. Jade was wrong, and Connie knew how and why the Gem was wrong. But translating it into terms the Gem would accept would be tricky.

"I think," she began carefully, "that the components you're working with are too small to be useful. And that there are a lot of other, um, variables besides tone and length you're missing. Really, the things you're starting with should be the last thing you worry about, not the first."

The defensiveness inside Connie deflated slowly. "Hmm. Please elaborate."

"Uh…" She looked around the room, her thoughts racing. Maybe they could go through a song together? It would be a good start, but the only song she could think to use would be &dra's magnum opus, and neither of them needed to hear that song in such excruciating detail.

Then her eyes fell upon a strand of thin, dull plastic color laying half-buried under the papers on her desk. Reaching out, she tugged the strand free and held it up, examining the glow bracelet that had long ago lost its radiance. To anyone else, it would have been trash, but it was priceless to her.

Slipping the bracelet onto her wrist, Connie said, "Let's try a practical example." She collected and prepared her violin, tuning the strings. Fitting the instrument to her shoulder, she said, "Listen to how I play. I'm gonna tell you a story."

"Very well…" Jade drawled, confused.

Connie improvised a short measure of music, a simple tune of eight notes. Each note hummed under the bowstring with simple, mechanical proficiency. Then, as soon as she had finished, she repeated the measure, only this time she changed the tempo to speed through the notes in short, sharp draws of her bow. And then she repeated the notes once more, this time drawing them out in a slow vibrato. On their fourth repetition, the notes hissed angrily, bleeding into each other. The fifth refrain was fierce and frantic, almost too quick to parse. And finally, she played the measure gently in minor key, drawing the last note with a long, low flourish.

As Connie drew a slow breath to ease her heartbeat, Jade said, "I am uncertain as to what you intended to demonstrate. You played the same progression in different manners, but to what end?"

"To tell you a story," Connie said. "That song was the day I met Steven."

"The hybrid? I confess, I did not infer the details in your, er, recollection."

Smiling, Connie readied her instrument again. "See, it started out like any other day for me. Dad dropped me off at the beach on his way to a meeting about one of his accounts. I didn't know anybody back then, so all I did was read by myself."
She played the measure again with plain notes. It wasn't boring, or bad, but it wasn't nearly what she wanted it to sound like.

"Then, all of a sudden, the weird carved cliff I'm sitting under breaks, and this huge piece of stonework is plummeting toward me. I don't even realize that I'm about to die! And then this strange boy who had been playing nearby jumps on me! He seals us both in a big, pink bubble, and when the stone hits us, it doesn't even leave a scratch on it. CRASH!"

The progression whirled under her bowstring. She let the last note screech as it became the stone's impact on Steven's shield.

"We're alive. We trade introductions. But we have a new problem: the bubble won't pop. Chairs won't break it. Harpoons won't break it. And as he leads me around this town I barely know, things keep getting weirder and scarier. I start to think we'll never get out."

Warbling, the violin repeated her notes with uncertainty.

"His solutions get so crazy that he knocks us into the ocean! And a giant glow-nivorous worm hurls us into the depths! The boy lands on my face! And I've had it. I'm scared, and angry, and I can't take anymore. I'm going to die at the bottom of the ocean, and only my parents will notice because no one else cares about me!"

Tears welled in her eyes as she played the memory, scraping it across the strings.

"But…" Connie wiped at her eyes, then cleared her throat. "But just then, he figures out how to get us back to dry land. He frees us from the bubble. And he defeats the giant worm, tricking it into destroying itself!"

Furiously, Connie shook the violin with the battle's refrain, the notes coming fast and razor-sharp.

"This is the hybrid you are recounting, yes? The one I have met?" Jade asked skeptically.

Smiling softly, Connie looked at the dull band around her wrist. It jostled in time with her playing, becoming a blur of colors with each refrain. "It's him. See, he made that bubble—the first bubble he ever made—just to protect me. And he was able to turn it off because he knew I was afraid of being stuck inside. And he drew the worm away from me to protect me. Because the only reason he was out there on the beach that day was to meet me, and to give me this." She tapped the bracelet against her instrument. "He saw me lose it, and he kept it for months just so he could give it back to me.

The measure made its final reprise in minor key. Connie drew the last note, and then lowered the violin with a sigh.

"The same sounds, more or less, but played in different ways," she said. "Each progression becomes a different moment from that day. And when you play them together, and add a little context, you get the whole story. Or at least one version of it."

Jade remained silent for a long moment. A pall flattened Connie's smile, its gloom settling over the light feelings still lingering from her memory of her day in the bubble with Steven. Finally, the Gem muttered, "I am a fool. This is a waste of both our time. My apologies, human."

"Whoa!" Connie hurriedly set her instrument back in its case. She had wanted to teach Jade by example, not overwhelm her into quitting. "Jade, you're not a fool. I heard you play last weekend, and you're already good. Don't give up now, please."

A wave of scorn arose between them, but aimed at Jade instead of Connie. "I can replicate the music
of others. That makes me little more than a sapient phonograph. My talent is for remembering and retelling, human. It is a Jade's only purpose."

Connie felt a sharp surge of anger, and was surprised to realize that it was her own, not Jade's. "That is not true!" she snapped.

Confusion rippled up through Jade's self-recrimination. "Human, what does it matter? Why is this foolishness so important to you?"

Hesitating, Connie tried to think of some rational excuse for the way she had been treating this project of theirs. There were good, logical reasons for making Jade play, and she could probably come up with them if she took a moment. But they weren't the real reasons. In the end, Connie admitted to herself that Jade was right about at least one thing: she sucked at subterfuge.

"Because I hate what happened to you," Connie said. She plonked onto the floor, sitting with her back to her bed and her knees drawn up to her chest. The black speckles covering her arms stood starkly against her skin. "I don't care about Crystal Gems and Homeworld, or rebels and loyalists, or whatever you want to call it. I hate what the Diamonds did to you. I hate how they make you feel."

As she hugged her knees, she felt Jade's presence inside of her grow absolutely still. It felt like an eternity before her passenger finally said, "I am how they made me, human."

Her fingernails dug into the denim of her jeans. "But that's not all you are. It's not even close," insisted Connie. "You're so full of yourself. You think you know everything, especially when you don't. You're mean, and pushy and you would rather blow the world away in a tornado than compromise on anything."

Bitter mirth dripped through the emptiness in Connie. "I suppose a lesser species might see my superiority in such a manner," she admitted, her words tired and only half-serious.

"And you're brilliant. And fierce," Connie continued. Her forehead tilted to rest on her knees. "You're tougher than anyone I've ever met. Even without a body, you're always ready to fight with everything you have for what you believe in. So when you talk about all the things you can't do, all the things you think you aren't, I get so angry, because I know you're wrong. I know the Diamonds were wrong about you."

"Human..."

Connie clenched her eyes against a sudden heat. "They were already losing. You said so yourself. So they flipped the board, scattered the pieces, and walked away. They made everybody suffer just because they couldn't win." Her lesions throbbed, filling her skin with a terrible ache. "We're all still suffering because of it. It isn't right."

Another moment passed in stillness. Then Jade whispered, "It is not our place to question the Diamonds' actions. But..." Her words faded, buzzing, as if somehow becoming lost in transmission. When they came back, they sounded so faint, so distant, they barely existed at all. "But if it were... perhaps I... I might..."

Looking up, Connie sniffed and swiped at her nose with her arm. Her head fell back against the mattress. "I'm sorry. All this stuff just makes me angry and confused."

"Those are perfectly normal reactions to matters beyond the ken for a primitive, adolescent primate," Jade assured her warmly.

She laughed and sniffed again, shambling to her feet. "You are such a jerk. But you're a lot of other
stuff too. I just wish you could see that."

Jade's uncertainty flickered through Connie's calming emotions. As Connie collected herself, her passenger said, "How did you compose your song? The one you originally played for me, I mean, not tonight's improvisation. Perhaps if you describe your own process it might better shape my understanding of your unreasonable expectations for my own efforts."

Connie sighed. "You're not going to like it," she warned the Gem.

"Suddenly my comfort has a bearing on you speaking your mind?"

Relenting, Connie sat back at her desk and pulled up the project file for her song. The sheet music filled the screen, tiny notes wandering up and down the lines, with her embarrassing lyrics lined beneath them. "It's a song I wrote about Lisa in The Spirit Morph Saga. I wrote it about how I thought she was feeling during one part in the story. I didn't tell you earlier because I know how you feel about books, but…yeah."

She scrolled through the song, letting the Gem absorb it in its entirety. Then she braced herself for the ridicule that was sure to follow.

"This composition is set during the protagonist's travails from the third volume in the series, correct?" Jade asked.

Blinking, Connie said, "Um, yeah. Overseath the Underworld. It's the part where Lisa is trapped in the Lavarinth by the Never Queen. I always imagined Lisa wishing Archimicarus could find her, just so she wouldn't have to be alone anymore."

"Hmm. I see."

"That's it? You're not going to make fun of it?" Connie said, baffled. "I mean, it's all based on fiction, right? That stuff humans invented 'for want of actual accomplishment,' or however you put it? I mean, I'm glad you're not making fun of it, but…huh?"

"One of your species' worthier individuals once posited," Jade said imperiously, "that simply because a product is unappreciated by one individual does not mean said product has no value whatsoever. If anything, the fact that a fictitious narrative inspired you to make music slightly elevates my opinion of fiction overall."

Connie brightened, grinning. "Really?"

"Slightly," Jade reiterated, stressing the word hard. "But why have you never played your work for anyone else? My musical survey has encountered many such odes to fictional peoples and events."

"Because it's not…finished," Connie said. Then she sighed. "It's not good enough."

"Patently false."

Connie couldn't help but smile at that. "It just seems silly now. Lisa is courageous. She wouldn't sing about how much she misses Archimicarus, even if she really, really misses him."

"Were they not joyous at their reunion? I do recall the events of the book, insipid and rote as they are, and the avian companion confessed great sorrow from her absence and equal relief at finding her. Surely your species' proclivity for melodrama would make their reunion worthy of song."

The backhanded pass at humanity whizzed by Connie without comment. She was stuck on Jade's
mention of the reunion toward the end of the book, when Archimicarus had at last found his way overneath. Suddenly she saw a hole in her song, a great gap that had been staring her in the face for years. It was like finding something she never knew she had lost.

"Archimicarus was looking for Lisa," Connie said slowly. "He was looking for her while she was trying to get back to him."

"Er, yes? The book made that fact painfully clear."

She smacked herself on the forehead. "It's in my lyrics already! How did I not see it?"

"See what? I do not understand."

"The song," Connie insisted. "It's missing Archimicarus! He's looking for her just like she's looking for him. Maybe the song isn't right because it isn't just about Lisa. It's not just Lisa singing to Archimicarus. It's a duet! It needs a second part!"

Jade sounded unconvinced. "How could you unknowingly write half of a song? That makes no sense."

"It totally makes sense. I always put myself in Lisa's shoes, thinking about how much she missed her familiar. But he must have felt the same." Years of staring at the song, at being unsatisfied with the way it sounded, were suddenly thrust into stark relief. And the moment of realization felt too perfect to be a coincidence. It was a sign. "Jade, would you help me finish the song?"

"Your song? Human, no," Jade said quickly. "I do not share your appreciation for the source material. Quite the opposite, as we both know. And we have already witnessed my compositional acumen—"

"Forget the books. Forget all of that," Connie insisted. "You like the song, right? Let's just focus on that. Maybe making your own music seems like too much right now, but what if we made this together? You could make a part for your zephyrphone to go along with my violin!"

She felt Jade's reluctance budge just a little. "I would not presume to alter your creation. The result will doubtless detract from its current state," said the Gem.

Connie pounced on the slight give in Jade's resistance. "It'll be way easier than starting a song from scratch. The structure is already there. We can compose a percussive accompaniment. I mean, you can! It'll be Archimicarus in the background, looking for Lisa. They'll be playing together, even if they can't hear each other. It's perfect!"

"You are certainly excited by the prospect," Jade noted, speaking above the timpani drumming of Connie's heartbeat.

"Just try it with me," Connie pleaded. "If you still don't like it, we won't be any worse off. But I know it'll be great. Please?"

Jade rumbled inside Connie with silent debate. Waiting with bated breath, Connie jittered excitedly, hoping, wishing, until at last her passenger said, "Very well, human. I accept your proposal—"

"Really? Yes!" Connie gasped.

"—subject to one condition," Jade finished, her tone cautionary. "When we are done, we play the song for an audience."
Connie blanched at the demand. Flashbacks of that first terrifying recital came screaming back at her, all to the haunting, scratchy tune of *Mary Had A Little Lamb*. "Wait. What?"

"*Music is not music if it exists in silence,*" Jade told her. "*If I am to accomplish what you so keenly think I can, then I will not be content to let my achievement lay fallow. It can be an audience of one or one billion. I do not care so long as we are heard.*"

Part of Connie balked at the notion of being forced to perform. After all, that had been Jade's complaint that had ruined their jam session at the farm. But Jade also made a good point: music wasn't music if nobody heard it. "Okay," Connie agreed. "When you say we're ready, we'll play the song for someone. I promise."

"Splendid," Jade said. A long beat followed as the Gem's satisfaction faded. "So...how do we proceed?"

Turning back to the laptop screen, Connie opened a new tab for another instrument in the project file. Her smile threatened to crack the corners of her mouth. "Let's take it like my story from before. Start with the events, find the feelings, and then find the music in those feelings."

"So when you previously said 'forget the books,' you were being disingenuous?" Jade noted wryly.

"Hush. The book doesn't cover any of Archimicarus's actual journey, so we only need to look at the basics," Connie said. "He was looking for his best friend. He's lost and alone, trying desperately to find the place where the undersky becomes the overneath. He's scared, not just for himself, but for the person he cares about the most. He doesn't think he can save either of them. What does that sound like?"

Connie listened eagerly to the silence in her thoughts. She already had a dozen ideas for how the familiar's journey might sound in the song, but she was excited to hear Jade's interpretation. This was the song that had pulled Jade back into the waking world, the song that Connie had always wanted to share but had never found the courage to do it. Hearing the song become complete filled her with buzzing, jittering, terrified elation.

And then, out of the stillness, she heard three notes emerge. They tolled with even more clarity than the real zephyrphone could have produced. Three notes, played in succession, repeated in sequence, in perfect time with where Connie's violin would follow. They rang purely, sweetly, relentlessly. Her dappled skin ached with the sound of it.

Connie's smile vanished, her blood running cold as she recognized the notes. Jade played them individually, but they had both heard the notes before, ringing together in a muddied harmony. They were the notes that had trapped Jade and transformed Connie's body. They were the song of loss and fear that lurked inside the prisoner Gem, the sound she had chosen for a journey that seemed endless and hopeless.

They were the sounds of the Diamonds' corruption.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed my edited note from last week, br42 has written a scathing, hilarious roast of this story, *So This Is Basically The Stranger In Me*. Click the link to read, and be sure to leave a comment, because it's fantastic!
Pen gripped between her teeth, Connie stood in front of her mirror and stared down at her forearm. The black lesions in her skin glistened in the early morning that peered through her blinds, the skin looking glossy and plastic in the light. The little spots still ached to the touch, but that didn't concern her at the moment.

"I attempted to correct the original commenter, Fart1st1c_L1cense, on their erroneous interpretation of the song's true intent, which is of course to be a satirical deconstruction of the futility of Earthling aviation. The so-called 'lounge lizard' aesthetics and dreamlike cinematography of the performance makes it so obvious that even a pebble should be able to see it."

She pulled at the skin on her knuckle, teasing one of the larger spots. Her thumbnail bit into the tender lesion, which complained with a bright pang shooting down to her fingertips. As her hand twitched in reply, she frowned at the dark spot rolling over bone and tendon. Had it always been on that side of the knuckle? And had it always been shaped like a teardrop?

"Rather than attempt to debate my infallible position, the dissenter posited that I ingest gastric methane emission for sustenance. The counterpoint that such a diet would be of negligible nutritional benefit held no sway with them or their supporters."

Frowning, Connie took the capped pen from her teeth and began to touch its end to the lesions on her arm. She had caught herself counting spots before, sometimes during some of the duller lessons in school, or when she grew distracted in the shower, but she had never made any real effort to gather their number. There were too many spots to count in total, but if she picked a manageable cutoff…

"I then suggested that, for the good of the human species, the prime dissenter consider voluntary sterilization to ensure that their diminished capacity for reasoning would not be propagated. The suggestion was not well-received."

Nineteen. Twenty. Wait. Had she already counted the spot in the crook of her elbow? And where in the crook of her elbow did she stop counting? Should she stop at the one gross little fold of skin, or the other gross little fold of skin?

"In any event, to make a long story short—"

"Too late," Connie mumbled.

"—our IP address has now been banned from the ReedIt sub-forum arr-slash-music. Thus my vindication remains unrealized, and the single worthy performance by the Earth songstress William Shatner goes further unrecognized. Tragedy abounds."

Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? Twenty…ten? "Jade, I am trying to do something here. Could you maybe give me a minute?"

Derision whorled around Connie's irritated distraction. "Honestly, human, even this basic math cannot elude you. You are counting the dermal aberrations past the region of your olecranon, yes? Look at your arm, then turn it over." As soon as Connie had done so, turning her arm over and back, the Gem said, "There are forty-three lesions occupying that region of your epidermis. I included
"No, that's okay. Thanks," said Connie. She retrieved a pad of sticky notes from her desk, then wrote the number down and stuck it to the edge of her mirror. Nodding at her reflection, she turned to gather her homework back into her book bag. "Come on. We'd better get ready for school before Mom starts yelling."

"Too often your education seems to impede our ability to accomplish something of actual merit. But I will limit my musical experimentation to exclude your perceptions. I would hate to deprive you of knowledge." The last of Jade's thoughts tumbled down a heap of sarcasm.

Connie grimaced. "Well, there's only a couple weeks of school left. Once it's summer we'll have a lot more free time to do what we want."

"Ah, yes: the annual period of mental sloth afforded to some human students. It would seem to be hindrance on your intellectual development, but as I stand to benefit from it, I shall not object. What does the summer period typically entail for you?"

As she collected her phone, Connie felt her frown melt into a smile at the sight of a new picture sent from Steven. She thumbed the picture open and saw the selfie he had taken with his green alien plushy perched atop his shoulders, the morning tide frothing around his ankles. Steven had taken to sending a photo each day when he started practicing his healing prowess on the toy, trying to trick the river stone out of it without tearing it apart. He still had yet to succeed, but he wanted to send her reminders that he hadn't given up. Connie didn't need any reminding, but it made her feel better to have it anyway.

Suddenly the shape of summer came rushing to Connie like a waking dream. A lengthy reading list compiled by her mother already waited for her, and there were projects and day camps that both her parents were hinting at already. But those were just distractions. The real summer would be in Beach City, spending lazy days in the sun, or learning the ways of the sword, or mastering the art of goofing off, all with Steven beside her. There were so many great days ahead, and she couldn't wait to wake to them.

"We're gonna do a bunch of things," she promised Jade, grinning.

"Such as?"

"—I dunno," Jeff puffed, jogging next to Connie. "Probably work on my board game."

They and the other students in the class ran circles around the edge of the gymnasium. Coach Fuji had decided they were taking too long to get ready after the bell rang and decided to help them learn to hurry by making them run laps until the lesson stuck. The short, thick-necked coach stood by the bleachers, watching the class carefully and blasting his whistle at anyone not "learning" hard enough.

Connie glanced sidelong at Jeff, her eyebrows lifting into her light sweat. Her breathing came steadily, and aside from a light ache in her skin, her legs kept up with Coach Fuji's curriculum. It had taken weeks, but she finally felt like herself again after she and Jade had abandoned their ¡Soy Delicioso! diet. "Board game? What, like Monopoly?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, my family doesn't play Monopoly anymore. It always ended with somebody throwing the house pieces at somebody else. Monopoly's lame anyway. My board game is basically Betrayal At House On the Hill, but set on a mysterious spaceship adrift behind the moon."

"Betrayal at...huh?" Connie said. It didn't sound like anything out of the Milton Bradley catalogue.
She had never really played board games with other people anyway. Board games existed exclusively in commercials, and were played exclusively by those TV families that had two-point-five kids and parents with free evenings and weekends.

Jeff gaped, though it was hard to distinguish his shocked gasp from his wheezing for air. "You've never...? You would love it! Everybody plays a different character exploring a haunted house, and then the house goes crazy and tries to kill you. It's great!"

His breathless enthusiasm made her smile. "Who would explore a haunted house that was trying to kill them?"

"I'unno. Teenagers with vans and Great Danes?" Jeff said. Then he frowned. "Probably, though, I'll just get stuck on a family road trip to one of my grandparents' house."

"Will that house try to kill him as well?" Jade mused to Connie.

"Why do you ask? Already thinking about summer stuff?" Jeff huffed.

Connie shrugged. "Just looking for ideas. I have a, um, friend who's spending the summer with us, and I don't want her to get bored. I never would have thought of making my own game," she added teasingly.

He smirked. "I could always use some guinea pigs to playtest it with me..." But his voice trailed off as he glanced to one side, his face slackening. "Whoa," he rasped.

Following his stare, Connie saw what had shocked him, and her feet stopped working. She thudded to a dead stop, barely hearing the angry yelps of the kids behind her as they swerved to avoid plowing through her. Jeff stopped as well, and leaned heavily on his knees as he heaved for air.

Standing beside Coach Fuji, dressed in clean and dry clothes, was Mandy Petti. She stood with her back to the class, but her figure was unmistakable, and her hair perfectly, impossibly coiffed for gym class. When Coach finished speaking to her, Mandy turned to join the jog. Her eyes glided right past the spot where Connie stood, pointedly skipping the spot.

The whistle trilled, and then Coach Fuji's voice belted across the gym. "You two!" he snapped at Connie and Jeff. "Keep moving!"

Feet shuffling on autopilot, Connie resumed the jog. Her pace wobbled, becoming lost in her thoughts. Mandy had been gone since Connie's return to school, and the gossip surrounding her absence had faded into background noise when the rumor mill had moved on to newer things. Seeing Mandy return with such little fanfare, and in the middle of the class period, felt wholly unbefitting of the school's queen bee.

Jeff found a little more breath as he matched Connie's slower pace. "Did anybody know she was coming back?" he whisper-wheezed.

Connie couldn't answer as she watched Mandy from the corner of her eye. The blonde settled into pace next to her two brunette friends, the ones whose names Connie could never remember. The nobility of the school had been reunited. Connie's would-be ballistic painters.

Of course Mandy was back. Why would something like ambushing and cornering the school's resident bookworm warrant any punishment more than a few weeks of vacation? Rumor had it that she had even been given her homework and tests at home during her suspension so her grades wouldn't suffer. And doubtless, all that free time had given her a chance to devise any number of new torments to bring back with her.
A bubble of anxiety lifted Connie's stomach. She had no intention of finding out what those torments might be. There were only two weeks of school left. With some careful timing in the hallways, she would avoid any confrontation with Mandy and her retinue. Even if the whole mess hadn't been her fault, exactly, she would still be the one to do the mature thing and keep the peace.

Jeff's hand fell onto her shoulder, jolting her out of her thoughts. She was surprised to find herself scowling, and quickly shook the expression off her face as Jeff looked to her with concern. "Are you okay?" he said.

"Hands to yourself and cut the chatter!" Coach Fuji bellowed with enough force to make the veins in his neck bulge. "You don't stop until you hear the whistle—"

A shrill, piercing blast resounded from his whistle, which still hung untouched from its cord around his neck. The whistling lasted almost a full minute, continuing until every student in the gym had come to a standstill and stared at the possessed silver bauble.

When at last the whistle fell silent, Coach Fuji picked it delicately from his neck and held it at arm's length, bracing himself in case it came to life again. He settled his frown back into a ghost of its former self and barked, "Uh, that's enough. Go get cleaned up."

---


"Human, what in the world are you doing? This repugnant place is devoid of any river mammals."

Connie opened one eye and found the closed door of the toilet stall right where she had left it. She had rushed into the locker room and bolted herself inside the first stall, sitting on the lid and stewing in her sweaty clothes as she waited for the rest of the students to change and leave. The bustle of locker doors and conversations on the other side of the door were soft mumbles underneath the sound of her counting seconds in her head.

It had been in her head, hadn't it? Jade had evidently heard her. Perhaps she'd been murmuring it aloud.

She waited, hardly breathing, until the clattering outside dwindled to silence and the last locker had slammed closed. Then she counted sixty more hippopotami for good measure before she risked sliding the latch of the door and opening the stall slowly, silently, wincing at every slight creak of its hinges.

The coast was clear. Hurrying forward, Connie peeled her shirt over her head, stumbling blindly into the bench in front of the locker row. She might still miss the bell and be late to her next class for the first time ever, but such unthinkable tardiness would be for a good cause if it meant avoiding more trouble.

Just as she's wrestled her head and hair out of her shirt, she heard the clack and creak of another toilet stall opening behind her. The sudden sound made her whirl and press her shirt over her chest, hiding her ugly, sweaty white bralette from the surprise appearance emerging from the stall three toilets down from where Connie had been hiding.

Mandy Petti stopped cold in the doorway of the stall, freezing mid-step. Her face was pale and stony, her eyes glacial as they locked with Connie's. Her golden hair was still perfect, and her gym clothes didn't have a drop of sweat in them.

Connie felt her insides jump under the icy stare. Her brilliant, self-sacrificing plan to avoid
confrontation had been thwarted even before it truly began. Adrenaline pulsed through her limbs, and she felt resentful at the jolt. Now that it had happened, why should she feel nervous about facing Mandy again? Mandy had been the one to attack her. Mandy had been dawdling on the toilet, probably making sure her makeup and hair were impeccable before gracing the rest of the school with her royal perfection. Why did Mandy warrant any special treatment from everyone else while Connie languished as a speckled spectacle?

But Connie's mouth couldn't fit around the size and shape of her outrage. She only managed to say, "Um, hi."

Mandy was unblinking, utterly motionless save for her lips as she murmured, "I can't believe they let you come back."

"Me?" Connie felt her brows crash together into a sticky, dry-sweat scowl. "You threw paint at me!"

"I can't believe it," Mandy continued, her voice soft. Her eyes seemed glued to Connie with penetrating focus. She still had yet to blink. "I thought… I told Sara not to post that video, but when she did, I thought…" Her words were reflexive, thoughts tumbling from her mouth with no mind for her audience.

Connie's anger climbed up her insides, using her ribs like rungs on a ladder to push up her throat. That video, along with her spots, had built an invisible wall between her and everyone else at school. She had never been especially social, but Connie had noticed the other students and even the teachers withdrawing from her. No one had recoiled from her, but they all remained at a careful distance, always moving across the hall or scooting their chairs away to keep beyond arm's length.

"You…" Connie snarled, surprised at the harshness in her own voice as she took a step toward Mandy. She wasn't sure what she wanted to say, or even what she would do.

Then she saw Mandy's eyes twitch, and the poised blonde staggered back half a step. Mandy's lip trembled, and her hand wrapped around the frame of the stall door, knuckles white with her grip. Her mouth moved as if to speak, but it took several tries before Mandy's voice could manage a squeak. "Stay away from me!"

The shout knocked Connie back against the bench, forcing her to stagger to keep upright as she finally recognized the expression twisting in Mandy's features. It wasn't haughtiness, loathing, or any of the smug expressions Connie had come to know in the queen bee's face. Mandy wore stark, mortal terror. She was scared for her life. Scared of Connie.

"I…" Connie uncoiled, releasing the tensions she hadn't realized she was gathering into her limbs as if to strike. Her fingers wrapped into the soggy folds of her shirt as she clutched it to her chest. "Mandy, I'm not going to hurt you. Okay?"

Tears welled in Mandy's icy eyes. "What are you? You turned into that…thing," Mandy said, her voice shaking. "Is that what you really look like?"

"No, that's not…" Connie struggled, wondering how she could possibly explain what had happened to her. Mandy knew nothing of Gems or corruption. How could she possibly begin to understand? "I'm a person, just like you," she insisted.

Mandy's lips quivered, but the rest of her face hardened, her tears falling from narrowed eyes. "You're not. You're different. And now everybody knows it. Even if nobody believes it, they all know the truth. You're a monster."
Something ugly twitched inside Connie, ringing with the sound of a three-part harmony. She felt her anger return threefold and explode from her mouth in a snarl. "I am NOT!"

The air around them whorled with her shout, pouring through Connie's hair and sweeping it into a war banner. Every locker in the room burst open, their doors crashing against their frames to fill the room with a deafening clap of metal. The doors caught the wind and rattled on their hinges in a clattering wail as the world around Connie billowed.

The sound sent Mandy diving sideways, her hands slapping the filthy tile as she scrambled away from the eye of the storm. Twisting around, she threw herself into the locker room door and tumbled out into the hall. Tears streamed from her eyes and she bolted around the corner, disappearing as the locker door swung shut once more.

As her anger faded, so too did the wind. Connie stared at the door swinging back into its frame, the heavy wood thumping into its frame as the clash of the lockers around her rang still. Her insides grew dark and cold as she turned to see the burst lockers and their spilling, scattered contents.

"That probably went about as badly as it could have," she muttered, and buried her face into the sweaty T-shirt in her hands. "The locker thing might have been overdoing it, Jade."

"Human, I..." Jade's voice shook inside of her. "I am upset, much as you are, but I am not certain that these pressure differentials came from me, knowingly or otherwise. I am...confused. And concerned."

The last was obvious, as Connie could sense the unease roiling between them. She bent forward, hunching into a ball on the locker room bench, and tried to feel where her own uneasiness ended and Jade's began.

Maybe it was because they were worried by the same strange bursts of wind, the same uncomfortable confrontation. Maybe it was the stress. Maybe she was tired, or confused, or surprised by Mandy's sudden return.

Maybe that was why she couldn't find a line between her fear and Jade's fear.

Chapter End Notes

For those who have never experienced it, go watch William Shatner's performance of Rocket Man. Check it out and thank me later.

And to check out Jeff's game, go read up on Betrayal At House On the Hill. Then find a copy and go play it with friends, because you'll have a blast! And if somebody knows about a sci-fi version of the game, let me know in the comments!
Recreational Outing

Bright and early on Saturday morning, Connie tossed aside her pajamas and dressed in a new green tank top and khaki shorts, pulling on her clothes to the tune of musical bells that tolled in her head. The melody wandered down a familiar path, its notes landing in odd places occasionally, but never straying so far that she couldn't recognize the shape of it. Its new notes put a smile on her face as she slid her feet into fresh socks. "Is that from the new solo? I like it," she said.

"Thank you," said Jade, her voice subsuming the fading reverberation of the bells.

A note of grateful abashment tinged the words, a flutttery tenor Connie had come to think of as the Gem blushing with pride. It was a relatively new feeling from her confident passenger. But as nice as it felt to be the expert on something, finally, for once, Connie tried to stay mindful of how she phrased her feedback. "You added something new to the opening measures. Do you think the zephyrphone can play that fast?"

Pleased surprise arose at the question, lined with a sliver of uncertainty. "Ideally, yes, if the engineer's construct maintains its previous responsiveness. I have tried to select notes and chords to fit the limitations of the instrument. But until we physically test it, there can be no guarantee."

As she gathered her discarded pajamas, Connie's gaze lingered on her pink sleep shirt and its cheery yellow star. Her fingers kneaded the soft cotton material as she took it to her hamper, consigning it with some reluctance to the dirty laundry. She always slept easier wrapped in her borrowed shirt, but six days in a row might have been pushing the limits of the garment's powers.

And, a corner of her mind noted, if the shirt was dirty, then she couldn't very well bring it back to Steven when she saw him later that day. The polite thing would be to wash the shirt first, and yet somehow, mysteriously, it kept finding its way into rotation as a part of her pajamas after each laundering. It was a vicious cycle that kept the shirt in her possession despite her every intention to return it. Such a tragedy.

"Maybe we can try a live rehearsal at the farm today. Or a two-person-one-body jam session?" Connie suggested.

That flutttery sensation subsumed the rest of Jade. "Oh. Er. No. No, the composition is nowhere near ready for a physical attempt. I can't—"

Connie smiled into her bedroom mirror, lifting her hands in a calming gesture. "Hey, it's okay. There's no rush. We can take as long as…"

Her voice trailed off as she spied the sticky note posted at the edge of her mirror. The number written on it loomed at her with a sudden reminder of their encounter with Mandy in the school locker room earlier that week. Since that day, she had listened carefully for Jade's moods and compared them with her own. There hadn't been any more spillover that she could discern, but at the same time, she wasn't entirely sure what she was looking to find. Jade's emotions had always butted up against her own, often in agreement with how she felt in the moment. The line between them had never been completely clear in the first place, which made it hard to tell if it was getting blurrier.

Mandy's terrified face flashed in her memories. The blonde hadn't approached Connie since, and there were no new murmurings from the rest of the school about the blustery outburst. But it still haunted the back of Connie's thoughts.
She was reaching for the pen on her desk to count again when a tantalizing new aroma drifted into her bedroom. Her eyebrows knitted with confusion at the smell, but her watering mouth had no patience for her curiosity. It drew her by the nose out into the hall, where she could hear a distant crackling noise coming from the kitchen. Her expression flipped, and she hurtled down the stairs, taking the steps in twos and threes.

Down in the kitchen, she found her father manning a full range of pans at the stovetop. He wore his ratty old T-shirt and a pair of faded pajama pants that were dotted with old rocket ships. His spatula prodded the edge of a bubbling pancake while a mess of eggs, onions, mushrooms, and cheese congealed into a scrambler atop the neighboring range. The largest of his pans popped and hissed with the smell that had called to her, its bottom layered with neat rows of sizzling turkey bacon.

"Good morning, Connie," her father said without turning around. "Did you happen to pass an avalanche on the way here? I could swear I heard one coming down the stairs a second ago." He shot a look over his shoulder, his eye twinkling at her behind his thick glasses.

Seated at the table, her mother nursed a steaming mug of coffee. The stately doctor wore her pajamas as well, wrapped underneath her fluffy white robe. "Please don't break your neck on the stairs," her mother chided reflexively. Then, smiling, she added, "And good morning, dear. Good morning, Jade."

The wind chime in the kitchen corner rang twice with its yes chime, a habitual reply Jade had developed for saying hello and goodbye. Connie's father had dubbed it the Gem Aloha. Deep in her stomach, Connie could feel the Gem's hunger doubling over her own. "Good morning! But what are you still doing here, Dad? I thought you had to work today. And Mom, don't you have a shift this morning?" She had been expecting to cadge a ride into Beach City on the way to the hospital.

After a delicate sip, her mother replied, "Doctor Crock asked me to switch shifts with him. His awful niece is having a birthday party next week, so he needed the day off."

"And the manager I was supposed to meet with is getting his appendix removed instead," her father said. He pulled crispy bacon from the pan to drain on a paper towel, and then layered raw bacon in its place. "So, with all these fortuitous medical happenings, I decided to celebrate with a few thousand extra calories to start the day."

"Calling an emergency appendectomy 'fortuitous' seems a little insensitive," her mother noted wryly.

Leaning back, her father patted his side and said, "Speaking as someone who already had his own, I'd say I'm entitled. Besides, now he gets to eat all the ice cream he wants."

"That's for tonsillectomies," her mother said.

"The man's an adult. He can celebrate a successful surgery with whatever food he wants," countered her father.

Her mother retorted with a withering look, the kind she only used when she wanted to seem annoyed without really meaning it. When even that pale archness melted at her father's grin, her mother pretended to ignore him and said to Connie, "We thought, since we don't often get the same day off on a weekend, that we could do something fun together today. I know it's last-minute, so if you still planned on going to Beach City, we could—"

"Absolutely!" Connie shouted. Her grin threatened to break her face in half, even as she felt a pang of guilt somewhere deep behind her excitement. "I'm sure Steven will understand. I'll text him to let him know."
Trading his spatula for a wooden spoon, her father prodded at the breakfast scrambler. "Well, we were going to invite Steven to join us. But if you think he'd understand…” he said, and tossed a Cheshire smile over his shoulder.

Connie could feel herself practically exploding at the idea. "Really?" she cried, and looked to her mother in disbelief.

Coyly nursing her mug, her mother said in a musing tone, "Steven and his family have been such good hosts to you, so it only seems right to extend the same courtesy." But her air of dismissiveness couldn't weather Connie's beaming excitement, and her face broke for a smile. Then she said, "What about you, Jade? Are you feeling up to a group activity today?"

The wind chime in the corner fluttered, and the note for requesting more context rang. Inside Connie, Jade said, "They are proposing a recreational outing, yes? What sort of activities historically have comprised such excursions?"

Connie's excitement swallowed the Gem's curiosity. Bouncing on her toes, Connie said, "We do all kinds of things, like go to museums, or walk through a botanical garden, or go to the movies. This one time we even saw the Calisota Philharmonic Orchestra perform the music of Star Wars!"

"Orchestra?" the Gem echoed, her interest piquing sharply.

"Yeah! And the last time, we…um, we..." Connie's grin rattled, her features dropping into a confused frown. She plumbbed her memory for the last outing she and her parents had taken together. the only day she could recall was their disastrous tour with the Crystal Gems. And before that... Had it been the dinner introducing her parents to Steven's family? The embarrassingly dramatic night felt like it had happened a lifetime ago. Surely they had done something else since then.

Her realization cast a pall on the kitchen, dimming their smiles. In the silence, their breakfast popped and sizzled merrily on the stovetop, completely unable to read the turn of the mood. "Wow. I guess it has been a while," her father admitted.

The guilt creeping into her parents' faces cast a long shadow across the day ahead of them. "It's okay!" Connie said hurriedly. "You guys are just really busy. You both have important jobs."

A humorless grin pushed into her father's features. He jabbed at the scrambler with his spoon, and said, "Maybe not so important that I have to take every account I can get. But when you have two sets of student loans—"

"—and med school loans on top of that," her mother grumbled into her coffee mug.

His face softened a little as he glanced back at Connie. "—and a brilliant daughter who deserves the very best college education... Maybe we go a little overboard, but it's all for a good cause."

A piece of Jade's confusion gathered into a point that pricked into Connie's dismay. "Is your family's emotional cohesion defined by more than your cohabitation? I had assumed the shared space and donation of genetic information represented a large majority of your non-hierarchal relationship. But these shared activities seem important to you."

Connie closed her eyes, summoning her very best Steven impression. Then, snapping her eyes open, she grinned and assured her parents, "We go for quality over quantity. Who wants to spend family time throwing Monopoly houses at each other on some board game night when we can go out and do something awesome instead? We've got a whole day together. Let's make it great!"

As ridiculous as she felt channeling her best friend, his enthusiasm-by-proxy brightened the room at
once, chasing away her accidental gloom. The particular brand of enthusiasm must have been easy to
discern, because her mother's smile turned sly as she mused, "It will be nice to spend some time with
Steven when swords and monsters aren't involved."

"Don't rule anything out just yet. Connie did say we should make it awesome," her father insisted.

Pretending to ignore him again, her mother smiled at Connie and said, "Well, don't keep us in
suspense, dear. You're in charge today. What's it going to be?"

As Connie drew a deep breath, ready with a half-dozen ideas, the chime in the corner rang twice
with its context chime. The soft tone drew confused looks from her parents, but Connie could only
answer with a baffled look of her own.

"Human, would you please adjourn to the hallway? I wish to converse with you in private," Jade
said as the tone faded from the room.

"We, um… We'll be right back," Connie stammered, and hooked her thumb toward the doorway
behind her.

Her father looked confused, but made a visible effort to swallow his question. "Don't take too long or
your pancakes will get cold. Or burned, actually," he said, turning his frown toward the griddle.
"Where did I put that spatula?"

A puff of air rattled the pans on the stove, chasing him back a step as the half-cooked pancake on the
griddle jumped and flipped itself. Its edges spattered as it landed golden-face up back on the griddle,
with the air that had propelled it growing still once more.

"That works too. Thanks, Jade!" her father said.

The chime rang twice with another Gem Aloha as Connie stepped out of the room.

Connie slipped back onto the stairway, settling into the sunbeam that streamed through the window
above the door. Motes of dust whorled around her in the golden light as she sat and murmured,
"Okay, Jade. What's going on?"

"We will perform our song today. Please extend an invitation to your parents to join us."

The bottom dropped from Connie's guts. "What?" she cried. Then, wincing at her own volume, she
cast a worried look toward the kitchen and said softly, "What are you talking about? The song isn't
finished yet."

"Yes, it is. I have finished it just now while you were dithering with your parents about lesser
activities. But there is no need for any further debate. We should play our song for your family."

The arguments collided on their way out of Connie's mouth. "We haven't even practiced it together.
We don't know how it sounds with my part. We'll need time to adjust it so our parts fit together better
when we play it."

"I would balk at the thought of our fitting any more closely than we already do," Jade noted dryly.

Scowling, Connie thumped her fists on her knees. "You know what I mean! The violin tempo might
need to change to fit the new percussions. The lyrics…” The words of the song poured through her
head, and suddenly her plummeting stomach wanted to jump up her throat at the thought of singing
them for an audience. "We're not ready!" she insisted.
"Yes, we are."

"We…" Her protest crumpled as it struck a wall of certainty inside the Gem. She grasped for any reason, any excuse, that might find purchase in that wall to overcome it. In the end, though, she could only hang her head, dropping her hands between her knees as she sagged forward on the steps. In a tiny voice, she admitted, "I'm not ready."

For so long, the song had been hers and hers alone. She owned its imperfections, its quirks. She loved its silly, sappy lyrics because they remained in silence. When she had offered half of the song to Jade, she had thought it would be something they shared between just the two of them. The Gem's insistence to perform didn't worry her because the song had never been complete and would never be completed. Jade would be free from her body before it became an issue. The heat death of the universe would happen before it became an issue. She would never have to play it for anyone else.

But never, it would seem, had arrived far sooner than expected.

"Yes," Jade told her, the Gem's voice gentle but firm. "You are."

The words thrummed through Connie, echoing inside of her, bouncing off the inside of her skin until they drowned out every last argument she had left. So she straightened herself with a deep breath, and then marched down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her heart hammered in her ears as her parents' curious, mildly concerned looks drifted back to her in the doorway. A cold, clammy sweat gathered in her palms.

As he stacked a plate with pancakes and more, her father said, "Is everything okay?"

She pasted a shaky smile over her squirming, screaming nerves, and said, "So, how would you feel about spending the day at a recital?"
Be Heard

A small, faraway piece of Connie found it hilarious that the awful, nauseating anxiousness that churned in her stomach was actually not because she was walking through a minefield. The mines didn't help, though, and neither did the garbage can automaton that led her family along the safe path across the barnyard. As they had emerged from their Steven-stewardied trip through the warp pad, the rolling can had instructed them in its facsimile of Peridot's voice to follow it or risk being glooped.

Carrying a ratty old quilt over her shoulder, her mother radiated with disapproval at the treacherous ground around them. "You never trained here, did you, Connie?" she said with obviously restrained accusation. Connie could feel the thought of a new unmentioned danger bring her mother dangerously close to the edge of a new argument.

"The mines are pretty new," Connie said quickly. "And, no." Her violin case bounced at her shoulder with each careful step as they began making their way around the corner of the barn.

"Plus," added Steven, who hefted an overstuffed picnic basket above his head as he treaded first along the can's rolling path, "Peridot says her campers know where all the mines are. As long as we follow Nikki here, we're completely safe!"

Hauling a cooler loaded with even more food, Connie's father lost a step, hesitating when his foot grazed the dirt outside of the trash can's caterpillar treads. "That, uh, doesn't sound 'completely' safe."

"Well, no accidents so far," Steven pointed out, laughing nervously. But even his eyes scoured the ground more studiously as they followed Nikki around the side of the barn. Even if the mines were as non-lethal as Peridot promised, the idea of being entombed in crystalized corn syrup didn't sound very appealing.

As they rounded the corner, Connie noted with some surprise that the stars of the show were the last ones to arrive. Steven had remained behind to ferry them to the farm, and so Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl were already camped in the safe zone behind the barn. The three Gems lounged on a blanket spread across the grass, each of them nodding in greeting at the family's arrival. Next to them, Peridot had erected a makeshift tarpaulin on metal rods, where she and Lapis relaxed in camping chairs that looked to be made mostly from duct tape.

Another blanket was spread nearby, where a surprise guest rose to greet Connie's family. "Hey, glad you made it!" Greg Universe exclaimed, and moved to help her parents with their picnic supplies. "Everybody still have all their limbs?"

Her mother smiled thinly as she handed half the blanket to him and helped him spread it across the ground. "No major injuries so far, though I suppose we still have to make the trip back. And thank you, Greg. It's nice of you to come today."

Grinning, he replied, "Steven invited me as his plus-one! And when I heard we were getting a solo and a duet at the same time, I knew I couldn't miss it. I'm something of a musician myself."

He tossed a wink at Connie that managed to drain a thimble's worth of the ocean of anxiety roiling in her stomach. She tried to smile back at him and felt her mouth make what might have been the proper shape for it. But before she could thank him, Jade's commanding tone filled her head. "Hold, human. Before you engage in any banal socializing, you first have a duty to attend. Please take me to the Rebels' encampment."
Connie frowned, but she set aside her violin and complied. The Gems' murmured conversation drew to an abrupt halt at her approach, and they looked to her with mild curiosity. "Er, hi, guys. Thanks for coming today," she said, and attempted another smile.

"Wouldn't miss it," Garnet said.

"Plus," Amethyst said, "Steven told us there would be food. Yo, Steven!"

Her bellow prompted him to dig a fried chicken drumstick out of the picnic basket and fling it in a high arc across the yard, dropping the large morsel directly into Amethyst's waiting mouth. She crunched through the bone with a satisfied hum as she flashed Steven a thumbs-up in approval.

Seething with impatience, Jade snapped, "What did I just say about socializing? Now, retrieve the note from your back pocket."

Connie started to ask, "What note?" But as she patted the seat of her shorts, she felt a rectangular shape bulging in one of her pockets. She withdrew it to find a piece of paper that had been folded together into a square origami note, a familiar shape Connie recognized from her own semi-successful attempts at origami. Jade's note was far tidier than any crease Connie had folded, and it was addressed in elegant calligraphy to the Crystal Gems.

"How on Earth did you get this in my pocket without knowing?" she demanded. "I picked out my pants just this morning!"

"Human, I exist adjacent to your very thoughts. I know you better than you know yourself, and can easily anticipate your every move, including what accoutrements you will select to adorn your body. I placed this note last night for my later use during your wakefulness knowing you would select these garments." Then, as her unspoken voice pitched slightly higher, she admitted, "But to guarantee the note's availability, I also seeded identical copies into each item in your wardrobe. You will want to collect those extraneous duplicates when we return home. For now, though, I need you to repeat after me."

Connie listened carefully to Jade, her head bowed in concentration. Then, when she was ready, she cleared her throat and offered the folded note to the three curious Gems on the blanket. "As ambassador of the rebellion to the terrestrial forces of the Diamond Authority, I have been tasked with delivering this critical missive to my superiors. Please see to it that your recording secretary enters its contents into record." Then, dropping her officious stance, she added, "Um, which one of you…?"

"Dibs!" Amethyst cried, and snatched the note from Connie's hands. Her thick fingers worked at the note's edges. "It's about time I got a fancy title. What does a 'recording secretary' do, anyway?"

"I think it means you're supposed to read stuff and—" Connie began.

Amethyst's glee collapsed into a scowl. "Reading?" she groused. Then she held the note over her head and blew a long, wet raspberry, her tongue flickering at her lips. The rude noise persisted until Pearl, exasperated, plucked the note from Amethyst's hand.

"The lettering is simply lovely," Pearl remarked as she unfolded the note. Her eyes flickered back and forth over the paper, and she murmured aloud, "As ranking present member of the forces of Homeworld, I hereby, hmm-hmm-hummm… Cessation of hostilities until such time, hmm-hum-hrmrm, pending resolution by rebel leadership or a majority consensus…"

Curiosity blasted through the wafer-thin membrane of Connie's diplomatic propriety. "What does it
say?" she asked eagerly.

Slowly, Pearl lifted her eyebrows. She glanced to Garnet, who had risen to stand behind Pearl and read the note over the pale Gem's shoulder. At Garnet's nod, Pearl said, "It's a nonaggression pact. Jade is proposing peace between Homeworld and Earth."

"Only for those Homeworld forces still present on Earth, up to and including those I would outrank," Jade clarified silently for Connie. "If ordered otherwise by a superior, I would have no choice but to resume hostilities. But until such a time... And even once I regain my own photonic form..."

As Connie listened, a broad grin crept over her lips. She knew exactly what such a gesture meant to her loyalist passenger. That small piece of paper seemed like a giant leap from where Connie remembered the Gem being on the day she had awoken. "I think Jade wants to bury the hatchet, you guys!" she exclaimed.

Confusion flitted across Pearl's elegant features. "That seems like an odd means of storing tools. But we do appreciate her note. It's very considerate of you, Jade. Thank you."

A noise of soft adulation squeaked behind Connie, and she turned to find Steven standing behind her, tears in his eyes as he clasped his hands together. "Oh, Jade! That's beautiful!" he gushed.

As she folded her arms, Garnet smirked and said, "I think we'll let our diplomat give Homeworld's ranking terrestrial soldier our formal reply."

"Yes!" Steven exclaimed even before Garnet had finished speaking. Then he cleared his throat and fought to put his features into a more somber alignment. "I mean, the Crystal Gems hereby accept your proposal for nonaggressiveness, and hope that this spells a new era of friendship between us. Now I propose we seal our new peace with a hug!" He spread his arms wide, his poorly masked smile exploding back into full bloom.


But Connie grinned and stepped forward. "Proposal approved!" she exclaimed, and fell into his embrace, giggling and feeling him giggle back in kind.

A ripple of muted irritation threaded between Connie's laughter. "Traitor," her passenger grumbled. But like the feeling that accompanied it, the word didn't carry any genuine malice.

A loud, pointed cough from across the yard pulled their hug apart. Clearing his throat, Connie's father said, "Well, now that all of the politics are out of the way, how about we set up for the main event?" He settled next to Connie's mother, their cooler opened and containers of finger food and cold leftovers being emptied onto the paper plates they'd packed.

"Oh, yeah!" Steven said. He scurried back to his father's blanket, and the two settled together with the basket of fried chicken and fresh tater tots sat between them.

"Yeah, on with the show!" Amethyst called. Then she flashed, her body stretching luminously into that of a large, blubbery purple seal, and barked at Steven until he silenced her with another piece of fried chicken.

That nauseating anxiousness rushed back into Connie's innards with gusto. She collected her violin case again and took position at the zephyrphone's twin arches. Behind her, the yard fell into muted conversations, with humans and Gems trading pleasantries, discussing the beautiful turn in the spring weather, or softly commiserating about the wary commute through the barnyard out of earshot of its
A glimmer of something blue caught Connie's attention, and she glanced back to see Lapis watching them intently. The lithe sprite had withdrawn from the rest of the commingling audience, contenting herself to lounging in the shade and silence. As their gazes met, Lapis smiled and offered an encouraging nod that only served to make Connie feel worse.

"Okay," Connie murmured, her voice quavering as she prepped her violin. She had tuned it to death while her parents were prepping the afternoon's picnic, but she tested the strings anyway, and fiddled with a peg that needed no adjustment. The bow skittered against the strings, squalling its displeasure at her shaking hands. Flustered, she turned her back to her small, enormously daunting audience, hiding her embarrassment from them.

"Human? Are you well?" Jade said. "You have demonstrated less anxiety in facing superior opponents in battle. Surely this performance cannot be as daunting as facing a deranged Quartz."

"This is so dumb," Connie hissed softly, glaring down at her trembling hand wrapped around the end of the bow. She clenched her grip until her knuckles went white, trying to keep her fist steady, but the bow refused to cooperate, which only made her angrier with herself. "I'm being stupid. This whole thing is stupid."

"Con..." There was a stutter in Jade's sub-vocalizations, a bodiless clearing of her nonexistent throat. "Control yourself, human. This behavior ill suits a resolve such as yours."

Connie squeezed her eyes shut, trying to imagine her own fraying nerves as needles that she could turn and plunge inward to burst her own apprehension as if it were a bloated, wobbling balloon to be popped. But there was no balloon. There were no needles. There was just her, a squirming collection of guts and feelings trying to project confidence for the people who mattered more to her than anything else in the world. And even she didn't think she was being that convincing.

"It's just a stupid little song," she hissed at herself, clenching her fist around the bow until her hand ached. "It's a stupid song about a stupid character from a stupid series that, yes, okay, you still really love even with its inconsistencies. You don't have to make a big deal out of this. It's not a big deal. So why are you acting like it's a big deal?"

"Human..."

Jade's voice gave her somewhere else to dump her anger and frustrations. "Why did you make me invite my parents? And Steven? And the Gems?" Connie demanded in a graveyard whisper. "Putting the song up on TubeTube would be better than this! Why do we have to play it for them? Why are you making me—"

"Human!" Jade's voice shook Connie into silence, rushing through her mind with the force of a hurricane gale. Her whole body went still in the moment of silence that followed. Then, gently, the Gem said, "We have invited these individuals because they matter a great deal to you. You care about them, and they about you."

"Jade..." Connie whispered, shrinking back from the prying eyes she could feel. Surely everyone was staring at her, watching, waiting, listening to her fall apart. They could all see it. Couldn't they?

"We are performing our song because that was the deal we made for my attempting a new activity which caused me extreme uncertainty and discomfort. You are a creature of your word. You are a host who has time and again attempted to make my circumstances somewhat less awful in whatever way you can. And because of your persistence, and your generosity, you deserve to be heard. As do
Scoffing softly, Connie scrubbed her forearm across her eyes and risked a glance back over her shoulder. Nobody seemed to be staring at her or judging her, at least as far as she could tell. "It weirds me out when you're nice to me," Connie muttered with bitter humor.

"I am not being nice. I am being truthful," Jade said testily. "Just as I am when I point out that you could renege now, back out of this performance, join your family and friends for a cordial outdoor meal, and not one person present would think less of you for it. No one. I believe that kind of love and support is worth risking a small modicum of one's pride for, is it not?"

Connie chuckled, sniffling. Then she opened her eyes fully and straightened herself with a long, deep, steeling breath.

Turning to her audience, she announced, "Okay, everybody." Her voice cracked at the first syllable, but she refused to let herself wince as her audience fell silent and poured their attention into her. She spackled over the last of her shaky nerves with a broad, forced smile, and said, "This, uh, doesn't have a name yet, but... I hope you like it."

Then she set her violin to her shoulder, bow poised, and focused inward with a wordless question. The air around her stirred in reply, lifting her hair into a gentle sway.

Then the zephyrphone moved, ringing with three pure notes.

Connie saw the reaction immediately. Her parents, Steven, and Greg all leaned forward expectantly, most of them surprised by the instrument playing seemingly on its own and ringing with pitch-perfect notes despite its rusty, splintery construction. Peridot seemed likewise eager to see her engineering put to use.

But the blanket where Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst lounged grew absolutely still. The Gems' expressions slackened at the tolling notes. Tears threatened the rims of Pearl's wide eyes, her mouth dropping in horror. And poor Lapis jolted as though she had been electrified, her wings snapping out of her back in a reflexive panic. Her wide eyes seemed to glaze, growing reflective as she stared in mute shock.

Then the zephyrphone continued, rolling the three notes over and over into the beginning of the song. The pattern began to wander, but never straying far from its foundation, as Jade's pattern became the percussive search of a magical falcon. And as Connie's bow touched her violin, joining the search, the Gems in their audience began to settle again, becalmed at the new notes that soothed over the first three.

Connie's bow rocked in long, mournful cants. She imagined the notes as tears falling from Lisa's face, hissing into steam as they struck the porous floor of the Lavarinth. The violin walked through the preamble to the song's opening chorus. As the preamble faded, its last note keening into silence while the zephyrphone stilled, for a single beat Connie thought about letting the lyrics lay silent for this first performance. Jade's Archimicus had no lyrics, obviously, and so Lisa's silence wouldn't seem out of place.

In that single beat, she saw her parents' warm, expectant faces. She saw the Gems and Greg waiting, drawn into the opening notes. She saw Lapis leaning back into her chair, her cloudy gaze growing sharp again with awe, and sadness, and longing. She saw Steven's eyes shining with excitement as he bounced his toes in time with the song. In that single beat, Connie drew a breath, and resolved herself. Then she sang.
Deep beneath the Over,
Across the Vapor Sea,
I quest away the endless day
And dream that you'll find me.
The Lavarinth is sprawling,
The Queen's revenge, complete.
So far from home, I stand alone.
I pray that you'll find me.

As her violin reprised the last measure, she listened to Jade's accompaniment. Hearing the notes in her head was nowhere near the experience of hearing them aloud in time with her own part. Jade's percussion was steady, as steadfast and sure as the familiar she evoked. For a Gem who dismissed its inspiration, she had absolutely captured the character in her chimes.

As the chorus ended, Archimicarus's search began to break its pattern, growing wider and wilder by inches. Then Connie's bow flashed into the next measure. Half-verse, half-bridge, the song moved into a minor key, sounding more plaintive than the opening woe.

Along the path, the lava's wrath
Will punish every mistake!
And Plinkman's lies, his awful guise
Haunts every choice that I make!
There's no relief, however brief,
There's nothing left they can take!
This vicious dream, this nightmare scene,
Is where I'll finally break!

As the verse ended, Connie stepped back between the arches of the zephyrphone. Her body vibrated as Jade's solo began. It had once been the middle chorus, the turn of Lisa's travails, but with Archimicarus entering the equation, Connie had been forced to rethink that turn. With the falcon's search in the forefront, Lisa's violin faded into the background as long, keening notes, her deepest sobs at her lowest moment.

Jade's chimes, in contrast, grew bolder. The same three-note foundation remained at first, but then her wanderings climbed higher from there, repeating the pattern in new notes. Her Archimicarus grew frustrated, despondent, angry, and found new resolve, all within the wordless reverberation of the instrument. As the notes grew louder, Connie's violin rose to answer it. The violin's sobs became shouts, and then singing, a voice in the void to answer the unspoken promise of Archimicarus's quest.

The lava's burn will never spurn
Your winged way to my side!
There's no travail that you would fail!
You'd never cower or hide!
It's now I see, your faith in me
Means more than courage or pride!
How could I stand, ask for your hand,
If I knew I never tried?

Connie's eyes drifted back to her parents as she stepped back into the fore, her hair billowing in the precise notes struck by Jade. The rules her parents had imposed, the concessions of those rules they had made, the long hours they worked for the sake of their family, and the faith they had placed in Connie as a warrior and a student, all rang through the lyrics. Jade's insistence that her parents be present for the song had seemed baffling only moments ago. Now, as she sang the words, it made perfect sense, more than she had ever realized when she'd written them.

But then, as the final chorus rose into the song's crescendo, her eyes flitted to Steven.

In each of us, there's reason
To brave that vaporous sea!
Soft, my dear, I'll ne'ermore fear.
I'll find you finding me.

Jade's chimes stilled in anticipation of the final reprise. With shaky breath, Connie softened her bow and sang sweetly:

In skies above, I'll feel your love,
And find you finding me.

She and Jade played their final harmony, letting their last notes fade together into the background chatter of the countryside. The whispers of Jade's breeze stirred through the old maple tree behind them was the loudest sound in the field. Connie lowered her instrument and waited, fighting with ever fiber of her being to stand against the silence. Her body trembled in the wake of her song—their song—finally leaving her.

Then Steven's hands began to pound together. With tears in his eyes, he stood and cheered, clapping a concert hall's worth of thunderous applause all by himself. Hearing his voice rise through the silence broke the nervous mask across Connie's features. Her smile burst across her face, and she let go of the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

His reaction drew the rest of her audience out of their quiet shock. Blinking away her trance, her mother and father rose, clapping and grinning. Her father even whooped, cranking his fist through the air with excitement. Greg was a heartbeat behind them, lifting Steven onto his shoulders so the father and son could cheer together as one gestalt fan.

The noise affected the Gems as well. Peridot jumped atop her duct tape chair and screamed the name of her instrument in triumph. "Yeah! Zepherphone! I made that!"
The graceful water sprite opened her mouth to speak, but no sound emerged. The three-note opening had drawn tears to her eyes, but she wore a broad grin between her glimmering cheeks. Lapis snapped her wings out in a broad sweep, and then spread them further still, flattening the constructs until they became gossamer sheets that loomed out of the tarpaulin. They caught the afternoon sunlight and bent it into a spectrum of dancing colors that showered Connie in whirling hues.

Pearl and Garnet rose to join the ovation, both of them beaming as they applauded. But Amethyst's face was stricken as she hopped to her feet. "What happened after that? Did she ever find him?" she insisted.

"I could always lend you the books," Connie said, hardly able to speak as she shrank back from her audience. The smattering of applause felt like a thunderous stadium roaring at her, and her cheeks hurt with the force of her grin.

Amethyst's stricken features sank in mock-horror. "Reading?" she said, hurling the word like it was a curse. Then she blew another long raspberry into her palm, her eyes sparking impishly above her hand.

Twirling her bow, Connie reveled in the flood of adrenaline charging through her shaky nerves. Her veins tingled with the thrill, and she clung to the feeling as hard as she could. "You want to keep going, Jade?" she said.

"Smoke on the Water!" her father shouted through cupped hands. Her mother elbowed him in the ribs, but her own grin betrayed her actual humor.

Connie giggled at the sight, but then tilted her head when she heard the zephyrphone stir behind her again. Its chimes tolled with an opening, its notes unmistakable. Cringing in disgust, Connie growled, "No. No! Don't make me do it!"

The opening notes repeated themselves. Their mere hinting of the full song yanked Steven off his father's shoulders and into the air, where he floated with his arms and legs splayed in excitement. "Do it!" Steven cheered.

Her cheeks flushing, Connie lifted her violin and bow again. "You're such a jerk," she grumbled through her smile, though she couldn't bring herself to mean it.

"If that were really the case, then I would think you find yourself in like company," Jade retorted. "Now play the stupid song. It will make the hybrid happy, which will make you happy, which will make you more pliable to future concessions I request of you."

Shaking her head, Connie waited for the zephyrphone's next pause, and then joined in with a passably close version of the market-researched, focus-grouped, painstakingly commercialized tune of T8King Over Midnight. The barnyard echoed with &dra's chart topper, chimes tolling and strings swooning as Connie and Jade played together.

"Friday night! We're gonna party till dawn!" Connie sang, grinning. "Don't worry, Daddy, I've got my favorite dress on!"
Forty-Six

As her hands folded her shirts back over themselves, making them into perfect little rectangles atop her smooth bedspread, Connie let the rest of her body bob gently in time with the song in her head. The melody swelled on imaginary violin strings, accompanied by imaginary chimes as she relived her performance from the day before. Her toes had been tapping all Sunday, her knuckles rapping on doorframes in time with the beat as she passed from room to room. And as the last sunlight faded in the window, Connie piled her clean clothes onto her bed to the rhythm of Lisa's promise to find her best friend.

"Really, human," Jade said, her tone a mixture of teasing and impatience, "if you wanted to live immersed in our song, we should have recorded the performance to publish on TubeTube. We could make a one-video playlist that loops on repeat."

Plucking a new shirt from the laundry basket beside her, Connie caught herself, and hiccupped. She hadn't realized she was humming the song aloud again. But once she'd swallowed her hiccups, she smirked and said, "Maybe I'm just practicing to becoming a concert kazooist. You don't know."

"I know that any kazoo you attempt to play will mysteriously burst from a mysterious rapid increase to its internal air pressure," Jade retorted. "If you are truly considering proficiency in a new instrument, I could provide the technical specifications for any number of options. How would you like to master the Chalcechord? It has strings made from solid light, projected within the confines of a levitating crystal geode in which the musician plays."

"Mmn," Connie hummed, trying to shape Jade's words into an image. "Violin strings are already pretty expensive. I don't think my parents would buy me a person-sized crystal geode."

She continued picking at the basket of clean laundry, laying a few blouses out to be hung in the closet later. With her homework done and her dinner dishes clean, this was the last of her chores. Her parents were both gone already for overnight shifts at work, and would not be back until early the next morning, so Connie wanted to make sure everything in the house was as clean and complete as possible for their return. Keeping up with all of the little chores around the house made her feel better about accepting the big leaps of trust her parents had made, particularly in the last month. After all of the Gem craziness that had crashed into their lives, it seemed only fair to Connie that she take care of the vacuuming once in a while.

As she reached the bottom of the laundry basket, Connie drew out her borrowed pink pajama shirt. The rest of the laundry had kept it insulated, so it still felt warm from the dryer as she spread it between her hands. "Ahh," she sighed, and smoothed the wrinkles from the shirt's yellow star. The scent of powdered sugar and ocean breeze danced in her nose, impossible after so many launderings, but there nonetheless.

Bemusement trickled up through the simple pleasure of having her favorite pajamas at hand. "You wear this garment with such regularity that one might mistake it for a component of your form. A pity you cannot simply make it an extension of your body," Jade teased.

"It's comfy!" Connie protested, her cheeks warming at the dig. Her bedside Archimicarus clock reassured her that it was close enough to bedtime to indulge herself. Huffing, she grasped the hem of the shirt she was wearing, and said, "You know what, Miss Smarty Gem? We're alone in the house, which means I'm in charge. And when I'm in charge, pajama time is when I say it is."

"Truly a mighty decree, O de facto Empress of the House."
She had wrestled her T-shirt halfway over her head when a knocking came at her bedroom window. The rapping on the glass spooked her into yelping, and she toppled blindly onto the carpet, clawing to shove the shirt back out of her face. When at last she had yanked her shirt back into place, she whirled on all fours to face the window, her heart pounding and body tensed for action.

A big smile filled the pane, worn on the graceful, angular features of Lapis Lazuli. In the yellowed light of the street lamp, her shades of blue were cast in an unearthly greenish pallor. She waved at Connie and knocked again, and without the surprise, the gesture sounded less like a vicious assault on the glass and more like a polite request for entry.

Tamping down on her embarrassment, Connie hurried to the window and opened it. The screen had rusted into place, but with some effort she managed to wrest it free and allow the Gem inside. Lapis retracted her wings back into her gemstone and treaded carefully over the waist-high bookcase, her toes wriggling curiously into the carpet.

"Lapis, what are you doing here?" Connie said. Then, blinking, she added, "How are you even here? Did you fly here?"

"Well, it would have taken a lot longer to walk here," Lapis said, her smile tilting impishly. "Peridot told me what the house looked like, and she showed me an overhead picture of this place on something called a Gaggle map. Even then, it took me a few tries to find the right roof. Some of those people in the other windows around here seem pretty rude…"

Connie cringed, wondering if her mother would be getting any irate phone calls from the neighbors. Maybe better, or perhaps even worse, would be the birth of a new Del Marva cryptid. Locals could whisper about the Wet-Winged Window Wailer for years to come, warning children not to answer any mournful knocking on their windows lest they be splashed for their curiosity.

A guilty voice emerged from Connie's urban legend musings.

"This, er, may inadvertently be my doing, human," Jade admitted.

Lapis drifted further into the room. Her hands glided across Connie's posters, tracing the expressions of Marie Curie and Valentina Tereshkova on the wall, her finger following the shapes of their faces. "Jade said we should spend a night listening to music together sometime, so I thought I'd head over. Sorry if I got here too early. She said you fall asleep after dark."

Narrowing her eyes, Connie aimed a look of suspicion into the mirror of her closet door. Jade's guilty voice quavered equivocally as she said, "I did propose such a venture, but only to gauge the Lazuli's interest in such an outing. I was certainly going to discuss the matter with you before finalizing any plans. The Lazuli may have taken the hypothetical to be an open invitation."

The silence had evidently stretched on too long, because Connie noticed Lapis staring curiously at her. "Sorry," Connie said, quickly shaking the scowl out of her features. "I've never really had anybody just come over. I mean, I don't know if I'm even allowed to have friends over when my parents aren't here."

Delicate brows knit together above the Gem's eyes. "Why not? I thought Peridot said that you lived here."

"Huh? I do," Connie said.

"Then why would it matter if someone else wasn't here? Do you need to have more humans than Gems in the building? Does it stop being a human building if you don't?" asked Lapis. "I won't tell anybody, I promise. I've already got a barn, so I don't really need this place."
Coming from anybody else, Connie would have pegged Lapis's confusion as sarcasm. As it was, she fought down her sudden laugh, worried that it would make Lapis feel bad. "No, it's not that. My parents just like to know who's coming here. But it's not like you're a stranger, and there's technically no rule against having people over, so...I guess it's okay?" Her last word tilted up into a hesitant question that, conveniently, no parent was around to hear and answer.

The permission of the de facto empress of the house seemed to satisfy Lapis. She turned in a circle, quickly seeing all the room had to offer while Connie went to close the window. "Why would anybody even want to live here? Steven's house is roomier, and the breeze comes through his door. And my barn is even better. It's bigger, and it's always open."

Her turning halted abruptly, her eyes stuck upon the mirrored surface of the closet door. A slight wrinkle dipped between her brows, and her arms rose to clutch around her stomach as if she were suddenly cold.

Connie paused with her hands at the window's frame, watching Lapis carefully. The breeze outside wafted gently through the curtains, cool without being cold, rich and full, but no longer damp thanks to summer's rapid approach. Her bedsheets would be more than enough to chase away any evening chill, and there weren't any bugs yet to take advantage of the disconnected screen. "It's not so bad. And we can leave any time we want," Connie told her, and pushed the window as wide open as it would go.

"Not all of us," Jade grumbled. But as Connie watched the tension on Lapis's face ease, she felt a soft glow of gratitude from her passenger.

"Did you want to listen to music with me and Jade?" Lapis asked, breaking out of her reverie to turn from the mirror. She plopped onto the edge of Connie's bed, and brightened at the piercing squeak it made. "I mean, I guess you would have to, wouldn't you?"

The thought of staying up all night with Lapis and Jade tempted Connie mightily. She had never been invited to a sleepover before. The closest she had ever come had been watching the snow fall with Steven during the previous year's storm, when he and his father had been snowed in at her house. It had never bothered her to miss out on what seemed like a silly thing like a teenage sleepover, not until that very moment, when she'd been asked to host one by accident. And having a sleepover with ancient aliens made the prospect even more exciting.

But it was still a school night, and though there was no letter of law forbidding people over, she had already contorted the spirit of the law into a pretzel just by inviting Lapis inside. The school night creed was immutable: in bed by eight-thirty, lights out at nine. Much as she now desperately wanted to, she couldn't have a sleepover with Lapis.

But maybe Jade could.

"Hang out here for a few minutes," Connie told Lapis. "I have to take care of a few things."

"Okay," Lapis said, still rocking back and forth on the bed to make it squeak.

Grabbing her pajamas, Connie hurried to the bathroom, where she changed and brushed her teeth. Then she hurried downstairs and slipped into the office next to her parents' bedroom. With a quick search of the drawer, she found the tangled set of earbuds her father kept for watching videos on the desktop computer. As much as her mother disapproved of headphones in the house, she'd relented after her father had figured out how to make his own TubeTube account so he could subscribe to the channels of his favorite comedians, thus proving empirically that the acceptable threshold for hearing loss began where her mother's patience for Dad Jokes ended. When Connie had tried a similar trick,
she'd simply been told to turn the sound down.

"Human, why are you doing this? Simply ask the Lazuli to return at a more opportune later date," Jade said as Connie untangled the cord of the earbuds. "There is no need to go to such lengths to accommodate a misunderstanding."

Connie draped the cord over her shoulders, and then bustled down to the kitchen. "No way. Lapis came all the way out here to spend time with you. Turning her away now would be rude."

"A Lazuli can circumnavigate the globe in mere hours," Jade noted dryly. "It is no more an inconvenience for her to visit here than it would be for you to cross the street in front of the house."

"Technicalities won't get you out of socializing tonight," Connie said firmly. "Besides, she came to our recital, didn't she?"

"She hosted the recital!" Jade protested.

"Exactly. And she even pretended to like it." Jade harrumphed, grumbling, "Perhaps accolades for your playing were embellished, but certainly not for my part."

Connie paused, kneeling on the kitchen floor, her head half-buried inside a cabinet to rifle through its contents. "Jade," she said, frowning, "Do you want Lapis to leave? Like, forget about the timing and the surprise and my parents not being here. Do you not want to spend time with her? Because if you don't, I really will ask her to leave."

Hesitation echoed through the Gem's inner murmurings. It felt as though Jade needed to pull the answer out of her own clutches before she finally replied, in a small voice, "I do wish to spend time with her. I simply do not want it to be an inconvenience."

A relieved smile, still minty with toothpaste, bloomed in Connie's features. "Then help me make her feel welcome, and it won't be" she said.

She pulled a large aluminum mixing bowl from a stacked set in the cabinet. As the bowl filled in the sink, Connie found a pad of paper and a pen, and scribbled a note:

Mom & Dad,

Jade and Lapis are having a surprise sleepover upstairs. I borrowed Dad's headphones from the office so they can both listen to music without bothering anybody. Lapis doesn't have earwax, so it should be okay. Please don't be mad. No monsters or property damage, I promise. See you after school tomorrow.

Love, Connie

PS – Knock if you need anything. I'll be asleep, but Jade will be driving (?) my body.

PPS – I'm not 100% sure about that earwax thing. I'll wipe off the earbuds before and after Lapis uses them so nobody gets grossed out.

PPPS – Seriously, please knock. Lapis seems like she spooks easily, and she can make tsunamis.

She would have added another post-script, but the bowl in the sink began to overflow. So she left the
pad on the counter where it would be hard to miss, and then hefted the mixing bowl back to her room, taking the stairs with dire caution to avoid spilling a single drop on the hardwood. By the time she pushed back through the door, her arms shook with the effort of carrying the water.

When she stepped inside, she found Lapis sprawled on her back atop the bed, her body sinking into the plush quilt. The Gem held an open book above her with straight arms. Lapis was so engrossed in the pages that she hadn't registered Connie's entrance.

Tilting her head, Connie gleaned the title from the book's cover. "Twenty Thousand Leagues?" she read aloud.

Lapis jolted at the words, and the water in Connie's mixing bowl exploded.

Connie flinched at the sudden spray, her eyes clenching against the impending drenching of her own making. But as she wished she had followed her own advice, her face remained perfectly dry despite all expectations. When she cracked one eye open, she saw globules of water floating weightlessly in front of her, collectively drifting in the shape of a geyser that had spewed from the bowl, frozen in the initial moment of the explosion.

"Sorry! Sorry," Lapis said, and rolled onto her knees atop the bed. She gestured, and the airborne globules collected themselves back into Connie's bowl, every drop finding its way back to the sloshing whole. "I saw the title and wanted to see what it was about."

Connie set the mixing bowl carefully on the corner of her desk, keeping it clear of her laptop and papers. "That's okay. I brought the water for you, actually. I know you don't eat or drink, but I thought you might, I don't know, like some."

"Oh. Um, thanks," Lapis said, sounding puzzled. "I'll just leave it there for now."

An awkward silence chased the heels of the Gem's words. Fighting to avoid it, Connie nodded to the book and said quickly, "You picked a really good one. Jules Verne is one of the greats."

Lapis collected the book from where it had fallen into the quilt. Connie couldn't help but feel approval at the way the Gem cradled her volume by the spine, careful to support the covers as she opened it again. "Steven's given me a few comics and mangos, but I haven't found many of the picture-less ones like these so far."

It took Connie's brain an extra second to autocorrect the statement. "You mean comics and 'manga?' He has some fun ones, but I've always liked books better," Connie admitted. Then the obvious notion struck her, and she exclaimed, "You should borrow it!"

The last of the room's awkwardness evaporated as Lapis smiled tentatively. "Really? Okay," she said. Her tone sounded casual, but she tucked the book against her stomach in an unmistakably pleased and possessive gesture. "It does get pretty quiet at the barn sometimes, and Peridot hates it when I re-re-watch Camp Pining Hearts without her."

"Let me know when you're done with it. I have lots of other good ones," Connie said, and gestured to the double-stacked, overflowing bookshelves around them. "It'll be nice to talk books with a Gem who actually likes reading. Besides Steven, I mean."

"Splendid. Another being succumbs to the allure of the inane," Jade sighed miserably inside of Connie. "This planet is in desperate need of a Chronicler if Gems like the Lazuli are so starved for context and narrative."

Unaware of Jade's disappointment, Lapis smiled. Her fingers gently kneaded the book's cover as she
said, "I like them. They're like little pieces, little memories, that humans chose to leave behind, only they make more sense than real humans do. And they're quieter."

Connie grinned through the exasperation that arose from her passenger, which reminded her of the night's true purpose. She opened her closet and, after some digging, found the vinyl bag that had contained the Soundwave Blastmasters. The headphones themselves sat on the desk, no longer a secret, but the bag contained some additional adapters and accessories, including a splitter. Connie had kept the full set in case she ever needed to return them to Sour Cream, but now she was thrilled at the lucky inclusion.

"I have to go to sleep for, um, human reasons," she explained, stepping backwards from the closet. "But once I'm asleep, you and Jade can listen to music with these." She caught the dangling end of the cord draped around her shoulders, then worked to plug it into the splitter's singular end.

"Oh," said Lapis. Her head tilted, and she asked, "Are we going to sleep together too?"

Connie got stuck somewhere between a yelp and a gasp, choking both into some sound of embarrassment as she jammed the ends of the splitter together. "What? Um, I don't…" she swallowed hard, but then saw Lapis watching her uncomprehendingly through the mirror in the closet door. That same lack of comprehension radiated from Jade's side of their shared space. Swallowing her inadvertent reaction, Connie smiled into the mirror and said, "I mean, you can sleep too if you want. But Jade, will, um, 'wake up' and start moving in our body once I'm asleep. Maybe you could read or listen to something downstairs, and then when Jade's up, she can get you?"

Lapis shrugged. "That works too. So, what happens now? Do you need help setting up your hammock so you can sleep?"

As Connie slid the closet door shut, she saw a flash of color cross in front of her. Her gaze followed it to the sticky note she had hung at the edge of the mirror. The number scrawled across the note made her jolt in sudden remembering.

She looked down at her skin, at the myriad black spots dotting the surface of her. The tiny little craters had become a regular part of her life far too quickly. She barely even noticed them anymore unless someone else was noticing them first. Even the worried stares of her classmates had succumbed to the banality of time and proximity, when she had failed to explode back into the monster that TubeTube and, purportedly, amateur special effects had made of her.

Connie plucked the paper from the mirror, and then held up her arm. "Uh, Jade, can you…?" she murmured.

"Yes, yes. Turn your arm over and back," Jade said, impatient as Connie followed the instruction. "There we are. The count is forty-s…"

The Gem's bored sub-vocalizations vanished into a wave of despair. Connie staggered at her passenger's reaction. The sticky note fluttered from her numb hand as she braced herself against the mirror, leaving a wide smudge beneath her spotted palm. "Jade?"

"Forty-six," Jade uttered. "There are forty-six lesions in the previously demarcated region of your epidermis."

As Connie looked at her hand on the mirror, she imagined the spots swimming in her vision, swirling in her skin. They weren't, of course, not so quickly that she could see the movement. But the lesion she had toyed with under her thumbnail was now unmistakably on the other side of the knuckle from where it had started. As she stared at herself, she noticed the large black ring around her one eye now
spilled into the base of her nose on that side. The other eye had a touch of color just below the lid, where a second shiner was beginning to form.

Forty-six. Less than two days ago, there had been forty-three. How many would there be tomorrow?

How much longer until there was more lesion than skin? How deep would they go?

"Um, Connie? Did you hear me?" Lapis said. "What do you do now?"
"Make haste, human!" Jade complained, her tone unusually boisterous as Connie plodded down the beach toward the temple.

Connie frowned at her passenger's impatience. All through the school day, Jade had been especially eager to be done and on the road to Beach City. The impatience fit well with the rest of Connie’s classmates in that final week of school, but seemed baffling coming from Jade. Even on the car ride over, the Gem had silently urged Connie's mother to drive faster, to get them to the temple sooner. Perhaps the sleepless sleepover with Lapis the night before had left Jade feeling especially social, though that seemed even less likely than Jade being eager to go anywhere at all.

Thinking about the car ride to Beach City made Connie relive the conversation in the car all over again. She lost a step remembering her mother's face when she had confessed the news of her multiplying spots. The doctorly, unshakable woman had processed Connie's words with a long, shaking breath, and then nodded. A razor's slash of a smile had been her only reply.

"Human? Perambulate!" Jade commanded, her voice piercing Connie's gloomy recollection.

"I'm going already," Connie grumbled, and started jogging the rest of the way to the beach house. She took the stairs two at a time, climbing the porch and grasping the handle of the screen door. "Why are you so excited?"

Jade's smug, wordless satisfaction answered her as Connie found Steven and Lapis waiting on the couch. The two of them chatted quietly, but sprang up at Connie's arrival, each of them wearing an identical grin. Steven stooped to gather a large pile of items heaped atop the coffee table into his arms. "You're here!" he exclaimed. "Did Jade say anything? She didn't spoil it, did she?"

"Spoil what?" Connie said, confused. Then her mind caught up, and she flung a mixture of disbelief and annoyance inward toward her passenger. "Jade! You hate surprises!"

"Inaccurate," Jade retorted, oozing satisfaction at Connie's reaction. "I hate 'being surprised.' Instigating a surprise offers an immense tactical advantage. Now follow the hybrid's directives. He will prepare you for what follows."

Even as Jade said it, Connie watched Steven pile his treasure trove at her feet. "Now, we have trail mix, turkey jerky, carrot sticks, celery peanut butter boats, and raisins for snacks, and two bottles of water," he said, kneeling to grasp each item as he inventoried it. "There's also a fleece jacket if it gets cold, a pocket electric fan if it gets hot, a flashlight if it gets dark, sunglasses if it gets bright, a compass for navigation, a whistle in case you get lost and the compass doesn't help, a field guide to birds and plants, a horseshoe for good luck, and this Best Friends Field Trip sticker book, which is really just a bunch of smiley face stickers, but I couldn't find anything more specific for the occasion sticker-wise."

Her mind boggled at the pile of oddities. She stared numbly as Steven pressed a sticker onto her shirt. "There's no way I can carry all of this. And why would I even need it?"

"Huh," Steven said, sounding puzzled by the realization. Then he belted out a more excited, "Oh!" and scampered up to his loft. Connie picked limply at the pile until he returned, hefting his solution over his head in triumph. "This looks like a job for a cheeseburger backpack!"

Connie stared at the hamburger-shaped pack, with its protruding Patty and cheese made of plush, and
its plastic pickle tabs, and its ceramic sesame seeds. Then she laughed and surrendered, and knelt with him to load the pile of equipment. She was begrudgingly impressed by the number of pockets and spaces hidden between each ingredient behind zippers. They organized the supplies by food, survival, and miscellaneous, the third of which consisting only of the horseshoe.

Once they had finished, Connie easily hoisted the pack over one shoulder. "Okay, I'm prepared," she said. "Now, can anybody tell me what I'm prepared for? Where are we going?"

Steven smiled as if he had been waiting for that very question. "We aren't going anywhere," he said, leaning into the first word. "Jade is taking you on a special field trip…with a little help from Lapis."

The blue Gem nodded. "We planned it last night on that Gaggle thing. Oh, and that reminds me!" She drew a small piece of fabric that had been tucked into the waist of her dress. When she unfurled it, a strand of elastic dangled from its corners, and Connie recognized the object as a black sleep mask. "Jade wants you to wear this. Which part of you does it go on?"

Connie cringed, edging back from the grinning pair, while Jade puffed with anticipation inside of her.

"Okay, we're heading down. Brace for landing!"

Biting back a sigh of relief, Connie tensed her legs around Lapis, her knees squeezing the Gem's waifish hips as the dark world around her suddenly lurched. Her stomach lagged several hundred feet above her as they descended into a world that only Laps and Jade knew.

The flight had lasted little more than an hour, and it hadn't been completely unpleasant. After the two Gems had wheedled her into putting on the mask—with plenty of assistance from Steven and his puppy dog eyes, because he loved surprises even by proxy—Connie had ridden on Lapis's back with only the promise of a short trip and a destination that would purportedly be worth it. Lapis had talked excitedly about the music she and Jade had explored during the sleepover, but Connie had been too nauseous from blind vertigo to offer more than monosyllabic replies.

Jade had spent the trip oddly silent, but not still. Her passenger's moods had collided with each other in a roiling, churning ocean of anticipation. By the time they were landing, Jade had become a tempest of nervous energy that had Connie jittering even harder before the hard stop of Lapis touching down upon their mysterious destination.

As Lapis straightened, helping her down, Connie felt something firm and uneven connect with the soles of her shoes. She stood on a slight incline of sandy, gritty stone, grinding underneath her as she wobbled upright. A soft breeze tickled her bare arms, the air cool but pleasant and smelling strongly of pine. That breeze murmured all around her, brushing up against a multitude of things Connie couldn't see but could hear in every direction. The sound and the crispness of the air gave her the impression of being somewhere expansive that was somehow empty and full at the same time.

She reached for the mask, eager to see, when Jade said, "Human, wait! Not yet. Please."

A sudden rush of wind hit the ground around Connie. She thought it might be Jade's doing, but then she heard the beating of watery wings, and noticed a lack of Lapis at her side. "Jade said to come and get you a little after sundown," came Lapis's voice from above. "I know humans go to sleep in the dark, so if I find you sleeping, is it okay if I wake you up?"

Connie managed to keep her laughter bottled. "If I do fall asleep, Jade will take over for me," she called blindly at the sky.
"Oh, yeah. Okay!" Lapis called back. "Have fun, you two!" The air stirred, and the sound of wings vanished, leaving Connie alone with her passenger and the gentle whisper of wind for company.

After waiting a moment to ensure they were alone, Connie released a long, slow breath and concentrated on her balance atop the uneven surface. "Okay, Jade," she said, "we're alone, someplace new, and I have no idea where it is or what it looks like. You do realize this would be a pretty good setup for a horror story, right?"

"Perhaps, but as with all other matters of fiction, this situation is already preferable by simple dint of being real. Now, prepare yourself, human. I am about to share something with you of great import," Jade declared.

Hands already rising to pull at the mask, Connie said, "What's that?"

"My spot."

Connie paused. Her memory tickled, slowly collecting something from a conversation with Jade long ago. "Your spot?" Connie said.

"Exactly. Months ago, when you shared your reading spot in the school with me, you asked if I had a similar affinity for a location. My reply at the time was a churlish falsehood, one which I intend to rectify now."

Any lingering impatience Connie felt for the Gems' skullduggery evaporated in an instant. She leaned keenly into her senses, savoring the piney taste of the air and the dry coolness of the whispering breeze. "Wow," she breathed. Then she said, "Can I take off the mask now?"

"Not yet," Jade commanded, her entire presence in Connie a bright mixture of emotions. She waited for three long, seemingly arbitrary beats, and then announced, "Now."

Connie lifted the mask from her head, shaking her hair free from the elastic band. Her eyes fluttered open, and her breath caught in her throat.

The toes of her sneakers were three inches from a precipice. Beyond that, the world dropped hundreds of feet below into a valley of reddish stone and lush, blooming greens. The rocks of the valley jutted up into the sky in craggy spires, taking shapes that Connie had never seen before in nature. Each stone was too irregular to be a Gem construct, yet still they flowed with a kind of grace. It was as though a moment of catastrophic upheaval had been frozen into a single, never-ending instant, frozen forever and then allowed to overgrow as nature reasserted itself in the cracks.

Shuffling carefully, Connie turned and found that the cliff she stood atop was actually a long, narrow crest that ran the length of the valley. Lapis had deposited them atop the highest point in the area, a landing only a few yards wide, but immediately beyond the valley there were mountains that rose right next to them, towering walls of stone so tall that they blotted out half the sky. Thick coats of evergreen clung to the mountains' rocks, ending abruptly near the top of the sky where the clouds nipped at the mountains' bald peaks.

Down below, there were brown dirt paths that squiggled between rock formations. Tiny specks of color traveled the paths, the human tourists that marveled at the rock formations from below. Connie wondered if they could even see her from where she stood, considering that she could hardly see them.

All of it—the titanic stones, the scope and altitude, the mountainous backdrop, and even the feeling of powerful solitude despite having the whole world laid out at her feet—slammed into Connie all at
once. When she finally remembered to breathe again, the thin air left her in a whisper. "Whoa…"

"Indeed," Jade said, sounding pleased.

Glancing straight down past her toes, Connie saw the precipitous drop, and smirked. "Good thing I'm not afraid of heights, or that would have been a way different reveal."


"Easy to say for a Gem who can fly."

"Not so easy for a Gem who 'used to' fly."

Connie carefully settled onto the rock, sitting cross-legged with the cheeseburger backpack next to her. Everywhere she looked, she saw a new shape in the earth. The landscape conjured dim memories of her life in the Southwest back when she had been very young, though she knew she had never seen anything remotely like this. "Your spot is beautiful, Jade," she said, drinking in everything to the mountainous horizon with her eyes.

"In all my centuries on this planet, I never failed to return here at least once every few years. I even managed a clandestine sojourn here during the war, before…well, during the war," Jade said. "I would spend days at a time just sitting here, listening to the wind play against the rock and watching the clouds roll across the mountain range."

Breathing deeply, Connie let the mountain air suffuse her. She imagined herself sitting there for days, becoming a part of the stone garden, existing as a silent, peaceful part of the world. If not for a few pesky biological necessities, the idea seemed like a glorious escape. She could imagine Jade the Explorer, or Jade the Scout, retreating here to just be a part of a world that didn't ask anything of her, if only for a little while.

"Of course, in those days, the local fauna wasn't quite so intrusive," Jade continued, her sub-vocalizations souring.

Connie looked down at the little walkways and their tourist specks. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a modest city sprawled farther out from the base of the mountains. "It's not so bad. Just a few paths so people can see it. They even put up little fences so people won't climb the rocks," Connie noted.

Something akin to a snort passed through Connie's thoughts. "Paths. Fences. I was going to recommend to Pink Diamond that this be the site for her Archive. It would have been preserved forever as a bastion of knowledge. I would have begged her, if such prostration would actually have worked."

"Was she not big on begging?" Connie asked. Only when she'd said it did it strike her how little she knew about Pink Diamond. The crux of the rebellion, and the reason behind Jade's consternation, and the heart of Steven's sorrow, was still a total enigma to her.

"I…never met her," Jade admitted.

Connie laughed mirthlessly at that. Leaning back with her palms braced on the gritty stone, she said, "Well, now you have one more reason why us backwards humans are the worst, huh?" She meant it to sound teasing, but didn't quite succeed.

A long silence trailed after Connie's words, broken only by the murmuring winds around them. As
the quiet stretched between them, Connie feared she had accidentally ruined the moment, or perhaps
the whole excursion, with what she had meant to be a joke. She started assembling a hasty apology
when Jade's voice finally broke the surface of her thoughts again.

"Human," said Jade, "I know it disappoints you. I disappoint you. Because I can never be the
Crystal Gem you wished I was. Even freed, I could never bring myself to stand with them. Too much
transpired between us long before you came to be. But it pains me that this truth pains you. I want
you to know that much, at least."

The admission slammed into Connie, smashing her cobbled apology. She sat there for several
moments, trying to think of what she could say to something so unexpected. After a short epoch, she
managed to say, "Jade, I'm not...disappointed. Not like you think. And I don't want you to be
anybody but who you are."

"Would that I believed you," Jade said, now herself half-teasing.

"But I mean it," Connie insisted. "Jade, I believe you when you tell me about the Crystal Gems. I
know they did terrible things to you. Just like you did terrible things to them. It was a war.
Everybody lost."

"...succinct, but astute," Jade admitted.

"But I also know that the Crystal Gems I know aren't the ones you fought against. Maybe they were,
but they're different now. They've been through too much not to be," Connie continued. She reached
up and cupped the boxy gemstone beneath her throat. "And if they can change, any Gem can
change. Even cranky, self-important Gems. So even if you never join us, I know you can find
something for yourself here on Earth. It was your planet first, after all," she said, and smiled.

A pattering amusement rose inside Jade. "Perhaps, human. If I did have the chance to stay. Certainly
this planet needs all the help it can get."

Her smile sprawled into a grin, and Connie said, "You did mention that Earth could use a Chronicler.
Why not do that here? You could build your own Archive right here and catalogue facts and science
to your stone's content. Humans from all over the world would come to you begging for
enlightenment, and you could slam the door in their faces and call them names."

Jade laughed at the thought. But her laughter soon dwindled into a large, looming emptiness that
opened inside of the Gem's mood. "It is a lovely fantasy, human, more than worthy of any in your
treasured fictions. But it has become abundantly clear that, if I were released from you, I would only
become a mindless beast again. The corruption of the D...that is, the corruption afflicting me
renders any such musings irrelevant."

The cavernous void began to swallow Connie's cheer. She straightened, sitting higher on their
precarious seat, and said, "Then I'll watch over you until the Gems find a cure. I'll take care of your
bubble myself. And when you're cured, and you reform, I'll catch you up on everything you missed."

Bitter amusement echoed in the void. "You are so certain this quandary of five millennia will be
solved within a century? Or have I been misinformed about human lifespans?"

But Connie didn't waver. "Then my kids will watch you, and their kids after them. We'll make it a
family tradition. We'll be Guardians of the Fabled Green Stone of Grumpiness. And then you can
think of smart ways of calling my descendants 'inferior humans' to thank them for centuries of
protection."
By inches, the void inside Jade began to crumble, cracking apart amid a low mental chuckle. It never completely vanished, but the glut of hollowness aching between them became just a sliver. "A worthy honor for any Jade," her passenger admitted.

Connie sighed in relief, smiling once more. "I wouldn't do it for 'any' Jade, you big green lump," she said.

Jade glowed with an inner warmth, and for just a moment, the rock in front of Connie shimmered with verdant light. "Con..." the Gem began, but her sub-vocalizations fizzled in tides of gladness and sorrow. "Conceding would seem to be my only immediate recourse. I surrender the point for the moment. Let us do as we came here to do, and enjoy the locale. Perhaps with snacks?"

The zippered depths of the cheeseburger backpack yielded their feast. "How do you want to divide them? I'll take the trail mix if you want the peanut butter boats," Connie teased.

A gust of wind puffed in Connie's eyes. "I take it back. Dealing with generations of humans based on your genetics and influence would be too terrible a fate to wish even on a rebel."

"Fine, be that way," Connie said, feigning indignation. "I'll just eat both."

And she sat atop the stone ridge, watching the shadows move across the valley as the day ended, mixing handfuls of snacks at Jade's insistence to explore their flavor potentials, and enjoying a moment away from the myriad problems of their bodies and lives and selves.
Thanks for your patience, everyone, I spent the better part of February 2018 putting myself back together. Let's celebrate with an extra-long chapter!

Connie hunched over her desk, scowling at the worksheet of word problems waiting for her solutions. The problems themselves weren't so challenging, but she had to cover each problem so she could only read one at a time and solve them before the cheating voice in her head could feed her the answers. It added an extra layer of difficulty to the proceeding.

"Write faster, human. I want that candy," Jade insisted.

Her eyes flicked up to the tiny gift basket on Miss Gala's desk. Their teacher had offered the wicker cache of assorted mini candy bars to the first student who could correctly finish the worksheet of mathematical riddles. It was a naked attempt at bribing the class into doing schoolwork, and she had admitted as much, but she didn't seem too concerned with the students who weren't really trying.

Even Connie, as studious as she prided herself on being, felt the energizing distraction that came hand in hand with the last day of school. The air in the classroom vibrated with the anticipation of impending freedom, practically rattling the windowpanes in their frames. Summer stood at the very brink of the school's doors, its warm breath seeping through the cracks to make everyone, student and teacher, eager to finish the perfunctory school day.

Her leg jittered under her desk as Connie thought about the long days of freewheeling ahead of them. She could take Jade on proper excursions, not half-daytrips, perhaps wheedling some transportation and company out of Steven in the process. Maybe they could even take their instruments, or at least Connie's violin and a more portable wind chime, back to Jade's spot so they could play for the human tourists down on the paths. A thousand possibilities lay before them, with even more beyond those that Connie hadn't even yet considered.

"Human, that basket contains no fewer than five distinct varieties of candy. I can recognize the differing color combinations of their wrappers from here," Jade said. "I have never experienced any of them before. Lay down your pride for the greater good of my culinary survey, and let me complete this trivial human educational exercise for you."

Connie drew a smiley face with a protruding tongue next to the latest completed problem on the worksheet as answer to Jade, and then uncovered the next problem from beneath her hand. Her passenger's need for flavors didn't justify cheating, at least not to her. Besides, Connie knew she could win the impromptu contest honesty if only the voice in her head would stop howling about candy.

But as she skimmed the next question, Connie felt a light tremor run up the legs of her chair and quiver through her seat. Her pencil skittered at the buzzing, making Connie frown at the crooked numbers she'd written. Another tremor followed quickly, this one strong enough to rattle the windows for real. By the third tremor, most of the other kids in the class had noticed as well.

Miss Gala looked up from her paperback romance, drawing a sharp breath to scold the class's
As Connie pushed her awareness out, keening her senses as Pearl had taught her, she could feel the
tremors radiating from a source in the direction of the classroom door. A muted *thump* accompanied
the rattling of the desks and chairs with each tremor. Suddenly Connie felt a memory overtake her,
one from a time long ago when her father had tried to show her an old dinosaur movie from the
Nineties. It had taken her mother's gentle coaxing and promises of cookies to lure a sobbing four-
year-old Connie out of the bathroom, where she'd locked herself after watching a tremendous
monster try to eat two kids right out of a Jeep as though they had been oysters in a stubborn shell.
The thudding footsteps of that T-Rex had haunted Connie's nightmares for weeks and had instituted
a new household rule against buying DVDs without express motherly approval.

An echo of that clenching fear grabbed Connie by the stomach as the tremors intensified.
"Footsteps," she murmured to herself. Then a flash of motion caught the lower edge of her vision.
She looked down to find her idle hand filling in the last answer of the worksheet in the impossibly
neat handwriting of her passenger. "Hey!" she hissed.

"*There. These paltry mathematical hypotheticals are solved. Now collect our prize,"* Jade
commanded.

"You're not the least bit worried about the shaking floor?" Connie snarked under her breath, too
softly even for her to hear herself, but clearly enough that she knew Jade would understand.

"*Curious, perhaps, but hardly worried,"* Jade said.

Connie was about to whisper an admonishment when the thudding abruptly stopped. A new sound
arose in its place, a booming, rumbling voice that filled the hallway outside the classroom. "Hello?
Are you in there? I mean, I know you are, but I'm supposed to ask first. Polarite gets mad when I go
in without asking," the voice said, its pitch and cadence at once familiar to Connie.

A new fear wrapped around her old fear to clench her innards harder. Connie swallowed hard
against a wave of hot terror trying to climb up her throat, and she heard Jade say, "*Oh. I am now
worried, human. Perhaps more than worried. We must find egress immediately.*"

The legs of her desk skidded as Connie threw herself out of her seat, her worksheet flapping in her
hand. She slapped the worksheet onto Miss Gala's desk, startling the confused teacher, and then
scooped up the big wooden toggle on a keyring that served as the classroom's hall pass. "I'm
finished, thank you, I gotta go, excuse me, sorry!" she blurted on her way through the classroom
door.

A hand the size of a manhole cover waited for her on the other side of the door. The white gemstone
in the center of its palm flared at Connie's arrival. As she slammed the door closed at her back,
Connie watched Milky Quartz draw back. A satisfied grin filled the Gem's craggy features as she
said, "*There you are! Hello!*"

Connie's brain struggled to reconcile the huge Gem's presence inside her school. Milky Quartz
dwarfed the lockers behind her, and her wild white mane brushed at the tiles of the suspended
ceiling. It was hard to imagine her squeezing through the front doors of the school at all. Perhaps
there was a hole somewhere where the Gem had made her own entrance instead. She seemed to
block the entire hallway just by standing in it, her gray bodysuit crowding everything around her. A
splash of new color hung at Milky's hip, a disc made of some kind of viscous purple alloy that
seemed to shift like liquid in the fluorescent lighting. It clung to her suit, but was not a part of it.
Something she carried that wasn't a part of her form, perhaps?
"Milky? Why are you here?" Connie said, failing to keep the quaver out of her voice. She started sliding along the wall, trying to back away from the Gem.

But Milky took a single, lumbering step that gobbled the distance between them, and loomed over Connie once more. "Well," the Gem said, "Flint was getting bored with waiting, which made Zircon mad, and they were shouting at each other a lot. Then Pyrite told them both to shut up, and then told me to find one of the squishy Crystal Gems and poof them. And I found you!" Milky's grin broadened, making her stalactite chin bow with the shape of it.

The door to Connie's math classroom cracked open, and Connie caught sight of Miss Gala's eye peering through the gap. "Connie? What is…?" the teacher started to say, but then choked on her words as her widening eye traveled up the length of Milky Quartz. The Gem heard the intrusion, and her smile vanished, replaced by irritation.

Connie was struck with a sudden vision of the irritated Milky Quartz 'dealing with' a curious student body or teachers with a misplaced sense of authority. "Jade, she's gonna hurt people," Connie said in a graveyard whisper, even as Milky's attention shifted toward the door.

"Plug your ears and tell them to stay hidden. I will do the rest," Jade commanded.

With no time to argue, Connie stuck her fingers in her ears, closed her eyes, and summoned her loudest, most authoritative tone: "All students and teachers are to remain in their classrooms until further notice!" she shouted.

The words left her mouth, and then boomed through the hallways of the school. Connie could feel her own voice reverberating through her body, rattling in her teeth. If she hadn't plugged her ears as Jade had instructed, she was certain the volume of her amplified voice would have ruptured her eardrums. Even the gigantic Quartz staggered back, clapping her mismatched hands to the sides of her head. But the classroom door next to them slammed shut, with seemingly no signs that it would open again from the other side.

As if sensing the question that arose between Connie's ringing ears, Jade explained, "Amplifying and propagating the vibrations rendered by your voice. A complicated trick, but a handy one when shouting to be heard above a platoon of unruly Rubies. Now run, human!"

Connie did not run, though. Locking her legs so her knees didn't quake, she waited for Milky to recover, keeping her features carefully neutral as the Quartz shook herself clear of the reverberations. "Hey, that wasn't nice!" Milky complained, and dug at one ear with her smaller hand. Then she reached out with her massive, rocky mitt, her fingers spread to engulf Connie. "Anyway…"

"Wait!" Connie shouted, holding up her own hand. She was a little shocked when Milky actually paused. "Milky, I don't want to fight you."

"Human, talking is not running!"

Milky's head tilted. "You don't?" she asked.

"Of course not. We know you weren't sent by Homeworld. And even after that stuff on the farm, and at the Kindergarten, we don't need to fight," Connie explained in a rush. "If we actually just stopped to talk to each other, we could figure out a way where everybody gets what they want. Wouldn't that be better?"

Connie could hardly believe it as Milky nodded at her pleas. "That does sound better," the Quartz agreed. Then, before Connie could sigh in relief, she continued, "But I really like smashing and
As Milky's grasp descended to crush her, Connie threw out her hands and shouted again, "Wait!"

"Huh?" Milky hesitated once more, and scowled around the edges of her thick fingers. "What now?" she snapped.

"Uh..." As Connie's mouth fumbled for an excuse, the hall pass she'd taken from Miss Gala's desk dangled in front of her, hanging by its keyring from Connie's thumb. She lifted it higher, suddenly struck with a terrible idea. "You, um, need a hall pass to stay out here in the hall. You're not allowed here without one."

"...really?" Jade uttered.

"Really?" Milky asked, her irritation retreating into puzzled confusion.

Jade's disgust shifted at once from Connie to Milky. "Really?" she snarled in disbelief.

Connie exhaled, lowering her hands. "Really," she said, nodding emphatically. "It's a, uh, a human rule. We have to follow the rules here, or we'll both get in trouble."

Looking around helplessly, Milky said, "But where do I get one?"

Smiling, Connie offered the Gem her own hall pass and said, "Here, you can take mine. Then, if you wait here, I'll go get another one, and then I can come back so you can poof me. Is that okay?"

Milky brightened as she took the pass. The wooden toggle looked comically tiny in the Gem's grasp. She waggled the keyring, chuckling, and then said, "Okay. Thanks!"

"Great! Wait right here," Connie said. Then she sprinted down the hallway as fast as she could. Her sneakers squealed against the grimy tile as she rounded the next corner.

"I am torn between my pride in your duplicity and a new deep concern for my species at large," Jade groused. But then her annoyance ignited into wild alarm as Connie made a beeline for a utility closet door down near the end of the new hallway. "Wait. What are you doing? Find the exit!"

"We can't just leave," Connie huffed, her lungs burning with the words. "Milky might—"

A booming cry erupted behind her, cutting the thought short as Milky rumbled, "Hey, wait a minute!" Then the thunderous footsteps from earlier returned, rattling the whole floor harder than before.

"She might take it out on the school," Connie hissed at her passenger. Her hands closed around the knob of the closet door, and she threw herself inside without looking. "We need—"

As the door slammed shut behind her, Connie collided with something warm, solid, and screaming. She fell into a tangle of limbs, recognizing the shape in the dark as something vaguely middle-schooler-ish. Desperate, Connie reached for the source of the scream and clapped her hand across an open mouth. Cries of alarm rattled against her palm as another hand clawed at hers.

"It's okay!" Connie pleaded in a brittle whisper. "It's okay. I'm not gonna hurt...you."

The last word thudded out of Connie as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she recognized the wide eyes of Mandy Petti staring back at her above her hand over the queen bee's mouth. A keychain-toggle hall pass dangled from Mandy's finger, clacking loudly as Mandy fell back onto the
closet floor and skittered backwards on all fours. "What is that thing out there?" Mandy whispered-screamed.

"What are you doing here? Didn't you hear me before? Stay in the classrooms!" Connie whispered-screamed back at her.

Mandy shook her hall pass. "I was going to the bathroom! Then I saw a monster in the school, so I ran and I hid! That's what you do when there's a monster in the school!"

"Human! Focus!" Jade snapped. "We have to get out of here now!"

Connie dug into her pocket for her phone. Her thumbs raced across the screen, typing with frantic speed and appalling grammar. "MLKY QRTZ SCHOL, TRAPD NEED HELO," she sent to Steven, and then stared intently for the bubbles on the bottom of the screen that would indicate he was typing a response.

"Go find your own hiding—" Mandy hissed.

"Human, this flawed strategy will be the end of—" Jade insisted, her ephemeral voice rising above Mandy's.

"Everybody be quiet!" Connie whisper-snapped, silencing her gallery. She listened to the thumping footfalls coming from the hallway outside, where Milky Quartz was passing the intersection where Connie had lost her. "Help is coming. And if she passes us, I can double back and then lead her toward the exit. That'll get her out of the school."

Mandy gaped at her. "Wh…What?"

Jade seemed less impressed. "Tactically sound, human, save for one detail: she's a Milky Quartz! How do you suppose she found us in the first place?"

The point struck Connie an instant before the thudding footsteps stopped directly outside their closet door. With a shriek of metal, the doorknob dropped from its housing as its other half was yanked away from the other side. A slate-gray eye suddenly filled the hole, glaring into the dark closet.

Connie wanted to scream at herself for forgetting Milky's sole purpose as a Gem hunter, but there wasn't time. She whirled, grabbing Mandy by the shoulders, and spun the blonde into the corner, wedging her behind a shelf filled with buckets and bottles of cleaning product. When Mandy tried to protest, Connie covered the girl's mouth again. "Crouch down and stay quiet," Connie murmured. "She won't find you. I promise."

"What are you—?" Mandy tried to say through Connie's fingers.

The door splintered, cracking like a gunshot as enormous stony fingers smashed through and gripped at it from the outside. Looking around hurriedly, Connie grabbed a mop and bucket and moved it in front of Mandy. Then she winced at the flimsy camouflage. "I'm sorry," she murmured to Mandy, and to Jade.

"Human, I can possibly delay her. But it would result in extensive damage to the school," Jade said. "There is, admittedly, a not-insignificant risk to your classmates' safety vis-à-vis the building collapsing from interior hurricane gales. But it would at least slow the Milky Quartz in her pursuit."

But Connie shook her head as she turned away from Mandy. She scooped up Mandy's discarded hall pass from the floor, and then straightened to face the door as it was ripped in half. Milky Quartz filled the empty frame, glaring through the spray of flinders that used to be the door.
Holding up the second hall pass, Connie smiled nervously and stammered, "Got that other pass! Heh…"

She tried to dart through the gap between the Quartz's legs, already imagining herself rolling back onto her feet and leading Milky on a breakneck chase out of the school and down the street. But Milky moved faster than she could ever have imagined. In a flash of white, Connie felt the Gem's grasp close around her like a tomb, engulfing her from hips to chest and yanking her out of the air. The blood rushed up into her head as Milky's gargantuan hand lifted her to eye level with the Gem.

"Human rules don't count for Gems!" Milky roared. The words hammered into Connie, almost as painful as the crushing grip wrapped around her. "Didn't you know that? Were you trying to trick me?"

Connie felt her guts trying to squeeze up her throat. Her eyes bulged, the edges of her vision growing red. She pushed at the edge of Milky's thumb with both of her hands, but it felt like pushing against a concrete wall. "No…" she wheezed.

Milky considered her for a moment more, and then relaxed. "Really? That's weird. It's pretty obvious," she said, and swung Connie out into the hall. "Well, come on. I'm supposed to poof you and wreck this place until your friends show up."

A sliver of fear lanced up Connie's spine for Steven, whose answer she had never seen before Milky had snatched her. The phone lay on the closet floor now, and any warnings she might send now to keep him safe were being crushed out of her, with her innards soon to follow. Jade was shouting something at her, but she couldn't hear her passenger above the ringing in her own ears. The red edge in her vision started turning black as it closed around her, the hallway fading into a spinning haze as Milky turned to lumber away with her in hand.

And then a white liter bottle thumped into the side of Milky's head. It struck with a half-hollow thunk and bounced off the Gem's shoulder, rolling down into the crook of the Quartz's rocky elbow. Connie's scrabbling hands hooked onto the handle molded into the bottle's plastic, and she clutched it tightly. The bottle was marked in large, dull lettering with the word BLEACH, and it took everything Connie had to cling to it as Milky whirled to face the origin of the bottle's arc.

Mandy Petti lowered her arm, shrinking back from the attention of the lumbering monster. A second bottle of bleach dropped from her limp fingers and rolled across the tile. "S-Sorry," she whimpered.

Connie wrenched the cap from the bleach bottle she'd caught and jammed her thumb over the bottle's mouth, leaving only a sliver open. "Jade," she croaked.

The sides of the bottle bulged as the air inside pressurized, propelling the bottle's liquid out from under Connie's thumb in an acrid spray of chemicals. Connie aimed the spray into Milky's face, closing her eyes and twisting her face away from the noxious liquids. The huge Gem squalled and staggered backwards, dropping Connie to paw at her face with her mismatched hands. An entire row of lockers crumbled behind Milky as she collapsed into the wall.

Scrambling backwards, Connie sucked in greedy lungfuls of air, her ribs aching fiercely. "Mandy," she wheezed, "get out of—"

By the time she looked over, Mandy was already gone. A fleeting glimpse of golden hair and the heel of a designer sneaker vanished around the far corner of the hallway. As beleaguered as she felt, some small part of Connie still had to admit that, whatever else Mandy was, she was clearly a good captain for the track team.
Then Milky regained her feet amidst the shriek of flattening lockers, and Connie put her mind back into the fight. The big Gem sputtered and wiped at her face with her smaller hand. "Yuk!" groused Milky. "That was a dirty trick!"

"I would suggest a pun regarding the cleaning product we employed, but the jest would likely be lost on her," Jade said. "Also, WHY AREN'T YOU RUNNING?"

The floor was only now settling back into place beneath Connie. Her head swam with the rush of blood, and her lungs blazed, thirsty for air but aching with every breath. She doubted she could manage a decent jog in the next minute or so, let alone matching Mandy's quick exit. "I'm sorry," she groaned to her passenger, sagging onto her hands and knees as she fought to regain her breath.

"Human..." Jade called to her, still half-muffled by the pounding of Connie's pulse in her head.

"No you're not!" Milky snapped, mistaking Connie's words as meant for her. "You're just like all the other little Gems who try to get away. You use tricks, and you cheat, and you run. You all think you're so much smarter than me!"

Sneering, Milky lifted her enormous arm, her hand closing into a fist like a boulder. The shadow of it eclipsed the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, leaving Connie to stare up at a dark Milky surrounded by a flickering halo. She had seen how deceptively fast the big Gem had moved to grab her before, and knew she had no chance of dodging the blow in her winded condition.

"But nobody's smart once they get poofed," Milky sneered. Milky's fist dropped, hurtling with the force of a crashing asteroid. Then the air between Connie and Milky flashed apart in a leonine roar.

As the sound of it punched Connie backwards, she watched the glowing tear spread apart and spit out a great pink wave that skidded across the slick tile. Ribbons of wax and grime peeled beneath pink claws as Lion crashed into Milky Quartz, bowling through the Gem and sending his three passengers flying off his back as the cat and Quartz smashed a crater into the brickwork at the far end of the hallway.

Steven scrambled out from under the dazed forms of Pearl and Amethyst. "Connie!" he exclaimed, and all but scooped her into a frantic hug. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where's Milky?"

As welcome as Steven's hugs always were, Connie felt the memory of Milky's grasp screaming through her ribs. Blinking back tears, she squeezed Steven back before stepping out of his embrace to catch her breath again. She pointed down the hall, where Milky Quartz was already rumbling back to her feet, batting aside Lion with the effort it would have taken to flick a ladybug off her bodysuit. The hulking Gem's brows avalanched into a scowl when she spied Pearl and Amethyst untangling themselves to face her.

"Steven," Pearl barked, "get Connie out of here. Amethyst and I will take care of this lout." Her stance broadened, shifting back as she drew the glowing length of her spear from the stone in her forehead.

"I don't know what that word is, but it sounds mean!" Milky shot back, and conjured her hammerhead around her enormous fist. It dropped to the floor beside her, cracking the tile. Her other hand hovered near the purple disc at her hip, quivering as if to grab it, but hesitating. After a silent decision, she dropped her hand from the disc, clenching it instead into a fist to brandish at the new arrivals.
"Don't worry," Amethyst said, and yanked glowing whips from her own gemstone, "I'll explain it with my foot in your face! Or maybe your butt, because that's easier to reach! You're very tall!"

"Thank you!" Milky bellowed, enraged.

Steven took Connie by the hand and dashed for the heap of pink fur that picked itself up from the tile. Breathless and aching, she dangled behind him like a banner. The floor beneath them quaked as Milky lumbered forward to intercept them, even while Amethyst and Pearl darted forward to intercept her. They all converged onto a single spot, poised to crash into a raging calamity of weapons and soft human flesh.

Milky's bulk overshadowed the teens, her weapon poised to crush them both with one swipe as she lifted her hammerhead in an overhand blow. But Amethyst was faster, tucking and rolling into a white whorl that kicked a spray of tile in her wake as she dashed into Milky. The whirling Crystal Gem struck Milky like a cannonball, blasting the massive Quartz back down the hall. She struck the wall in the crater she and Lion had made, and then kept going, vanishing into a haze of dust and mortar with the piercing crack of brick shattering behind her. Pale daylight streamed through the hole where she'd been, the pluming drywall glittering in the air. Still spinning, Amethyst drove through the hole, shearing one edge wider as she disappeared after the massive Quartz.

Steven winced at the fresh hole in the wall. "I hope that doesn't go on your permanent record," he said to Connie.

Lion finished shambling to his feet, rumbling in irritation while Pearl ran past them in pursuit of the battling Quartzes. "Go!" she shouted to the teens, and then leapt forward, folding herself along the haft of her spear to pierce the hole in the wall without brushing its edge.

Connie accepted a hand from Steven, grateful to cling to him as they mounted Lion. With a gentle plea from Steven, the great cat loped forward and split the air with another roar, turning the world around them into a rushing corridor of light.

Sagging against Steven's back, Connie allowed herself to sigh in relief. She buried her face in his shoulder and squeezed with her arm around his waist. The touch of his hand on hers as he pressed at her grasp around his waist was a comforting anchor that made her world finally stop spinning. "Thanks, Steven," she breathed into him.

"You're okay now," Steven said, possibly more for his own benefit than for hers. "Pearl and Amethyst can handle Milky. I guess Garnet was right, that she didn't need to come. Now I feel bad for yelling at her... I'll apologize as soon as we get back. What matters most is that everyone's okay. You're okay."

As Connie caught her breath, reveling in the scent of powdered sugar and ocean breeze, her pulse slowed, and Jade's voice rose above the faded throbbing between her temples. "I am glad we are safe, despite your own best efforts to the contrary. But now that the immediate danger has passed, I have concerns."

Connie chuckled through her nose. "I think Jade's complaining about the rescue," she told Steven.

"It was a little rushed," Steven admitted. "Next time we'll do better. After all, we'll have more practice at it after this time."

"No," Jade insisted, pushing back against Connie's post-gallows bemusement. "Human, the Milky Quartz could have found us at any time. Why attack now? And more importantly, why did she attack alone? We had yet to see her without the Flint before now, and she mentioned others."
The niggling thought drew Connie's brows together. "Maybe she didn't think she needed anyone else to 'poof' us? She wouldn't exactly be wrong," Connie suggested.

"*Humph. Perhaps she would care to try again when there isn't a building full of potential collateral damage surrounding us,*" groused Jade.

The tunnel of light around them rushed into a single point, collapsing into an instance of sunlight and sand that then exploded into a familiar, picturesque shoreline. Sweet sea air rushed around them, the sand spraying in great clumps beneath Lion's paws as their feline steed touched down in a controlled skid. They landed in the shadow of the Gems' temple, mere steps from the edge of the house's porch, and came to a rest facing the glittering sapphire expanse of the ocean.

Steven started to say something, his weight shifting to slide off Lion's back. Then he froze, and his breath hitched. Connie felt him tense beneath her arms, and she followed his gaze to the edge of the shoreline.

Garnet stood with her back to the house, her feet planted firmly in dry sand. Her heavy gauntlets hung formed at her sides, clenched into fists as she faced the surf. Everything about her stance screamed warning that she was about to wreak mayhem, and that warning was aimed squarely at a figure crawling out of the frothing waves.

"Well, well," Flint called to Garnet. The lanky Gem straightened from the white foam with rivulets of seawater streaming from her black armor. Her red hair hung heavy and limp around her leering gray features. Strands of yellow and green seaweed were plastered to her limbs, dangling from her elbows and hips. "I've been looking forward to finally getting some alone time with you."

"Or maybe it's a trap," Connie breathed, finishing her thought from the warp tunnel. The air stirred dangerously around her, and her hands tightened into fists.
Taking Refuge

Waves lapped around Flint's ankles where she stood at the edge of the shore and stared down Garnet. The water beneath the gangly Quartz roiled, and a halo of steam rippled off of her body. Her smirk rippled in the superheated air as her puff of red hair *phoomphed* dry and stood upright. "Do you feel that, Doublet? That quiver deep inside your stones? That's fear," Flint told Garnet, sneering through the last of the steam. "Bet you haven't felt that in a long time, safe and isolated on this ball of rubble with your Off-Color friends."

Garnet didn't budge. Gauntlets at her sides, the fusion stood at the shoreline with her back to the temple, her stance unreadable, unconcerned but focused entirely on the threat that strode out of the ocean. The gentle sway of her afro in the breeze was the only break in her statuesque vigil.

"See, I walked here through that glorified puddle hoping to burn down your base, or maybe catch one or two of your friends unaware, shatter them while the rest of you rode to the rescue of your little freaks. Just a bit of annoyance to wear down your resolve, eh?" Flint stepped dry onto the beach. The yellow and green strands of seaweed clinging to her curled into brown flakes and crumbled off of her, leaving her armor pristine. "But lo and behold, I find the very prize herself standing here alone, ready for the taking and with nobody coming to save her."

"Except for us!" Connie shouted. She barreled after Steven, pounding through the sand. They skidded to either side of Garnet and formed a line against the hostile Quartz. Lion loomed behind, rumbling, the shadow of his lashing tail dancing in front of them.

"Yes," Flint continued, glancing briefly at either teen, "nobody but them—wait, what?" She looked again, registering Connie's and Steven's arrival, and staggered back in annoyance. "Milky, you great big tottering mound of mediocrity! You had one job to do!"

"Steven, you shouldn't have come back," Garnet said without looking.

"I didn't know you meant because this would happen! And if I did, I would have come back anyway!" Steven insisted.

"I didn't know this would happen," Garnet said through clenched teeth. "I just knew that you needed to go for you and Connie to be safe. You're in danger here."

"You're in danger here!" countered Steven.

Eyes smoldering, Flint snarled, "Excuse me! You're all in danger here!"

Connie looked between the lot of them, confused, and said, "I feel like we're losing focus on what's happening here."

"Thank you!" Flint shouted.

Garnet shifted, putting herself between Steven and Flint. She lifted her gauntlets and said to the Quartz, "Leave. This is your last warning."

A sharp smirk cut across Flint's features. "Is that a threat? From you? Consider me half-impressed. But I suppose you do have me a tad outnumbered, what with the return of your squishy experiments and that pink hair-thing, whatever it is."

As the renegade Quartz spoke, her hand slipped behind her back, and then emerged with something
purple and round. Connie recognized the shape and color at once as being identical to the object Milky had carried. Flint had one of her own, and she tossed it out between them onto the sand.

The object began expanding even before it landed, flattening itself into a broad circle upon the sand. Its surface glimmered, then blazed with twinkling iridescence, glowing with such intensity that Connie had to shield her face behind one arm as she staggered back from the glare.

Flint's voice emerged from behind the flash. "What say we—"

Garnet's gauntlet rocketed off her wrist and smashed into the circle of light. Smoke and shards exploded into a lavender plume, peppering the beach in hot fragments. Steven manifested his shield and covered Connie, crouching with her as they flinched at the spray rattling against their translucent protection.

As the smoke cleared, Flint reappeared through the purple haze, her mouth agape at the crater in the sand that had been her device. "What the…? What did you do? Do you have any idea how hard those are to get hold of?" she howled.

A hurricane gust answered her, blasting a geyser of sand out of the beach. Connie was glad again for Steven's shield as the blowing sand pounded them back a full yard with the backlash of the gust. Squinting against the wind, Connie saw a mote receding into the sky, perfectly in line with a long gash that had been gouged into the beach where Flint had stood.

Straightening, Steven let his shield dissipate as he stared at the empty scar being filled with seafoam. "Wow. Thanks, Jade," he said.

"Well, someone had to do something," Jade groused inside of Connie. "Honestly, does anyone on this planet have any survival instinct anymore? Talking, and talking, and talking… And you! What were you thinking, charging at a Flint like that, human? You are mostly water! Water boils!"

Connie remained silent, instead watching Garnet for some cue as to what happened next. What else had the prescient fusion seen? Everything about Garnet's demeanor told Connie that the danger was far from gone, despite Flint's blustery ejection from the beach.

Steven noticed it too, and his fists clenched as he rounded back upon Garnet. "Did you know this was going to happen? Is that why you wouldn't come with to save Connie?"

"I told you, I didn't know 'what' would happen," Garnet snapped, her visor still fixed upon the ocean. "I knew that you'd both be safer if you went to help Connie, and that we would all be in danger if you stayed."

"Well, why didn't you say that?" Steven exclaimed, throwing his hands above his head.

"There wasn't time for a debate," Garnet said. "I thought you would trust me."

"Then don't be so mysterious about it!" cried Steven. "You have to trust me to trust you!"

"I do trust you to trust me 'when' you trust me," Garnet insisted.

A flash on the horizon drew Connie away from the twisting argument. She saw an orange glimmer where the sea met the sky, and squinted across the water to fix upon it. In seconds, the glimmer expanded into a jittering blossom of red-orange color, and it grew larger as it cut down through the glare of the ocean, growing closer at an astonishing rate. Eyes widening, Connie backed away and said, "Um, I think she's coming back!"
"What was I just telling you about survival instinct?" Jade chided.

Garnet's head shifted, and the warm color filled her visor. "Steven," she barked, "bubble!"

The world around Connie turned pink as Steven summoned a bubble shield around them both. She watched the blossom of fire grow larger still, its flames becoming a billowing contrail behind its approach. A mote appeared in the heart of the blossom, revealing herself to be a furious Flint, who rode on roaring jets of fire that blazed out of her soles. Above the roar of the inferno, Connie could hear the Quartz screaming in rage, and saw Flint lift her hands toward them all. Then the world around Connie vanished into flames.

Everything was fire. Connie could feel the heat in the surface of the bubble, and jerked her hand back, shrinking into the bubble's center with Steven. Sweat prickled in every inch of her mottled skin. Her sneakers stuck as she shifted around, and she realized that the rubber soles were melting against the bottom of the bubble.

From outside, they heard a feral feline yowl pierce the flames. The yowl became a roar, and the roar became a tear, a bright scar of white visible through the fire. Lion's silhouette flashed across the scar, then vanished.

"Lion!" Steven cried, too late. The big cat's roar winked out as quickly as the scar vanished back into the fire.

After agonizing seconds, the inferno around their bubble finally abated. Flint crawled out of the bubbling ocean completely dry. The corona surrounding her turned any water near her into billowing steam. "Right, that's enough frolicking!" snarled Flint. "I'm poofing all of you, shattering three of you, and walking out of here with the only one of you worth her facets!"

"Roll back to the house!" Garnet bellowed at the bubble shield.

Then the world became fire again, and the fusion vanished behind a red-orange veil, its crackling underscored by Flint's hysterical, high-pitched laughter.

Connie's voice rose with Steven's to cry out for Garnet, reaching to help, but then flinching back from the intense heat that seeped through Steven's protection. She could feel it cooking up through the bottoms of her shoes, feel it stinging in her eyes and scraping at her lungs. The sand at the edge of the bubble was boiling, turned to liquid in the unimaginable heat. Through it all, a faint silhouette stood at the center of the firestorm with her arms raised in triumph, laughing all the while.

And then a shadow shaped like Garnet speared through the haze and swung a haymaker gauntlet through the silhouette's chin. The firestorm vanished in an instant, and Flint collapsed onto the muddy glass her heat had made of the beach.

Scrambling onto her knees, Flint lifted one hand and sent a stream of white fire pouring into Garnet, vanishing the fusion into a torrent so bright that it hurt Connie's eyes just to see it. "Burn, you shameless double-stacked little waste of—eh?"

The implacable fusion walked up the length of the stream, striding up to its source until the white flames jittered off of her chest piece like water blasting off a stainless steel pan. Then Garnet backhanded Flint, sending the Quartz tumbling back onto the hard glass beach.

"Oh, yeah," Steven said, easing back in the cooling bubble. "Garnet swims in lava. I forget that sometimes."

"That might have been useful information in planning our counteroffensive," Jade said dryly,
radiating displeasure in Steven's direction.

Flint dragged herself backwards and reached to her gemstone for the glowing haft of a javelin. "Now, let's chat about this," she stammered. "What I meant was—"

Garnet's boot sent Flint flying again. Even before Flint hit the ground, Garnet was chasing after her, pausing only long enough to shoot a pointed look at Steven's pink sanctuary. Then she pounced on the Quartz and became a hurricane of gauntlets.

With nudging from Steven, Connie helped roll their bubble uphill toward the beach house. They hamster-scurried to the foot of the porch before Steven dissipated the bubble to let them up the stairs. Flashes of warm light and the muffled screams of strange, unintelligible cursing chased them through the screen door, intercut with the sound of a merciless pummeling.

Connie hesitated near the couch, unsure of where to go. It concerned her that they were taking refuge from a fire-slinging Gem inside a wooden house, but she didn't have any better ideas at the moment that didn't involve a fire truck or one of those fireproof tinfoil suits she had seen stunt people wear for special effects. "Will Garnet be okay?" Connie asked Steven.

He had taken up a vigil at the window, peering through the drawn blinds to watch the carnage outside. "She seems to be doing pretty good." A vertical stripe of orange light poured across his face to illustrate the point before the sound of a gauntlet smashing something and a flinty cry of pain extinguished the light.

After adding 'swims in lava' to her constantly expanding list of amazing things her friends could do, Connie let the adrenaline trickle out of her brain, making room for rational thoughts again. "what was that purple thing Flint threw at us? Some kind of weapon?" she asked.

"Dunno. But she didn't like it when Garnet blew it up," Steven said, his eyes still glued to the fight outside.

"A weapon seems unlikely, given her proximity to it when she activated it," Jade answered inside Connie. Though Connie's uneasiness had started to fade, she could still feel her passenger's worry digging into her like a needle. "If I did not know better, I would suspect its purpose was to create a vectored spatial distortion. But that is impossible, of course."

Connie scowled at the idea of anything being impossible at this point. "Impossible? Why?"

"What's impossible?" Steven asked distractedly.

"Such a thing would require a fixed, tethered point, such as a warp pad," Jade chided Connie impatiently.

At Jade's words, Connie finally recognized the glow she had seen in Flint's disc. It had been identical to that of the warp pad the Crystal Gems used. "Are you sure that's still true after five thousand years?" Connie pointed out.

The silence and uncertainty welling in Jade was answer enough.

Working from that assumption, Connie said, "If that thing she threw really was a warp pad, what did she need it for? Was she trying to run away?"

"She probably should have," Steven remarked, and winced at something he saw in his gap through the blinds. "Garnet doesn't usually take her time like this. I think she's really mad."
"However erroneously so, the Flint was certain of her presumptive victory. Did she not speak of numbers when she activated the device in question?" Jade said.

Connie thought about the pad that Milky had carried. Perhaps the two had meant to work together, with one ready to back the other up if too many reinforcements came to either fight. She supposed that it no longer mattered. With Flint's pad destroyed, Milky wouldn't have anywhere to arrive at on this end of things.

Nowhere, that is, except…

The chiming sound of the temple's warp pad rang behind them an instant before Connie could complete the thought. She whirled and saw a column of white light splitting the house, coalescing into the outline of an enormous figure atop the raised crystal platform. As the light faded, and the figure took form, she felt her heart leap into her throat.

It wasn't Milky Quartz who stood upon the pad, as Connie had first feared, but instead a new Gem almost as large as the pale Quartz warrior. This new Gem was built of lean, predatory lines, with limbs that belied their nimble power and a tall, elegant frame to match. Her shimmering metallic purple hair framed golden features that were half-masked behind a mirrored visor. Beneath the angular crystal mask, her mouth was drawn into a dissatisfied pucker. She had formed black leggings that rose up over her body into a leotard patterned with bright red flames across her chest, with a black brand of the three-sided broken diamond sigil over one breast. A purple cape hung from one shoulder, obscuring her arm to the elbow as it wrapped around to drape behind her.

The strange Gem's mirrored gaze fixed on Connie, sending a jolt through her. "Steven!" Connie cried.

Steven turned from the window and jerked in surprise. "Oh. Um, hello?" he said, and waved nervously at the new arrival.

Curiosity and caution spilled up through Connie's chest. "A Pyrite? Have a care, human. They are relatively unremarkable soldiers, but can nonetheless be dangerous. Let the hybrid dispatch it, and then we can—"

Light erupted from beneath the fold of Pyrite. Striding off the pad, Pyrite reached across her body and under the fold of the cape. From out of the glow she drew a long, double-headed butterfly axe. The golden sculpt of the axe head gleamed, intricately woven from metallic strands into identical blades that looked to hold a deadly edge. One swipe with the axe obliterated the island counter in the kitchen, turning it into a scattering of flinders that crunched underfoot as Pyrite advanced on the teens.

Steven leapt forward to meet Pyrite's next swing. His shield twinkled into being and caught the axe blade, stopping it cold. A pure, rumbling note tolled from the shield, shaking the whole house with the force of the blow. Lip curling, Pyrite swing again, and again, moving in a blur to carve Steven apart. Each time Steven put his shield between them, if only barely in time to save himself from being bisected.

A low rumble emerged from the fading chime of the shield, and Connie realized that the sound was Pyrite's frustrated growl. With her free hand, Pyrite reached down and snagged the edge of Steven's shield. She couldn't hope to pry the bonded protection away from Steven, so when she flung the shield aside with an irritated flick, Steven went with it, smashing into the far wall and shattering pictures and drywall alike, then tumbling down through an end table on his way to the floor. His head lolled, his eyes glassy and unfocused as they searched for Pyrite, who stalked toward him with her axe raised to finish the fight.
"Never mind," Jade uttered, her shock radiating through Connie's body. "Run."

"Steven!" Connie screamed. She sprinted after Pyrite, scooping up the shattered leg of a kitchen stool in mid-run.

"The other way, human!" Jade howled. A gust began to gather ahead of Connie to push her back the way she came.

Both Connie and her passenger were too slow. The arm beneath Pyrite's cape shot out in a blur, and Connie's scream became a choked squeak beneath impossibly strong fingers that wrapped around her neck. She dropped her stool leg and grasped at Pyrite hand, gripping it for all she was worth. The Gem's grasp would never budge for her human strength, but she feared if she let go, her neck would snap like dry spaghetti.

Her own puffing, purpling features stared back at her in horror as Pyrite lifted Connie to examine her, staring from behind that mirrored visor. Connie thought she saw Pyrite's hair jerking back and forth, as if caught in a series of torrential gusts, and thought she might have heard someone screaming in the back of her head. But she couldn't hear anything over the sound of her own racing pulse as Pyrite's grasp squeezed it up into her ears.

A sudden red glow colored Pyrite face, and the visor angled away from Connie. She found herself swinging around as Pyrite carried her away, bashing the screen door off its hinges. The door tumbled over the porch rail, and then Connie was outside, dangling in sunlight.

It was hard to see from the prison of Pyrite's grasp, but Connie saw Garnet crouched on the glassy beach some distance away. The fusion was hunched over a crumpled black and red form, pounding a scrub of poofy red hair deeper into the scorched glass while limbs flailed uselessly in an attempt to escape Garnet's pummeling.

"Get off of her." The voice was gravelly, and it rattled against the side of Connie's head. Pyrite didn't shout, but her voice carried across the entire beach, echoing back from the cliff behind them. "Flint, get up."

Garnet paused with her own visor poised upon Pyrite and Connie. A glimmer seemed to cross the stoic Gem's gaze. Then, with a casual grace, she punched Flint one last time before rising and backing away.

Flint tore her face out of the beach and spat out a sandcastle's worth of glass shards. "Pyrite!" she cheered at the new arrival. Then her joy curdled into annoyance, and she scrambled back to her feet. "Load of help you are! What kept you?"

"Zircon lost the signal to your mobile pad, so I assumed you needed saving. You're lucky you were practically on top of their pad already, or you'd be glitter in the dirt," Pyrite said. Her body shifted, squaring off against Garnet once more, and her voice became an arctic chill. "Unfuse, or I shatter your weird little friend."

Connie felt herself lurch forward as Pyrite lifted her for Garnet to see. The fingers at Connie's throat shifted, three of them wrapping around to back of her head to cup her skull. Her hair tore under the fingers, the tips of which wrapping all the way around to cover her ears and her forehead. The pressure in her head tripled, and she felt the whole of her being squeezed out through her face, held back only by the tenuous pressure of her swollen features.

"I won't tell you again," Pyrite warned.
Through a haze of tears, Connie saw Garnet's fists fall to her sides. The gauntlets vanished in a flash. Connie wanted to scream, to beg Garnet to keep fighting, but she couldn't even breathe. She could only watch as Garnet fell apart into two glowing shapes.

The pressure around Connie's head eased a fraction as the two glows that had been Garnet coalesced. Steven had described the fusion's component Gems, but had failed to describe either of them as being adorable. The pair manifested with their hands intertwined, the gruff little Ruby poised in front of her partner to shield her from the larger Gems. Sapphire's gaze was hidden behind her silken white hair, but Connie thought she could feel the seer's cool gaze passing through her. As she watched, helpless, Connie saw Sapphire nod almost imperceptibly to her, answering a question Connie hadn't even thought of yet.

"Good," Pyrite rumbled. "Flint?"

With a spin, Flint drew a javelin from her shoulder and lanced it at the pair. The black weapon shot through Ruby faster than Connie's eye could follow. In the wake of the blur, Sapphire's hand jerked emptily through the cloud of red smoke that had been her partner.

Then Connie yelped as the world spun around her, sent whirling with a flick of Pyrite's hand. Connie went flying and hit the sand hard, bouncing. By the time she found her feet again, Pyrite had seized Sapphire in her free hand, hoisting the blue Gem without noticeable effort. Sapphire offered no resistance as her captor lugged her back toward the beach house.

"Finally. Let's get her back to Ascension," Pyrite snapped at Flint.

"No," Connie croaked, and staggered forward. Even if her legs weren't wobbling, she had no idea what she might do to the two invaders. She had no sword, no plan, but she felt herself crawling forward, reaching for Sapphire as if she could possibly hope to catch her.

Pyrite didn't spare Connie another glance, but Flint did. The battered Quartz turned, grinning back at Connie, and lifted her hands. Sparks burgeoned in Flint's palms.

Jade's voice rushed back to Connie. "Get down!" she cried.

Fire poured out of Flint's cupped hands, consuming everything between her and Connie. Curling into a ball on the ground, Connie looked away, and with her last shred of sense she hoped that the fire would turn her to ash too quickly for her to feel any of it.

Then her hair blew into her face as the air around her became the eye of a flaming tornado. Winds roared around her with unthinkable force, consuming all of Flint's blast. The tornado channeled the heat straight up into the sky, creating a line of twisting flames a hundred yards tall, blinding Connie to everything but the light and the heat.

The flames clung stubbornly around her, but eventually Jade's tornado won. Outlasted, the curtain of fire dwindled into nothing, and the winds carrying it stilled back into a warm ocean breeze. As Connie lowered her arms from her face, she found herself alone on a circle of black char, surrounded on all sides by glowing, muddy glass. Pyrite and Flint were gone.

And Sapphire was gone with them.
Broken Mirror

Steven fluffed the pillow in the handbasket, carefully arranging the red gemstone atop it for maximum comfort. His efforts didn't draw any change from the stone, but it seemed to make Steven feel better. He drew the blinds to let in the last of the afternoon sun inside, letting it spill over the basket's perch on the coffee table.

"It's okay," Steven promised the Gem, his voice thready and high. "If you need a blanket, just flash, or glow, or something. You'll be okay."

Seated on the couch with her legs folded underneath her, Connie watched Steven stagger back and forth between distractions. He would fuss over Ruby's bodiless gemstone until he couldn't stand it anymore, and then he would try to clean the fragments of the island counter in the kitchen. She thought she should be doing something to help him, to calm him down or at least pick up a broom. But those notions were a million miles away from her limbs.

Her neck throbbed as she stared down at the glittering gemstone in the basket. Seeing it by itself felt wrong to Connie. Just as she knew that Stevonnie was more than the sum of two teenagers, she knew that Garnet was more than two Gems merged together. Without Sapphire next to her, Ruby was smaller in every sense of the word. She was incomplete.

Garnet might never exist again. And it was all Connie's fault.

"Human," Jade said warningly, "don't."

Connie blinked hard to keep her eyes dry. "Can you read my thoughts now too?" Connie asked in a graveyard whisper.

"I feel what you feel. The specific thoughts are not difficult to interpolate between your massive swells of guilt," Jade said sternly. Between the steel in her passenger's thoughts, though, Connie could sense her genuine concern. "You are responsible for no one's safety but yours and, perhaps more importantly, mine. So any conviction you might have of this situation being your fault is therefore erroneous."

Another swell of guilt arose in Connie to argue with Jade. If Connie hadn't called for help, the other Gems would have been there to face Flint and Pyrite with Garnet. If Connie could have protected Steven, or even just herself, maybe Pyrite wouldn't have used her to force Garnet apart. If, if, if… The maybes piled up inside her until they threatened to spill out of Connie in a rush of hot bile. She swallowed hard, barely keeping them down. "Sure feels like my fault," she whispered.

"Feelings are not fact," Jade said. "Only the foolish would treat them as such."

Connie wanted to argue more, but stopped at the sound of soft crunching at the doorway. Her body tensed as she whirred around, and then eased at the sight of the pink creature lumbering through the empty frame. Steven had already abandoned his broom to rush to the door, crying, "Lion!"

The great cat settled just beyond the edge of the scattered debris of the kitchen. Swaths of black char cut through his fur and tore a broad wedge out of his mane. When Steven reached for one of the burns, Lion shrank back and rumbled warningly. With a little coaxing, though, he surrendered to Steven's gentle touch.

Connie watched Steven comb his fingers around Lion's burns. The raw red patches reminded Connie of those horrific seconds between Flint's blaze and Lion teleporting himself to safety. The memory of
that raw heat prickled in the soles of her feet. The tread of her shoes had been melted into a smooth, waxy surface. How badly must it have hurt poor Lion to be outside the bubble? How angry must he feel because Steven bubbled her instead of him?

"The important thing is to remain logical and proactive as we move forward," Jade said, her calm voice rising against the wail of Connie's inner monologue.

"I'm so sorry, Lion," Steven cooed, and kissed Lion's paw. His lips touched next to one of the burns, and the fur around it began to ripple inward, filling in the gap as the raw red skin turned pink and healthy again. Other parts of Lion's lost fur began to shuffle back into place, but slower. As Steven moved his lips to the next burn further up Lion's leg, his voice caught in his throat. "This is all my fault," he choked.

Connie flinched. How could Steven think something so ridiculous? He had rescued her, and now he was paying the price for it.

"The biggest mistake would be to act rashly out of a misplaced sense of obligation, or worse, guilt," Jade said. The forced serenity in her voice cracked as she practically had to shout over Connie's whirling misery.

"I should have bubbled all of us right away when I saw Flint. I should have run away like Garnet told us to." Steven licked his palm and leaned heavily on Lion's flank. Tears glimmered in his eyes. "I should have been able to stop that big Gem with the axe."

Connie's head throbbed along the lines where Pyrite's fingers had grasped her. The Gem had picked her up like she was nothing, and tossed her aside like she meant nothing, because she was nothing. Garnet, or Sapphire, had been their target all along. Connie's only importance to the Crystal Gems was being a weakness the bigger Gems could press on until Garnet broke.

"Let us assess our current situation and consider, LOGICALLY, how best to proceed," Jade shouted, but her voice was all but lost in the din.

As his mane rippled back into fullness, Lion stopped fidgeting, and leaned heavily into Steven. His head twisted around, and he began idly grooming Steven's disheveled hair, licking the shards and splinters caught in his dark curls. Steven's flimsy restraint broke, and his tears poured freely. He buried his face in Lion's mane while the cat methodically licked him back into order again. "And now Garnet's gone. And I never got to tell her I was sorry for yelling at her. And Ruby's all alone, and so is Sapphire, and it's all my fault."

"Oh, my stars! Hybrid, would you please shut up?" Jade howled at Steven, unheard. "Human, do not listen to him!"

But the world had already vanished from Connie behind a curtain of her tears. She saw a blurry pink shape in front of her, and heard her best friend's quiet sobs, and she broke. Stumbling off of the couch, she ran for the bathroom and shut herself inside, pressing her back against the door and sliding down to the cool tile. Both her hands were clasped over her mouth so Steven couldn't hear her crying.

"Con..." Jade hesitated. "Consider the larger picture, human: we are alive. And... And the enemy took the Sapphire intact. Perhaps they will release her once her purpose has been served. O-Or perhaps the remaining rebels can mount a successful rescue."

Connie wrapped her arms around her shins and pressed her face into her legs, curled up against the door. "It's my fault, Jade. It's all my fault!" she blubbered into her knees. "I'm a big, speckled piece
of bait, and those jerks used me, and now even if I could fight them, which I can't, I couldn't anyway because we have no idea where they took Sapphire, and we'll never find her in time to save her! I really am just a dumb little human…"

Her voice cracked around the last word, shattering into long, shuddering sobs.

From out of her rollicking pity party, a thin ribbon of uncertainty coiled up and clenched around her stomach. It was Jade, muddling Connie's guilt with a different flavor all her own. "Portions of your self-recrimination are…somewhat inaccurate," her passenger hedged.

She swiped her knuckles across her eyes and coughed a bitter little laugh. "Why? Am I slightly less pathetic because I have a superior Gem stuck inside of me?" she wheezed.

"Well, technically, yes," Jade admitted. "But I was referring to your notion that we do not know to where the Flint and Zircon absconded with your Sapphire. Because I…might."

Connie bolted to her feet. Her whole body crackled with excitement. Staggering to the bathroom counter, she gripped the edges of the sink and stared wide-eyed at her own reflection. "You know where they took Sapphire?" she demanded.

The wall behind her had cratered inward where Steven had been slammed into it from the other side by Zircon. Flecks of drywall and stud littered the counter where they had bounced off of the mirror hard enough to leave it in a spidery web of cracks. Her reflection stared back her in fragments of a spotty, teary mess that looked even worse than she felt. But behind the crooked sight of her own wild, wide eyes was a glimmer of guilty truth that belonged to her passenger.

Connie could practically feel Jade's stone squirming in her chest as the Gem said, "The Pyrite said they were returning to Ascension. I am familiar with this name. It is a location here on Earth."

The revelation jerked Connie upright. She gaped at her shattered reflection and said, "You know where they took her? Where?"

"Ascension is one of several landing platforms constructed on-planet after the rebels seized control of the Galaxy Warp. It was built expressly for use by the Diamonds and their courtiers...including their Chroniclers."

Jade's words fanned a spark of hope inside Connie, making it burst aflame. "Then there's still a chance! You can take us to—"

"I cannot."

That flame guttered, growing cold again. "Wh... What? Why?" Connie demanded.

A strange, wavering edge carried Jade's answer up through Connie. "Ascension is a secure Homeworld installation. I am committing treason by even admitting its existence to anyone. To bring a gaggle of armed rebels there on a hostile incursion for any reason would be unthinkable."

Connie couldn't breathe. It felt as though Jade had punched her right in the stone, knocking the wind out of her. "A secure..." she choked. Her elbows shook the counter as she collapsed forward, fighting to fill her chest again. When she finally had the breath for it, she pushed herself back up and bellowed at the mirror, shaking its pieces as she glared at herself and exploded, "Are you serious?"

"When am I not?" Jade retorted. "Human, I do not revel in telling you this, but I must honor my pledge to be forthright with you, just as I must honor my commitment to my Diamond and my Homeworld."
"Jade, the war is over! None of that matters anymore!"

The tension in Connie's stomach loosened, unfurling into a wave of resentment. "It is the only thing that matters, human, because it is what I am! My nonaggression pact with the rebels does not absolve me of my duty. I am a Jade."

Connie's fists shook the counter. Half a dozen pieces of mirror tumbled into the sink, clattering into a jumbled, scattered reflection of her scowling face. "They left you, Jade! They corrupted you! You can't—"

"I cannot betray my purpose for the sake of a rebel—"

"—pretend like nothing happened, you don't owe them anything, so how can you care—"

"—or for any human, regardless of how fond I may have become of her, because it is not a matter of caring, it is a matter of being—"

"—what the rules were five thousand years ago when the Diamonds themselves don't even care? I mean, look at us, Jade!"

"—because no matter how much you wish it, I am what they made me, and not what you want me to be!"

"SAPPHIRE!"

The cry rattled the bathroom door, silencing Connie and Jade at once. Connie didn't recognize the shrill, rough voice, but she knew it could only belong to Ruby. Steven's voice rose in a firm but soothing patter, which quickly disappeared inside Ruby's frantic tirade. She couldn't hear much of Ruby's shouting so distinctly through the wall, but Connie heard Sapphire's name come up again and again, each time harder and more panicked than the last.

Listening to the pain in Ruby's voice, Connie felt her anger and frustration drain away, leaving her half of the argument an empty shell inside of her. She tried to imagine losing someone as important to her as Sapphire was to Ruby, and her eyes stung with fresh tears. If it were her parents who had been taken… If it were Steven…

"Jade, please," Connie croaked, shutting her eyes against the tears as they rolled down her cheeks. "Please help me. I messed this all up. I should have run, like you said. Like Garnet said. I should have known better than to try and fight. I know I don't deserve it, and I know I can't ask you to do it, but I have to. Please, please help me make this right."

Jade's vitriol evaporated as quickly as hers had. "Human, I…I cannot betray everything I am. Not even for you. I am sorry."

Ruby's panic on the other side of the door kept mounting, and each shout made Connie flinch. "Please," Connie begged softly. "I'll do anything. I'll take you anywhere you want. I'll eat anything you ask me to. I'll give you whatever you want. Please."

A warm, bitter sympathy poured through Connie in answer, making her cry harder. "Your own kindness cripples your bargaining position, human. I know you already make every effort to ensure my comfort. And we both know that, unless the hybrid has made recent and unparalleled progress in his healing practices, you cannot promise me the only thing I want."

Connie collapsed against the countertop again, sobbing in breathless heaves. She saw her spotty, spindly arms braced against either side of the sink, saw her empty mottled palms, and knew that she
had nothing left. Jade had never made a secret of who she was or what she wanted. From that very first day, Jade had…

From that very first day…

"I truly am sorry, human. But not all hope is lost. Perhaps her captors do not intend to harm the Sapphire. After all—"

"I can set you free," Connie blurted.

Jade's mental tongue tied itself in knots. It took several tries before she could sub-vocalize again. "Huh?"

"If you promise to do everything you can to rescue Sapphire, I'll set you free. I swear it," Connie insisted. She wiped her eyes dry and straightened, staring hard into the broken mirror.

Speaking slowly, Jade replied, "Even if I were at liberty to fulfill my end of such a bargain, how would you propose to fulfill your end?"

Connie didn't hesitate. "I'll take that long walk off the beach," she said.

Jade was silent for even longer this time, leaving plenty of space for Ruby's tirade to filter through the wall. Something outside the bathroom shattered noisily, and Steven's pleas for calmness grew panicky.

Then Jade said, "You have no idea what you are offering, human."

"I know exactly what I am offering," Connie retorted. "I was halfway out there the night we met. Remember?"

"I have already apologized—"

"I'm not trying to guilt you, Jade!" Connie snapped, interrupting her. "I know what being a Homeworld Gem means to you. If you have to betray that to help us save Sapphire, then I'm willing to give you myself. Our self. I'll give up my physical form so you can have it for yourself."

A sliver of intrigue jabbed up through Connie's resolve, but just as quickly it was lost in Jade's sense of refusal. "Even if you did—which you will not!—I would simply succumb to my corrupted state once more. At best, I would become a mindless beast who roamed the planet without purpose, or dissipated and collected with the other of the rebels' captives."

But Connie wouldn't balk. "Maybe. But it's my human-ness that brought you out of your corruption in the first place. With my brains out of the way, maybe you can settle in and work like we are now. But even if not, you'll still have your own body again. You'll still be free."

Connie could feel her passenger trying to wriggle out of her point. There were a million logical paths she could have tried to argue back, but the argument wasn't a logical one. Connie had just jabbed an emotional knife right into Jade's biggest sore spot, and they both knew it.

"Human, you cannot mean to sacrifice your existence for a Gem. You owe no fealty to her or her rebellion. You are… You are human!"

Her head screamed at her that she was making a huge, terrible mistake, but Connie knew in her guts that this was the right decision. The stories from all those books on her shelves, and the dozens of thrilling adventure movies her father had snuck her to under her mother's nose, and even the example
of the Crystal Gems themselves had showed Connie the fundamental truth of the world: real heroes weren't always the strongest or smartest ones around when something went wrong, but they were the ones with the courage to do whatever it took, to make any sacrifice needed, in order to do what was right.

Connie knew they could still save Sapphire because they had to. As long as Connie had the courage, she knew she could still do what was right.

Remembering something she had told Jade a long time ago, Connie said, "It isn't just about loyalty. On Earth, everybody is their own Diamond. They make the decisions to build their own world. I messed up, so it's up to me to fix it. And I need your help, Jade."

"Human, don't—"

"You don't have to fight," Connie told her, scared at how calm she sounded, but also a little impressed. "Just get the Gems to that Ascension place, and then get them back. Then you're done."

"Human…"

Connie found her eyes in the broken mirror and stared into them, pouring every ounce of seriousness she had left into the gaze. "Is it a deal?" she said.

She listened to the wordless, one-sided debate raging in Jade's half of them. An undercurrent of disbelief ran through Jade's flip-flopping emotions. But gradually, that disbelief cooled into a sense of awe, and the debate settled into a silent answer.

When she strode out of the bathroom, she found Ruby and Steven locked in a strange grapple at the front door. The stout little Gem had her fingers hooked around the edge of the empty doorframe to drag herself outside, while Steven had grasped Ruby's ankles and was pulling her back inside with all of his might.

"Lemme go, Steven!" Ruby howled. "I have to find Sapphire!"

Steven only doubled his efforts, and Ruby's fingers slipped one by one from the frame. "But you don't even know where to start looking!" he insisted.

"I do."

The sudden words startled Ruby off the doorframe. She jerked sideways into Steven's grasp, and they collapsed together into a tangle of limbs. Steven pulled his mouth out of Ruby's elbow and cried, "Connie! I was really worried about you. You were in the bathroom for a long time. And you were shouting. Angrily. That hasn't happened to me since Pearl made me stop eating those Hungry Bro frozen dinners."

Ruby poked her head out from under Steven's knee. "She's fine, Steven!" snapped Ruby. Then a brief flash of guilt crossed her features. She shook away the expression, jostling Steven's leg atop her head, and said, "Connie, I'm sorry you got caught up in this, but we don't have time—"

"No, we do not. So be silent and listen," she snapped, silencing the pile of limbs in an instant. Pointing to the Ruby half of their tangle, she said, "You, Ruby: go and collect the Peridot from your farm. And you, hybrid," she continued, turning her finger toward the Steven half of the tangle, "take your Off-Color savannah feline and retrieve the Amethyst and Pearl. We will need to consolidate our meager forces before mobilizing for Ascension."
From deep inside the cold waters of her quiet, meditative mental stream, Connie saw her best friend's face slacken in realization. Her distant awareness watched Steven pull himself free of Ruby to stand and stare in realization, his glistening eyes searching the stern, cold features of his best friend that were no longer hers. "Jade?" he said.

A new sensation resonated through the green banks of Connie's river, shaking the trees and their leaves, rustling the grass, and rippling through the current. Far outside, in her body, she could sense Jade asserting herself in the unfamiliar limbs, spilling into every nerve that had formerly been just Connie's. The assertion felt stronger than the last time, as though it were already settling into place, hardening like concrete.

A spark glimmered around Jade's gemstone, and then flared into a wave of green light. The light poured out of the top of her shirt collar and over her shoulders, trailing down her back in a wave of iridescence that coalesced into metallic green fabric. The corners of the fabric snared threads around her ankles and her wrists, creating a cape-like sail that stirred as the air around Jade's mottled body began to swirl.

"And bring me the human's sword," Jade said, her tone turning Connie's voice into an edge that jolted Steven and Ruby into action. Her long black hair drifted in the breeze, rippling in time with the green sail behind her. "We are getting your Sapphire back."
Amethyst squinted, her finger hovering millimeters away from the big dark splotch on what used to be Connie's cheek. "Huh. So this is what a Jade looks like? Because it pretty much just looks like Connie."

Jade slapped at the intrusive finger and snapped, "Stop that." She sat upon the couch with the sheathed pink sword of Rose Quartz laid across her lap. Her green sail hung beneath her, its metallic fabric glistening and pristine against the stained couch upholstery. Though she kept her hands folded atop the sheath in a seemingly serene pose, her thumbnail tapped against the pink alloy, betraying her impatience.

"Oh, this is all wrong," Pearl moaned, and paced in front of the couch. Her hands worried at the edges of a flat purple disc, the twin to the one Flint had lost to Garnet's ballistic gauntlet. "We've lost Sapphire, and Garnet can't tell us where they took her because Garnet doesn't exist without Sapphire, so now we have to listen to this…this…loyalist! And to do that, we lost Connie, which I just know is going to upset her parents again."

Since returning from the school courtesy of Steven and a reluctant Lion, Pearl had done little but fuss over the situation, torn between worrying over Steven, over the state of their kitchen, and the change in living arrangements that had occurred inside of Connie's body. Amethyst had been more put out by Milky's escape, which had been accomplished with the use of the disconnected purple warp pad they had brought back with them after it had warped Milky out of the fight. Lion, unconcerned with any of it after so many trips in such a short period, had collapsed into the corner to sleep on the problem.

"We didn't lose Connie!" Steven cried. He paced a few steps behind Pearl, wringing his hands. The look of utter despair on his face made Pearl seem serene by comparison. "Jade's just borrowing her body so she can help us. Right, Jade? You'll give Connie her body back afterward, just like last time. Right?"

The banks of Connie's mental river trembled at the quaver in Steven's voice. She felt the cool waters around her stir as if to push her up and out of the river. Her first impulse was to scrubble at the riverbed, or even push at the current to keep herself submerged. But she had no hands, and trying to swim without a body made the waters recede faster. It took a monumental effort to focus instead on the river itself, and the green banks, and the trees and bushes that ran lush along its edges. Adding details to her mental sanctuary kept her too busy to thrash with a body that wasn't hers anymore. As she added a dappling of river stones to the rapids downstream, Steven's voice faded into the background, and the waters around her calmed and deepened.

Her troubled waters didn't go unnoticed. She felt Jade flinch, and then the Gem's impatience doubled. "Concentrate on the mission at hand. All other concerns will keep until it's finished." The edged words were aimed at Steven, but Connie got the impression that they weren't meant solely for him.

Amethyst started to reach for Jade's cheek again, but then jerked her hand back. "You should try chilling out," Amethyst said, and grimaced. "I think all of that stress is messing with your spots."

The waters around Connie quavered again, and this time not from the inside. Through her former
passenger's gaze, she watched Jade look down at her forearms in startled realization. The spots in her skin, their skin, were starting to drift. It was almost imperceptible, but as Jade continued to stare, Connie noticed the slow, lazy crawl of the black lesions as they moved with no discernable pattern. The gentle movement reminded Connie of a lava lamp her father used to own that had been lost several cross-country relocations ago.

Just as quickly, Jade slapped down her own offending arm and snarled, "I hardly think you are in a position to mock another's physical abnormalities, Quartz."

An ugly look crossed Amethyst's face. She took half a step at Jade, purple fists clenched at her sides, when Steven grabbed her by the arm to stop her. "Please!" Steven pleaded. "Don't fight, you two! We need to work together to save Sapphire and figure out Connie's spots thing."

It wasn't Amethyst's glare that worried Connie, or even the near-breaking panic behind Steven's voice. Instead, it was the creeping dread she could feel inside of Jade as the human-bound Gem rubbed her mottled arm.

The chime of the warp pad saved them all from the mounting tension. They turned to see the column of light fade from the pad, revealing Ruby with Peridot in tow. Ruby practically carried her green tagalong off the pad, shoving Peridot toward the couch where Jade fidgeted.

"Here!" Ruby snapped, grabbing the dizzy engineer by the shoulders and presenting her to Jade. "Now take us to Sapphire!"

Poor Peridot's visor went askew as she flailed out of Ruby's grasp. She straightened the yellow lens and gave Jade an appraising look. "I see you've started using your sail again. Good to see you embracing your Gem side more, Connie Jade."

Jade rose stiffly from the couch, pushing Peridot back a step as she hoisted the sword and sheath to her back. The metallic green fabric of her sail rippled out of the way, allowing her to tie the sheath into place, then flowing over the sheath to pin it to Jade's back. "Pen and paper," Jade said to Ruby as she tightened the sheath's strap. The other Gem bolted into the remains of the kitchen to find the items in question. Then, thick eyebrows dropping into a frown, Jade said to Peridot, "You have been apprised of our mission?"

"Most of it?" Peridot said uncertainly. "Ruby wasn't clear about the details, but I got something about a rescue mission."

Connie felt waves of displeasure gather outside of her imagined sanctuary, a veritable storm front that threatened to break into a hurricane with one wrong word. "The enemy has your Sapphire. Since they have evidently commandeered a former strategic Homeworld location, I will be leading a strike force of rebels to retrieve her."

"You aren't leading," Pearl interjected archly. "You're guiding. And you're absolutely not fighting. Connie promised her parents."

"Aw, c'mon," Amethyst said, and leered at Jade with a vicious smile. "Green Gleam here has been talking a big game since she showed up. I wanna see if she's got the guts to back up that mouth she's borrowing."

"Neither my guts nor my mouth will be required," Jade said. "The Pearl may have issues with my authority, but she is more or less correct about the purpose of my role. My deal with this human requires me to get you to Ascension and back. You rebels will provide any necessary tactical support."
A sudden uneasiness sparked in Peridot's face. "Erm, will you need 'all' of the rebels to fight? I left my defensive prosthetics back in the barn."

"We already have a Ruby, an Amethyst, and…miscellaneous," Jade said, directing the last word back and Pearl and Steven. "Your contributions will not require you to accompany us. Thank the stars." Her last thought emerged as little more than a whisper.

"Well, at least we can agree on one part of this disaster of a plan," Pearl sighed.

Peridot's hair bristled and her cheeks puffed with indignance. "Are you forgetting that I'm the one who singlehandedly defeated Yellow Diamond's personal enforcer?" she insisted.

Jade lifted an eyebrow. "Seriously? You beat Topaz?"

"What? No, the other one!" huffed Peridot.

"Yeah, only there were at least three other hands in there somewhere," Amethyst added, and tossed a smirk at Steven that the boy completely missed.

A cry of triumph resounded from the kitchen shards. Ruby scooped up a crumpled pad of paper from the debris and rushed it back to Jade. Pressing the paper and a pen into Jade's hands, Ruby shouted, "Here! Now everybody shut up so we can save Sapphire!"

Jade smoothed the paper, and then drew a tight line of glyphs across the page. As the pen scratched, it was hard for Connie not to stare at the lesions drifting across the back of their hand. Hints of sickly green color was starting to bleed out of the black spots, infecting the rest of her skin. The sight of it made Connie's waters shudder, and she wished she could avert her eyes. But they weren't her eyes anymore.

"Here," Jade said, tearing the page free from the pad and shoving it into Peridot's hands. "Enter this authorization sequence into your warp pad. It will give your pads access to the network with Ascension and the other post-rebellion sites."

Pearl scoffed in disbelief as she watched Peridot scurry back to the warp pad. "Excuse me? There's only one warp network left on Earth, and we've mapped all of it. If there were a secret landing pad accessible by warp, we would have found it centuries ago."

"Of course," Jade retorted, rolling her eyes. "Because after the dawn of the rebellion, Homeworld never would have constructed its own terrestrial warp network secure from the compromised network possessed by the rebels. Because the Diamonds are, for all their perfection, unfathomably dense."

Ignoring Pearl's irritated glare, Jade watched Peridot crouch over the crystal pad. The engineer drew her finger across the pad's surface, leaving a line of glowing symbols in the wake of her touch. When she had finished the line, the glyphs she had drawn flashed, then merged together into a flat rectangular screen in the top of the pad. Dozens of lines of Gem-speak crossed the length of the new screen, and though Connie couldn't read any of it, she knew a list when she saw one.

"Success!" Peridot crowed. "We're now connected to at least five new destinations. Maybe more if I can implement some repairs at the other end. Nice work, Connie Jade!" The little engineer grinned and offered Jade a thumbs-up.

Jade accepted the praise with faint irritation. Then she gestured to the pad and said, "Make ready. We leave immediately."
Ruby got behind Pearl and Amethyst and bulldozed them both toward the pad. Jade was about to follow, but a warm grasp stopped her by the wrist. She turned and scowled back at Steven, who let her go immediately, but did not back away from her ire. "Jade," Steven said, speaking too softly for the others to hear, "when is Connie coming back? Is she okay in there?"

The worry in his voice nearly tore Connie out of her meditation again. Even Jade wasn't immune to his concern, as Connie felt the Gem's irritation fade. "Hybrid," Jade murmured, "do you trust me?"

Steven squirmed at the question. After a long pause, his eyes fell to the floor, and he admitted, "I want to."

Jade smirked and nodded. "Fair. Then let me ask you this: do you trust this human?" She hadn't finished speaking before Steven was nodding emphatically. "Your friend has placed both her safety and the rescue of your Sapphire in my hands. I take neither of these responsibilities lightly. Please believe in the merit of her faith and judgment. As I do," Jade said softly.

"I do, and I'm glad you're helping us, and I'm worried about Sapphire, but... I'm worried about Connie too," Steven admitted.

"Then help me," Jade said. Hesitating, she added, "Please."

"Jade! Now!" Ruby bellowed from the warp pad.

The air around Jade stirred, making her sail snap taut between her limbs. It was a purposeful gust that carried Jade nimbly across the room. She landed in a plié atop the pad, light as a feather, and settled amidst the others until she stood at the pad's center. Steven scrambled after her and climbed aboard, awkwardly wedging himself into the already crowded space.

"Good luck!" Peridot cheered and waved.

As the world vanished into a white haze, Connie struggled against a mounting despair inside her river. She didn't like Jade lying to Steven like that, implying to him that she was protecting Connie instead of admitting the full truth. Granted, it wasn't a good time to tell Steven that Connie had bargained her corporeal form for Sapphire's rescue. And truthfully, Connie couldn't think of any good time to break that kind of news. The lie was probably necessary to get the other Gems to listen to Jade, but it still made Connie feel awful. If she could only explain her decision to them, make them understand that there had been no other way...

But she couldn't, and she never would. Her mouth wasn't hers anymore. Her hands, her eyes, her voice, all belonged to someone else. She might never even get to say goodbye to any of them if Jade didn't allow it.

With an awful jolt, Connie realized that this helplessness was how Jade had lived for months. How on Earth had her passenger endured such loneliness for so long without going crazy? Just an hour of it was enough to break Connie, and they had hardly begun.

The light of warp space vanished, and the world returned with cavernous resplendence. They had rematerialized upon a warp pad that stood atop a raised dais at the end of a long, tiled terminal made of white stone. The ceiling hung two hundred feet above them, its paneling made from a translucent crystal that was clearer than any glass, and beyond that was a sky that looked cold and impossibly blue. Thick embedded columns ribbed the walls of the terminal, and between each column was a mural of colored tiles, each image too large and intricate to take in from their distant perch on the pad.
If Connie still had breath, it would have been lost to the sheer magnitude of Ascension. The room wasn't simply grand, it redefined grandeur. A battalion of Gem warriors could have marched from end to end and still left enough room for an audience of upper crusts to watch them parade. She could imagine an honor guard of Quartzes lining the walls to fawn over a Diamond's arrival, greeting them at the immense staircase at the far end of the terminal that led upwards into some unknown.

Today, the reality of that grandeur didn't feature any honor guard or parade. Instead, it saw Milky Quartz lying on the floor with her mismatched hands folded behind her head as she stared up through the ceiling while Flint stood nearby, idly trying and failing to balance one of her javelins upright with the blunt end cupped in her palm.

"What do you suppose all those puffy white things up there are for?" Milky said as the shadow of a cloud rippled over her.

Distracted by her uncooperative javelin, Flint said, "Dunno. Probably some old art installation left behind by some dizzy Emerald."

"I think they're pretty," Milky sighed.

The surprise of their arrival would undoubtedly have been a huge tactical advantage for the Crystal Gems, had Ruby not spent it by rushing forward and bellowing, "Hey, you! Give Sapphire back!"

Jade snarled a curse of "Stars!" and led the rest of the Gems after Ruby as the two off-world invaders jolted in shock. Flint juggled the tumbling javelin before finally catching it by the tip, and Milky tried to get up too quickly, thudding onto her face before picking herself up to square off against the new arrivals to the terminal.

"Oi!" Flint snarled, shouldering her javelin in a doomed attempt at nonchalance. "You lot best skedaddle. Nobody around here has need of any multi-colored gravel."

Amethyst already had her whip out, bracing its length behind her to lash its spikes at a second's notice. "I hope you liked having a face, bro, 'cause I'm gonna pound it off of you."

Looking horrified, Milky said, "Who doesn't like having a face?"

"Enough!" Jade bellowed, her voice echoing to fill the terminal. "Surrender the Sapphire. You are outnumbered."

"Outnumbered?" Flint laughed the word back at her. "You bring in two squishy lab experiments, a Pearl with a stick, half an Amethyst, and a single Ruby, and we're the ones who're outnumbered? Even if you had any real fighters, you're already too late: Zircon and Pyrite toddled off with your precious bauble. They could be anywhere right now, having themselves a jolly polish while her gracious Clarity gives us everything we need. So best regards, and do try to get lost in the warp on your way out, you pathetic gaggle of rocks," Flint spat, her eyes blazing.

Hopeless panic crashed through Connie's river as she watched her rescue gambit crumble to ashes before it even began. But then, just as quickly, the panic vanished as Milky Quartz turned to Flint with her confused expression and said, "Wait. I thought they just took her up to the landing pad where all the equipment is. I mean, I know the landing pad is also 'anywhere,' or 'somewhere,' I guess, but it's pretty close. They could probably still find it. It's just up those stairs."

Flint's eyes snuffed as she squeezed them shut. She grasped at the air as if to choke some invisible proxy for her frustrations, and growled, "Milky, you just...! You are unbelievable! You can't go around and...! They didn't know any of...! Argh!"
"Are you okay, Flint?" Milky asked.

Rubbing at her face, Flint groaned, "You're a wonderful chum, Milky. But stars, do you exhaust me sometimes."

"Splendid. We go upstairs to the landing pads," Jade said, narrowing her eyes upon the broad staircase at the far end of the terminal.

Flint pulled her hands from her face, and blue-white fire filled her palms. The sheer heat of it stopped the Crystal Gems halfway down the stairs of the dais. "Right, well, it doesn't matter what you know, because to get anywhere, you gotta get through us. And that is absolutely—"

Whatever Flint was going to say was lost to a primal, echoing scream that exploded out of Ruby. The tiny Gem leapt from the dais and hurled herself into Flint, latching onto the gangly Quartz's neck with her legs. Ruby's fists worked like pistons, pummeling Flint's temples mercilessly, all while she snarled in a shrill, terrifying fury. Flint flicked ablaze, her entire body engulfed by flames as she reeled backwards, but Ruby just kept hammering her face, the smaller Gem too angry to form actual words as they lurched together, a screaming tower of fire that wheeled across the floor.

"Flint!" Milky cried. When she tried to pluck Ruby off of her friend's face, a studded whip lashed around her wrist, jerking her massive arm back. Furious, Milky's glare followed the length of the whip back to Amethyst. The smaller Quartz had coiled the whip around her ankle and stood with her whole body braced to anchor Milky's reach.

"Round two?" Amethyst called, and waggled her eyebrows.

The giant gray Gem roared in frustration. As her hammerhead materialized around her wrangled hand, she jerked the arm back. The barest tug sent Amethyst hurtling forward, her legs flying out from underneath her as her own whip betrayed her. Amethyst swung into the nearby wall and disappeared into a shower of mosaic tiles as the image of someone tall, elegant, and blue shattered under her.

Pearl dropped nimbly inside Milky's guard as the hulking Gem straightened. Her spear flashing, Pearl jabbed and slashed at the Quartz's thick form. Even deep inside of Jade, Connie marveled at the glimpse of her mentor in full form. Perfect footing, poise, balance, speed, and timing became a blur that that turned Milky into a shower of sparks as Pearl's weapon drew shallow lines all across Milky's body.

"Ow! Ow!" Milky howled, batting helplessly at Pearl's onslaught. "Quit it!"

As impressive as the assault was, Connie could see that Pearl was merely biding time for some other opening. The spear couldn't break Milky without a direct, full thrust with all of Pearl's power behind it, and such a blow would take too long to land before Milky crushed Pearl for the attempt. Pearl might win with a thousand cuts, but that was a war of attrition at best, and Milky only needed to land a single hit to win.

As Pearl tore Milky's gray tunic to shreds, the big Quartz lost her patience. Her hammer-hand thundered into the floor at her own feet, cratering the pristine stone and sending a peppering of shards in every direction. Pearl tumbled backwards, her footing lost with the exploding floor.

With only human legs to chase after the other Gems, Jade and Steven were still running into battle when Pearl went sailing over their heads. Steven's shield flashed across his arm, swinging as he ran. "Pearl!" he cried, sparing a glance backwards to follow Pearl's arc.
Jade kept her eyes forward, so she and Connie both saw the bigger danger heading their way. The red aura around Ruby and Flint flared, then ballooned, spilling out over the floor like a blazing tidal wave.

"Hybrid, jump!" shouted Jade. She leapt upon Steven's back, wrapping her forearms around his chest, and clung to him as Steven leapt on reflex toward the ceiling. He propelled them halfway up the height of the terminal before their ascent finally slowed, leaving them drifting lazily far above the inferno.

Snarling a muffled curse, Flint at last tore Ruby from her face and flung the diminutive Gem as far as she could. The fires in the floor abated long enough for the gangly Quartz to get her bearings again. Her red eyes narrowed upon the targets floating overhead, and her swollen, puffy face twisted with rage. She lifted her hands and sent a geyser of fire into the air to swallow the floating pair.

As the first inkling of heat prickled around them, Jade reached back with one arm and spread her palm flat. A blast of air jetted forth, propelling Steven's gentle float into a ballistic trip across the length of the terminal, outrunning the curls of fire Flint sent after them. The far wall loomed at them with breakneck urgency, ready to splatter them across a tasteful mural of some urban alien skyline.

"Bubble!" Jade shouted, and braced herself against Steven's back.

Steven's barrier swallowed them, turning the world pink an instant before they slammed into the wall. Broken tiles spewed around them while the bubble thumbed its metaphorical nose at the laws of physics, cradling them through the impact and protecting them as they bounced onto the floor far below. The second bounce spent the last of the bubble's kindness, and it popped, dumping them onto the floor in a heap, rattled but alive, and directly at the foot of the grand staircase.

"I thought you could fly," Steven groaned.

Jade shoved him off of her and crawled up from the floor. "When it is just me? I can," she retorted.

A red blur tackled them both back to the floor, knocking them out of the path of a black javelin. The javelin cracked the stair behind them as it hit, then dissipated into sparkling motes. Tumbling off of the pair, Ruby landed on her feet and summoned her gauntlet, guarding against another attack.

Flint was crossing the floor with another javelin in hand, her battered features fixated on the trio. Behind her, Milky followed backwards, keeping a hammer-hand raised against Amethyst and Pearl, who trailed cautiously after them with their own weapons readied.

"You lot just don't seem to get it," Flint snarled, her words slightly slurred by her swollen cheeks. "It doesn't matter if you send a million Off-Colors. Pearls, pebbles, defects, and squishy freaks, all of you! You lost the moment you were made!"

The anger in Pearl's face became righteous, and she stopped. Her spear dissolved into white motes as Amethyst stopped beside her, confused. "You have no idea what we are," Pearl told the fiery Quartz. "And you have no idea what we can make of ourselves. Right, Amethyst?"

As Pearl held out her hand, Amethyst's confusion turned into a beaming smile. "Let's boogie," she agreed.

The two of them joined hands and spun together, their gemstones flaring brightly. Their bodies dissolved into blinding brightness and came together into a graceful whole. Growing, extending, amassing, the combined light coalesced into the form of a towering woman. Four arms stretched from her shoulders, the skin of them a dusty purple that made the green and teal of her tunic all the
more vibrant. A mane of white hair was tied behind her, so long that it nearly reached the floor. She possessed an angular nose and a wide, ready smile, the obvious relics of the Gems who became her, though the iridescent stones at her forehead and chest left no room for doubt.

Connie had heard about the fusion from Steven, but she had never seen Opal with her own eyes before. Technically, she still hadn't, but the effect of it was none the lesser for her borrowed gaze. Opal was powerful, beautiful, and she moved with impossible grace as she drew forth two glowing shapes from her stones and wove them into a longbow the size of a canoe.

"You three get upstairs," Opal said, her voice melodious. "I have some lessons to give."

Flint and Milky both had given up the pretext of caring about anyone getting up the stairs. "Jank me with a chisel," Flint wheezed in shock, backpedaling from the new fusion.

Connie couldn't blame Flint for being shocked. She found herself staring at the fusion, captivated by Opal's every move. It took her several seconds more to realize that she was only staring because Jade was staring. Outside of her sanctuary, Connie could feel Jade's emotions swinging to wild extremes, unable to process Opal's emergence in any rational sense. There was sickening fascination, and a marveling at the sheer alien-ness of the fusion, undercut with horrors left over from the war long past, and even a sense of wonder at the beauty of a Gem who had never existed in the Diamonds' perfect designs.

"Jade? Come on!" Steven called form behind her.

But Jade was rooted to the spot. She stared as Opal summoned a wave of luminous arrows to scatter across Milky and Flint, forcing the pair into retreat. Steven's voice was a distant nuisance, barely audible over the sound of Jade's own shock.

Connie summoned all of her will behind a single word and shoved it out of the waters of her river. "JADE!"

The silent shout roused Jade out of her stupor. Her emotional turmoil faded, and the calm order of the Gem's mind resumed as she turned to the stairs. Far ahead on the sprawling staircase, Ruby was almost cresting the top to vanish from sight, and Steven was halfway up, turned to look back at Jade with concern. Wordlessly, Jade began taking the steps in twos, running after them.

Connie wanted to feel some relief at besting this first obstacle in their rescue. But they still didn't know what to expect at the top. And worse, the skin of Jade's forearms had turned almost completely green and black, the lesions pooling together to consume every inch of her in sight.

Chapter End Notes

Regular commenter of this old rag and cowriter of the excellent ConnieSwap BR42 has commissioned a pic of Jade's new situation. The art below, courtesy of ConnieSwap's own MJStudioArts, is a fantastic look at the new Jade. Check it out!
If anyone is looking for a great artist to commission, check out MJ's page right away. And of course, if you're not already reading ConnieSwap, get over there now and check it out! You might find a familiar author lurking in their Omake collection. Just sayin'.
Harvesting Futures

The steps of the staircase flashed beneath Jade, a blur of white stone rushing past as the human-clad Gem glided upwards on a gale. Rippling with the force of the wind, Jade's sail clung between her limbs and pressed the pink sheath tightly to her back. Her gaze remained fixed upon the top step and the crisp blue sky above it, and she grimaced into the cold air billowing around her.

Connie felt the banks of her meditative river clench around her in anticipation. She could feel the adrenaline brewing outside of her sanctum, a chemical excitement that set Jade's heart to racing. This was the battle Connie had promised, and even if Jade wouldn't fight to directly retrieve Sapphire from whatever dire straits they found her in, the Gem was not leaving Ascension without some kind of fight, and both of them knew it. Connie was grateful once more that Jade had been persuaded to come, but the hardest part to come might belong to Connie after all. She was fighting every instinct she had earned through her training with Pearl to not take back her arm and draw her sword, and it was driving her mad.

But it wasn't her arm, she reminded herself. She needed to concentrate and stay out of the way. Jade wouldn't break her promise, and so neither would Connie.

Though Steven had gotten halfway to the top before Jade even reached the stairs, Jade and her winds made it up first, leaving him puffing in her wake. She touched lightly onto the top step and let her arms drop, her sail relaxing into malleable fabric once more.

The top of Ascension was made of four large landing pads, each one a rhomboid shape fitted to its neighbor to create a familiar four-diamond pattern. Connie hadn't seen many spaceships in person, but from behind Jade's eyes, she thought the pads looked enormous, each one a dozen times bigger than what might be required for the Crystal Gems' Roaming Eye at the farm, or for the invaders' saucer craft. As if to illustrate that last thought, the saucer in question had been parked in the middle of the southernmost pad, greedily occupying the entire space when a corner would have been more than enough.

Beyond the edge of the landing pads, a barren, rocky terrain rose around them on all sides, climbing steadily into stubby mountain peaks. More mountains, taller and sharper, surrounded them as far as Jade could see, blotting out the horizon behind stone walls. Ascension, wherever it was, had been built in the middle of some extreme mountain range, high above the tree line and somehow immune to the snow that capped the other mountains around it.

At the near corner of the southern pad stood a squat cylinder made of black alloy. The cylinder's surface glinted in the sunlight like some kind of carapace, and portions of that surface had shaped itself into shackles designed to snare the wrists and ankles of the person strapped to it, a figure of blue and white. Sapphire. Trembling, Sapphire hung trapped against the cylinder, her bare toes not quite brushing the pad as they dangled from the bottom of her dress. Another portion of the cylinder had wrapped into a band that covered across Sapphire's eye and held her head fixed in place. Her mouth was moving in halting words that were inaudible from so far away.

A strange new Gem stood next to the cylinder and fussed over Sapphire. Compared with the warriors who had been hounding them, this new Gem seemed slight. Her bouffant hair wafted in the breeze like cotton candy, and her eyes blinked owlishly from behind a pair of round translucent lenses as she turned toward the stairs. Her spindly limbs and poofed, high-collared clothes were both vibrant shades of pink. "Pyrite!" the new Gem squallled and pointed at the stairs.

Pyrite was already there, axe braced on her shoulder in one hand. In her other hand she held Ruby
by the face, lifting the furious little warrior and holding her at arm's length. Ruby kicked and swung, slinging muffled curses, but her blows and words accomplished nothing. Pyrite was too fixated on Jade, her mouth a wide, dangerous smile.

Staggering up the last few steps, Steven lurched next to Jade, puffing with the exertion. "If the Diamonds wanted their space-airport so big, why didn't they build moving walkways and escalato—ohh, Ruby!" His wheeze became a gasp as he saw the red Gem caught in Pyrite's grip. Then his gaze shifted, and he gasped again. "Sapphire!"

"Stop identifying them and start helping them!" Jade snapped. Then she charged forward, legs pumping in a full-tilt sprint directly at Pyrite.

Connie's sanctuary rattled as she watched Pyrite looming ahead of them, bracing with her axe and her prisoner to meet Jade's charge. Despite her outward confidence, Jade was in turmoil, and Connie could feel it as the passenger-turned-host contended with burning lungs, a heartbeat thudding in her unfamiliar chest, and limbs that ached with effort. Perhaps Jade's natural form would have been suited for such a blitz, but Connie doubted her own skinny, mottled body was up to the challenge.

Then, just outside the axe's reach, Jade leapt to one side. The edges of her sail went rigid against her spreading arms and then caught a sharp breeze that yanked Jade sideways. Pyrite's swing chased the laces of Jade's sneakers, but the wind was too fast, and Jade spiraled through the gust as it swept her across the landing pad in a shallow glide.

Connie felt a phantom stomach thrill at the weightlessness. Their ascent to the landing pads had felt like an extended jump, but now they were swooping and twisting through the wind. They were flying. Like the light of a guttering candle renewed, a joy swept into every last corner of Connie's sanctuary, shining across the grassy banks and through the water from far away. Jade's elation at being airborne again was the purest, most ecstatic feeling Connie could remember coming from the Gem, and in spite of the danger around them, Connie felt herself swept along in the feeling too.

Steven's pink shield struck Pyrite edge-first in the back of the head, staggering the big Gem forward. As the shield dissipated, Pyrite whirled upon Steven, who brought a new shield to bear. The gold and purple invader snarled and hurled Ruby like a baseball straight at the shield. Steven yelped, letting the new shield dissipate so he could catch Ruby instead of deflecting her, and the two of them went crashing across the landing pad in a tangle of limbs.

Even as Connie fretted for the pair, she felt a sense of weightlessness seize her waters as the winds died around Jade. Her host drifted in freefall, sail retracting as she gestured sharply with mottled hands. A torrent of wind flew past Jade and hammered Pyrite into the cold stone of the pad. As the Gem bounced across the pad, Jade's winds returned, sweeping her down toward the device containing Sapphire and toward the pink Gem who guarded her.

Jade landed hard on the stone with her palms braced in front of her. As she grunted and pushed herself back to her feet, Connie saw a glimpse of Jade's forearms. The skin was a deep, glistening green, hardly different from the sail at Jade's back. The dark lesions in Jade's body weren't drifting anymore, they were practically swirling, merging and separating like bubbles of air trapped in a water bottle.

The pink Gem stumbled back as Jade rose with clenched fists. Her large glasses were flashing with some kind of text that Connie couldn't read, at least not backwards and with a brief, borrowed glimpse. "Release the Sapphire," Jade commanded, pointing to the cylinder.

"S-Stay back, Earthling," the pink Gem stammered, drawing herself upright. She hardly stood taller than Jade was now, minus her officious hairdo. "I am a mighty alien from the stars, and I have great
and terrible powers!"

"You," Jade said, her eyebrow arching. "are a Zircon."

An uneasy smile wobbled across the pink Gem's mouth. "Um…powers of persuasion?" Zircon mewled.

When that failed to elicit even a twitch out of Jade, the slight pink Gem bolted at a dead sprint for the scouting saucer parked at the far end of the landing pad. A ripple of annoyance passed through Jade, but she ignored Zircon's retreat, and bent low to examine Sapphire's bonds instead.

"What the…? Zircon!" Pyrite bellowed from behind Jade. A backwards glance revealed the large brute wrestling one-handed with Steven while she pinned Ruby under her boot. "You miserable coward!"

Already climbing into the bubble cockpit of the saucer, Zircon called back, "Shard will want a full report on these premonitions right away. You can clean up the operation from here. Good work, Pyrite!" Then the cockpit canopy rose and swallowed Zircon, and the saucer lurched off the pad. Its engines buzzed, rattling Jade down to the bone and making the pillar that held Sapphire jitter at its base until the saucer arced over the mountain range and disappeared behind a wall of peaks.

"Useless waste of silicates," snarled Pyrite. She battled Steven aside, punked Ruby in the opposite direction, and then lurched into a heavy, thudding run straight at Jade. The axe in her hand swung low, kicking a line of sparks off the stone as its edge skittered next to her.

Jade cupped her hands and gestured upward, but her winds proved too slow for Pyrite this time. The bigger Gem swung her axe in a high circle and buried it into the stone, then held on as a geyser of air tried to blast her upwards. The cape at the Gem's shoulder crackled in the gale, then settled back into place when the air stilled again. The stone crumbled as Pyrite levered her axe free of the pad and, with a sharp toss, sent the double-headed weapon hurtling at Jade.

The sail at Jade's back went rigid again, and the speckled scout started to blow herself out of the axe's path. As the air stirred through her long hair, though, she changed her mind. The corners of her sail unfurled from her wrists and hardened into razor-thin points that stretched past her fists. The points crossed in front of her, and Jade's arms rattled hard as the axe deflected off her sail, the force of the blow knocking her back a step.

Connie couldn't believe that Jade was standing her ground until she heard a soft, low moan coming from behind them. Then she understood: if Jade had dodged the axe, Sapphire would have taken it instead.

That half a step backwards left Jade unbalanced long enough for Pyrite to fall upon her. The big Gem lunged, drawing a fresh axe from underneath her stunted cape. Jade lost one of the corners of her sail trying to parry a blow, and countered with a blast of wind. But her gales were more subdued now. Anything as powerful as her previous air geyser would suck Jade along the blast's path if she tried it so close to herself. Jade's gusts proved annoying for the invader, but less so with every sweeping gust, until Pyrite stood over Jade in a wide, rooted stance with her axe lifted high overhead to split Jade down the middle.

And then Steven's shield frisbee'd into the back of Pyrite's head again, knocking her forward. Pyrite staggered around to meet the attack after the fact, and instead took a flying Ruby to the midsection, doubling her over as the tiny red Gem buried her gauntlet into Pyrite's purple tunic. Pyrite recovered while Ruby bounced away, and the glittering axe swung after her.
But Jade had taken a few large steps backwards during the exchange. And with a little distance, she had no trouble slamming a freight train's worth of wind into Pyrite. The big Gem went tumbling all the way to the next landing pad, bouncing nearly fifty yards before she hooked her axe into the ground again and dragged herself to a halt at the end of a long, jagged scar in the white stone.

"Sapphire!" Ruby cried. Her gauntlet dissipated as she rushed to the black pillar. As soon as her fingertips grazed Sapphire's arm, a burst of jagged energy knocked her onto the flat of her back. The red brawler slid to a stop a dozen feet away, her hair standing on end, her body stiff as a clinging static sizzled across her form.

The shock of the touch made Sapphire buck hard against her restraints. She grimaced beneath the curve of the pillar's grip across her eye. "Rrr… Rhrrruh…" she moaned through her teeth. "Rhrrr—ude human tools break the key from its setting, burying its future in their past."

"What's happening?" Steven said, letting his shield dissipate as he leaned forward to examine Sapphire's bonds.

Jade grabbed his shirt collar and yanked him back. "Hybrid, guard the rear," she commanded.

The speckled Gem braced herself on her knees, ostensibly to puzzle out Sapphire's imprisonment. But Connie could feel the truth of it from inside her river: Jade was exhausted. Her greenish, blemished skin hurt to the bone, and every movement cost her double in exertion and pain. As the Gem looked down through watery eyes, Connie jolted, struck by a horrifying sight.

The corner of Jade's sail had melded with the skin of her arm. There was no clear beginning or end between the limb and the green metallic fabric. The fingers of the arm were stiff, and Connie saw that they had fused into a lumpy mitt, the flesh of the thumb so swollen that it obscured the thumbnail. Glistening bumps were forming in the skin, making it glossy. Whatever the limb was becoming, it wasn't human, and it didn't look like anything the Gem would want either.

Scrambling back to her feet, Ruby crowded between Jade and Steven. Her hand hovered as close to Sapphire's as possible, a hair's breadth from actual contact. Whispers of electricity arced between them, making the little warrior's hair frizz. Tears rimmed Ruby's eyes. "They're forcing it out of her," Ruby sobbed. "They're harvesting futures out of Sapphire."

"Rrhuu… Rhr—eluctantly, they plumb the depths for their lost green stone," Sapphire groaned, "finding two hearts but saving only one."

"What is she saying?" Steven asked.

"Hybrid, guard the rear!" Jade snapped.

Ribbons of electricity danced across Sapphire's clenched teeth. The fingers of her bejeweled hand craned to touch Ruby, and sparks flew between them. "Rrrhr—minating on their options, they visit the little sister, finding old secrets that promise new threat."

"Come back, Sapphy," pleaded Ruby. "Find your way back."

Jade pinched the fingers of her intact hand together so that only a sliver of an opening remained between them. A shaft of wind whistled into her palm and shot through her fingers. Connie thought she understood the trick as Jade brought her puckered fingers down to sit just above one of the shackles. But the mottled fingers shook badly, then splayed apart at the force of the air, turning what might have been a needle-thin drill of rushing air into a breezy puff against the pillar. Flexing and shaking out her hand, Jade tried again, but got the same result.
"What are you trying to do?" Steven asked Jade.

"Hybrid!" Jade snarled in frustration. "Guard the r—"

An axe blade slammed into the ground between Steven and Jade. As the pad beneath her cracked, Ruby split open into a scarlet cloud that rushed through the wake of the blade. Ruby's gemstone clattered to the ground while Jade and Steven both swiveled to find Pyrite looming over them.

Steven was already diving for Ruby's stone as Pyrite lashed out with her foot. His fingers closed around Ruby's facets just as Pyrite buried her boot in his stomach, launching him across the flat white landing pad. Pyrite's body strained as she tried to jerk her axe out of the ground, but her swing had been too sure. She was forced to dissipate the weapon instead and pull a fresh axe from under her cape as she whirled on the one remaining target.

Jade danced backwards, and Connie could hear the scout curse the stars under her breath as the winds around them began to stir. The distant, fearful rumble of her old body made Connie quake in her waters in sympathy.

"You know," Pyrite sneered, hefting her axe, "I'm almost sorry to shatter you all before Shard gets here. Your little rebellion is the whole reason we have to even be here. If it's your fault, you should get to see us fix it. But I'm also looking forward to grinding you down and adding you to my record. So it's still a good victory."

As the tall, powerful Gem talked, she flicked at her stubby cape with what seemed like an unconscious motion. The dark fabric glittered in the harsh, waning light that spilled through the mountains. Its iridescence was a collage of tiny motes. Horrified, Connie drew the truth out of the Gem's boast, and realized that the tiny motes were granular minerals crushed into the fabric. Every color Connie could imagine glimmered together in that cape, so many colors that they blended together into a muddy brown-black.

Revulsion pounded through Jade, swallowing Connie's dawning horror. "It isn't my rebellion, you glorified doorjamb," she snarled. "And you haven't bested me yet."

Jade's mismatched hands slashed through the air, and the air leapt in reply. Ripples coursed off of her fingertips, the cold atmosphere stirring so violently that it made the world in front of Jade bend and sway. Blades of air slammed into Pyrite, knife-thin hurricane gales that lashed across her form, driving the big Gem back a step. Pyrite's tunic split, and her golden skin bulged with thick brown welts. But Pyrite kept advancing, gritting her teeth and pushing back against the winds with her axe.

Darting backwards, Jade threw gale after gale into Pyrite, slashing as fast as her mottled arms would move. Every cutting gust made Pyrite angrier, battered her more, but the big Gem just kept coming. The gusts Jade threw began to weaken, and her leaden arms began to falter. Her greenish-black hair billowed across her vision, torn forward in the wake of her ailing winds.

Pyrite marched through Jade's hurricane with purpose, her axe poised for the right moment. As Jade's arms faltered, the bigger Gem lunged through a weaker gust and swung her axe in a double-handed hammer blow. In a split second of panic, Jade sucked her winds back to fill her sail and shove herself backwards. The axe blade split her sail between her legs, and she wobbled out of the air, arching backwards. Her spine crashed into the pillar, rattling it in its base, and Jade and Sapphire made identical sounds of pain.

Connie's river boiled amidst Jade's pain. She watched through borrowed eyes as the Gem collapsed onto the stone. As Jade pushed herself onto hands and knees, Connie cringed in horror to realize that they didn't actually have hands anymore. Her fingers had fused completely into a set of mitts, their
nails vanished and their flesh the same contour and color as the sail. The legs of her jeans had split open as her calves had flattened to merge with the tattered bottom corners of the sail as well.

Pyrite stalked back to the pillar, letting her axe drag a long, slow trail of sparks behind her. "What in the stars are you supposed to be, anyway?" Pyrite mused, her lip twisting in disgust. "What were you? Some kind of Beryl? Why did they stick you into one of these things?"

Arms shaking, Jade reached back and jerked the sword free from its sheath. The sight of the pink blade stopped Pyrite in her tracks as Jade shambled to her feet. "This," Jade wheezed, clutching the hilt in both mitts, "is the sword of Rose Quartz."

Pyrite stopped in her tracks, and her smug expression uncurled. Connie could sense a spark of concern flaring beneath the invader's reflective visor, and should have felt encouraged. But something seemed wrong. Something about Jade didn't feel quite right outside the confines of her sanctuary.

"You know this blade, don't you?" Jade taunted, her voice hoarse and thin. "Maybe you've seen it in person. It shattered a Diamond. It broke armies. It cleft a whole colony from our empire. Only a fool would stand against its edge."

For the space of three heartbeats, Pyrite didn't move. Then, slowly, her impassive mouth cracked into a sneer. "If that blade is so fearsome," she said, "then maybe you shouldn't be holding it like it's a cudgel."

And just like that, Connie realized what had triggered her worries. Jade's weight was too far forward, and her stance all wrong. Even forgiving her mitt hands, her grip on the sword was too tight, too stiff. Connie realized with a sinking feeling that this might have been the first time Jade had ever actually held a sword. The scout had lived a thousand lifetimes, but her experiences before Connie had all been rigidly defined by what Homeworld needed her to do. And evidently, they had never needed her to carry a blade.

Her bravado crumbling, Jade collapsed. The sword clattered to rest next to her as she crumpled onto the stone. Connie wondered if the called bluff was paining her so much, but then saw that the brown spots in Jade's forearms were receding. The flesh was hardening into green chitin, and distending itself into a flatter shape. Bones crackled like popcorn beneath the glistening skin, suddenly making Connie a little glad she couldn't feel them anymore even while her mind screamed silent horror at what was happening to her former body.

"Get up, Jade!" Connie tried to beg, but her voice was lost in the rush of water around her. She summoned every last scrap of herself and became a voice that cried, "Get up, Jade! Get up!"

As she drew imaginary breath to heave herself into the words again, the waters above her clashed, bubbling downward. Something reached into Connie's river and clamped onto her. Then she felt herself jerked upward, out of the waters, high above the grassy banks and their picturesque trees, and falling up into darkness.

Connie landed with a grunt. The air around her was frigid, chilling her to the core with her first breath. She tried to flex her fingers just to make sure they still worked, and found that she couldn't feel them at all. Her limbs prickled with sleepy numbness that hurt almost as badly as the cold did, like they were fiercely asleep. Her whole body…

Her body.

She was back in her body.
As she reeled with her sudden return to the physical world, the freezing stone beneath her trembled. A shadow fell across her, and she squinted up to see Pyrite towering above her. The vicious golden Gem hoisted her axe, ready to cleave Connie into pieces of varying sizes. Still numb with shock, Connie could only stare up at the imminent bifurcation.

"Connie, move!"

The silent shout broke Connie out of her stupor. She rolled, missing the axe's edge by inches as it broke the stone where she'd lain. Her numb hands found the grip of her sword, and she hefted it with her as she flopped back onto her feet. Another flashing glint made her lift her sword on instinct, and it took every ounce of strength her body had left to deflect Pyrite's next swing up and away.

"Sticky little nuisance, aren't y—" Pyrite started to say, but then a big pink missile slammed shield-first between her shoulder blades. Connie sidestepped to let the bigger Gem sprawl past her and land on her chin.

Backpedaling on wobbly legs, Connie closed with Steven to form a short line between Pyrite and Sapphire. Steven kept his shield readied, his dark eyes fixed on Pyrite picking herself back up. His fingers were white-knuckled around Ruby's glimmering red gemstone. "Pyrite doesn't pay much attention to stuff behind her," Steven remarked.

Grimacing against a terrific ache that lurked between her numb, twisted extremities, Connie replied, "Yeah. Pearl would totally lecture her about situational awareness."

Steven's face lit in a bright mixture of surprise, hope, and concern. "Connie?" he squeaked.

Connie's answer was cut short by a snarl from Pyrite. Picking up her axe, the Gem scowled and marched on the pillar and its protectors. "I am so sick of whatever it is you two are," Pyrite declared.

Lifting her sword in reply, Connie already knew that she and Steven would lose. Ruby was bodiless in Steven's hands, and as bravely as he'd fought, Steven didn't seem to be able to beat Pyrite on his own. Connie would fight as hard as she could, but she couldn't feel her limbs beneath the hot prickle of the corruption warping them. Her mitten hands could barely hold the pink sword, let alone swing it with any competence. She and Steven could run, but that would leave Sapphire trapped.

A glance backwards reminded Connie of what she already knew, of the black bindings around Sapphire's wrists, ankles, and head. There were no joints or components to the bindings, and not nearly enough room to wedge her blade in safely and pry them loose, even if they could be loosened, and even if Pyrite weren't about to dice them into chunks and shards. The pillar's electric touch was torture to Sapphire, arcing into her wherever it touched, its needles of power crackling even down to Sapphire's gemstone.

And then Connie felt her innards jolt as she realized how they could win. The inspiration sank inside of her like an icy ball of lead. She swallowed hard and gripped her sword as tightly as she could, hardening her face to the awful task ahead.

"Steven?" Connie said. "Bubble her."

As Pyrite lifted her axe to strike, Connie swung out with all of her might, sweeping her pink blade in a broad, clumsy swipe. Pyrite danced back from the swing, laughing at such a desperate attack.

And the swing continued all the way around to slam into Sapphire. The blade wedged into the black pillar as Sapphire erupted into blue smoke, her form pouring through the shackles as her gemstone clattered to the ground.
For half a second, none of them moved, too shocked to react. Connie, unable to look at the pillar or the dissipating smoke, had to watch the aftermath play out in Steven's features. In an instant, his face twisted with shock, then horror, and despair, cutting into Connie as if the sword had struck her instead. But just as quickly those expressions gave way to one of understanding, and then he dove, grabbing Sapphire's stone.

Seeing Steven move broke Pyrite out of her shock. "No!" the Gem snarled as a pink bubble swallowed Sapphire's and Ruby's gemstones in Steven's hand. But it was too late, as Steven tapped the top of the bubble, sending it vanishing into itself with a rush of motion and light. Her prisoner gone, Pyrite turned her rage on the creatures who had taken that prisoner.

Connie yanked on the hilt of her sword, but it was too firmly wedged in the broken pillar. Electricity crackled up the blade and bit at her, but whatever her hands had become were evidently unimpressed, because she still couldn't feel anything. Sparks crackled off her chitinous skin as her mitts kept slipping off the hilt.

A shadow fell across the pillar. "Connie, leave it! Run!" Jade shouted at her.

Yelping, Connie let go of the sword and staggered backwards, flinching at a spray of stone bursting around Pyrite's axe in the ground where she'd been standing. Connie tried to backpedal and twist into a run, but her legs collapsed underneath her, dumping her onto the freezing stone. When she looked down at the problem, she nearly wretched at the sight of her jeans torn open past the knee, burst from the inside by the flattening half-limb sheets her legs had become. There weren't feet at the ends anymore as much as there were floppy lumps that hadn't been completely absorbed into the flat shape.

Pyrite pried her axe from the stone and lunged after Connie. "Stop scampering and just get squished already!" roared Pyrite.

The Gem's charge hit a stumble as Steven darted between her legs, running at a full sprint. Without slowing down, he bent and scooped Connie off the stone, then raced toward the direction of the stairs. Connie bounced in his arms like a sack of grain, her ribs banging against his shoulder with every step. "Sorry!" he said to her between heaving breaths. "It looked like we should keep scampering!"

The indignity and discomfort of the rescue didn't bother Connie nearly as much as did the sight of Pyrite barreling after them. Her perch on Steven's shoulder gave Connie ample time to consider the murderous fury twisting around Pyrite's mirrored visor. "Scamper faster!" Connie cried, her voice wobbling with the rhythm of Steven's pace.

Connie risked a look behind her—which was Steven's forward, and the actual direction they were moving—and saw the entrance to the grand staircase less than twenty yards away. When she turned back, though, Pyrite was gone. Then she heard a loud thump somewhere ahead of Steven, and twisted around again to see Pyrite landing hard between them and the mouth of the stairs. The warrior flicked out with her cape, blocking their way with a wide gesture and a ready axe.

Steven's arm tightened around Connie, and then she felt his shoulder drive up into her stomach, crushing the breath out of her as Steven jumped just as Pyrite had. With Connie in tow, he sailed high over the Gem's head, high over the stairs' entrance, and began arcing down past the edge of the landing pad, where the skylights of the terminal lay ahead of them like a crystal carpet unfurled across the rough terrain of the mountaintop.

With his off hand, Steven summoned his shield and flung it toward the section of crystal skylight rushing up to meet them at an alarming speed. The crystal fractured under the shield's edge, but held,
sending Steven's shield bouncing away. He threw a second shield, and then a third, turning the skylight into a web of cracks. When they were mere feet from landing, he summoned a pink bubble around them both and let them drop. The beleaguered skylight turned into a hail of razor shards that plinked off of Steven's barrier as he and Connie floated together into the terminal below.

At the center of the terminal, Opal had become a whorl of dazzling lights and crackling heat. Flames wreathed the air around her as she spun, tracking Flint in a circle with her bow. Her glowing arrows spring out and slammed Flint backwards, flames twirling from the fiery Gem's hands as she slammed into the far wall. Another arrow split into a flurry, and that cloud of arrows converged on Milky Quartz, peppering the pale Gem. Milky howled amidst the barrage, and her thick hide began to crack and flake beneath the luminous arrowheads. Compared with the minor scratches tattering Opal's long tunic tails, the two invaders looked a mess.

"Wow," Connie breathed, and watched a swarm of arrows light up the sky around them as Steven carried them gently toward the floor.

"Yeah," Steven agreed. "She doesn't usually get to cut loose like this."

Thick purple boots slammed into Steven from above, pounding him out from under Connie and sending him crashing to the floor like a comet. Connie felt gravity yank her stomach upwards and the rest of her downwards as the world tumbled. Flashes of freshly splattered Connie oozing between the cracks in the floor inundated her panicked thoughts. But she didn't have enough time to marinate in the waking nightmare. They must have been closer to the bottom than she'd thought, because when she struck the tile, she bounced instead of crunching into a human-ish puddle.

Connie's vision was a black tunnel slowly widening to fit the confines of the terminal. The first thing she saw was Steven facedown in a crater of his own making. His nose was buried in rubble, his dark hair obscuring his features, but his back rose and fell in a shallow rhythm. Then those purple boots stepped between Steven and Connie, blocking him from view, and the butt of an axe haft knocked the floor beside them.

"What was that about situational awareness?" Pyrite said, stooping so Connie could see the Gem's sneer.

Trembling, Connie lifted the roiling, twisting, flattening thing that used to be her hand. "J-Jade," she croaked.

"I…I cannot help you, Connie," Jade said. Then, brightening, she continued, "Not on my own. But you can help me."

Pyrite cupped her ear, grinning. "Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Use your construct of the river. Picture that, but outside of yourself," Jade said. The edge of desperation in her voice was impossible to miss, though she tried to hide it. "Picture it in front of you."

"Come on, speak up. Last words are important."

"Make the river into a circle." It was as though a gentle set of hands guided Connie's imagination, shaping the idea of her river into a tremendous ring. The river made a path up and overhead, circling halfway to the ceiling and then winding back. Then those gentle hands helped Connie push the bottom of that ring so it ran straight through Pyrite. "Now imagine the river stretching into itself, like a rubber band hooked on a nail and drawn around the circumference of a wheel. Hold the tension as tightly as you can."
"...you haven't bested me yet," Connie wheezed up at the smug Gem.

Pyrite's smile vanished as she straightened.

"Now!" Jade instructed. "Release it!"

The axe swung down, arcing toward Connie's skull.

The tension vibrating through Connie vanished, and she collapsed forward. As she teetered, the air ahead of her thundered, and an invisible wall slammed into Pyrite, lifting the Gem off her feet and throwing her across the terminal. Connie's hair jerked wildly as she watched Pyrite sail above Opal, arcing high overhead, and then slam into the base of the stairs at the far end, shattering the white stone to powder beneath her fall.

When Jade's voice returned, it was a whispered shell, tired but brimming with pride. "Splendid. Absolutely splendid."

Connie was too exhausted to smile at the praise. She crawled forward to where Steven lay and cradled his body against her chest. He felt like a sack of bricks pressing down on her, but she wrapped her arms around Steven's chest and began kicking at the floor with whatever remained of her legs. She refused to look at the flat, flappy extensions and just worked them against the stone. When her back hit a hard edge, she bit down on a yelp and started dragging Steven up the staircase leading up to the warp pad. The staircase felt a million times longer than it had when they'd first arrived, an endless line of sharp, solid edges punching her in the back. But at last she flopped onto the surface of the warp pad.

"Steven," she croaked. "Steven, you have to warp us."

He lay still atop her, barely breathing.

"Connie, picture the temple. Picture the hyb... Picture Steven's home," Jade pleaded with Connie. "Think about its warp pad, and then fill in the area around it. Add as much detail as you can remember."

Thoughts glorped through Connie's mind like cold molasses. She tried to remember the warp pad outside the temple door. The kitchen, and the loft where Steven slept. The screen door that let in the smell of the ocean. The crash of waves outside.

"Now jump. Jump!"

There was nothing left in Connie's body. But she jumped with everything else.

A familiar chime rang, and a rush of light swallowed them. Connie clung to Steven, heaving the cool, tingling air of warp space into her lungs. The warmth of Steven's body felt like an anchor that kept her from disappearing into the icy prickle climbing up her limbs.

Then she fell back into the real world, bouncing off of another hard surface. Steven tumbled off of her as she found herself facedown on the grain of a hardwood floor, awash in the smell of sandy lacquered birch planks. Connie gripped at the floor, sinking her fingernails into the familiar wood, and reveled in the sensation of the beach house.

For a long, hard moment, Connie just breathed. Her heart hammered against her sternum, rattling her all the way to Jade's gemstone. She rested her forehead against the hardwood and focused on her breathing. Whatever else her body had become, she could still breathe. That was something, at least.
Eons later, Connie heard the warp pad chime behind her. The image of Pyrite chasing after them in a vengeful fit slammed into her thoughts. Panicked, Connie rolled across the floor and grabbed the first solid object her body struck. Her mitts clamped around a broken stool leg, and she lifted it in challenge to the faraway warp pad.

Warm eyes blinked at her from atop a towering visage that stood upon the warp pad. "Connie?" Opal said, letting her bow dissipate.

With no enemy left before her, Connie watched the stool leg clatter out of her hands. The world drifted sideways, and she felt a distant thump against the side of her head. Then the sideways beach house faded into a dull, silent, peaceful blackness.

Waves broke across the pale shore, leaving a shadow of dark, wet sand in the wake of its foam. The night sky glittered like a field of broken diamonds strewn into patterns that defied any Earthbound constellations. The world was calm and quiet in the shadow of the broken temple guardian that loomed above the beach.

Connie wandered along the edge of the water. She wasn't sure how far she had walked, or for how long, but her legs weren't tired anymore. She thought she remembered them hurting, but that seemed like a distant memory now. Her bare toes wiggled in the sand, the hem of her sundress brushing at her calves.

"Connie?"

As she looked up from the sand, Connie saw her self standing near the shoreline. A half-remembered sandcastle crumbled behind the other self. With skin of bright green and clothes a shade of deep emerald, the self looked like a verdant reflection of Connie.

"I am glad to see you," her doppelganger said. "I was worried you wouldn't find this place in your current state."

Memories of the beach trickled back to Connie. Slowly, tenuously, she remembered this place and this reality. The rhythm of the tide chanted in low, long whispers and nipped at the edge of the sandcastle. The castle's spiral towers had started to collapse, loosing gobs of damp sand that marred the crenellations of the towers on the other side. They had built that castle together only a moment ago, a lifetime ago, an epoch ago.

"Jade?" Connie said. "Why are we here?"

The double smiled. There was genuine affection in the way her lips curved and in the crinkle of her deep green eyes, but there was a sadness in it too. "I brought you here," Jade said, "so that you could fulfill your bargain."
Connie blinked, her mind struggling to make sense of her green doppelganger's words. Her thoughts came in sluggish, leaden surges. It felt as though she were searching her own memory through a straw, only able to draw a little at a time no matter how hard she pulled.

There had been a deal. She had made a deal with Jade. It had involved their body? Poor phrasing. Though taken that way, it should have seemed weirder or more illicit, but it just reflected another facet of the weirdness that was their life together.

Remembering something so recent shouldn't have taken so much effort, Connie knew. Something was wrong with her. It had something to do with where she stood. The beach was less substantial than the last time she had stood there. Somehow she could remember that, if only because it felt so much harder to think about the last time. As if remembering a time when she could better remember than she could now made more sense than the idea of meeting back on the same dreamlike shoreline enough times to compare the visits.

"Human," Jade said softly.

Her attention snapped back to the smooth green version of herself. It felt easier to think when she focused on Jade. Did that make sense? "Fulfill my bargain," Connie repeated back to her.

Jade's mouth quirked at the uncertainty Connie let slip in her voice. "Yes," Jade said in a coaching tone, as if leading Connie through the thought. "I was to guide you to Ascension and assist in the rescue of your Sapphire. The Sapphire is safe once more, if a tad bodiless at the moment. And now that I have honored my obligations, you shall honor yours, and give up your physical form."

With those last five words, Connie's memory straw struck into the right nugget of frozen memory, drawing a great, cold chunk up into her thoughts to chill her. That moment in Steven's bathroom came back to her with perfect clarity, when she had looked into her own reflection with her steeliest gaze and done the only thing she could think to do to set things right with the Gems. It had been a desperate choice to make, but also the right choice, the heroic choice.

Only that moment wasn't the only one rattling up Connie's narrow recollections. She remembered the ocean spread before her like glass, reflecting a sky where the stars were vanishing into the distance. The air around her has been thin and cold, leeching the heat out of her, and her footfalls on the mirrored waters had sounded faraway, as if her ears and feet were moving in different directions. It was the first night she had met Jade, the night when Jade had almost tricked her into walking out into nothingness.

And Connie had promised to now finish that walk. That had been their deal.

"Human? Are you unwell?" Jade said, her head tilting quizzically.

Connie sucked in a sharp breath, snapping out her reverie at Jade's question. "No, no, I'm okay," she insisted, though even she didn't think she sounded convincing.

Her brows furrowing, Jade said, "You are not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No!" Connie said, her mind fixated upon that very second thought in spite of her kneejerk protest.

It had been so easy to commit to their deal when all had seemed lost. But with Sapphire and the rest safely back at the temple, Connie could no longer find the certainty behind that commitment. All she
could think about was having dinner with her family, a stack of pancakes that her father would
sheepishly cook while Connie and her mother teased him for his limited repertoire, even while they
knew they would love every bite. She thought of sitting with Steven in the shade of the lighthouse on
a sleepy summer evening as they watched the colors fade from the sky, when it would be too warm
to touch, but how he would lean against her anyway, both of them growing sweaty and sticky and
content in just being with each other. Seeing a grade come back on a math test she had studied hard
for, and reveling in the A+ at the top of the paper. The feeling of freshly laundered sheets cradling
her as she fell asleep to the sound of the air conditioner rumbling in the house's vents. Fresh
lemonade splashing across her tongue, a sweet and tart explosion that heralded the start of summer.

"No," Connie repeated dully, lost in the flood of things she never realized she would miss. "No, of
course not."

Jade's expression broke into a smile. She stepped forward and took Connie's hands in her own. "Of
course not," she echoed. "You are a creature of your word, after all. And I must commend you for
being such an agreeable companion throughout our difficult circumstances. You have been generous,
kind, considerate, and stalwart. You have taught me a great deal about what it means to be human.
And somehow, in spite of that fact, I will still remember you fondly."

How could Jade be smiling at a time like this? And cracking jokes? Connie was about to walk
herself out into oblivion, and Jade was treating it like they were signing each other's yearbooks at the
end of a school year. This smug, self-important alien had tried to kill Connie, tried to kill her friends,
had starved Connie, and now she was getting a body for the low, low cost of one erased former host.
And she was smiling about it!

Connie's outrage flickered and died as quickly as it had flared. Jade hadn't been the one to propose
their deal, she reminded herself. Connie herself had come up with the terms. And after spending just
a few hours trapped inside a body that wasn't hers, Connie could never blame Jade for wanting out
of such horrible isolation. "You're a good friend too, Jade," she said, forcing a smile into her features.
"Thank you for all of your help. We could never have saved Sapphire without you."

"I am aware of that."

Connie felt her grasp tighten around Jade's hands, as if she could hang on and continue to exist by
sheer imaginary finger-strength. Beside them, the tide continued to rumble, sounding eager, even
hungry, for Connie to get on with it. How could an ocean sound hungry? "Please tell the Crystal
Gems that I…that I said 'thank you' for everything they've done. And be nice to them when you do it.
One last time, for me?"

"Of course," Jade said, her smile warming.

She tried to fight it, but her eyes grew hot. Blinking hard, she continued, "And tell my parents that I
love them so, so much. And that I'm sorry I had to leave. And not to be mad at you."

"I will," the blurry sight of Jade promised her.

"And tell Steven…" Connie's voice hitched. Swallowing, she managed to squeak, "Tell Steven he
was my best friend. And that meant more to me than I could ever say."

"He knows, human," Jade answered her, and gave Connie's hands a squeeze. "But I will tell him all
the same."

Connie tried to come up with some other messages for Jade to take back to the waking world, but
there were too many things left to say, and too many things left to do. She could cling to Jade for
another three lifetimes and never be finished. Drawing a shaky breath, Connie nodded and said, "Okay. Goodbye, Jade. Th-Thanks again." And then she drew back, ready to walk across the waves out into the end.

Jade's hands remained in Connie's. When Connie tried to step away, the green doppelganger held her fast.

The minor pause threatened to shatter the thin, brittle dam holding back Connie's panic. "Please let go," Connie whimpered, her voice in shambles. "I'm trying, I promise, but I'm really scared right now, and if you—"

"Connie," Jade said firmly, tightening her grip on Connie's hands, "you are not going out there. You never were."

Connie wavered, staring blankly. Then that brittle dam shattered, and she collapsed to her knees, sobbing. Burying her face in Jade's dress, Connie wept great, ugly tears. They streamed down her face and left dark splotches in the skirt twisting through her fists as she bawled until her throat ached.

Jade knelt next to her and cradled the sobbing girl. "My apologies," she said, patting Connie on the back. "I had no idea this would disappoint you so much."

When Connie could breathe again, she laughed between sobs. "You jerk," she wheezed. Her insides felt raw with too many emotions rushing through her at once. Surprise, relief, anger, gratitude, and lingering terror all left her body in wracked, shuddering breaths until she felt like she could finally think once more. Wiping at her eyes, Connie looked up and said, "Why? Why don't you want me to hold up my end of the deal? Don't you want a body again?"

Jade rolled back on her heels, crouched next to Connie but no longer in contact. "Oh, I do, very much. Even a squishy, smelly, fleshy body is still a body. And for half an instant, I was tempted to accept your offer at face value." A break in her voice betrayed a sliver of guilt at the words. But then she continued, "Luckily for both of us, you future-proofed against such lapses in judgment."

"Me?" Connie squeaked. "What did I do?"

"Our very first treaty, on the morning after I regained consciousness," explained Jade. "I swore that I would not, through action or inaction, knowingly allow you to come to harm, physical or otherwise, if it was within my ability to prevent said harm. And as soon as you made that ludicrous offer to me, I knew that you were determined to seek harm in your mad quest to rescue the Sapphire. So I acted."

Swiping at her nose with the back of her hand, Connie sniffled and said, "But you took the Gems to Ascension. Rebels in the secret Diamonds-only spaceport. Isn't that treason?"

Jade lifted her nose in affront. "Please. I remain a loyal soldier of Homeworld. I only acted because honor demanded no less than a Jade keeping her word, even if it was to a lesser indigenous creature." A twinkle lit her eye as her haughty expression softened and she added, "Admittedly, the decision was easier knowing that the facility had been abandoned for five millennia. Should my platoon's Agate wish to reprimand me, she is well within her right to order me back for punishment. First, though, she may need to build a new communication tower on Earth so she can let me know."

Connie laughed hoarsely as she accepted a helping hand in shambling back to her feet. Her whole body ached with the relief of knowing that she didn't have to cast herself into nothingness. It was as if everything had been tensed and knotted into a coil that started at her stomach, and now it had unclenched into blissful exhaustion. "So did you just bring me here to see if I would chicken out?"
"Partly. I did have my doubts," Jade admitted. "Foolish of me, I know. Given your species' aversion to intelligence, it would be impossible for you not to be braver than you are smart. But I should have known you would also be braver than you are stupid."

"Guess I showed you, Miss Smarty Gem," Connie jeered.

Jade's smile faded from her eyes, becoming a grimace instead. "But mostly, I brought you here because I wanted a chance to say goodbye."

All of Connie's elation hardened into a cold, worried lump, sinking her heels back into the sand. "Wh-What are you talking about?" Connie said.

Green eyes growing distant, Jade turned out to the ocean. "You are not walking out there today, Connie. I am."

With a start, Connie realized that the steady thrum of the tide had grown silent. The ocean had completely stilled, becoming so flat that it perfectly reflected the night sky like a mirror the size of the world. It looked exactly as it had the night Jade had tricked her into walking out, and the sight of it reawakened the animal panic in Connie. "This isn't funny, Jade!" she snapped, backing a step from the motionless water.

Jade wasn't smiling anymore as she turned back to Connie. "The corruption is spreading. You saw what we became when I took majority control of our form. It is slower when you are in control, but still spreading. Our spots were multiplying before. Who knows how long our current form will last?"

Connie had to steel herself against taking another step back toward the cliff. The horizon loomed like a deep, dark chasm stretching endlessly in both directions, and it was hard not to think about falling into it. "That doesn't mean we're giving up!" Connie insisted angrily. "If me walking out there was stupid, how can you just turn around and do it anyway?"

A flash of prideful anger creased Jade's face. "This is no snap decision, human. I have been considering this recourse ever since we confirmed the corruption's continued progression." Then her features relaxed. She actually smirked, and added, "I had been working on a farewell gift, but assumed I would have more time. It was almost complete, but now… Well, perhaps you will find it and finish it for me."

"Gift? I don't want… This is crazy!" Connie said, and clutched at her temples. "You don't have to do this. The Crystal Gems will think of something, or Steven will heal us."

"Steven cannot heal corruption. And if he could separate us, he would have done so already," Jade said matter-of-factly. It infuriated Connie to hear Jade discuss her own sacrifice in such a calm manner. "We were previously under the illusion that we could wait for him to manifest the ability to physically isolate us from each other, but that is no longer the case. Or do you want to be a mindless beast who rampages across this human-riddled planet?"

Fists clenching, Connie bit back against her impulse to scream. If Jade insisted on being psychotically logical about this, then wild emotion wouldn't convince her otherwise. "Then the Gems can, I don't know, lock us in the temple. They can keep everyone safe from us while they come up with a better solution."

"Like their bubbled collection?" Jade pointed out, eyebrow raised. "And how will they care for their monstrous half-human guest?"

"There's still plenty of ¡Soy Delicioso! to eat. And Steven could take us on walks so we don't go stir-
crazy. And… And…” Connie felt tears welling again as her flimsy scenario collapsed beneath the sight of Jade's skeptical eyebrow. Her voice cracking, Connie insisted, "We can make it work! You don't have to go!"

Jade's expression softened. Her perfect composure sagged, and her own eyes grew warm and wet. "Connie," she said, her voice plaintive, "I was already gone. My… The Diamonds ended me. But you brought me back." Tears trailed down her cheeks in bright, shimmering lines. She swiped at them with her fist, but more tears fell in their place. "You gave me a chance to say goodbye to the planet I love."

"No!" Connie's voice broke. She slapped her palms over her ears, shaking her head with such vigor that her hair whipped over her shoulders. "Don't say that!"

"More than that," Jade continued, "you have gifted me with experiences I never could have imagined. I am the only Gem in existence who has ever truly appreciated cold pizza. That alone is a splendid legacy." The words were meant to be a joke, but the tremble in Jade's voice made them closer to truth.

Connie barreled forward and slammed into Jade, staggering her double. Wrapping her arms around the slender green frame, Connie caught Jade in a furious hug, and she buried her face in the crook of Jade's neck. "You can't leave," Connie sobbed. "You can't! You can't leave just because of me…"

Jade's whole body stiffened in surprise. Then, slowly, her arms rose to embrace Connie in return, squeezing tightly as the girl cried. Leaning her head against Connie's, Jade murmured, "I would wait a million years for a chance to live again as I once did. But that life and that world are gone forever." As she stroked Connie's hair in a soothing motion, Jade added, "And I won't wait one more minute if it means risking your existence, Connie. Not for anything."

"You can't go," Connie whimpered. "You finally learned my name."

She could hear the smile in Jade's voice. "I learned your name a long time ago."

Crying harder, Connie dug her fingers into Jade, her grip pressing into soft, cottony cloth and warm green skin. She braced with her whole body against even the idea of anything leaving her grasp. "I don't care. You aren't going anywhere, ever," declared Connie. "I'll pin you down and sit on you until you give up on this stupid, crazy plan. You're staying."

Her passenger's whisper brushed past her ear. "Don't you remember what I told you? Giving up one's physical form is a conscious decision a Gem must make. That means no one can make the decision for you. And at the moment…we are not physical."

And just like that, Connie was clinging to nothing. She staggered forward, barely catching herself from sprawling onto the beach. Her head whipped around in a panic, her heart pounding with the fear that Jade had simply evaporated. Then she spotted her green self standing atop the reflective water several feet out from shore.

Jade began walking backwards. Her bare feet made ripples in the starry surface of the ocean, making the stars dance in time with her steps. She seemed to glide backwards so that each step carried her giant strides away from Connie. "Tell the Crystal Gems that they need to be better. They won their rebellion, so I expect them to act accordingly as stewards of my planet," Jade called back to the shore.

Connie scrambled in chase, and then staggered when her feet plunged into the still water instead of treading upon it as Jade did. Surprised but undaunted, she waded in, clawing at the water to push…
herself forward. "Jade, wait!" she pleaded.

"Thank the Lazuli for being such an empathetic companion. She is far better than I likely deserved… or, I suspect, than she thinks she is."

As the water plunged up to her chest, Connie kicked off of the soft ocean bottom and thrashed into deeper waters, trying to swim and shout at the same time. "No! Don't do this!" she begged.

"Be certain to thank your parents as well for their hospitality." Jade's voice was dwindling. Through the splashing, Connie could barely make out a green dot against the black of the horizon. "And tell Steven to have faith. This new world doesn't need Quartzes or Pearls or Sapphires or Jades as much as it needs kindness like his. Almost as much as it needs courage like yours."

Connie had barely made it a dozen yards from shore. The water was freezing, and it felt like it was pushing her backwards. But she kicked and paddled with everything she had left. "Jade!" she screamed.

Jade's voice drifted back to her, barely audible over her struggles, sounding tired and heavy with the weight of the empty sky pressing down upon her. "You are brilliant and fierce," Connie heard. "You were always a Jade. You just lacked the stone for it."

"No!" Connie shrieked.

The invisible current overwhelmed her, and she dropped beneath the surface. Stars rippled above her as she fought the undertow. Icy coldness swallowed her inside and out as she fell away from the light, her last breath rushing out of her in a stream of bubbles, a wordless scream that vanished into the ocean. As she sank, limbs too heavy to move anymore, she heard two final words usher her back toward the shore.

"Goodbye, Connie."
Darkness gave way to soft white cushions as Connie rolled back into her body. She would have dropped onto the hardwood floor if not for a pair of bejeweled hands catching her and easing her back onto the couch. Her body thrashed against freezing waters that weren't there anymore until those same hands caught her arms and squeezed, keeping her from hurting herself on accident.

"You're okay, Connie," Garnet told her in a firm, placid voice.

Connie stilled, her heart racing, chest heaving as she drew in the warm ocean air. The broken, mirrored ocean had vanished so suddenly that it left a vacuum inside of her, and the waking world was slow to trickle back into place. Slowly, the details of the beach house filled in around her, cast in the fiery red and orange light of the fading day. Somewhere above her, a kerplunk resonated loudly against the walls of the house.

From her angle on the couch, she could see Pearl sitting up in Steven's loft, and judging by her soft fussing sounds, Steven was up there on his bed. "Steven," Connie breathed, and tried to sit up.

Garnet didn't hold Connie down, but she kept her grip around Connie's forearms, trying to convince the girl against moving suddenly. "Steven's okay," Garnet assured her.

"The bump is starting to go down," Pearl called from above, her voice thready and teetering at the edge of panic. "Maybe Greg won't have to buy a hospital after all." There was another soppy kerplunk and a dripping sound as Pearl dipped a washcloth into a bucket at her feet and wrung it out, then folded it back into a press to reapply to Steven's forehead.

With her biggest fear eased, Connie focused on Garnet's calming features. The fusion looked as she always had despite her constituent parts' dissipations. Framed in the light of the sunset, she looked even more like the invincible guardian she had always appeared to be. It seemed farcical that she could be the same two tiny beings who had been in danger atop the landing pad in a battle that felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

"Garn… Sapphire, I…" Connie struggled with the nomenclature. Addressing half of a fusion seemed rude somehow. And thinking on it, she owed both halves the same apology. "Garnet, I'm so sorry—"

"I'm okay." The corner of Garnet's mouth quirked. She eased her grip off of Connie's arms and sat next to the girl, helping her to sit up on the couch. "It wasn't pleasant, maybe, but it was the only way. That's why Steven and Ruby never would have done it. Sapphire knew you had to be there to save her. I'm grateful you were."

Connie thought back to Sapphire's last moments before being taken by Pyrite. Had that actually been a nod meant for her? Garnet's knowing smile made it feel that way. Sagging with relief, Connie looked down at the fists clenched in her lap, relaxing her hands at last.

That's when it really hit her. Turning her palms upward, Connie examined her hands, her wrists, her forearms. Ages ago on that battlefield, her body had been warped into a mottled green nightmare of chitinous flesh. Now, when she flexed her hands, she saw tendons jumping under healthy smooth skin, her fingers moving independently instead of fused into a mitten-like wad.

She parted her hands and looked past them to her legs. Her jeans had split along the seams up to her
thighs to accommodate the bulging sheets her legs had been. But now her legs looked like legs again, bare and healthy skin peering through the gaps in her jeans. She tried to wiggle her toes, and her toes wiggled obediently. Her body was hers again. And it felt…empty.

Reaching up, Connie cupped the stone beneath her throat. It felt cool and solid, like it always did, and was still rooted in her sternum. But there was only one set of feelings inside of her. The growing panic she felt had no other presence to push against it. She spoke the question aloud, even though she already knew what the answer would be. "Jade?"

Nothing.

Her fingers trembled as she dug against the edge of the gemstone. She threw a novel's worth of nonsense thought-noise into her mind, trying to spark a reaction. She hummed the opening notes of *Taking Over Midnight* under her breath. She wanted to scream and shout until that haughty, superior voice emerged in her thoughts. But nothing came.

Connie let her hand drop from the stone. Her eyes welled, and her breath hitched, but she clamped down with every muscle in her restored body. An ironclad coil of refusal wrapped around her lungs, squelching the cry before it could leave her.

There had to be something else she could try. Peridot was a Gem expert, and would undoubtedly know how to wake Jade back up. Or the other Gems would reveal knowledge of some lost relic that would restore Jade to her gemstone. They would lead Connie on a grand adventure into some dangerous, forgotten Homeworld ruin, where Connie would brave traps and corrupted monsters until —

Then Garnet’s hand slid atop Connie’s trembling fist, pressing it gently back to the couch. Connie’s gaze snapped to the fusion, and she was shocked by the sight of her own angry, teary reflection in Garnet’s visor.

Her body slackened. Her fist went limp. She felt Garnet’s fingers thread between her own, and without a word, Garnet leaned next to her. All of Connie’s fantasies broke apart under that quiet, comforting gesture from the fusion. Closing her eyes, Connie gripped Garnet’s hand and began to cry. Her sobs came out as quiet, shuddering gasps.

Garnet never said a word, or even squeezed Connie’s hand. She just remained a steady presence that Connie could lean into. And though Connie’s eyes never opened, when she felt the couch next to her shift and someone else take her other hand, she knew that Pearl had descended to sit on her other side.

A small part of Connie felt so grateful for the Gems’ silent support. But the rest of her just felt lost.

Connie rested her chin atop her knuckles, her arms folded over the deck railing of the porch, and watched the last colors fading from the sky. There were wispy clouds that blazed with pink, and low waves inching their way up the shoreline, and the pungent smell of brine in the air, and the grit of sand under her unblemished skin rubbing against the wood of the railing. There were a thousand little reminders that Connie was back in the waking world. But all she could think about was the blank expanse where the ocean met the sky, stretched out endlessly in front of her.

Steven had woken shortly after Connie’s tears had run dry, however long that had taken. He used his phone to call Connie’s parents, since her phone had been left in a utility closet in the wake of a monster attack that had left her school in chaos and her parents in a desperate panic. Shortly after that, Amethyst had returned through the warp pad, looking disgruntled. And then the two teens had
been filled in on what they had missed.

Pretty much the moment they had seen Pyrite being cannonballed by a freakish green monster, Flint and Milky had decided that the fight wasn't worth getting poofed over, and had scampered. Opal had warped back to the house to find Steven and Connie both insensate. Half of Opal wanted to stay and care for the teens, while the other half wanted to return to Ascension and rout their enemies, at which point Opal stopped being Opal.

While Amethyst returned to the battlefield, Pearl had made Steven and Connie as comfortable as she could, and released Ruby and Sapphire from their bubble. By the time Garnet had pulled her two gemstones together, Connie's warped body was crinkling back into its current shape. And then…

By the strictest physical definition, Connie felt fine. Her muscles ached as though she had crabwalked an entire marathon backwards, and her stomach was turning itself inside-out with hunger. But her lesions were gone, and her limbs were limbs again. From the outside, she looked whole.

Inside, it felt like half of Connie was missing. Whenever her mind had wandered, she could recall feeling Jade's impatience pressing her back into focus. Something that amused Connie might amuse Jade in kind, or irritate Jade, or result in a sense of superior indifference. No matter the feeling, there had been another feeling moving in concert with hers, responding to her. Connie hadn't been aware of what a significant unspoken presence Jade had been until confronted with the absolute silence of her feelings echoing alone inside of her.

Murmurs filtered through the screen door behind her. the discussion was kept quiet in the same way her parents would speak when they were upset within earshot of Connie. "—probably warped out of there before I got back. I circled the mountain, but didn't find diddly," Amethyst finished explaining. "So I smashed their doohickey and came back here."

"We could have given their device to Peridot. She might have gotten some information out of it," Pearl chided, but didn't herself sound convinced.

"No," Garnet said firmly. "They can't retrieve it now. If they want to know any more futures, they can wait for them."

There was a significant pause, and then Pearl whispered, "What did you see?"

"As little as possible." Garnet's even tone flattened into something bitter. "Sapphire resisted for as long as she could. Eventually they stopped asking complex questions and just fed her possibilities."

"Possibilities?" Amethyst echoed.


"How soon is soon?" asked Pearl.

"Weeks. And more of them are coming to help."

"Did Sapphire see that too?"

"Eavesdropping. Sapphire heard them talking about a ship dropping off a Polarite with heavy equipment."

"Good," Amethyst declared. "More of them means they'll be easier to find. They already know they
can't win a straight fight. As soon as we find them, they're as good as poofed."

The other Gems didn't answer Amethyst's confidence with their own. In the silence, Connie heard floorboards creaking, and then the whoosh of the temple door at the back of the house. Minutes later, the screen door creaked open, and the porch behind Connie shifted slightly with a new presence.

Steven stood on his tiptoes and peered over the rail next to Connie, one hand braced to lift him to the edge. His other hand dragged a plush green alien toy across the decking. One of the alien's legs thumped against the boards, too heavy to be filled with regular stuffing. Connie knew the lump in its leg was a river stone with the word JADE scrawled across it, a stone that had been trapped within the alien's stitching back when it had been reassembled.

"I tried," Steven said. His teary gaze dropped to the sand below them. "I really did. I practiced until my mouth was dry every day, but I couldn't get the stone out. Maybe Peridot was wrong, or maybe I just didn't do it right, but...I'm sorry."

Connie stared out at the darkening horizon. With all of the extra space inside of her, it took some effort to find her reaction. When she did, she was a little surprised, but too exhausted to raise her voice above a whisper. "I'm so mad at her, Steven."

From the corner of her eye, she saw his brow furrow. "At Jade?" he said.

Nodding tiredly, Connie let her chin drop back against her knuckles on the rail. "I don't know if there was any other way to save both of us. Jade is...was so much smarter than I am. So I'm sure she already thought of everything I could have. Honestly, she probably figured out everything two seconds after she counted my spots for me."

Fresh tears threatened Connie's eyes. She dug her fingernails into the railing and fought them back.

"But she didn't tell me. She wouldn't talk about it, and she wouldn't listen," Connie rasped. "She just left. Talked about leaving me some kind of gift, as if that would help. Acted like I had done her some big favor for just letting her exist. And then she just left."

Steven reached for her, but then hesitated. "Connie..."

She kept her eyes locked on the horizon. If she looked at him, saw his consoling expression, she knew she would start blubbering again. So she crushed her eyes shut. "After I messed everything up, she saved Sapphire, and you, and me. She wouldn't let me make it right. And now I'm stuck here wondering why she did it, why she wouldn't warn me, why she couldn't stay. And I hate myself for being mad at her, and I know that's crazy, but it just makes me madder, and I can't even yell at her for it because she's gone. She's just...gone."

"It's okay to be mad at her," Steven said. "I get it. Pearl and Garnet and Amethyst and my dad spent so long not telling me things I needed to know because they thought I wasn't ready. And maybe I wasn't, but it was still awful not knowing. Jade didn't tell you she was leaving, and you have every right to be mad at her."

"But..." His voice began to crack, and Connie felt her eyes grow hot under their clenched lids. "But I hope you won't be mad at her forever, because I'm really grateful for what she did. I know it's selfish to think of it this way, and it's okay if you hate me a little too for saying it, but...Jade saved my best friend. I'm sorry I can't be mad at her with you. I'm too glad you're alright."

Connie lost the fight. Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks as she opened her eyes to see Steven crying with her. She heard herself laugh, or sob, or do both at once, and took her hands into his.
Their foreheads met with a soft bump as they leaned into each other.

When she could speak again, Connie wheezed, "I'm sorry I lost your sword."

"That doesn't matter," Steven told her.

"It was your mom's sword. Of course it matters," she insisted.

She felt his nose brush against hers as he shook his head. "Mom left me a whole armory," he said. "I only ever found the one Connie. And I need her way more than I'll ever need a sword."

Connie smiled through her tears, and her insides warmed. It made the cold, echoing void inside of her ache that much harder, but the warmth made it bearable. "Then you're in luck," Connie said, her voice tight. "She's back in her original packaging." Then, stepping back, she gestured to her sopping face and coughed up a little laugh. "Do you have anything for…? I don't want to freak my parents out any more than they already will be when they get here."

Steven produced a clean handkerchief from his pocket and presented it to her. "I got you covered," he said.

Her smile widened as she remembered what Jade had said about Steven. Accepting his handkerchief, she mopped her face dry. At the very least she could look slightly put-together when her parents arrived. She had no idea what she would tell them, and even less idea what their reaction would be. Would they turn into a mess like she had? Though she knew they would never say it out loud, Connie had to believe that some part of them would feel relief at their daughter being just a plain old human again, even if she did have an extra lump of pyroxene in her chest.

When she blew her nose, Connie felt her lungs crumple like deflating balloons. A tremendous blast of wind tore the handkerchief out of her grasp, and the force of the blast blinded her and knocked her back onto the deck, pain shooting up through her tailbone.

She shook the hair out of her face and blinked her eyes clear again, dizzy from the sudden fall. Then she gaped in shock.

The wind that had knocked Connie down had been the blowback. Steven, and the patio furniture, and a large portion of the far railing, had taken the brunt of the wind, and were scattered across a dozen yards of sand beyond the edge of the porch. The patio table had snapped in half, and the chairs were plastic flinders mixed with the splinters of the rail. Beyond them, Steven pulled his face out of the sand and gaped back at her, bewildered at his violent relocation.

Touching Jade's stone, Connie took in the aftermath of her accidental hurricane, and realized that she might owe a few other explanations to her parents. If only she could explain it to herself first.

Chapter End Notes

ValeRossi1416 put together an awesome interpretation of corrupted Connie from the end of her flight from Ascension. Check it out below!
Thank you to everyone who stuck with the story through all of the unintended delays. Your patience and continued investment in Connie and Jade's journey has meant the world to me.

Though the story here has come to a conclusion, there is still a lot more plot to explore. So, as many of you had already surmised, I do plan on continuing with a sequel story. I'll be taking a few weeks to map out the story to come, as I would like to tighten up a few elements of the story as it continues. If you'd like to see what happens next, please subscribe to my author alerts and join me shortly for *The Stranger I Am*, coming as soon as I can manage. Until then, I hope you like what's to come!

### End Notes

Thanks for reading! Leave a comment with any thoughts or questions!

If you've ever wanted to listen to me talking about movies, check out the podcast I cohost: [Snooty and Goon](#)!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!