Paragon
by Kitsune_Heart

Summary

It is impossible. It is unthinkable. Only a diamond can cut another diamond. But Rose Quartz kept so many secrets. As the Corruption song rings out across the beach, Steven steps forward and, in desperation, he sings back. And the Corruption...stops.

To save the Earth and find out what he really is, Steven makes a deal. Fourteen years of his life.

And, oh. What can happen in fourteen years....

Canon through "Room For Ruby."

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 1 theme song: "This is Gospel" by Panic! At The Disco.

If you'd like to see a beautiful animatic of that song with SU characters, check one out here. I can not recommend it more highly.

Cover art by Tikkish.

Paragon.

Noun.

1. A person or thing regarded as a perfect example of a particular quality:

1.1 A person or thing viewed as a model of excellence:

1.2 A perfect diamond of 100 carats or more.

https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/paragon

The Crystal Gems screeched and contorted as the song of the diamonds surrounded them, and Steven looked on in terror.

“G-guys!” The boy rushed to their sides, raising his shield to block the attack, but in seconds it was quite apparent that a small, translucent shield wasn’t enough. His mother had only been able to protect two other scared gems when the diamonds had released their song from the stratosphere, the discordant notes washing across an entire planet, dispersing and weakening enough to be deflected by the shield of a single, if strong, rose quartz.

But this wasn’t two gems, it was five now crouched on the beach sand, the edges of their forms growing fuzzy, their weapons dissolved in the first seconds of the song. And then it was six as Garnet bellowed and split into two smaller figures, holding one another and still crying out in pain, hazes of caustic hot and cold air clashing where they met.

And it wasn’t diamonds in the sky, shocked and maddened with grief. Not this time. This time, they stood before Steven, at the tideline—they had laughed at the oceanic attacks of Lapis, slapping them and her aside—and they did not cry out in grief, but with an anger which had festered for millennium. Even Blue Diamond, whose pain Steven had once shared, who kept a hundred of his own gems in stasis as a tribute to her beloved sister, had only briefly looked upon Steven’s gem before lashing out with a power that dissipated Alexandrite instantly, leaving the gems as they were now. Small. Separate. And falling to the Corruption.
"Steven!" Connie, who had been slapped aside before the song began, was back now, rushing to Steven’s side. Looking over her shoulder, she saw her mentor, who had begun to sprout sharp wings from her back, and gasped. “What do we do!? Could Stevonnie—”

“No!” Steven shouted, terrified. He imagined their fusion, also screaming, and then separating, Connie continuing to contort on the beach like the gems as the song went on and he felt nothing. “No, we can’t. We...we...”

“Then what do we do?” Connie shouted, struggling to be heard over the song of the diamonds.

“I...I don’t know!” Steven shook his head, tears flying off his cheeks. Not Blue Diamond’s make, but his own. “I...stop!” His voice cracked. The young hybrid looked up through his shield, to the faces of the diamonds who stood serene, eyes closed and mouths open in glorious, discordant song. “Stop!”

The diamonds did not react. Not to Steven’s words or the screaming of gems. Just as they had not reacted to the lapping of waves at their feet.

At Steven’s back, six gems shifted and grew, smooth skin mottling with spines and fur and scales. Ice and magma. Shards of glass.

“Stop!” Steven screamed. “Stop stop STOP!” He repeated himself, over and over, until the word became meaningless. And then he just screeched. One long sound, torn from his throat and battling the diamonds for volume. Crashing and clashing against their song.

And then blending with the song.

And then harmonizing.

And at Steven’s back, the cries of the gems shifted. What was once pain and fear became just...fear.

Connie again looked over her shoulder at the gems, then back to Steven, her mouth gaping. Finally, her gaze rose to the diamonds. Her breath caught somewhere deep down in her core, below her lungs, where it went cold and sour.

The eyes of the diamonds were open once more. Yellow and blue and the nearly transparent iris of the eldest, the largest by a full head, White Diamond. They looked down upon the gems, whose forms shrank once more, bestial traits melding back into almost-human skin and hair and clothes made of light.

They looked down at the little boy whose song had gained in strength, notes expanding on their own patterns, forming a small, repeating melody. Turning their song into his own.

It was Blue Diamond’s voice which faltered first, though her lips remained open as her chorus turned to silence. She blinked, rapidly, and a long-accustomed haze came to her eyes.

“Steven,” Connie whispered, but then stopped herself. She waited.

Yellow Diamond’s chorus broke with a crack deep in her throat. She leaned back, looking at her blue sister, and then again down at the boy. Her brows drew and her head shook just a small fraction. So miniscule that it would have been imperceptible on a human, only seen now as magnified by the gem’s enormous body.

And, finally White Diamond went silent, her mouth closed to a delicate bow. The lines at the
corners of her eyes and lips deepened as she tilted her head to listen more carefully.

And still Steven sang, his voice large, yet growing raw. He sang and sang, for minutes past the silence of the diamonds, until his gem family had long since gone silent, but for heavy breaths.

The gems sat hunched together on the sand, too tired to stand, too tired even for Ruby and Sapphire to reform into their larger self. They sat and listened, looking at the back of their ward in awe.

And Steven sang, tears gathering on his cheeks and coursing down to soak into the collar of his shirt. He sang until his voice went harsh and until it cracked and only went on as a rasp. He dropped his shield and dropped to his knees at the same moment, mouth still open, breathing out harshly, only managing the occasional squeak as he tried to sing on.

And then the only sounds on the beach were labored breathing and the susurration of waves, forming unmatched rhythms across the sand.

It was Blue Diamond who broke the stillness, lowering to her knees with a grace that seemed truly alien from such a large creature. The waves coursed over the skin of her calves and the many folds of her robes, leaving behind granules of sand. Even so much lower, she still towered over the humans and gems, and when she reached out with a hand, Connie reacted at once, stepping in front of Steven, sword raised and teeth bared.

“Back off,” Connie growled, knuckles going white on her grip. Her arms were bruised and the right shoulder of her tank and the skin below were torn, but she stood, staring down a diamond, ignoring the blood which oozed down to her elbow.

Blue Diamond...hesitated. She looked to Steven, her brows drawn.

“Call off your pet,” Yellow Diamond said, voice cold, though her eyes were no longer so intense as they had been when she had emerged from her ship to stand alongside her sisters. She made no effort to hide her examination of the half-human boy, except for not joining her sister on the sand.

Steven scowled at Yellow Diamond, pushing himself back up to his feet. “She’s not a pet. She’s my friend.”

Yellow Diamond snorted. “No. She’s a human you taught to do a clever trick. Now, tell her to—”

“Shut up,” Connie snapped.

Yellow Diamond gasped and clenched her fists. “Why, you little—”

But her words were cut off as a delicate white hand came to rest on her shoulder. White Diamond, who was as serene now as when she had told her younger companions to begin the song which would torture and deform the final defenders of Earth. “Yellow. Think. It’s what you do . We must find out what happened, and we can’t do that if we all just began to fight again.”

“We weren’t fighting, we were finishing this,” Yellow replied, shrugging White Diamond’s hand away. “So let’s get back to—”

“No,” Blue whispered, and Yellow once more choked on her words, staring down at her companion.

Blue looked upon Steven and Connie, but did not reach out further. Instead, she let her hand rest on the beach, palm up, fingertips digging into the sand.
Connie and Steven looked to one another and huddled closer. Between them, the air seemed to grow a charge, and Steven’s gem let out a small glow.

“May I see you?” Blue Diamond said, voice straining for calm.

“Are you crazy?” Amethyst finally spoke up, rising from the beach, using a hand on Pearl’s shoulder as leverage. She looked...smaller. Though perhaps that was because of the proximity of the three enormous gems waiting at the tideline. “So you can shatter him, like you did to everyone in the war? Or do you just want something different for your little zoo?”

“It’s not mine,” Blue said, frowning, eyes flickering to Amethyst before once more training on Steven. “It’s—”

“Blue,” White Diamond said, bringing her companion to silence.

One by one, the other gems joined Amethyst in standing. Pearl had to lean on her spear. Peridot and Lapis leaned on one another. Ruby and Sapphire stood in each other’s arms, too battered and exhausted to fuse, but needing to be close again. Each gem looked one hit away from dissipating their form, but they took small, awkward steps forward until little bits of their skin were brushing the backs of their human counterpart. They waited, ready for another final stand.

They waited. All of them. Three massive and elegantly attired diamonds. Six small, battered gems. One determined, but quaking human.

And Steven.

“What…” Steven licked his lips. His voice cracked on the word, but he gathered himself and tried again. “What do you want?”

Blue studied the boy’s face, and her lips curved in a small, gentle smile. “We’d like to see you.”

No one bothered with a “you can already see him.” They all just gathered closer to the boy. Their not-quite-leader. Their collective son. Steven looked around at his friends and back up to Blue Diamond.

“We will not harm you,” White Diamond said in her low, almost slow voice, each syllable pronounced with the precision of a diplomat. “You have my word.”

Peridot snorted.

Yellow Diamond shot the little gem a glare, and there was just a moment when Peridot quelled. Then she stuck out her lower lip and straightened her spine, hands out, a strange tension entering the air as she reached for all the metal on the beach. Abandoned bottlecaps and lost coins and entire ships seemed to shimmer. None moved, but all seemed to wait, as if alive and eager as trained hounds.

Yellow Diamond rolled her eyes.

Blue Diamond spoke again. “Please.”

Steven frowned at the word, gaze flickering between his three enemies. All around him, his many protectors didn’t move. Connie barely seemed to breath. The diamonds looked on.

Steven looked to the sand covering his toes, where his feet had sunk down under the force of the diamond’s attacks. He was still surprised he hadn’t been outright buried by their power. It
was...unstoppable.

Steven reached out and lay a hand on Connie’s shoulder. The muscles twitched under his touch, but she did not break her focus on the diamonds.

“Okay,” Steven said.

“What!? ” Pearl shouted, taking her eyes off White Diamond to gape Steven. “No! Not ‘okay’!”

“Yeah,” Amethyst joined in, “they’re just getting your guard down so they can shatter you.”

Blue gave a small shake of the head, opening her mouth, but Steven spoke first.

“They can do that anytime they want. You know that.” He took a deep breath. “We can’t win this.

Steven. Please,” Ruby choked out. “You can’t. You...Sapphire, tell him not to.” She looked to her lover, but the royal gem was looking at her hands. “Sapphy?”

“He...he has to,” Sapphire breathed.

“He does not!” Pearl shouted.

“I do!” Steven snapped, turning to glare at Pearl.

She flinched back. Just an inch, but more than enough for Steven to notice. He took a breath, clenching his fists at his side. “I do. I will.” He turned again, looking up at Blue Diamond. “I will. Connie?”

The girl, his companion, his knight, stood between Steven and the diamonds, sword raised, for some moments more. Then it seemed all the will was sapped from her. Connie’s arms lowered, the tip of Rose’s sword digging into the sand. She turned to Steven, gaze lowered, hair obscuring her eyes.

“Connie?” Steven whispered, reaching out to cup her cheek.

“If they hurt you,” she said, her tremors so violent Steven could feel them in his fingers, “I’m going to kill them.”

White Diamond let out a soft laugh, pressing a hand to her chest. “I forgot why she liked them so much. Amusing creatures.”

Connie held out a hand to the diamond and made a gesture whose meaning failed to cross species barriers.

Steven snickered, but quickly grew quiet. He took a moment, looking about at the battered, yet valiant gems. Each plead without words, and he smiled.

Then he stepped away from his family and walked onto Blue Diamond’s palm.

When Blue rose from her crouch and lifted her hand, it was with all the care of a grandmother embracing her child’s firstborn. A little shaky, a little unfamiliar with the maneuver after so many years, but desperate. Her fingers curled up, not into a fist, but into the cup of a hand at rest. Steven reached out to steady himself. Her grip was firm but gentle, her palm a cup, firm and inviting.
gentle.

She brought him up in a smooth arc, slowing as the boy came close to her face, stopping so close that, if he had edged up to the heel of her palm and leaned far out, he could have rested his own hands on the diamond’s nose.

At Blue Diamond’s side, Yellow and White leaned in, Yellow pressing her chest to Blue’s back as she strained close, White holding back only enough to allow the smaller pair their fill.

Steven considered speaking. He could tell them about Earth and all the living things on it, as he’d done with Lapis and Peridot. Or about the ways the Crystal Gems had grown and changed in his lifetime, becoming things never seen before on Homeworld. Or maybe he could tell them the story of his mom and dad. About how they fell in love. About how they made him.

But before he’d worked up the courage to say anything, White Diamond began to hum, joined in moments by Blue and Yellow Diamond, and he froze in horror as the trio opened their mouths to let out a single note.

On the sand below, Connie and the gems cried out his name, and Steven wished he was back with them, instead of feeling the power of the diamonds’ slam into his gem.

But there was...no pain. His skin didn’t crawl, he didn’t double over. Steven stood tall and...confused. Even more-so as he realized the diamonds were no longer singing their one note and no longer looking at him, but focusing their gazes just behind him, each of their eyes reflecting something...something….

Steven spun around.

“No,” he whispered.

The shape of a shimmering pink diamond hung in the air, bright and strong.

Under his feet, Blue Diamond’s once-confident hand began to shake, and Steven stumbled, losing his grip on the gem’s fingers. His sandaled feet sought purchase, and found none, and the boy fell backwards, arms waving, towards the sand below.

It was less than a second before he landed in a pair of cupped palms, shocked by their hardness and coolness, the abrupt landing forcing half the air from his lungs. He gasped to regain his breath, and then gasped once more as he looked up at the close and suddenly vibrant eyes of White Diamond, who was...smiling.

“What...what is that?” Steven whispered, sprawled on the elder leader’s hands. “Is that...because Pink Diamond made my gem?”

“No,” White Diamond said. “No, it is not.”

“T...then...what is that?”

White Diamond gave a soft laugh. “Little gem. You tell me. What are you?”

At the elder gem’s side, Blue Diamond’s once-comforting hands had gone to her mouth, trying to muffle small cries. Yellow Diamond had her arms around her quaking sister, shaking her head.

“I’m...I’m a Crystal Gem,” Steven said, pushing himself up to his knees.
“No,” Blue Diamond croaked. “You’re not. You’re—”

“Blue,” White Diamond warned, “let him say it.”

“You’re her,” Yellow Diamond finished for her sister.

Steven looked between the trio. “I...I’m not Rose Quartz. She’s my—”

“You’re her,” Yellow Diamond repeated, and Steven saw something on the tactician’s face that he had never thought possible. Tears. “You’re her.” She reached out, cupping her hand under White Diamond’s, as if she desperately wished to hold the boy, as well. “Pink. Pink Diamond, it’s...it’s you.”

Far below, on the beach, shocked silence.

And then Amethyst called up, “He’s WHAT?”

“Did you know?” Steven asked, for what felt like the millionth time in his life, though just the first time that night.

A jumble of “nos” and “of course nots” and one “HE’S WHAT?” was Steven’s response, and it was all so automatic—and the gems generally so bad at lying—that Steven believed. Which was no comfort. He groaned, pulling a fuzzy orange blanket tighter around his shoulders, and scooted back, closer to the furnace.

Around him sat his family. Greg, of course, who had arrived too late for the sudden battle (probably the best for his poor, beleaguered heart). But also the Crystal Gems, Lapis and Peridot included. Connie sat at Steven’s right hand, a phone in her lap, fielding a constant influx of texts; not just from her parents—who demanded a reply every five minutes, or they were coming to take their daughter home, so help them!—but from Mayor Dewey. And Sadie (and Lars, at her side). The Frymans and Pizzas, Vidalia’s clan, and even Uncle Andy, far off in Croatia and cursing a frozen engine and fuel scarcity. The arrival of three massive aliens had been noticed by the whole world, and the world wanted answers.

To be fair, so did the gems.

It looked like no one was getting them, though.

Despite all of the fighters having taken a trip to Rose’s Fountain for healing, all somehow looked haggard, if more wary than weary.

“It just...it doesn’t make sense,” Greg said. “I spent so much time with Rose. You all were with her for thousands of years. Surely someone would have seen her turn into an even more enormous woman?” He threw his hands in the air. “It’s not like that would be something you could miss!”

“I saw her...shattered,” Pearl whispered. “I was there. Rose and I—” She cut herself off, clenching a fist and pressing it to her lips. “I saw it. Hundreds of gems watched Pink Diamond shatter.”

“Not to mention Steven having, you know, Rose’s gem and not a big diamond!” Amethyst said.

“Yes!” Pearl agreed. “Those diamonds are wrong! They have to be.”

“But...he resonated to their song,” Peridot muttered, chewing on a knuckle. “The Diamond’s call...but not the...the other one.” She shivered. “I...look. The evidence all points in one direction.”
“It’s just a song,” Lapis said, though she, too, shuddered at the memory of her fingers turning to glass. “Maybe it’s because Steven is a hybrid? After all, he was able to bypass the security barriers on the ship. And you said he was able to keep his form when he broke the safety barriers on the Ruby ship.”

“Maybe that’s how he avoided being corrupted, but what about Steven’s song?” Peridot said, looking to the human boy. “I’ve never heard of a gem being able to stop the corruption song…except if that gem was another diamond.”

“Whatever that was about, it got the diamonds to leave,” Lapis said. “We’ve got until dawn to come up with a new plan.” She looked to Garnet. “Alexandrite wasn’t strong enough, but maybe if Steven and Connie joined? And if Peridot and… and I…” She swallowed.

“It wouldn’t be enough,” Garnet said, dispassionate. “Even if we brought back Bismuth and every gem in this temple, we couldn’t take on a diamond, let alone three.”

Steven gasped. “The other gems! Garnet, if I could stop the song, shouldn’t I be able to reverse it?”

“How, Steven?” Garnet asked, quelling the boy’s excitement with two low, pained words. “That song hurt you. You still don’t sound right.”

Steven reached up to touch his throat. Even drinking from the fountain hadn’t soothed the hot scratch that came with every word. Aspirin had helped dull the pain, but he could feel it waiting for when the double-dose wore off.

“It was less about stopping the song than… negating it,” Peridot said. “And shocking the diamonds enough to stop. If they had tried again when you stopped singing….”

“But…but I want to try,” Steven said, a crack on the final word, though that crack was more similar to the ones that had begun to sneak into his speech in the last few months, rather than from the day’s strain. “I can do it. Listen. Ahhh,” Steven opened his mouth to sing, but it came out shrill and wavery. “Aaaaa,” he tried again, frowning. “Aaaaah-huu-hugh.” The boy’s creaking song dissolved into coughing and a wheeze. He rubbed at his injured throat, going silent.

“Give it a few days, buddy,” Greg said. “I’ve blown my voice at a few concerts in my day. Gargle with salt water and drink some honey and ginger tea. You’ll be singing in no time.”

“We don’t have ‘no time,’” Peridot said, flailing her arms. “We don’t have any time!”

“Either way, even I know we need a plan,” Amethyst said, turning her focus to Garnet. “So… what’s going to work?”

It was an unsettling question from Amethyst. She’d never dismissed Garnet’s abilities, but none could recall a time when the purple gem had sought out the future. Amethyst—and all quartz kind—were responders. Doers, fighting against gems and fate, never accepting any loss.

Garnet sighed, pushing her visor up to rub her third eye. “They have a sapphire on one of those ships. Probably many sapphires. Having them so close…it fuzzi...
“They can be there and it could still be a trap,” Connie said, and all went silent at the truth in her words.

Steven rubbed his round gem. There was no way he was some...long-dead diamond. How long was it going to take the Homeworld gems to realize that? Well...Jasper had never seemed to catch on, but she, to be frank, didn’t seem quite so intelligent as those massive diamonds.

More importantly, did he even want the diamonds to realize he wasn’t one of them? What would they do when their hope was once-again...well, shattered?

“It sounds like we don’t really have any options but to go,” Greg said, looking at his son. “We’ve just got to show up, right? Like to a coworker’s wedding. You gems can't fight the diamonds. Talking to them is our only chance.”

“I guess you’re...wait, ‘our?’” Steven said, looking to his father. “‘Our?’ Dad, no. You can’t even fight. You’ll—”

“I’m not letting my son do this alone,” Greg said, reaching out to lay a hand on Steven’s knee.

“That’s right,” Connie said, sending a final text to her parents and long-pressing on her phone’s power button until the screen went dark. “We’re all going, Steven. Whatever happens, we face this together. Humans and gems, fighting for Earth!” She held a fist up in the air, earning a whooping cheer from Amethyst.

“Aw yeah,” Greg said, holding his palm out to Connie, who gave him an enthusiastic high-five that left him shaking his palm out and blowing on his fingers.

“Sorry, Mister Universe,” Connie said, blushing. “Training. I guess I’m still not used to being so...strong.”

“No, it’s fine,” Greg said, standing. “That’s good. It means we have the best possible chance tomorrow. But know what else will give us an even better chance?” He raised a brow at the gems and human children, an enormous smile on his face.

“E...explosives?” Peridot asked, hesitant.

Greg pause. “I mean...maybe. But I meant a good night’s rest. Come on, everyone. Gems, you too. Time to cool down and head off to sleep.”

Peridot groaned. “I’d much rather it be explosives. I hate sleeping.”

“You only have to do it once,” Greg cajoled.

“You’ll only get to do it once,” Lapis muttered, wiping the smile from Greg’s face.

“Greg is right,” Garnet said, standing and walking towards the bathroom, stopping just to its left and opening a thinner, slatted door. “There’s nothing we can do to train that won’t exhaust us.” Pulling out a stack of blankets that rose nearly as high as her hair, Garnet made her way back to the lounge, where she tossed the blankets up high, each falling down in gentle, perfectly flat rectangles, marking out beds for each of the meeting’s participants. “Now. Go get ready for bedtime.”

Lapis sighed, also taking to her feet. “Fine, but, we can’t leave Veggie Head overnight. Last time we tried that, he got pump-napped by racoons.” Glancing down to Peridot, she added, “Come on.”
Peridot, still deep in a scowl, grumbled back, “Do you really need me for that?”

Lapis paused, chewing on her lower lip. Tentative, she reached out with a hand, waiting.

Peridot took some moments to notice the hand, and finally looked up. Her scowl faded and she studied the blue gem, eyes darting across her thin face.

“I need you,” Lapis said, softly. “Really.”

In the background, Amethyst and Pearl shot one another glances, brows rising, before turning back to the little drama that was the barn gems.

“Oh...okay,” Peridot couched and reached out, allowing Lapis to encompass a hand with her own. A little tug and she was also on her feet, lead by her barn-mate, threading their way between gem and human legs. Peridot held her head high, the angle of her visor hiding her eyes, though it was unable to mask the dark green on her cheeks. Mercifully, all in the room remained quiet until the pair had mounted the warp pad and phased away.

The moment the pair of gems was gone, though, Amethyst crowed in glee. “Finally! Go get it, P-dot!” Woofing, she pumped her arm in the air, cheering on the long-absent gem.

Steven tilted his head, looking to Amethyst. “Go get whaaaaah!” Mid-way through his word, understanding dawned, and Steven went into a cracking shout. It took some seconds to recover from the jab of pain in his throat, but when he had, his excitement had only grown, his volume barely kept in check. “Oh em gee, I’ve got to see this!” Jumping to his feet, he sprinted towards the warp pad, but soon found his feet swinging several inches off the ground.

Garnet raised Steven up by the back of his shirt, making sure to hold on low, so he wouldn’t choke. “No one is to follow Peridot and Lapis. This is a private moment for them, and I will not have it turned into a show.”

“But...but....awwww...” Steven slumped, bending at his waist. His toes and fingertips both nearly touched the floor. “But fusion....”

“Garnet is right, Steven,” Pearl said, standing and coming over to her charge, putting her hands under his arms to lift him back up to a standing position. “They deserve some privacy.”

“Speaking of privacy,” Garnet said, letting Steven’s shirt go and looking down at Pearl. “I think there’s enough time before bed for a phone call.”

“Hmmm? Oh!” Pearl straightened up, arms going rigid at her sides and a light blue blush covering not only her cheeks, but also rising up the back of her neck. “I...yes. Yes, true. I...yes.” Patting Steven’s hair as a last bit of comfort, she trotted past the warp pad and to the temple door, which lit up and slid open, letting Pearl in to her inner sanctum.

As the door closed again, Amethyst looked about at the other five remaining beings, lips quirking. “Well. Anyone looking to have some private time? I know, I’m intimidating, but I’m a real pussycat when you get to know me.” To illustrate, her form glowed bright, sinking down until all were presented with a luxurious, fluffy cat, who sat up and tossed her head back before licking at the ruff of fur on her chest.

Greg laughed, pushing himself over on the couch and reaching out to twitch a finger under Amecat’s chin. “Aw, how can anyone resist that offer?”

Leaning into Greg’s hand Amethyst allowed first her chin to be scratched, and then her ears, before
her body began a long undulation under the human’s hand as she walked over and settled on his lap.

Greg’s laugh turned a fraction strained. “Okay...uh...is this weird?”

“You’re a sack of thinking meat, dude. Of course it’s weird. Between the shoulder blades. Yeah. Aw yeah. That’s the stuff.”

Looking up at his son, Greg tried to regain his smile, but only managed on his upper lip, and just on one side. “Does she do this a lot?”

“Only to the unsuspecting,” Connie said, standing.

“Unsuspecting?” Greg looked down at Amethyst, who stretched, paws flexing, revealing inch-long claws.

“Yes,” the girl said, going to Steven’s side. “I learned better after the first time I missed training because she wouldn’t let me up. You’re stuck.”

Groaning, Greg let his head fall back on the couch back. “Ugh...just like a real cat.” His hand slowed as the will left his body.

Which was not to Amethyst’s liking. Sabre-sharp, but so-delicate claws curved down into Greg’s leg, not puncturing, but pushing in the skin of Greg’s thigh in a clear and diplomatic warning. The human clued in and got back to his scratching duties.

“Garnet,” Connie said, looking up at the mountain of a gem, “is there enough time for a walk before bed? To relax?”

Garnet opened her mouth to answer, then paused. While she continued, as was her usual, to display very little emotion, there were little twitches on her face. The right side seemed to tense up, lips curving down, while the left was soft and smooth, mouth not so much smiling as serene. Sighing and giving a nod, Garnet turned from the two children, climbing the stairs to Steven’s room to fetch pillows. “Fifteen minutes. Then, bedtime.”

“Yes! Thanks, Garnet!” Connie cheered. Reaching out, she wrapped her fingers around Steven’s wrist, pulling him to the beach house door. “Come on! Let’s see if we can find any sand dollars.”

At first pulled off balance by his surprisingly strong friend, Steven got his feet back under himself quickly, doing a few jogging steps to catch up with Connie’s stride. “Huh? Connie, it’s high tide, we won’t find any—” But his words were cut off by another tug as Connie pulled her friend through the door and began to sprint down the stairs, only slowing when feet met sand. That being more from necessity, given how impossible it is to run on dry, loose sand without tripping and getting a mouthful of grit.

Still, they moved quickly for two people walking on sand, tethered to one another by Connie’s strong grip, which showed no sign of easing. It wasn’t uncomfortable, and Steven was sure he could twist free with no protest from the girl, but she was so focused on moving forward that he just let himself be carried along without an explanation. Just the sound of breath growing a little more labored and the crunch-squeak of sand pressed under feet.

Connie didn’t stop until they had nearly reached the tideline, where the ocean water added firmness to the shifting ground beneath their feet. There she paused, looking at the sky. Not at the moon rising over the ocean, creating a shifting reflection of itself in the water, but a bit above and to the left, where three shapes also hung in the air, far enough to only resemble blobs, though the light of
the moon gave them a little shine. Yellow and blue and a white which shone like the moon itself.

Steven stood at Connie’s side, following her gaze for a moment. Once he realized what she had focused upon, he turned his attention away from the distant flagships of the diamonds, and to the girl’s face.

She still had a little scar on her cheek from her early training days. Maybe a half-inch long, and thin as pencil lead, but it was light on her brown skin, which had gone even darker as summer and the sun returned. It was the only real mark he could see, after their trip to the healing fountain, but he could recall each scrape and bruise and drop of blood she’d suffered just a few hours before. And he could hear her gasps and cries as the diamonds made their few, devastatingly effective strikes before the song.

But, despite all that, her eyes were still strong and keen, never wavering from the diamond ships on the horizon. Connie would attack the very flagships if Pearl had built her a shuttle.

It must have been at least a minute that they stood there. When Connie turned her head to look at Steven, she gave a small, strained laugh, reaching up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ears. She used her free hand, her grip on Steven’s wrist no less strong after all the time they’d been out.

“So...do you feel any...different?”

Steven swallowed, and it felt like a lump remained in his throat. Not an obstruction, but a muscle spasm working its way slowly down. He didn’t think it was all from the singing. “I’ve felt like this for a long time,” he said.

“Yeah. I mean,” Connie shrugged, “if you were some kind of...other gem, you’ve always been that gem. Right?”

“Ah.” Steven paused, then nodded. “Yeah. Exactly. I don’t know what’s going on, but...it’s always been going on.”

“So you just need to figure it out!” Connie said, smiling. She gave Steven’s wrist a tighter squeeze, and then her grip finally slackened enough to give her friend’s arm its freedom.

Rather than taking it back, though, Steven turned his palm up, cupping it against Connie’s own, and then, slowly, shifting the grip until his fingers intertwined with hers, and they stood on the ocean, in the moonlight, looking down at their clasped hands and most definitely not at each other.

“I will figure this out,” Steven whispered.

“Mmmhmmm,” Connie agreed, a little squeak coming into her hum.

“And when I do...” Steven bit at his lower lip, daring to lift his eyes for a peek at Connie’s face. He smiled on realizing she, too, was worrying at her lip, and her scar stood out even brighter over blushing skin and rising moonlight.

“Connie?” Steven said, and it was a clear enough question that the girl looked up, waiting for the rest.

She was only a little taller than him, now. Maybe an inch. Despite being younger than him, she’d always been tall, but the last few months had changed things enough that, when Steven reached out and put his free arm around Connie’s shoulder, dragging her body to his, he was easily able to rest his chin on her shoulder and hers on his.

Connie stood, surprised in her friend’s embrace, before putting her own arm about Steven’s waist.
It felt a little odd, standing there, each with an arm at their side so they could keep their fingers twined, but neither was letting go.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Steven whispered.

“I know,” Connie said, holding on tighter.

Steven turned his head, hiding his face in Connie’s neck, knowing she was going to feel the wetness of tears on her skin. He didn’t worry about that. She’d seen him cry plenty of times. He cried easily. And it wasn’t long before she, too, was shaking and pushing down sobs, only allowing hot, wet breath and strained squeaks out of her mouth.

There really wasn’t any way for them to comfort each other. No soothing shushes or “it’s gonna be okay” declarations. They knew it wouldn’t. There were three diamond ships on the horizon, only holding off their attack until they could figure out what this strange Earth boy was to them. And, once they realized he was nothing more than the killer of their beloved companion, it wasn’t just Steven who would suffer, but the entire planet. The life of everything below those ships was being measured in hours, by a race which thought of things in millennium.

It was, no doubt, longer than fifteen minutes before Garnet came onto the porch and called to her human charges. Future Vision, even when marred by the none-too-distant presence of another clairvoyant gem, had definite uses. Just enough time had passed for the crying to turn into a gentle emptiness, and for the ocean wind at night to dry their eyes. The children parted with smiles, wiping at their eyes, not bothering to hide the strain, even if they were unwilling to speak of it.

Then Steven and Connie walked back up the beach, fingers still laced together.

They drifted off to songs from Greg, who himself had betrayed drooping eyes and clumsy fingers as the night wore on. In a half-asleep daze, Steven saw Pearl reach out and ease the guitar from Greg’s hands, setting it aside and patting a pillow on the couch to urge him to just tilt a bit to the side, until he fell over into deep slumber.

Steven didn’t sleep solidly, but in fits. Several times, he woke to a dim light from his right as Pearl checked another text message. Other times, it was the shifting of Amethyst to his left as she fought for a better position. And, sometime after the moon had disappeared behind the temple, its light gone from the windows, the warp pad came to life, and all the gems, sat up, tensed, only to find it was Peridot, finally returned from the barn, Veggie Head cradled in her arms.

Pearl looked down at Steven, who closed his eyes, pretending sleep. It must have been good enough for her, as she whispered “Where’s Lapis?”

“The sea,” Peridot said, stepping around the tangle of bodies, finding a large area which had been left for her, Veggie Head, and one other. She set the half-animal, half-vegetable creature down, urging it to be quiet, and then lay on the blankets herself, moving in as close to the other gems as possible, instead of using the entire, geneous space available.

Questions hung in the air, but none were voiced, and all the Crystal Gems lay back down, their bodies taking on a still and quiet that would have been unnerving to anyone who had not grown up beside them.

In and out of sleep. He caught five minutes here, ten there, but it was the kind of night where, logically, you know you have slept, but you’re remain certain you lay there, awake and thinking, for every single minute.
It was still dark and quiet when Steven left his bed on the floor. His movements were slow and silent. Every moment, he expected Garnet’s large hand on his shoulder or his father’s voice, asking where he was going. Perhaps it was charity on their part as they saw Steven approach the Temple Gate and bring up its resonance with his gem. They all needed time alone, on occasion, in their sacred spaces. And with so little time left….

Steven stepped through into the brightness and pink clouds of his mother’s room, but he did not stay for long. Once inside, he called out to whatever powered the space, telling it where in the temple he needed to go, and it guided him there as it had those few years before, when he had only just begun to control his powers. He slipped out of his room and back in only moments later, holding something close in his arms. He breathed a sigh of relief, half unable to believe he’d gotten this far. He addressed the shifting clouds once more. “Any way to get to the hand?” He asked.

A glowing rectangle appeared before the boy, solidifying into a wooden door, which he opened and stepped through, finding himself high above the beach, standing before a washer, dryer, and warp pad.

And one very pissed-off pink lion, sitting upon the warp pad. It was actually rather impressive the degree of disdain the creature could exude without moving, and while being so glaringly...pink.

“Oh, h-hey...Lion,” Steven greeted, all false enthusiasm, holding his prize close to his chest.

“Waiting, uh...for the sun?”

Lion flicked an ear and blinked slowly at Steven, the ocean breeze ruffling his fur.

“I, uh...I think I just heard the Big Donut opening and putting out the trash. I bet they’ve got some expired Lion Lickers in there.”

Lion perked up, sitting a bit taller and looking off down the beach. After a moment, however, he seemed to compact again, looking back at Steven, tail lashing.

“Heh...yeah. I guess you’d know before anyone,” Steven said. “Look, Lion. I...I need to go somewhere on the warp pad. Could you...?”

Lion looked upon the hybrid boy, impassive.

But then, he shifted. Just a bit to one side. He was still well on the warp pad, but there was a little space to his left. Just enough for a child. He looked down on it, and then back to Steven, head tilted.

“Oh. You...want to come with?” Steven asked.

Lion sat silent.

“Um...okay,” Steven said, coming forward and mounting the platform. “But you have to be good, okay? No hunting up weird animals or digging or, er...grooming yourself. Beha-ow!”

Steven ducked down and rubbed the back of his head, looking over his shoulder at the lashing, thick tail of the cat. How could something with such a fluffy tip hit so hard? One of these days, Lion was going to break something.

“Just...just be good. Please.” Steven said, knowing that the request was all but useless. Lion was a cat. And a feral one, at that. He’d do what he wanted.

Steven paused there on the warp pad only a moment longer. He kept expecting it to light up and for
Lion and himself to be pushed off as several angry gems transported up to ask just what, precisely, he was doing, and with...with that? But it was just the setting moon and the blinking stars and the line on the horizon where you could barely tell that the ocean ended and the sky began.

Steven took a steadying breath, hugging his arms tighter about the bubble in his arms, and activated the transport.

His body turned to light and the warp spirited him away to that strange, interstitial space between spaces. He had just enough time to straighten from his stealthy crouch before he felt himself go solid again. Steven stood in a sweet-scented wilderness of vines and strawberries, already awash in the light of a day that was still hours from touching Beach City.

“Early,” a voice said from behind the boy, and he spun around to find not three gems waiting, but one. Still tall and powerful and terrifying, but just one creature, her pale skin almost reflective in the bright light of the noon sun overhead.

White Diamond actually...sat. She was sitting on the ground of the Strawberry Battlefield, shifted to one hip, her legs curled up at her side, hands folded gently on her lap. Her diaphanous gown was unsoiled, despite being pressed to the dirt, and she seemed to give off a faint light as the sun reflected off her skin. She looked down upon the boy, but it wasn’t from nearly so far away as when they battled. And her gaze certainly was far less distant than when he was merely the new form of an old, hated enemy. It was...curious.

“Where is the rest of your retinue?” White Diamond asked, turning her gaze to Lion, who was ignoring her steadfastly, flopping down on the warp pad, pushing Steven off the surface with a back paw.

“Where’s yours?” Steven asked, mentally cursing himself for the sullen turn in his voice.

If any offense had been given, it wasn’t received, as White Diamond shrugged. “I do not have the best grasp of time, I suppose. Especially in such small quantities. So, I am also...early.” She smiled, and it was...warm. Easy. Perhaps not familiar, but unconcerned. “Now...do you intend to answer any of my questions today?”

“Yes,” Steven said. Then shook his head. Then nodded. Then sighed. “Yes, but...I’m here alone because I have a question, and I need to know the answer right now.”

White Diamond extended a generous hand. “Ask away.”

Steven looked down on the bubble wrapped in his arms. He held it out. “You caused the Corruption?”

White Diamond looked about at the field. At the weapons that served as the final remnants and memorials of a thousand-thousand gems. At the strawberries run wild on the ambient energy of their fights and their deaths. At all that had once been.

She sighed. “If you speak of the song we sung to end the war on this planet, then yes. The other diamonds and I did cause the Corruption. But I really do think you can’t put all of the blame on us. The Crystal Gems did shatter many of our soldiers, and my own sister.”

“I know, I know,” Steven said, words rushing out of his mouth with far too little thought. “But you made gems get sick. You made gems like this.” He held out the bubble, urging the diamond to look.

She did. Though she didn’t lean in and though her eyes were so far away from the bubble and the
gem inside that any human would have been strained to see more than a vague geometric shape, Steven had the impression she could see each facet of the cut and each blemish on its hard surface.

“Yes,” she said. “We did.”

“You did it,” Steven said. “So you fix it.”

White Diamond blinked. Genuine shock was obvious on her face, and, on a diamond, it almost seemed comical. But then she frowned, and it sent a chill through Steven’s heart.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you did this!” Steven shouted. “You did this, to Crystal Gems and to your gems and to gems who just couldn’t get out of the way fast enough. My home is filled with the gems of soldiers who were turned into monsters just for doing what they were told, or for doing what was right, and you need to fix this, White Diamond. If you’re any kind of...of gem like other gems, if you feel like other gems, then you need to fix them!”

Sighing, the diamond rolled her eyes, rubbing at the deep line between her brows. “I didn’t mean why should I? Seriously, I don’t care either way. I meant why haven’t you?”

Steven let out a small, cracked noise. He looked down at the bubble in his arms. At the orange gem within, and the blue and green mottling that had nearly overtaken the entire surface. He had to control his grip on the bubble, because he was so close to just tightening his arms and letting it pop, and letting the gem inside emerge. “But...I can’t.”

“Of course you can,” White Diamond said, upper lip curving up in a light snarl. “You’re a diamond.”

“I don’t know how!” Steven shouted, and the force of the words, even from such a small creature, had White Diamond leaning back. Just a few degrees, though it translated to several feet of her large body.

She opened her mouth to shout back a reprimand...and stopped.

Below her, the small diamond—this strange creature she had never seen before, but which she had felt so many times, which she had stood beside for centuries, and which she had said goodbye to millennia ago—was crying.

Surely, it wasn’t an activity she was unfamiliar with. Over the years she must have spent many nights at Blue Diamond’s side, soothing her through long grief, wishing she knew what to do for someone who found themselves unable to move on.

“I...I don’t know how,” Steven said, his tears falling onto the bubble and sliding off its surface. “This...this one is my fault, and I don’t know how to fix it. Please. Please, just...just fix it.”

White Diamond looked to the sky. Far above, barely visible, two ships were descending. Blue and Yellow, on time to the coming meeting, surely ready with battalions and battle plans. Ready to end this era of loss, for all and good.

She again looked about the battlefield, at the strewn weapons of countless brave warriors. Gems she herself had directed to grow from the ground. Which she had greeted and evaluated and sent forth to serve Homeworld and their kind. Gems who were now only remembered by their weapons, and not by the shattered jewels that gave them life.
She looked down at the almost-human, almost-gem creature that shook and sobbed on a warp pad, holding onto one of the gems he had ordered created once, so long ago, in another life.

Gently, White Diamond reached out a hand.

“*I will teach you,*” she whispered.

Steven looked up, into the clouded-glass eyes of the diamond.

“I will heal her. This *I* will do for you. This once.” She held her hand out, inches from the bubble. “But *then,* I will teach you. And you will learn from me, and from my sisters. We will teach you how to be a diamond once again.”

Steven hesitated. But briefly. All he had to do was look down at the orange gem in his arms, and he knew what had to be done.

Gently, he placed the bubble on the diamond’s fingertips, giving it a little push so it rolled down onto her palm, where it rested in a confluence of lines.

“Do it,” he said. “Heal her.” He took a deep breath. “And then...teach me. Teach me everything.”

White Diamond smiled and gave a small nod.

She looked down at the miniscule pink bubble in her hand and clicked her tongue, soft and quick, the sound digging into the surface of the bubble, popping it.

The gem inside hung in the air. Then glowed. Both figures on the battlefield watched as it turned to light, growing in size, first becoming an enormous figure of power and purpose, a cascade of hair falling down its back. Then a wave of static passed over the gem, and it began to turn. It bent over, arms shortening and legs elongating. Its mouth turned to what could better be called a “maw,” lined with sharp edges instead of teeth. Its hair became a ridged mane, all down its spine. And all over the skin, which was at first orange and cinnabar, green splotches spread and sprouted spikes, until it was hard to tell which color was more prominent.

The gem beast that was once Jasper rose to its hind legs and roared a challenge up at White Diamond.

White Diamond laughed. “Ah! Yellow Diamond was wondering where this one went. Well. Brash as ever.” Reaching out with one finger, she attempted to stroke the monster’s mane, but was warned off by slashing claws. “And as impertinent as ever, she will be disappointed to know. Though...I suppose this one isn’t her problem anymore.” White looked down on Steven. “She’s yours.”

Steven frowned, opening his mouth to protest the ownership of this gem, but was silenced but an upraised finger from his elder.

“Now. Listen.” White Diamond turned her gaze back to Jasper and opened her mouth, pouring out a song.

And it was beautiful.

The beach house was roused long before dawn by the cries out on the sea. Distant, but shrill, cutting through the troubled sleep of all inside.
“Whuzza?” Greg mumbled, struggling to sit up from the absolute pit that was the old, sagging couch. He had barely got an arm under his chest by the time the gems had taken to their feet, rushing for the screen door, somehow managing to go through in a swift line, instead of bunching up. Connie was close behind, followed by a barking pumpkin dog.

“It’s Lapis!” Pearl shouted for the elder human’s benefit. “What is she sa—”

“They’re leaving! The ships are leaving!” The blue gem went from a small spot on the horizon to her full size hovering before them in seconds, flapping her wings before her to counteract her momentum. At her back, the ocean had parted ten feet down the surface, the waves crashing off to either side before filling back to the sea’s normally troubled level.

In the sky above, three spots of color were moving away, growing smaller, until they seemed no bigger than the last stars in the pre-dawn sky.

“Get Steven,” Lapis said. “They’re going to sing again!”

“Liars!” Pearl snapped, turning from Lapis to the other gems. “Quickly, we need to get inside the Temple. Steven, your shi—”

From far above, nearly out of the atmosphere, there came a tremendous boom and a flash of light.

They screamed. All, without any attempts at bravery. Even Connie, the safe human, screamed out final breaths, arms raised as ineffective guards.

Their screams faded out before the last echo of thunder from the sky. In the silence that followed, each waited for the first, terrible note.

The waves crashed on the beach, and birds startled away by the noise cried out in annoyance. In Beach City, car alarms set off by the explosion blared, turning off again one by one.

The beach house screen door creaked open and crashed closed.

“Where’s Steven?”

The gems turned to look at Greg, standing before the door, looking them over. They turned to one another.

“He went into his temple room last night,” Amethyst said. “I bet he’ll come out—”

The quartz was interrupted by the crash of Garnet’s knees hitting the wood deck, and then her fists slamming down to either side of her head as she screamed, “No, no, NO!”

“Garnet!” Pearl crouched next to the leader gem, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Garnet, what’s wrong? Are they going to sing?”

“No no no no no!” Garnet cried out again, and her body turned to light as she literally fell apart, leaving Sapphire supine where her greater self had just been, Ruby staggering back a few steps before getting her balance and looking down on the screaming seer.

“They’re gone,” Ruby said, oddly calm for the normally raving gem. “The ships, the other sapphires got far enough away, so Garnet looked for Steven and…. Ruby went to stand before Sapphire, laying her hands on the court gem’s shoulders.

“Ruby,” Greg said, words even, yet tense. “Where is Steven?”
Ruby shook her head. “We didn’t see him.”

Greg’s mouth opened in a croaking cry. Even without all the words, the final sentence, the worst fate for a parent, his eyes had begun to spill over in tears. “Is he...d—?”

“No,” Ruby said, looking up at the father. “No, if he was, we could see...we’d still see him, somewhere. We didn’t see him...anywhere.”

Peridot gasped, and looked up past Lapis, to the sky. “If you can’t see him, then...”

Lapis turned in the air, following the path of the retreating diamonds. “No. No!” Pumping her wings again, she streaked into the air, far faster than her wings themselves could accelerate.

She didn’t get far before coming to another sudden stop. For a moment, Peridot couldn’t see the reason. Then, far off in the sky, a speck appeared. Small and blurry, at first, but falling swiftly into Lapis’s outstretched palms.

Her wingbeats slowed. Lapis began to descend, gentle, controlled, until her bare feet touched the wooden deck, and still she continued down, legs folding under her until she sat back on her thighs, feet just visible under her pooling skirt.

“Sapphire,” Ruby whispered, shaking her lover’s shoulders. “It’s a communicator. The diamonds sent a communicator.”

Sapphire shook her head, continuing her cries, though they grew softer, the ice forming around her body growing at a glacial rate.

“What is that?” Greg said, stepping to Sapphire’s side. “Some kind of ransom letter? What does it say? How can you even read that?”

“No, it’s,” Pearl began, then sighed. “Here.” Reaching out, she twisted the top of the octahedron, which moved smoothly for a full rotation before becoming suddenly stuck. From within, a pink light began to glow and the communicator rose out of Lapis’s hands.

The gems and humans looked on as the glow strengthened, overtaking the other colored sides of the octahedron, which suddenly split in two, the pieces moving apart, the glow between then turning flat and solid and, suddenly, shifting from a plain, bright pink and into a full-color display of a room, though said room was, for the most part, a sterile white.

A boy sat in the middle of the screen, a strained smile on his face and an enormous pink lion lounging behind him, forming the back of his seat on the floor.

“Hi, everyone,” Steven Universe said, waving, then quickly looking away from the screen. “Um...gosh, where to begin?”

“You begin,” Pearl shouted, stamping her foot, “by coming down here this instant!”

“First of all, this is a recording,” Steven said, and Pearl screeched in frustration. “Sorry. I know I’m not going to be able to answer all your questions, because I won’t think of all of them. But, uh...here goes?”

On the deck of the beach house, gems and humans looked at one another and, without saying a word, began to move closer. Even Sapphire went silent, shifting from her wailing crouch to sit in the icy patch, arms wrapped about her knees. Ruby stood at the blue gem’s side, arms wrapped around her partner’s shoulders, squeezing to remind Sapphire that she was still there.
Up above, the image of Steven took a deep, preparatory breath. “You’re safe,” he said, then quickly, “I’m safe. We’re all...all of us, the Earth, everyone. We’re safe. Don’t worry, the diamonds won’t be coming back, they won’t be sending anyone. That would be...” He held up his hands, making air quotes, “‘Interfering with a sister-colony.’ At least, that’s what we’re calling things until we come up with a better term for....” He frowned. “Gah...beginning, beginning.”

A longer pause came as the boy sorted out his thoughts. None below complained, as they all studied their loved one’s face for emotions, for connections, for anything.

“Oh... Okay,” Steven said. “The diamonds think I’m a diamond. Pink Diamond. And...I don’t know, maybe there’s something there, because I...I can do things mom couldn’t. But only a few things, and not the things you need me to do. Things like...protecting the Earth or leading the gems or...healing Corruption.” He looked directly at whatever device had been used to record his speech. “They can do all that. Diamonds can heal Corruption. White Diamond, she...” Steven paused, biting his lower lip, then looking off to the right.

He turned back to the camera. “Hey, Peridot? Um, get ready to calm down Lapis, okay?”

Peridot frowned and, though she knew it was a recording, she asked Steven “Why?”

Her answer came as Steven reached out, grabbing his recording device and moving it so the view shifted, no longer straight back at his face, but over his right shoulder.

Standing some thirty feet away, crossing her arms and leaning against a vast window—an entire glass wall, it seemed, with no frame in sight—looking out on a view of the Earth below, stood a familiar, enormous, and no longer green-mottled orange gem. It took the gem some moments to realize she was under scrutiny, and when she did, Jasper looked up for only a second before scowling and turning her back on the recorder.

Down on Earth, Lapis screamed. “No! No, Steven, NO! Get AWAY from her!”

Peridot hesitated, looking between the screen above and her friend, before edging in towards the elder gem. “Calm down. We need to hear Steven, Lap—”

“Shut up!” Lapis snarled, turning on Peridot, her wings raised high above her head, the very tips curved back down, edges sparkling like glass in the rising sun.

Peridot’s mouth hung open and she looked up at the face of her companion. Then, swiftly, she looked to the ground, taking a step back, hand going to fists at her side.

“I know you’re not okay with this,” Steven said, returning the camera to its original position, flopping back onto Lion, who huffed at the impact, raising his head to give Steven a reproachful look. “But White Diamond healed Jasper, and then she did that song thing, where the pink diamond came out of me and....” He sighed, rubbing his hands over his face. “None of us—me, the diamonds, Jasper—none of us know what is going on. But Jasper...she said she wouldn’t hurt me.”

Steven frowned, brows drawing. “Vowed, really.” Shaking his head, he tried to meet gazes across the screen once again.

“A diamond can cure corruption, but they won’t just...do it for me. Not to everyone. It’s that ‘interfering with a sister-colony’ excuse. If we’re going to get rid of corruption on Earth, then...I’ve got to do it myself. And...I don’t know how. Yet.

“So we—White Diamond and I—made a deal. It took a few hours, and there’s still some little bits to work out, but it’s...fair.”
Steven hesitated, then. For quite some time. He looked down at his hands, fingers laced together, with the thumbs rolling over one another. He had a few near-starts. Single sounds, not even words, each waved away as he went back to thinking.

Down below, no one was speaking. Greg had long-since settled down on the ground. The early-morning wake-up, the disappearance of his son, and the sudden presence of this communiqué from space having raised his adrenaline and heart rate too quickly for the out of shape man. His heart didn’t so much race as seemed barely to beat, and Amethyst had gone to his side, feeling his forehead and pressing her fingers to his neck. Whatever she felt didn’t seem to increase her alarm, but she kept by the man’s side.

Ruby rocked Sapphire, shushing her little cries, trying to hold her close, as if holding the gem was nearly as good as being fused once more.

Pearl was crying. Without any sounds, merely letting the tears cascade down her cheeks. But she would not wipe them away or hide her face in her hands, because she needed to look up at her charge. She had to keep looking at his face.

Lapis, stood, wings still outstretched, shaking and Peridot looked on, terrified, more terrified than she had been facing the Cluster. Even Veggie Head seemed to feel the tension, backing up from the pair to go stand next to Connie.

Connie. Who merely shook her head, whispering, so quiet her repeated word had been overtaken by each of Steven’s own, a constant litany of “no no no.”

Steven took a deep breath and finally continued. “They get to teach me for as long as you taught me.” A very brief pause before he shook his hands at the recorder. “Not five thousand years! Gah, no. I mean, they wanted that, but they knew it wasn’t an option.

“Fourteen years. They’ll teach me for fourteen years. All about gems. Writing and technology and culture. And...how gems are made.” He hesitated there. “On ancillary colonies. Nowhere that there’s complex life. That was one of my demands.

“I said no, at first. I didn’t...I don’t want to make gems. But what the diamonds did to Earth, trying to create more gems...there’s got to be a better way. And I’m not going to find it if I don’t learn how it’s done in the first place.

“So, making gems and leading gems and...and how to heal the Corruption.”

“Fourteen years?” Greg said, as if it had taken this long to process. And perhaps it had.

“But...but…” Connie said, “but he’ll be an adult! We’ll be old when he’s done!”

“I wish there was some other way,” Steven said, closing his eyes, his lashes ushering small teardrops down his cheeks. “But this is what I have to do. The diamonds said...if you had me for fourteen years without them interfering, then you had to do the same for them. They won’t let you send me any messages directly. This communicator will only work one more time, and the only message they’ll pass on is if one of you all is really hurt. If it...looks bad, I can come home.” He gave a strained smile. “But...do me a favor, guys? Take Dad to the fountain every few weeks, okay? The diamonds...did not like that concession.”

“Because we won’t let you go again if you come back!” Greg shouted at the sky. “Steven! Steven, dammit, you come back this instant!”

“And the diamonds will let you send supplies,” Steven went on, his past self oblivious to his
father’s mourning. “Food, seeds for growing fresh stuff, clothes, books, movies. Oh, and, Dad?”

“What?” Greg said, as if it were a real conversation.

“Please send a guitar, okay?” Steven smiled. “I don’t want to get out of practice.”

Greg suddenly let out a wail that the gems hadn’t heard in over fourteen years. Not since Greg had lost someone else who had meant everything.

“I’ve got to wrap this up. Um...gееze.” Steven huffed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Look, I know you’re all going to be worried. About what the diamonds are going to say to me, and what I’ll think of you because of what they tell me and just...don’t worry. I mean...you taught me first, right?

“Amethyst,” Steven said, and the purple gem sat up straighter, turning her attention from the boy’s father to the boy himself. “Our first stop is the Zoo. I’m kicking Holly Blue Agate out of there. Your sisters are going to be okay.”

Amethyst smiled, small, and whispered, “Thanks, bud.”

“Peridot,” Steven went on. “If I’ve got to make gems, I’m...I’m gonna give it everything I’ve got. I’m going to give them everything. Even if I can’t make as many as the other diamonds, I’m not cutting any corners. Every gem gets to be the best they could ever be.”

Peridot nodded, stern.

“And Pearl,” Steven said. “Whatever those gems are, they...they can be whatever they want. I told the diamonds that. I’m allowed to do what I want with my gems, and I am going to have them choose who they are.”

“Good,” Pearl whispered.

“And I promise you, Pearl,” Steven said, “I am never...never making a pearl. Never.”

Pearl let out a quick breath. “Yes. Good.”

“Garnet,” Steven addressed his leader. “I’m not going to keep everyone...divided. Or make them seem...different, or more or less important because of what type of gem they are. We’ll be gems. Just gems.”

Ruby continued to look at Sapphire, rocking her gently, but nodded in agreement.

“And, I guess...Lapis, I know you’re mad at me.”

Lapis flicked her wings.

“But I chose Jasper to be healed. What you both went through...I’m never going to let gems take advantage of each other. Not like that, not any other way. I’m gonna protect them, from each other and...from themselves.”

“But who is going to protect you, Steven?” Lapis keened. “Who’s going to protect you from her?”

“Dad,” Steven said. “Dad. I’m going to be okay. All the other things, all the things that I learned that the gems didn’t teach me? That was all you. You taught me, Dad. I’m gonna be okay. After all...I’m Mom’s son, right?”

There was no way for Greg’s wailing to grow louder or more pained. It just went on and on.
“And...Connie.”

Steven sat forward, pressing his lips into a thin line. He looked away from the camera, a redness coming to his cheeks. His breathing picked up and he let out a quick, shrill laugh. Then he quelled that, focusing on the recorder, seeking out distant, deep brown eyes.

“Connie. Connie, I...I...” Steven hesitated, his tongue high up in his mouth, resting on his teeth, keeping in a sound half-formed. With a sob, he cut it off, reaching up to wipe at his eyes, before looking back at the recorder, tears already obscuring his vision again. “I’m gonna think of you every day. I’m gonna think of everyone, but I am going to think of you the most because, Connie, I already miss you so much it hurts, and I am so sorry. Please, believe me, I’m sorry, but I had to go.” He choked on a cry, hunching up his shoulders. “W...would you...could you send some jam with the supplies, bud?”

Down on Earth, Connie sobbed. Sobbed and nodded and shook her head, no no, then again yes, and no again, because she was lost, she couldn’t think, he was gone, already long gone, so far away that the light of his ship wouldn’t touch the Earth’s surface for dozens, maybe hundreds of years.

“Gosh, it must be almost dawn,” Steven said, looking back over his right shoulder, where the orange gem and the view of Earth awaited. “I really wish I could see that....” He sighed. Then, turning back to the recorder, he reached out, holding his hand over the device. “I’ve got to go. Don’t worry, everyone. I love you all. I’ll be okay. I’m coming home. I promise.” And then the screen went blank.

And Steven was gone.

Long, long gone.

And on the Earth far below, the cries began anew.
Fourteen years. Steven's family and friends wait for him. For fourteen years.

A lot can change.

There has been some confusion about the scene where Connie is picked up from the party, and I'd like to reassure everyone that Connie completely consented to sex; she just had a very emotional response.

Chapter 2 theme songs:
"Big Houses" by SqualloScope
"Oh Calamity" by All Time Low

Greg. This is far too much. Half of these supplies won’t go to use. And you’re going to spend all your money, at this rate.” Pearl frowned at the third moving truck full of food, clothes, and other sundries which her human friend had brought in to load on the automated transport ship. Yes, the ship was vast on the inside—far exceeding its outside dimensions, as all gem ships of the new generation did—so there was no need to worry about fitting everything for its trip to...wherever in the galaxy. However, fitting all of the items into the recipient was going to be a complete impossibility, Steven’s appetites notwithstanding.

“I’m just trying to think of everything,” Greg said, lifting the roll-up door, which crashed so hard that Peridot, standing nearby and marking off the supply list, yelped, arms flailing as she tried (and barely managed) to keep a grip on her tablet. “Yikes! Sorry, Peridot.”

“Three times,” Peridot muttered. “Three times, and it still gets me....” She gave herself a little shake, puffed hair settling back down as she schooled herself to calm.

“We can think of everything, but we can’t send everything, Greg,” Pearl said, coming to his side and looking in at the pallets. “As much as we might like to, the fact is, Steven might not even have space for all of this!”

“You don’t know that,” Greg said, pulling out the unloading ramp and heading up. Grabbing the pallet jack, he pushed it under the nearest plastic-wrapped block. “He’s a diamond, right? For all we know, they’ve given him a...a castle! Or his own ship! Or a ship that looks like a castle!”

Grunting, he pushed the jack’s arm down, lifting the pallet and backing down the ramp. “We don’t know what Homeworld plans to do with him, so we need to give Steven whatever he might need.”

“If he needs something, the diamonds will just send another ship. Trust me, diamonds are not content with doing without.” Pearl stepped back from the ramp, letting Greg get to the ground. Once in reach, she placed a hand on the man’s shoulder, and he stopped, turning to the gem. “Greg.
Stop. You know you need to stop.”

“I need my son,” Greg snapped, jerking his shoulder away from Pearl’s touch. “And he needs me.”

“He needs you to be okay, Greg,” Pearl said, following behind as Greg moved up the driveway of the car wash to where the transport had landed. Steven must have had just enough foresight to direct the ship not be sent to the temple, where the task of loading would have become exponentially more complicated. “Steven is doing this to save the Earth, to save all of us, and he told us to take care of you!”

“Yeah? Well, who is taking care of him?” Greg grumbled, then jerked to a halt as the front wheel of the pallet jack hit a crack in the asphalt. Scowling, Greg pulled the jack back, then leapt forward, but the momentum wasn’t enough to get over the uneven surface, and his shoulder smacked into the tall block of supplies.

“He’s not a baby anymore,” Pearl soothed, coming forward and taking the handle from Greg’s hand. Backing up, she moved it a few degrees to the side, skirting the crack in the ground before offering the jack back to Greg. “He’s fourteen. He’s smart and he’s strong and...and he’s a Crystal Gem!”

“He’s a diamond,” Greg said, reaching out and taking the handle, but not moving the pallet

Pearl paused for a few moments, then nodded. “All the better. He’s safe, Greg. He’s safe and he’s learning and he is about to receive enough food, clothes, and entertainment to last him ten years, and this is just the first shipment!”

Greg looked to his full truck, and back to Pearl. “But...he’s alone,” he whispered. “My boy is all alone. And they won’t even let us send a message saying we miss him.”

Pearl closed her eyes, feeling the sudden sting of rising tears. She couldn’t. She couldn’t. She had cried for an entire week after Steven left, and she just couldn’t. She had cried for an entire week after Steven left, and she just couldn’t cry anymore. He’d told her not to worry, and she needed to try, for him, but it was so hard when Greg said things like that.

From next to the truck, Peridot spoke up. “What if we can?”

They worked on it all night. Sitting together in the beach house, going through phones and old plastic tubs and books Greg had put together years ago, in a fit of odd domesticity. Even Connie came, with her laptop and a little portable printer, plus her own precious digital cache of photos.

They were careful about what they chose. Very, very careful. They kept out images from their missions, worried not only that these would also be seen as some sort of subtle cipher, but that their enemies in the cosmos would glean insight into the state of the planet and its many artifacts. They bickered back and forth about the inclusion of seemingly banal, inconsequential moments, each of which were steeped in meaning for one of them, and yet meaningless to those who had not been there.

And, of course, they cried. It’s what one does when looking through photographs of lost loved ones. The sweetness of sharing the memories is yet still a sting to the heart.

They settled on a hundred pictures. At first, they had all put forward images of Steven as a baby, a toddler, a precocious child, and as an emerging warrior, but Connie pointed out, gently, that these were all the images they wanted. It wasn’t what Steven needed.

So they picked out pictures of themselves alongside the lost boy. Amethyst found images online of
the Purple Puma and Tiger Millionaire pumping up the crowd. Garnet disappeared for a moment and came back with a flyer which proclaimed her and Steven “banned forever,” with the pair holding up plastic drumsticks. Peridot supplied an image from one of the small...accidents during the construction of the drill, she and Steven covered in thick oil, except for patches around their eyes, where their safety goggles had once been. Lapis produced a shot Uncle Andy had made from the cockpit of his plane, Steven “surfing” on the back of his flying friend.

Connie had so badly wanted to send a picture of Stevonnie, but it was too risky, too close to Homeworld’s hatred of fusion. So she picked a selfie of Steven and herself at the latest Dogcopter midnight screening, their noses painted black, whisker lines on their cheeks, and little propeller hats spinning on their heads.

Greg, of course, had hundreds of pictures of their time together, but lost all composure on finding one at the bottom of a photo bin. In it, Steven was barely old enough to sit upright, and he looked up in drooling awe at his father as Greg stood, strumming energetically on his guitar, what hair he had left seeming to defy gravity.

Pearl had taken the longest to make her selections. She had a few random memories—training and birthdays and the more innocuous outings to gem sites—but she seemed half-satisfied with each. Until her phone buzzed and she looked at the newly arrived text message and shrieked.

"How did she get this?" Pearl dug a hand into her hair.

Before the lithe gem had a chance to delete the message, or at least hide her screen, the gems had crowded around, finding Pearl’s new paramour had sent a very particular image: Pearl standing beside Steven and Amethyst, in a donut shop, the pale gem bedecked in jeans and a leather jacket, struggling with a can of juice.

"How?" Pearl repeated, her entire face nearly blue with flush.

Greg smiled at the shocked gem, nudging her shoulder with his own. “Judging by the donut sandwich ad in the foreground, I’d say she took it from the parking lot.”

“But...but….” Pearl looked about at her companions. “We hadn’t even said ‘hello’ by then!” When no one was willing to break from laughing long enough to enlighten her further, Pearl huffed and she looked at the newly arrived text message and shrieked. Despite her embarrassment, she put the photo forth as her top choice. Not that the gems would have let her get away with anything else.

They put a single photo of Rose in the back, hidden behind an innocuous image of Amethyst shoving an entire burrito in her mouth. At first, she’d been the cover—the introduction to their story, just as she had for so long been their introduction to Steven’s—but it was Amethyst who pointed out that any Homeworld gem who saw that on the cover of the book was bound to report it, if not destroy it immediately. So she was hidden near the back—not quite the final images, but a few pages before—sitting serene and lovely under an umbrella on the beach. How long would it take Steven to find this precious reminder of the one parent he could never know?

After ousting Rose, the cover was obvious: the one time they had all been together and happy, standing before the barn in the day’s fading light, Greg and Uncle Andy arm in arm, their free hands resting on Steven’s shoulders, and the gems surrounding them all.

They filled the photo album with a hundred pictures, and they wanted to include so many more, but even this seemed such a risk. Was it a message? Of course it was. It was a way to send all of their love and their concern and their longing. There would be no way to find out if Steven ever got to
see the pictures. But it was worth it. It was worth the wrath of three diamonds if Steven could see them again, even for a moment, even if frozen in a book.

There was no sense in trying to hide things—surely every bit of the transport would be examined—so they placed the album on the floor before the door, so it might be the first thing Steven saw. Then Peridot closed the ship up, activated the navigation systems, and they stood back, watching as the transport rose into the air, growing smaller and smaller until, with a bright flash, it was gone.

He couldn’t...believe. She was saying this to him. That she had the audacity to say this. Greg had barely ever struck anyone in his life—only ever in self-defense or in defense of his loved ones—but in this moment, it was all he could do to keep his fists clasped about his coffee cup. The effort was enough to make it rattle on its saucer.

“She can help you, Mr. Universe,” Priyanka said again, urging her hand closer to the man, offering him the discrete white business card. “I’ve seen Doctor Calkins myself, over the years. She is very kind, very understanding, and she has agreed to keep a spot open for you. You just need to call.”

“I don’t need a shrink,” Greg growled. “I lost my son. This lady isn’t going to fix that!”

“I know that.” Priyanka sighed and pressed the card down on the little table which sat between them. “She can’t make what happened with Steven okay, but she can help you at least function until he gets back.”

“I am functioning.”

Priyanka leaned back in her chair and flipped her eyes up and down the man’s body.

Greg tried to be subtle in his efforts to hide his stained shirt, dirty fingernails, and snarled hair. It was significantly harder to mask the funk of five days without a shower.

Sighing, Priyanka swirled her coffee cup, blending the foam art to a pale brown. “Mr. Universe, she has a lot of experience helping grieving parents.”

“Yeah?” Greg said, rolling his eyes. “How much?”

Priyanka rubbed a thumb along the rim of the ceramic cup. “Quite a lot.”

It took him a moment, but once Greg understood, he couldn’t stop looking at Connie’s mother. He read the little lines by her eyes, the slump in her shoulders, and the sudden paleness that had come to her skin. “Ah,” he said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “Um...I’m...I’m sorry, Priyanka.”

“Don’t be,” she said, taking a deep breath, drawing herself back up to good posture. “Like I said, she has helped a lot of people. And you do need help.” Standing, Priyanka picked up a purse from the back of her chair. Rooting inside, she produced a few bills, laying them under her saucer.

“Is that your opinion as a doctor?” Greg asked, making the weakest possible attempt at levity, his smile quavering and in no way convincing.

“That’s my opinion as your friend,” Priyanka chided, earning a chuckle from the man. “Will you at least think about it?”

“Yeah,” Greg said, “of course.”
“Good.” Giving a little wave, Priyanka turned away from the table, walking out of the coffee shop, leaving Greg to finish his cup in solitude.

Greg looked down at the business card. It was almost too discreet. Just a name and number. Not even a “doctor” or an “M.D.” or even an address. It was the kind of card you’d find in your jacket pocket after a trip through the wash, stare at for a moment, and then toss in the trash.

Sighing, Greg fished a cell phone from his pocket and began dialing.

“Peridot?” Amethyst called out, pulling back the barn door, stirring a cloud of dust. “P-dot? Peridactyl? Perri Perri, quite contrary?”

“No,” a voice called from up in the rafters. “Not that one. That one is the worst.”

Amethyst looked up, shielding her eyes against a bright beam of sun which came through a brand-new hole in the roof.

Up above, her arms and legs draped over a wooden beam, Peridot lay amidst the rafters, looking down on the purple gem.

“Answer the first time and I won’t use that one,” Amethyst said, leaping to the next rafter over with an ease and grace typical of the powerful quartz. Once up, she settled back against a strut, crossing one leg over the other, arms under her head to form a pillow. “Or message us back, huh? We’ve been trying to get in contact with you and Lapis all day.”

“Lapis isn’t here.”

Amethyst frowned, looking about the barn, as if Peridot was mistaken and she would see the ocean gem lurking somewhere in the shadows. “Where is she?”

Peridot shrugged, turning her head away from Amethyst.

“Well, when did you last see her?”

Peridot shrugged again.

Amethyst sat up, focusing on Peridot. “Hey. Dude. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Peridot said, kicking her legs once, letting them swing with the momentum for a few seconds before settling back so they dangled as dead-weight from her hips.

Amethyst watched her friend for some time, thinking. Thinking. Thinking.

But a quartz can only think for so long. With a small grunt of effort, Amethyst jumped across the rafters, landing just in front of Peridot’s head, nearly stepping on her nose, causing her to squeak in surprise. Before the green gem had a chance to pull back, Amethyst had lifted her from the beam, tossing the little techie over her shoulder, and jumped back to the wood floor of the barn.

“Wh-what are you doing!” Peridot snapped, pushing against Amethyst’s back and, when that didn’t work, pounding her fists into the compact gem’s shoulders. “Let me go, you...you...”

“If you say ‘clod,’ I am going to spend the next week teaching you human curse words,” Amethyst said, walking to the barn doors. “They’re a lot more interesting.”

“My insults are perfectly adequ—ah!” Peridot hissed, covering her eyes with a forearm as they
emerged into the midday sun. “Grrr! Stop it, Amethyst! Let me down!”

“I’ll let you down when we’re back at the temple,” Amethyst said, stepping onto the warp pad. “If you’re going to sulk, you can at least do it with the rest of us.”

“I am not sulking!” Peridot shouted, squirming with all her strength and making no progress.

“I know,” Amethyst soothed, patting Peridot’s hip. “Now, let’s go not-sulk together.”

Rose Quartz’s sword felt so heavy in her hands. It always felt heavy, of course, but today, it was all Connie could do to lift the blade. But she did. She lifted and swung the sword over and over, until the calluses on her hands ached, and then blistered, and then popped, oozing out over the grip and sticking her skin to the wrap. She didn’t stop. She had to be ready.

“Connie?” A voice called from inside the house. After a moment, the sliding glass door to the backyard opened, and her father stepped outside, pushing his glasses up on his face. “Connie? It’s time to clean up. Dinner’s in—CONNIE!”

Connie lifted the sword and swung again. Her fingers were numb, but her palms screamed.

Stumbling over himself, Doug Maheswaran rushed to his daughter’s side, grabbing her wrists, squeezing them tight. So tight he was sure he was hurting her, but he had to make her let go!

“Drop it, Connie! Drop the sword! Now!”

“No!” Connie shouted, pulling back from her father, careful to keep the sword away from him. It was meant to dissipate the forms of gems, but she knew intimately that it could still cut human flesh. “Dad, stop, I’m training! You said I could train!”

“Not until you bleed!” Doug shifted his grip, recalling his guard training, and pressed his thumbs hard into Connie’s wrists.

With a shocked cry, Connie’s grip loosened, and another shake from her father had her dropping the sword to the ground. It lay there in the grass, shining in the moonlight, little drops of blood bright and stark on the pink handle.

“What are you doing?” Doug demanded, making his daughter turn to face him as he shouted. Some distant, civilized part of him tried to step forward and remind the man of vows made with his wife to never harm their beloved miracle child, their rainbow baby, but that was tamped down by the pure instinct to keep her from hurting herself, no matter what.

“I have to help him, Dad!” Connie cried out, trying to wrestle free, with no success. She might have been training with the sword for over a year, but Connie was still a child, barely entering pubescence, and he was a full-grown adult. “I’ve got to be ready to help Steven!”

“This isn’t helping, Connie!” Doug yelled back, and then flinched. Breathing harshly, he tried again, his voice only a degree calmer. “You know this isn’t helping.”

“Then what is?” Connie sobbed, suddenly ceasing her struggles, falling to her knees. “What do I do?” Hanging her head, hair falling into her eyes, Connie let thick, quick tears fall to the grass.

Which was more terrifying, Doug wondered? Yelling at and hurting his daughter for the first time ever—even if it was to keep her from hurting herself even worse—or hearing this question and having absolutely no idea what was the answer?
Sheena woke in the night to Pearl’s sobs.

She was sitting up in an instant, alert, heart racing, looking down at her girlfriend. “Pearl? Pearl?” Reaching out, she was about to lay her hands on the strange woman’s shoulders, but hesitated. God, all she wanted to do was touch her and hold her and whisper that it was okay, but no, not now, she should have realized.

“Fuck, Pearl, I…. “ Gritting her teeth, Sheena backed out of the bed, rushing to the back of her bedroom door, pulling off a pair of fuzzy robes, wrapping one—lime green, like her hair this week —about her nude body before approaching the bed with the other held out as far as her arms would reach. “Pearl? Pearl, here. Put this on.” Gently, she lay the blue robe —it would be enormous on the thin woman, but it was something —on the bed and stepped back once more, watching the pale figure lying twisted in the covers.

Pearl didn’t move, but for the shaking of her shoulders as she sobbed.

“I…I’m sorry,” Sheena whispered. It was so hard to whisper, because all she wanted to do was fall to her knees and beg forgiveness with all the theatricality of any of her awkward teenage romances. But, no, she was an adult, now, and she was going to act like one, even if it meant having to keep calm as this wonderful, powerful, unfathomable woman cried in the night. “Look, I...should I call you a cab? Or, wait, no. That Greg guy? Do you want him to come here? Or you...you could borrow my car? You can drive a car, right? It’s no problem, you don’t have to stay, I’m so sorry, I thought you were okay, it’s fine if you don’t want to see me again, if I had known you didn’t want to—”

“I want my baby,” Pearl whispered.

Sheena froze.

She was a monster for feeling such sudden relief at knowing it wasn’t her fault.

She pushed that thought down; Pearl didn’t need Sheena to start pitying her own self. Not when the gem had curled up even tighter, fingers digging into her hair as her entire body shook.

“Oh...oh, hun.” Moving slowly, Sheena went back to the bed, sitting down on the edge, still far enough away from Pearl that they needn't touch.

It didn’t last. With a sob, Pearl uncurled and flung herself onto Sheena’s lap, arms wrapping about the woman’s waist, thin fingers almost claw-like as she clutched tightly at the human.

“Go on,” Sheena whispered, laying light fingers on Pearl’s bare back, stroking down her spine and then back up again. “Go on, hun. Let it out.”

Gems didn’t sleep. She’d learned that on their first date. So Sheena knew that, when Pearl stopped crying a half-hour later, it wasn’t because she had exhausted herself and gone unconscious. It was just that there was nothing left to give.

Lapis sat before the dead Galaxy Warp. She’d tried it, of course. Tried it every day. Just as she had tried to fly out of the atmosphere, out of the grip of Earth’s gravity, out of the very solar system, only to be confronted in the depths of space by a waiting ship which, though it was unable to communicate to her while she lacked any sort of electronic equipment, still manage to make it known that she was to go back and stay on Earth, just like the rest of the gems.

Lapis sat before the dead Galaxy Warp as the sun rose and the sun set and the sun rose once more.
She’d never thought Greg would come to her for lessons. Not after he’d realized that he would never join Rose in fusion. But even she couldn’t see every possible future, and now she sat beside the human on the beach, breathing in salt-sea air and letting the wind pass over their bodies as the sun sunk down behind the temple.

There was no real firm end-time to their meditation routine. Garnet just waited for Greg to finish whatever thoughts he had been puzzling over, at which point he yawned, stretching, and lay back on his beach towel, looking up at the darkening blue of the sky. She too looked up, picking out a certain light in the sky. She always knew where that one was. It was where she came from. Perhaps it was where Steven was this very moment.

“How are the gems?” Greg asked, as he did at least once every week.


“What one are you?”

Garnet tilted her head, talking amongst herself. After a moment, she replied. “Both, at different times. Sometimes at the same time.”

“I know how that is,” Greg said, and for one of the first times in her life, Garnet was sure that he did.

“Tell me,” Garnet said, careful in the framing of her words, making them more a request than a demand or, of course, a question, “tell me about this doctor you’ve been seeing.”

“Hmmm...painful. Seeing her is really, really painful. But in a good way?” Greg looked to Garnet. “I didn’t think she’d be able to help. I mean, Steven isn’t dead. He’s just...” He gestured at the sky. “Out there. But Calkins told me about all these parents who lost custody of their kids in a divorce, or parents that hadn’t married before their partner died, and the kids went to relatives. I mean, it’s not the same as your son going off to outer space to become some grand poobah gem, but it’s a little similar, at least.”

“You just...talk to her.”

“Yeah. Well. There’s the medication, too,” Greg said. “Which didn’t really make things go away, but it made things easier to handle.”

“Hmmm.” Garnet tilted her head, considering the human. “I never thought I’d be envious of humans and their...biology.”

Greg laughed. “Yeah, I know, right? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s still so hard, but at least now it only feels like I’m dying, rather than being sure I am.”

Garnet turned her gaze back to the stars. “Lucky.”

They didn’t need the ship’s arrival to tell them when it had been a year. They didn’t even need calendars, or the news stories about the anniversary of the alien encounter, or the supportive calls from the people of Beach City. They all knew.

Pearl took charge of the supplies, this time. Greg had argued, but eventually acquiesced. After all, she was the tactician. She’d even handled the supplies for the gem war. Which, granted, didn’t include food, but it was still a far more complicated task than gathering things for a single human
It was Connie who threw a bit of a wrench into the proceedings. The next volume of the “Unfamiliar Familiar” sequel series had come out, and she insisted that it be part of the shipment. And then she insisted they send the entire series. And then she demanded they send an entire library’s worth of books, and that was just not feasible, even for the enormous interior of the supply ship.

Peridot pointed out the very obvious solution, waving her tablet in the air and reminding everyone that humans had finally converted their entertainments to a digital format. Duh.

Would it be seen as a form of communication? Whatever. Once again, they didn’t care. They loaded up a pair of tablets—because, of course, you always break one, don’t you?—with books and tunes and movies. With sheet music and games. With the entirety of the “Crying Breakfast Friends” series, including that one really weird anime spin-off where the food items were all somehow human?

The night before they were to send the ship back into space, Greg had Peridot add on one particular book and set it as a link on the home screen, magnifying the image of the cover until it took up the entire tablet.

Connie had looked at the cover and turned a deep, hot red.

“Your Changing Body” it proclaimed, followed by the names of three different doctors, all above the image of a young man and a young woman, both of whom had their thumbs in the hems of their jeans, pulling them out from their hips and looking at what lurked beneath.

“Good idea, Greg!” Pearl said, clapping her hands together. “I’m sure you’ve told Steven some things, but he’s undoubtedly forgotten, and this is about the time when his hormones would enter into full production!”

“I’m gonna go use the bathroom,” Connie muttered, leaving the little tablet convocation, spine stiff, legs swinging like planks of wood.

“Oh, Connie! It’s fine,” Pearl said. “This is all a normal human biological function! I mean, from a gem point of view, there is really no difference between sleeping or eating and sexual—”

“Nevermind, my mom just texted, time to go, bye!” Connie shouted, hands nowhere near her phone as she rushed out the beach house door, leaving the gems and Greg to chuckle amongst themselves.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Pearl hissed at Sheena, eyes darting about the elevator as it rose high into the air. “This is...this is...not my thing.”

“It’s just a work party,” Sheena said, wrapping an arm about Pearl’s waist, pulling her in closer to her hip. She could almost feel the woman’s light-made skin through the sheer fabric of the dress she had so magnificently manifested from her gem just minutes before they had departed for the hotel. She was looking forward to finding out if it could disappear as impressively and totally as it had arrived. But, first, canapés. “Besides, you promised.”

“I promised under duress!” Pearl shot back.

“Yeah,” Sheena chuckled. “That was fun.”

Flushing, Pearl faced the front of the elevator again. “Well, yes. But this is ridiculous. I’m not some human office worker. I don’t even know how your economy functions, how do you expect
me to fit in at your work par—hellooooooo!” Pearl crooned as the elevator doors opened and she found herself suddenly faced with a dozen humans, all bedecked in suits just as finely tailored as her lover’s, if in somewhat more conservative colors.

Sheena smiled and stepped forward, ushering Pearl along with her until they were amongst her coworkers, who looked upon the thin, delicate creature in shock. “Everyone, this is Pearl. My girlfriend.”

A rather uncomfortably long silence commenced.

Pearl held up a hand and waved her fingers. “H-hello.”

Out ahead of the others, one man gasped, a hand flying to his chest, ruffling his cravat. “Sheena! She’s real?” He stared at Pearl, his focus making the small gem fidget.

“Of course I’m real,” Pearl muttered, clutching her hands at the front of her sheer blue dress.

Another moment of silence, and the man smiled, reaching out to lightly push Sheena’s shoulder. “Go Sheeeeeenaaaaaa,” he drawled, earning a laugh from the other attendees, leading them into a round of introductions and compliments that had Pearl accentuating her dress with a lovely shade of dark blue on her cheeks.

Sheena preened as Pearl loosened up. Very, very worth the hour of argument to get her up here. And it would be even more worth it when….

“Come on,” Sheena said, lacing her fingers with Pearl’s, taking a step away from the crowd, waiting until Pearl said a quick goodbye and followed along. “I told you about my ex, in accounting?”

Pearl scowled. Oh yes. She had.

Sheena grinned and leaned in, giving Pearl a hummingbird-fast kiss on the lips. “Let’s go make her shit bricks.”

“Do you think Lapis would help fetch my limb enhancers?” Peridot asked one evening.

Amethyst snorted. “You want to go ask?”

“Oh. No.” Scowling, Peridot looked out to sea. There was a storm on the horizon. At present, just dark clouds in a thin line, the sky above the temple a shifting series of pinks as the sun set. By the time she would have expected the stars to come out, rainclouds would be overhead. It had rained several times at the beach house since...well, in the past year and a half. Sometimes in gentle, barely-there drops that were hard to distinguish from the normal dampness of the beach at night. And a few, memorable times, so hard and powerful that boards had been torn off the house’s exterior. Her metal control had come in handy, then, as the gems positioned boards and she, the great and lovable Peridot, nailed them in place with a casual flick of the wrist.

Barring that first time, when she’d...sent a nail through the window and that had to be boarded up, as well...but she was improving!

“Why would you even want those things?” Amethyst asked, kicking her legs over the edge of the porch. “You’ve been doing pretty great out on missions with us. Hey, you poofed that last gem without help from anyone!”
“Eh.” Peridot shrugged. “That was a gypsum. Even an Era 2 Peridot has more powers than one of them. If it had been a tanzanite or a jade or even an Era 1 Peridot? I’m...well, I’m not good for fighting.”

“You don’t have to be good for fighting, Per-Per,” Amethyst said, leaning in towards her friend and nudging her with a shoulder. “You’re super smart and you’re adaptable and, hey, metal powers!”

“But what if I want to be?” Peridot looked to the quartz. “Is it a bad thing? If I want to be stronger?”

Amethyst laughed softly. “Ain’t gonna hear me say being strong is bad. But I think maybe you need to get that strength on your own, and not go back to depending on Homeworld.”

Peridot’s brows drew together as she puzzled over this cryptic decree.

Then she grinned, slamming a fist down on an open palm. “Oh! You mean I should make my own limb enhancers!”

Amethyst blinked. “Uh...I...guess?”

“That’s brilliant!” Jumping to her feet, Peridot grabbed Amethyst’s shoulders, giving her a tiny shake. “You’re brilliant, Amethyst!”

“That’s a first,” the purple gem murmured, cheeks going dark.

“I’ve repaired and upgraded my original limb enhancers enough to know the basics of the design! I bet I can duplicate them easily! Heck, I bet I could make an even better set! Oh my goodness!” Peridot slapped her hands over her mouth. Then held her hands out, examining them. “I bet I could make some that don’t encase my fingers! You know, the Homeworld design gives you a stronger grip, but there’s a real loss in dexterity and tactile input! With a little planning, I bet I could make the display digits a more ancillary feature. An addition, not a replacement! Though I definitely need to keep the high-friction for climbing, and oh man, the rotational abilities were great for escape!”

“And the lasers?” Amethyst asked, grinning. Peridot was always so endearing when she found something to obsess over.

“Amethyst.” Peridot crouched and put her hands on the purple gem’s cheeks, squeezing them until her lips pouted out like a duck. “So. Many. Lasers. Oh, this is exciting! I need paper! I need clicky pencils! I need coffee.”

Amethyst blinked. “What do you need coffee for?”

“I have no idea,” Peridot yelled, throwing her arms in the air. “It’s what Pierre got for everyone when they were brainstorming for the Color War. Nnnnyeeeee, come on!” Grabbing Amethyst’s hand, Peridot leaned back, putting all her strength into making the quartz rise from the deck. “There’s so much to do!”

“All right, all right,” Amethyst chuckled, allowing Peridot to lead her into the temple and to the Gate, and thence into Amethyst’s messy, but supply-filled room. Hmmm...if things kept up like they were, it might be about time to add a sixth little gem to the doorway. Peridot couldn’t keep sharing her room all the time.

Not that she objected. Not in the least.
The rain came down in thick, cold sheets, half the time solidifying into bullets of hail which pelted her skin. She didn’t bother calling on her powers to push it away.

“I don’t know, doc,” Greg said, looking down at the little bottle in his hands with trepidation. “It’s only been a year and a half. He’s not coming back for another twelve and a half years. It seems kind of...soon to stop taking this?”

Doctor Calkins nodded, more acknowledging the statement than agreeing. “Greg, you have made phenomenal progress in this year. I know there is still a lot of pain there, but you seem to be functioning as well now as you did before Steven left.”

Greg considered this. “I guess. But won’t stopping make it hurt again?”

The counselor smiled, leaning forward and resting a palms on the man’s hands. “It already hurts, Greg. The difference is, you can handle it, now.”

“I...yeah.” Greg smiled. “I can. So, how do we do this?”

“Not all at once,” Calkins said, quickly. It was always important that they understood to not do this quickly. “Take a half-dose for three weeks, and call me if you have any problems. Sound good?”

Greg paused, squeezing his pill bottle. But, laughing, he nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, doc. Let’s do this.”

Garnet looked upon the communicator. She could talk to Steven. Find out how he was. Ask if he needed anything. Tell him about how they were doing. Tell him how much she missed him, how they both missed him, their sadness and loneliness melding together to a deep emptiness at her core.

Sighing, Garnet summoned a bubble around the communicator and lifted her hands gently into the air, letting it rise to join the hundreds of corrupted gems and fusion experiments within the Burning Room.

“Mom? Dad?” Connie ventured, knocking on her parent’s cracked bedroom door. “I need you to sign something.”

“Come on in,” Priyanka called, and Connie entered, finding her mother in her night-robe, sitting before a vanity, wiping makeup off her face. From off in the bathroom, Connie could hear the shower, and she desperately, desperately wanted to get out of here before her father finished. He walked around without a shirt on after he showered. Eugh.

“Here.” Connie set a sheet of paper on the vanity, along with a pen.

Priyanka finished wiping off her face and picked up her glasses, settling them back on. Picking up the paper, she began to read it quickly. “What is this for?”

“A field trip,” Connie said.

“Where?”

“Dover. We’re going to watch a session in the legislature.”

Priyanka blinked down at the paper, then turned her focus on her daughter. “That sounds really
interesting. But not something I’d expect from any of your current classes.”

“It’s for a club. The Model UN. I joined last week.”

“Really? I thought you were in that fencing club.”

“I am,” Connie said. “But I’m also really into...you know. Diplomacy. Politics.”

“Thinking of becoming a politician?” Priyanka asked, genuinely curious. She’d always encouraged Connie to bigger and more important career aspirations, but the girl’s interests tended to come and go rather quickly. Doctor, lawyer, writer, engineer, back to lawyer. Connie had made some comments about a life in politics before, but it was just another of those week-long fancies.

“I dunno. Maybe? I guess I could see myself as, like, a senator or a diplomat or—”

“President?” Priyanka teased, earning a laugh from her daughter.

“Go big or go home?”

“That’s my girl,” Priyanka chuckled, leaning in to give Connie a little hug around the waist. “Alright. This sounds fine to me. Just remind me the day before, so I can pack you a lunch, okay?” Picking up her pen, Priyanka scrawled messy letters.

Connie was just reaching out to take the paper back when the shower...turned off. She paled.

“KAYTHANKSMOMILOVEYOUGOTTOGOTOBEDGOODNIGHT!”

And then she was gone, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Priyanka snickered and turned her chair around to watch the bathroom door, awaiting the grand entrance of her husband.

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Pearl really thought this third delivery wouldn’t come with any unexpected additions, so when Greg arrived at the drop-point outside the car wash, a full chest freezer sitting in the back of a rental truck, she was both frustrated and relieved that it was something this small. Yes, it was a chest freezer big enough to hold a few bodies (and she fantasized for only a moment about making one of those be Greg), but it was one freezer. It was a marked improvement.

“Hey, Pearl, you got space to hook this up to power in there?” Greg asked, stepping out of the truck and giving the freezer a slap on its side as he walked down to the tailgate. “I’ve got an extra surge protector, if that helps.”

“I assure you, Greg, another freezer isn’t going to short out anything,” Pearl said, rolling her eyes. “You could hook an aircraft carrier up to this ship and it wouldn’t so much as slow down.”

Greg crossed his arms, giving Pearl a fond smile. “Yeah, but a ship shipping ships? Doesn’t that seem a bit...unnatural to you?”

Pearl flipped a hand to throw off the joke, jumping into the back of the truck to help with the unloading. She was certainly the weakest of the gems—well, second, now, and thank you Peridot—but she still had more strength than Greg.

“And how would you even get it inside?” Greg asked, putting down the tailgate. “Although, I suppose that’s half the point of all your ships.” The human looked up at Pearl and waggled his eyebrows.
Pearl looked down at the human.

She shoved the freezer, letting it slide along the back of the truck, heading towards Greg, until it came to an abrupt stop, balanced precisely half-on and half-off the tailgate.

“WOAH!” Greg shouted, stepping back from the truck, arms raised. On realizing his life was spared for another day, he put his hands to his hips, looking up at Pearl. “Hey. I thought we were over the animosity.”

“That wasn’t animosity,” Pearl sang, leaning down and resting her forearms on the lid of the freezer. “That was pun-ishment.”

Greg groaned. “Oh, man. I think I prefer to be crushed.”

“Oh, same,” Pearl said with a wink.

Greg took a moment to laugh back, but when he did, it was loud and genuine. “Geeze, Pearl...come on. Let’s get this plugged in before everything melts.”

Pearl complied, and with a little awkward maneuvering and, admittedly, the help of a holo-Pearl, they managed to get the freezer down onto an appliance dolly and up the ramp into the ship, where Pearl made quick work of wiring it into the ship’s power banks.

“Should I be expecting more, Greg?” Pearl asked as she made the last connection and pressed the access panel back down. “Because I’d like to be prepared if you’re going to start bringing furniture.”

“Nah, no worries,” Greg said. “It’s just a sixteenth birthday gift. Wanted to do something special.”

“A birthday gift? In a freezer?” Pearl asked, looking at Greg, and then down to the appliance. She reached out, lifting the lid. “What kind of birthday present would...oh.”

Little black cat faces looked up at her with dichromatic pink and white eyes.

“Oh.” Pearl whispered again. She picked up a pink package, looking it over, barely feeling the chill of the frozen treat. She turned to Greg, brows drawn. “How? They stopped making these.”

Greg shrugged. “I bought out some time at the Lion Lickers plant.”

“Ah.” Pearl nodded, squeezing the Cookie Cat for a moment. Then realizing what she was doing to the treat, she put it back in the freezer, shutting the lid tight. Turning again, she looked at Greg. Examined him. Considered.

“Although,” Greg was saying, rubbing the back of his neck, “they made a lot more than just one freezer full, so we’re going to have to fig—oof!” The human staggered back a step before regaining his balance. He looked down at his shoulder, where a swath of pink hair lay pressed.

Pearl wrapped her arms around Greg’s waist, wondering how humans could get so squishy. Still, it was...comforting. She smiled. “Greg?”

“Uh...yeah, Pearl?” Greg said, strained. His arms were held up high, as if he feared touching the warrior gem.

“You’re a good dad.”

Sighing, Greg let his arms fall, embracing his old rival. “You’re doing great, too.”
Before Steven, the Crystal Gems had preferred to keep their contact with humans down to a minimum. Part of it was a simple disconnect between species, making it hard to really care about the strange, yet familiar creatures. But mostly it was how quickly they changed. Pearl was easily the eldest among them, and in her time on Homeworld, about all that had progressed was fashion. But here, on Earth? The gems would disappear for a few centuries, and come back to find the humans had moved from bronze swords to rifles. It was a bit dizzying.

It was even more startling after Steven came and they began to really partake in human life. One day, they were looking out the window as Steven used his “funky flow” to make friends with a shy human girl, and then the girl was blowing out sixteen candles, surrounding by school friends, family, and four refugees from an interstellar war.

They grew up so fast.

“Look at this,” Peridot said, running a hand over the thick green torus bracelet on her right wrist, bringing a screen flashing to life in the air above their table. On the screen, Connie stood beside Steven. “You’d almost think she had dissipated her form and come back! She’s…she’s so….”

Peridot held her hands up to her chest. “Different.”

“Inappropriate,” Garnet chastised, patting Peridot on the head.

“Why?” Peridot grumbled. “Even when gems reform, their basic body shape remains constant. We just alter our clothes.” To illustrated, Peridot pulled on one shoulder of her jumpsuit, where a large black star now rested. “But Connie looks like she shapeshifted and got stuck!”

“She’s not stuck,” Pearl said, primly defensive of her student. “Connie is at a completely normal stage of human development.”

“Okay,” Peridot said. “At what stage does the swelling go down?”

“Peridot!” Pearl hissed, and then turned her glare on Amethyst and Garnet, who were both doing a poor job of masking their snickers. “Will you three try to act civilized?”

“I’m a Gem,” Peridot groused. “We’ve been civilized since these humans were still monkeys.”

“Actually,” Pearl said, lifting her nose in the air, “the notion that humanity descends from monkeys is doubly wrong. Humans are far more similar to the chimpanzee, but they merely share a common ancestor; they are not a descendant of any currently living—”

“Hi Connie,” Amethyst said, bringing Pearl’s lecture to a sudden halt.

“Oh!” Pearl flushed, looking back down to find her human student standing a few feet off, hands behind her back and grinning. “Connie! Oh my, you look beautiful!”

Blushing freely, Connie laughed, acquiescing to Pearl’s gesture to give a slow spin. Her red chiffon dress floated about her calves. She paused with her back to the gems, shimmying her shoulders to show off her bare back, earning ego-stroking catcalls from the gems. The exposed skin had been a major battle with her mother, but the fact that the dress went down so low, rather than ending at her thighs, as all her other picks had done, helped to convince Priyanka that her daughter was old enough for a little tame exposure. Besides, most of the time, her back was covered in her thick, curled hair, which bounced and shifted just as much as her light attire.

“Thanks for coming,” Connie said as she faced the gems again, and though she’d said those exact words several dozen times that night, this was the first time it hadn’t sounded rehearsed. Her smile
was tremulous, but genuine, and it prompted the gems to hold out their arms, drawing her into
individual hugs.

Pearl received the final embrace, and she held it longer than the rest. When it was done, she kept
her hands on the girl’s shoulders, continuing her inspection. “You look well. Have you been
keeping up your sword work?”

“Of course! I’m president of the fencing club. In fact…” Connie looked over her shoulder at the
partying teens, then back to her mentor. “I was hoping we could put on a little demonstration?”

Pearl’s lips twitched. “Demonstration?”

“Just a little one,” Connie said, eyes wide and innocent.

“Oh, well, if it’s little,” Pearl said, airy. Waving her hand as if the motion would be enough to waft
the suggestion away. “We wouldn’t want to show off…”

“Of course not,” Connie said, prim.

Amethyst and Peridot looked to one another and rolled their eyes.

“I’ll go have the DJ stop the music,” Connie said, practically skipping away from the gems.

“We’ll be here,” Peridot muttered. “Vomiting.”

Pearl glared at the green gem. “There is no shame in an exhibition of skill. Connie has spent many
years developing her swordsmanship. She should feel pride in her accomplishments.”

“It’s not Connie’s pride we’re making fun of,” Amethyst returned, smirking as Pearl turned her
nose up at the jibe.

“Whatever,” Pearl said, rising from her seat. “Oh, what blade should I use…? Connie does
stunningly against foils and rapiers, but they do look so plain in battle. A flamberge is intimidating,
but anyone who knows their swords won’t be in any way impressed. A simple saber…or perhaps I
could mix things up, use a khopesh….”

“Or you could sit down for a bit,” Peridot said, looking out at the party and grinning. “We’re about
to watch a different kind of show.”

Pearl scowled, looking to Peridot and then following her gaze.

Connie had not made it to the DJ. She’d barely made it onto the dance floor before she found
herself facing an entirely unexpected kind of opponent. A boy with arms and legs which seemed
just a fraction too long for his body and a shock of brown hair which might have been tamed at the
beginning of the night, but which now roamed free across his brows and into his eyes, which were
bright and more than a little terrified. He held out a hand to the birthday girl, saying something that
was a bit too distant and too drowned out by a speaker which was shifting from a deep bass thump
to a lighter, higher, and far slower melody.

“What in the….” Pearl edged around the table and took a step towards the dance floor, but found
herself stopped in her tracks. Looking down at her wrist, she found it encased in Garnet’s deep-
brown hand, and she looked to her leader. “Garnet?”

“Pearl. Let her have some fun,” the fusion said, voice as even as always, though she too was
observing the small drama of girl and boy on the dance floor.
Pearl twisted to watch as Connie bit her lip and gave a small nod, placing her right hand into the boy’s outstretched palm. The tall gem growled, pulling towards the pair, but was unable to escape Garnet’s grasp. Turning back once more, she glared down at the seated gem and gestured back at the dance floor. “But St—”

“He’s not here,” Garnet whispered, gently squeezing Pearl’s wrist. “And even if he was, it isn’t his decision.” Nodding at the dance floor, Garnet went on, “It’s hers.”

Pearl looked to the dance floor. To the girl she had watched grow into a young woman, now held in the arms of a human boy she didn’t even recognize. She looked at Connie’s dress—such an echo of the innocent sun dress she had worn to a celebration at the barn little more than three years before, and yet so different in intent—and her steps made confident with hundreds of hours of sword training.

The young woman’s face open in a bright smile as she was lead and twirled and brought back into a close embrace. The boy’s hand tapped lightly at Connie’s chin, lifting up so he could let his own face angle down until lips brushed in a soft, slow kiss.

Pearl wrenched her arm away from Garnet and ran, ignoring the startled look on Connie’s face as her mentor fled.

They sometimes joked about not knowing how long it had been. Of course, this was a lie. Greg, of course, could give you years and months, but the gems seem to feel the passage of time far more intimately than they ever had in their ages of existence. They could tell you the number of days and hours. They could tell you how long, precisely, until their child was coming home. It was a celebration when they realized precisely a third of Steven’s exile had passed. A fourth transport was gone, and so soon after a fifth was being prepared.

“Eighteen,” Greg said, pulling a sweater off a rack, turning it about and scowling before putting it back. “He can vote. I wonder if the diamonds would let him?”

“I think he doesn’t meet the residency requirement,” Pearl said, pulling on the waist of a pair of stretch jeans. “Besides, there must be some sort of conflict of interest, with Earth being his colony. Favoritism to a region, at least.”

“What, you don’t think Steven is going to come back and declare himself emperor, or something?” Greg said, examining the next sweater size up and grumbling at that pick, as well, shoving it back on the rack with little care, one shoulder coming off the hanger. “That’s not really his style.”

“By now?” Pearl said, standing back from the racks. “Who knows? And who knows about all this!?” She gestured at the thousands of clothing possibilities all around the store. “For all we know, he’s twenty feet tall and thinks the height of fashion is capes and scepters!”

“I don’t think Jasper is going to rub off on him that much,” Greg said, crossing his arms, but also examining the year’s fashion. “But I get your meaning. If they’d just give us some details, this would be a lot easier.”

“Ugh! If I was up there I could take measurements and sew something….” Pearl shook her head and sighed. “He needs someone to take care of him. A gem, a pearl —”

“Woah,” Greg interrupted, going to Pearl’s side, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Hold on. You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe I do!” Pearl shot back. “At least then we’d know someone up there cares about him!”
“Pearl,” Greg said, jostling the gem’s shoulder. “Come on. This is Steven we’re talking about. I bet, by now, he’s got the diamonds calling him their nephew and throwing a birthday party.”

Despite herself and her frustration, Pearl snorted a laugh. Raising her hand to her lips to hide her smile, she looked to Greg, eyes shining. “Imagine them in party hats!”

Hilarity ensued for far longer than was seemly, or comfortable for the watching employees of the store. Just when the pair seemed about to regain control, one would choke out a phrase—“Imagine the diamonds eating cake!” “Imagine Jasper singing Happy Birthday!” —and they were off again.

They only stopped when Greg moaned, clutching his stomach. “My abs. My aaaaabs. Oh, oh, I can’t. Come on, stop. Stoooooop.”

“Snrk. Fine. Fine, fine!” Pearl waved her hands at her face, cooling down. “Oh, I hope you’re right, Greg.”

“Same.” Greg smiled, and he looked to their cart, which stood empty next to the racks. “Now, if we don’t have any clue what Steven needs, I think it’s time we go back to basics. There’s a fabric store down the road.” Greg grinned. “I think it’s time for Steven to learn how to sew.”

Pearl pursed her lips. After some moments, she sighed, hanging her head. “Oh, he’s going to look like a disaster for years....”

She knew the leaves were falling. Somewhere. She hadn’t seen them in years. All she saw was the ocean and the Galaxy Warp and a million, million stars above at night, any one of which Steven might now call home. She wanted to soar up to them, into the darkness of space, and fly until she found him, but she couldn’t. She didn’t. She waited. She’d waited far longer once. He’d be home, soon.

Pearl didn’t understand why her phone was ringing in the middle of the night. The one person who actually used it to contact her was laying next to her, hogging all the covers. It was a good thing the gem was a manifestation of light, or else the constant theft of blankets might have been annoying.

The phone continued to ring, and it was only when Sheena began to rouse that Pearl realized the phone was going to keep ringing and possibly wake her lover if she didn’t tend to it. Slipping out of bed and grabbing the phone from on top of her nightstand, Pearl clicked the “accept call” button and snuck out of the bedroom before speaking into the receiver. “Hello?”

“P-pearl?” A thin, small voice came from the other end of the line.

Pearl frowned, and then the voice clicked into place. It had changed significantly in the last year, as the last of adolescence faded from the speaker’s body. “Connie? Connie, it’s three in the morning.”

“I’m sorry. I...never mind, I’ll—”

“What’s wrong?” Pearl asked, clicking the bedroom door closed and leaning back on the wood. If she’d been human, her heart would have raced. “Is it a gem monster? Are you alright? Where are you?”

“No, no, it’s not a monster. It’s...” A hesitation. A sob.
Pearl clutched at her phone. “Connie?”

“Can you come get me?” Connie gasped, and dissolved into tears.

It took some minutes to get the girl to calm down enough to get an address. She didn’t recognize it —some fifteen miles outside Beach City, into the hills, out of sight of the ocean—but navigation would direct the gem easily enough. She grabbed Sheena’s car keys—the motorcycle was her lover’s preferred transit, but sometimes you really did need a larger vehicle—on the way out of the condo, and arrived at the house in half the time the GPS recommended.

Someone’s parents were out of town, that was obvious enough. It didn’t look to be the kind of party that would lead to lasting property damage or noise complaints, but Pearl highly doubted that any parents in the area would have encouraged a trio of teens to sit on the front porch passing around a very decorative “vase” while a good two dozen more young humans seemed to be inside, laughing over red cups.

She didn’t have to go inside to find Connie; the young woman was sitting on the curb, arms wrapped around her stomach, hunched over, hair obscuring her face. As the lights of the sedan fell upon the little warrior, she looked up, squinting into the driver’s seat, and gave a weak smile on recognizing the gem. Pearl had barely come to a complete stop before the the passenger door was yanked open and Connie slipped inside, fumbling with her seatbelt and saying “take me home” even before she managed to click it into place.

Pearl stared at Connie, the car’s engine still rumbling. “Connie?”

“Take me home,” the girl repeated, looking out the front window, eyes wide and unblinking. They were a little red and puffy, but nowhere near the state of the teens on the front porch.

“Connie...are you okay?” Pearl whispered, wanting to reach out to the girl, but instead tightening her grip on the steering wheel. She looked out the passenger window, at the party, and back to the girl.

Connie clenched her fists on her lap. She nodded, swallowing hard. “Yeah. I want to go home.”

Pearl pursed her lips. Putting the car back into drive, she did a quick u-turn, heading back the way she’d come.

It was dark and quiet, and the streetlamps provided barely any light for the road, much less enough to study Connie’s face. What light there was revealed...nothing. The girl had been doing well with training her emotions for debates and presentations at her little diplomacy club, but this was...unsettling. Unnatural.

And Pearl was not going to let this pass. Halfway to Connie’s home, Pearl had decided the silence had gone on for too long. With a screech of tires, Pearl pulled over on the shoulder of the highway and shut the car off, sending the pair into an even deeper darkness, even the light of the dashboard now gone. Only the occasional fellow late-night traveler served to provide a flash of illumination, and the first one found Connie staring at her mentor, those slightly-reddened eyes wide.

“P-Pearl, I want to—”

“Are you hurt?” Pearl interrupted.

Connie stared at the gem. “W...what? No, I—”

“No? Then what is this?” Pearl hissed, reaching out and grabbing the collar of Connie’s sweater,
pulling it off her shoulder.

A red mark—the precursor to a bruise—was momentarily lit up by yet another passing car, and the yellow light of the headlamps turned Connie’s skin sallow.

Leaning back and yanking her sweater free, Connie covered herself up again. “It’s nothing,” she whispered.

“Have you been smoking?” Pearl demanded.

“No.”

“Drinking?”

“You’re not my mom, Pearl!”

“Oh, do you want to answer your mother’s questions, instead?” Pearl asked, holding up her phone. “Tell me, is she at the ER tonight, or am I about to wake her and your father up?”

“Don’t!” Connie yelled, reaching out for the phone, but Pearl shifted it to her further hand, keeping it well out of the girl’s reach. “I wasn’t drinking! I wasn’t smoking, I didn’t do any drugs, and I’m not hurt, I just want to go home!”

“Do I need to call the police?” Pearl growled.

Connie gaped. “What?”

“Do I need to call. The police?” Pearl repeated, intense, looking straight into Connie’s eyes. Waiting for the smallest flicker, the barest flinch.

“N-no! No, Pearl, it was just a dumb party, you don’t need to—”

“Then why did you call me at three in the morning to come get you?” Pearl growled, and she wanted to keep her temper in check, but it was Connie and she couldn’t.

“I wasn’t cr—”

“Don’t lie to me, Connie!” Pearl shouted, slamming her fist on the steering wheel, setting off the horn, startling the girl so much she nearly hit her head on the roof.

“I’m not lying!” The teen choked out, and then sobbed. She gritted her teeth, trying to fight down the tears, but she’d already tamped them down once, and it was too much. She shook with deep cries, and the force of them went down to her core. Grunting, she wrapped her arms back about her waist, pressing her legs together.

Pearl could feel her gem glowing. She wanted to reach up, pull out a bastard sword. Run back to the house and call out to her opponent. Face him in combat as she had with a hundred overconfident and ill-fated quartz warriors.

She did the civilized thing. She called the police.

Connie looked up as she heard the phone ring. With an alarmed cry, she scrambled across the center console and snatched the cell phone from her gem mentor’s hand, ending the call before the second ring.
“Connie,” Pearl warned, but Connie had begun to babble.

“No no no, don’t call the police, don’t tell my mom, don’t tell anyone, it’s okay, it’s okay Pearl, I suggested it, I asked for it, he didn’t do anything wrong!”

There was silence in the car. A long, long silence.

Then the phone rang.

Connie yelped, looking down at the display.

Sighing, Pearl leaned over and tapped the accept button and speakerphone icon.

“Beach City Emergency services,” a bored voice came from the other end of the line. “We got a disconnected call from this number. Is there an emergency?”

Connie looked up at Pearl. The girl’s eyes were wide and redder, now, and she bit her lip, waiting.

Pearl examined her student. There were more bruises, she now saw. On the other shoulder and down the front of her top, and her lips were ever-so-slightly swollen.

“No,” Pearl said. “I’m sorry, it was a misdial.”

“Good night, then,” the voice said, and the phone clicked as the call ended.

They sat in silence as the phone’s screen first dimmed, and then locked and shut off. Gingerly, Connie handed it back over and sat back in her seat, hanging her head down low.

Pearl watched her for a minute more. Then, turning forward again, she put the keys back in the ignition, started the car, and headed back onto the road.

She went much slower taking the girl home than she had fetching her. It was so silent on the highway. For minutes at a time, it seemed no one else was awake. It was just the crescent of the moon, now rising on the horizon, foreshadowing a pre-dawn which was still two hours off. The road was smooth and the air cool and the car so quiet in the night.

Connie spoke, so low Pearl might have missed it if there had been even a note of music from the radio or a hint of misaligned gears in the engines. She whispered to the night.

“I wanted it to be him. I...pretended it was him.”

Pearl closed her eyes. She ached.

“Woah,” Peridot said and gave out a low whistle. “There were not this many gems in here last week.”

Garnet looked about the Burning Room. She shrugged.

“What have you been doing on those missions?” Peridot asked, turning around slowly, assessing each of the hundreds of gems floating near the ceiling. She recognized a few from when Steven had released her those many years ago. A few were her own triumphs. But so, so many….

Garnet went to the center of the room, where the molten heart of her room burned. Opening her right fist, she tossed a small, silver feather into the magma, watching it melt and disappear. Work done, she turned away from the disposal unit, heading back to her door. “Preparing,” she said.
“Preparing for what?” Peridot asked, fixating on something altogether too familiar. A green, triangular gem.

“For when Steven comes home.”

“We brought *supplies!* ” Amethyst crowed, tossing the six boxes of donuts into the back seat of Connie’s car, where they bounced alarmingly for a moment before settling, keeping their sugary, glazed contents safe inside, instead of remodeling the car’s interior.

Connie looked to the easily twelve-dozen donuts, and back to her friends. “Thanks, but you do know there are donut shops in Silicon City, right?”

“Well, duh,” Amethyst said, licking her fingers, which had gained a lovely sweet flavor as she brought in her going-away gift. “But they don’t have the Big Donut.”

“Actually. they do,” Connie said. “It’s a chain. They have five.”

Amethyst considered this. Then, reaching into the car, she pulled out an entire donut box, tossing it—cardboard included—into her expanding maw.

“Do you have enough clothes?” Pearl fretted, looking through Connie’s trunk. “A winter jacket? Shorts for summer? Sunscreen?”

“Pearl. Do I look like I burn?” Connie asked, spreading her arms wide, displaying her dark skin.


“Got to hit the road!” Connie yelped, jumping onto Pearl, gathering the gem up into a tight hug, which squeeze the air for words right out of her.

Amethyst snickered, elbowing Peridot. “Never changes,” she teased, waggling her brows at Connie.

“What doesn’t change?” Peridot asked, frowning as Connie stuck her tongue out at the purple gem.

“Nothing,” Garnet said, smiling. “Nothing doesn’t change.”

“That is terrible grammar,” Pearl sighed as she was released and Connie moved on to hug the fused gem. “But I suppose you are correct. My goodness. I can’t believe…six years.”

“Almost halfway!” Connie scooped Peridot up, twirling the gem around before setting her on the ground, a little ruffled up by the manhandling, though the gem got a second-hand revenge as Amethyst returned the favor, momentarily morphing into the size of a full quartz, sending Connie flying a few feet into the air before catching her and setting her back down on the ground, a little wobbly.

Garnet laughed at the antics of her crew. “Steven is going to be so shocked when he sees you.”

Connie flushed, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She’d been growing it out. It reached well past her waist, now. Most of the time, she kept it in a braid, but today it wafted in the ocean breeze, unruly and dark and beautiful. “You think?”

“Well, of course he will,” Peridot said, grinning. “He won’t have seen a human woman in fourteen years! Ow!” Rubbing her shoulder, Peridot glared at Pearl, who whistled a little tune.
Connie laughed and gave nodded. “Well, I’ll make sure I’m the first one he sees! Promise!”

“Study hard,” Pearl said.

“Except for the Chaucer class,” Garnet said. “It’s a group final, you all pass.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And don’t forget to call me if you’re having problems in your programming course!” Peridot said. “I mean, your human systems are disgustingly primitive, but I’m sure I can dumb myself down enough to help you through.” The little gem puffed up her chest, but deflated as Pearl leaned over, smushing her hair down, obscuring her vision. “Hey!”

“And when you come back to welcome Steven home,” Amethyst said, smile big and dangerous, “don’t forget the contra—”

“BYE!” Connie shrieked, jumping into her car, slamming the door, and shooting off down the road, Amethyst’s laughter following her across three states.

“Road trip,” Amethyst said, apropos of nothing.

Peridot looked up from wires and chips and the tiniest soldering iron known to man. On her right wrist, her bracelet’s holo-display projected from its finger-wards edge, guiding the gem through her work. “What? Like in season 7 of Camp Pining Hearts?”

“Exactly,” Amethyst said, sitting at the coffee table, careful to not jostle Peridot’s work. She didn’t get the appeal of these new mini limb-enhancers the green gem was so fixated on, but she knew Peridot was approaching a level of focus which was one misplaced screw away from a melt-down. “I mean, there’s nothing going on around here. Pearl spends all her time with her girlfriend. Garnet is out catching gems. Greg is...well, he’s Greg. No offense to the guy. And Connie already got out of here for an adventure! We never do anything anymore. I want to go somewhere.”

“Surely you’ve been everywhere on this planet,” Peridot muttered, picking up a tiny chip and putting it in place, watching intently as the perfectly-sized pins slid onto the board. “You’ve been around for thousands of years. What is there left to see?”

“Dude. Lots. There’s new hotels in Oasis. I hear they’ve put some faces on some mountains up north. And there’s this town in Oregon where there was all this crazy gem activity a few years ago. Might be nice to see it when it’s normal.”

“Yeah? Well, have fun.” Peridot positioned a wire and placed the tiniest bead of solder.

“Peeeeeere,” Amethyst drawled.

“What?” Peridot mumbled, soldering at the other end of the wire.

“Peeerrrrrrrrr.”

“What?” She blew on the board, moving a stray hair out of the way.

“Peeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
“I want to go with you,” Amethyst said.

Peridot blinked and looked up at her companion.


Sighing, Peridot lifted her visor, rubbing at sore eyes. “Will you at least wait a few days, so I can finish this?” She gestured at the second band, the pair to the one on her right wrist.

Amethyst considered. “Oooooonly if you take me on a copter ride over the Grand Canyon.”

“Amethyst. You can turn into a bird and fly over it.”

The purple gem shrugged. “My demand stands, P-diddle.”

“Ugh…fine!” Peridot flung her hands in the air. “Take me on the human rite of passage known as the ‘road trip!’”

“ALRIGHT!” Amethyst shouted, jumping up from the floor and rushing to the Temple Gate, opening up her room. “I’ll get the bindles!”

“Hey!” Peridot shouted after her. “We better not get arrested by buck-toothed townies, like in episode five!”

“No promises!”

“Do we really need to send all these souvenirs?” Pearl asked, loading up another three boxes of useless knick-knacks. “I mean, does Steven need a jackalope teacup? Or a one-fiftieth scale model of the world’s biggest ball of twine. Which. I’d like to remind you, is a ball of twine.”

Greg laughed, taking a miniature of the Statue of Liberty out of the box he had just set down next to the ship’s stripped-down navigation console. “Hey, Peridot and Amethyst went through a lot of trouble sending these back.” Pressing a button on the base of the statuette, a small flame came from the tip of the torch, which he shut off quickly, before the ship’s systems decided to douse him with fire-suppressing foam. “Besides, if we don’t get these off-planet, I suspect they’ll be confiscated as evidence for a shoplifting case.”

“Hmmmm. True.” Pearl set her boxes down and brushed her hands together to banish unseen dust and grime. “Honestly, I’m shocked they haven’t called us to wire bail money.”

“You know? Same.” Greg smiled, deep lines coming up at the corner of his mouth and around his eyes.

Pearl examined the human for a moment, but turned away quickly. “Well, that does seem to be the last of it.” She took stock of their eighth shipment. Seven years over. All downhill, as the humans said, completely ignoring the realities of topography. “Shall we send her off?”

“Just a sec. I got something….” Greg held out a flat palm to Pearl and dashed out of the ship. There was a beep of an alarm system outside—the van had finally died the year before, and Greg’s newest ride boasted such luxuries as automatic windows, keyless remote, and working air conditioning—and a little shuffling before Greg was power-walking back up the ramp, holding out what Pearl thought, for just a moment, was a half-liter of soda.

And then she recognized Greg’s last addition and held out her hands wide, legs parted in a
powerful stance, refusing to let the human anywhere near the shipment. “Oh, no! You are not sending that! Steven is not old enough to be drinking, Greg!”

“Pearl,” Greg said, pausing before her, resting his hands on his hips, “he’s 21. He is exactly old enough to be drinking. And this is just one bottle.”

“Oh, it always begins with one bottle,” Pearl raved, “and then it’s another and then it’s cannabis and then boom, Steven is on methamphetamines and working as an inter-stellar call-girl to get his fix!”

Greg blinked at Pearl. “You have been watching way too many 90s sitcoms with Sheena.”

“My point stands!”

Laughing, Greg reached out, patting Pearl on the shoulder. “Pearl. I was going to share this with Steven if he was on Earth. Look.” Holding out the bottle, he pointed at the label. “I got it the year he was born. It’s the only bottle I bought, so don’t worry, I’m not going to load up the next shipment with Everclear and moonshine.”

“Oh,” Pearl grumbled as she watched Greg gingerly wrap the bottle in one of the bolts of fabric and lay it down in a safe little nook among the dry goods, ‘you say that now.”

“Let it go, Pearl,” Greg chuckled, wrapping an arm around his friend’s shoulder and ushering her off the ship. “You’ve got to trust him to make his own decisions.”

“I’d much rather do that when i’m around to make sure he makes the right ones,” Pearl muttered, fingers dancing over the ship’s outer control panel, starting up the launch sequence.

“That’s kind of the opposite of what that means,” Greg said, stepping back as the red teardrop rose into the air with no evidence of a propulsion system. In a few seconds, it had risen higher than the nearby temple, and just a few seconds later it had turned into a pin-prick against the light blue sky. Then, with a pop, it was gone.

They stood together in silence, eyes stuck on the last place the ship had been. Another year gone. Another collection of food and fabrics and little trinkets as stand-ins for the hundreds of thousands of words they wished they could have sent instead.

Greg frowned. “Wait….” His eyes bugged out. “WAIT! DAMMIT! I FORGOT!” He waved his arms at the sky, as if the lightyears-distant ship would turn around and zoom back to Earth. “I FORGOT A CORKSCREW!”

At his side, Pearl rocked onto her heels and smirked. “Yes. I know.”

It was not, strictly speaking, ironic for Pearl to arrive at Sheena’s condo and find the dinner table supplied with an opened, airing bottle of red and two wide-mouthed glasses. No. It was just another little jab from the universe at large.

But Pearl could take a few jabs, and so she said nothing as she embraced her lover at the door and allowed herself to be ushered to her side of the table, which was empty, as per usual. Dinner was just another excuse to spend time together. It had taken Sheena a few nights to get used to dining with someone who didn't actually eat, but both had found it far more agreeable to be in one another’s presence during the human ritual than to stay apart.

“Is there an occasion?” Pearl asked as she sat, hands folding on her lap, watching as Sheena struck
a match and lit a single tall candle. “The last time you put out candles was when we took that long weekend in Montreal. And that was because the power went out.”

“Not really an...occasion,” Sheena said, turning out the lights and moving carefully through the dimness, taking her seat opposite of Pearl and completely failing to actually look at the gem.

She wore glasses, now. They were an addition from two years before, and she’d been so excited about the accessory that she’d thown several hundred extra dollars at her optometrist, coming out with five simple, but vibrantly-colored pairs of glasses, which she coordinated with her hair. This month, her dark-blue mane had been cut short and spiked up so sharply that she would need to wash the hard gel out before stabbing Pearl during...things.

“Not an occasion?” Pearl asked, resting her elbows on the table and steepling her fingers together, cheek resting on her hands as she studied her lover. She’d been so shocked the first time Sheena had arrived for a date and her hair hadn’t been that initial, gut-wrenching pink. Even more-so when, a year after, the human woman’s hair had been completely shaved off. Nowadays, it was almost a routine. She’d actually failed to noticed the switch to blue for two days, and when she’d looked to her lover and asked when the change had occurred, Sheena had laughed so hard the neighbors had pounded on the walls. “But a...something?”

“Yeah. A big something.” Sheena puffed out her cheeks. That having proven to not be quite fortifying enough, she picked up the wine bottle and poured a generous portion into her glass, adding just a half-inch to Pearl’s. It was mostly for show. Pearl only ever drank enough to accommodate toasts. Or enough to coat her lips with liquid red, which had never failed to serve as a distraction.

Sheena didn’t seem to be aiming for that, however. She picked up her glass and gulped down a mouthful, nostrils flaring as the light warmth of alcohol coated her throat. It was awkward and quite an unfamiliar sight, and just enough to tickle at Pearl’s anxiety.

Tense dinner. Drinking instead of talking. Not meeting her eyes.

“Oh,” Pearl whispered. “You’re breaking up with me.”

Sheena, in the process of putting her glass back on the table, jerked violently, sending the red toppling onto her plate and the brocade tablecloth below. “Shit!” Jumping back from the table, the blue-haired woman scrambled to lift up the tablecloth and form a dam before the wine escaped onto the cream carpet.

“I...I should let you take care of this,” Pearl murmured, pushing back from the table and rising, trying to move unobtrusively, invisibly, to the door.

“No!” Sheena shouted, letting the tablecloth go, wincing as a tiny river of wine escaped and fell to the floor. Turning away from the ruination, she rushed to the door, not quite blocking it, but making sure Pearl could not get out without facing her first. “No, Pearl, that’s not it!”

“Then why are you so scared?” Pearl asked, on the edge of going shrill. “What is wrong, Sheena?”

“Nothing is wrong!”

Pearl swept her arm towards the mess. “Then why are you acting like this?”

“I...I’m just...just nervous, okay!” Sheena blurted out, her cheeks going red. “I don’t know what you’re going to say! I can’t read you half the time, and I’m nervous and I don’t want you to freak out, but I have apparently failed.”
“Yeah, you kind of have!” And it was getting worse by the minute. The conversation seemed nowhere near its culmination to the gem, and she wanted so desperately to yank the door open and to run into the night. Things had been so good! So good and so easy and—

Sheena grabbed Pearl’s hands. “Will you move in with me?”

Pearl boggled, jaw dropping.

Sheena stared at her lover and, after several seconds of silence, let out a high and short laugh. “Aaaaand this is why I was nervous. Pearl. Pearl? Hello?”

“But I live at the Temple,” Pearl muttered.

“Yeah. I know. I was hoping you’d live here, instead.”

The gem blinked, her normally so-swift brain stumbling. “But why? Sheena, I’m already here several times a week. Surely you see me enough?”

“No.” Sheena squeezed Pearl’s hands. “Not nearly. That’s the point.” She hesitated. And then her face went blank. “But, uh...if you don’t want to see more of me...?”

“I like seeing you,” Pearl replied, “quite a bit. I just...why would I move? Why wouldn’t I just come over more, instead?”

Sheena looked down at her hands where they clasped Pearl’s. “I don’t know?” She frowned. “I guess...you’d move...just for me?”

“Oh,” Pearl breathed. Just for her. That was a concept she understood. “This is something you want?”

Sheena hesitated. Then, gently, she pulled on Pearl’s hands, guiding her lover in so she could wrap her arms around the small, lithe gem’s waist. Once they stood chest-to-chest, with Pearl looking up at her human partner and Sheena looking down at that pale, confused face, Sheena managed a smile. “Yeah. So much, Pearl.”

Pearl wasn’t sure when she decided she needed to kiss Sheena. Perhaps it was a constant state, because it came so naturally in that moment. Just the slightest rise to her toes, head tilting to the left, and her girlfriend was responding in kind, their noses brushing before lips connected in something soft and long and so, so familiar.

When they broke off, Pearl sighed, gentle, and settled down to rest her gem on Sheena’s shoulder. “Okay. But this is one of those human things I don’t get. How does one even...‘move in’ somewhere?”

Sheena laughed, tightening her grip about the gem’s waist. “Pearl. You are, like, the worst lesbian I have ever met. You get a U-Haul.”

“U-Haul?”

Sheena groaned. “Just...the worst.”

It had been a year since she was in Beach City. They’d been in Beach City? She. She, at the moment, she. Just enough time for a few more stoplights to be installed, a couple potholes to be filled, and for a handful of stores on the boardwalk to close up and reopen as something new.
But there was one stalwart, and oh man, she was so psyched to walk into Fish Stew Pizza once more. Or...crouch in. Yeah. Maybe this was a bad idea? Yeah. Fair point.

With a glow so bright it blinded the half-dozen patrons milling about the inside of the restaurant, Fluorite fell apart into two gems, both small enough to fit comfortably inside the building. Really, even stacked on top of one another, they’d have fit; it was only the act of fusion which had made them formidable.

“Let me handle the transaction, Amethyst,” Peridot said, brushing a hand over her left enhancer band, bringing out a glow that solidified into a jingling bag. “I don’t want to be kicked out of another restaurant.”

“Look, they needed to be more specific,” Amethyst drawled, lacing her fingers together and stretching high up in the air. “If they’re going to call themselves ‘French Laundry,’ then obviously the linens are up for grabs.”

“Amethyst. The linens are never ‘up for grabs.’ I’m not even from Earth and I know that! How many times have we been over this?”

“Not enough, apparently.”

Rolling her eyes and letting out a long-suffering sigh, Peridot approached the order counter and tossed down her bag of change (totally not illicitly claimed from a fountain). “A small house deluxe and a large Hawaiian, please,” she said in her primmest, most polite voice.

The woman behind the counter did not seem impressed. Though she had, admittedly, been put upon a bit already, what with the initial entry of a sizeable gem, the subsequent blinding flash of a fusion ending, and the presentation of literal chump change. Grumbling, she reached up, producing a pencil from hair voluminous enough to impress any quartz warrior. A quick note was scrawled on an order pad and handed off through a wide window leading to the back room of the parlor, where a second woman—nearly identical, but for her hair kept down to a quarter-inch buzz—accepted the note and scoffed.

“What, abomination pizza? Who in the world would order—” The cook looked past the front counter, eyes alighting on Amethyst. “Oh, hey. You’re one of those gems, right? Amy?”

“Eh, close enough,” Amethyst said, shrugging. “How’s kicks, Kiki?”

“Quiet,” Kiki said with a content sigh. “The town hasn’t been torn up in years. I think this is the longest we’ve ever gone between insurance claims!”

“And it better stay that way,” the front-end worker—no doubt Jenny—broke in, crossing her arms and shooting daggers at the gems.

“Hey, wish in one hand.” Amethyst’s grin was not mirrored back at her, but it didn’t diminish one bit.

“Hey, uh…” Kiki ventured as she took two balls of dough from the fridge, flattening them out into perfectly round pies in just seconds. “Have you heard from...you know…” She poured out sauce and cheese, looking down as she applied the toppings, as if the task required all of her attention. “The kid?”

“You mean Steven?” Amethyst drawled, and a flinch went through the other three women. “Nope,” she said, adding a pop to the P.
“He can’t exactly phone in,” Peridot added.

“We heard. That’s rough.” Kiki turned, opening the brick oven door, bathing the gems in warmth for the few seconds it took to slide the two pizzas in and close up again.

Jenny nodded, looking over her shoulder. “I don’t know what I’d do if Kiki ever went off like that.”

Kiki smirked at her sister. “Probably fail the next health code inspection.”

“Truuuuuuue.”

As the pizzas cooked, the human twins and the gem pair indulged in less-charged small talk. Which shops had closed and opened in the three years Amethyst and Peridot had been gone—”Oh, thank the stars, there’s still donuts. I don’t care what Connie said, they never tasted right at the other locations.”—and the changing relationships around the city and quite some time on the antics of their erstwhile Pearl and her partner.

“So that’s still going on?” Peridot asked, tilting her head. “Them living together? In the same place?”

“Oh yeah. Pearl even comes in to get a pie, every so often. I think she might even eat some of it.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?” Amethyst gasped, eyes going wide. And wider still as she shape-shifted, until she was a creature made up primarily of eyeballs. And then she snapped her proportions back down to proper size, grinning at the disgusted stares from Jenny and Kiki. “Like, with her mouth?”

“God, I hope so,” Kiki whimpered. The sudden beeping of a timer distracted her—perhaps for the best—and she turned back to the oven, opening it up and peeking inside. “Alright, you two. Here or to-go?”

“Oh-ho-ho man, if Pearl actually eats, this is so to-go! Wrap that baby up!”

Just as Kiki slid the pizzas from the oven and onto a waiting wooden table, a jingle came from the front of the shop, catching the attention of both Pizza twins. Jenny’s smile grew suddenly larger and bright, her voice going up a few notes as she greeted the next customer. “Hey, Doc! Haven’t seen you since...well, I’ve been in your office more recently than you’ve been in here!”

Turning about, Peridot and Amethyst watched the rather bouncy approach of Beach City Hospital’s Chief Physician. “It’s a cheat meal kind of day, ladies!” Pulling a wallet out from her pocket, she walked between the gems and slapped a card down on the counter. “A large double-sausage! Doug and I are celebrating!”

“Celebrating?” Jenny asked as she slid for payment and her sister got about the preparations. “What’s the occasion?”

Priyanka squealed. Clutching her hands to her chest, she hopped on the tips of her toes and did a little spin before stopping facing the twins again, arms outstretched. “She got in! Oxford. Oxford! Connie is going to Oxxxx-foooord!” Priyanka sang. Actually sang her joy.

“Oh my goodness! That’s amazing!” Kiki clapped her hands together. “I mean, we all knew she could do it, but, wow! It seems like she just left for college!”

“Well, she did finish in three years.” Priyanka said, rubbing at her chin, eyes glinting. “No sense messing around in undergrad when she’s going straight through until she gets her PhD. And she
didn’t want to get too attached to Stanford. I mean, yes, it’s technically more well-regarded for poly-sci, but Connie insisted that she have a more international education, and I think that’s a great idea. It’s not like we can just ignore the rest of the world, can we?”

“Speaking of ignoring the world,” Peridot muttered, reaching out to accept two pizza boxes handed from Kiki to Jenny to herself.

Priyanka blinked and looked down, suddenly noticing the short gems. “Oh. Oh my goodness! Amethyst! Peridot!” Kneeling, she swept them into quick hugs—a little strange, after so many years, but entirely warranted for two of her daughter’s closest friends. “My goodness, it’s been so long!”

“Yeah, yeah, speaking of so long,” Amethyst said, shaking herself as she was freed from the mother’s grip, “I thought Connie was coming home once she was done with school? You said she finished her degree.”

“Her first degree. She’s still got a Master’s and a PhD to earn!”

“A PhD?” Peridot asked, frowning. “Like you’ve got?”

“Well, sort of. It’s like we say in the surgery: ‘she’ll be a doctor, but not the kind that helps people.’ Although, hah! With Connie in political office someday, I’m sure she’s going to help a lot more people than I’ll be able to, in my lifetime!” The woman smiled, aglow. “Oh, she’d have been a good doctor, but she is just brilliant in her field. Stanford tried to get her to stay for her advanced degrees, but…well, Oxford!”

“Yeah, yeah, great, Oxford,” Amethyst said, scowling, “they had good fries there—weird name, funky sauce, but whatever. How much longer until she’s done?”

“Oh, well.” Priyank straightened up, crossing her arms and considering. “Connie said it’s normally three years for the Masters and five for the PhD, but this is Connie we’re talking about. I bet she takes five years, tops.” Lifting her nose in the air, Priyanka preened.

“Oh,” Peridot said, looking to Amethyst. “Five years? That’ll work.”

“Yeah,” Amethyst agreed. “Just in time for Steven to get home.”

Priyanka paused.

She looked down on the gems.

“Steven?” she intoned.

“Well, yeah.” Peridot shrugged. “He’ll be back right after, so that works great. Connie will be done with school and back in Beach City when he returns!”

“Excuse me,” Priyanka said, clearly not caring if she was excused or not, she was going to barge on through, “my daughter’s life does not revolve around Steven or when he’s coming back.”

Peridot and Amethyst looked to one another. Then back up to the human woman. Peridot raised a brow. “Why not?”

Priyanka spluttered, face going red and hot. Before she had anywhere near recovered herself, the gems turned away and walked out of Fish Stew Pizza, heading off for other welcome homes.
“You put that...in your mouth,” Amethyst breathed, looking upon Pearl in awe.

Pearl blinked down on Amethyst, two fingers between her lips, cleaning off the last of the little flavor from her grip. Popping the finger free, she rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. “Really, Amethyst. It was just a little pineapple. It’s not like I ate the...the...” Pearl shuddered. “The meat. That is a line I just will not cross.”

“But you ate it!” Amethyst laughed, reaching out and throwing her arms about Pearl’s waist. “My picky eater! Growing up!”

“Oh, really!” Pearl patted her old friend’s head. “It’s not like this is a first.”

“Yeah,” Sheena of the snow-white hair said, leaning back in her chair, twirling up a string of stubborn cheese on her index finger. “She’s been eating out for ages.”

Pearl squeaked, spine going rigid.

“Oh? Really?” Peridot looked to the elegant gem. “I’m still not entirely used to it. Some textures are just unsettling. What do you recommend?”

“Well, I, uh...let me think.” Pearl covered her mouth with a hand, trying to unobtrusively mask her cheeks, but they were bright blue and Amethyst was laughing and fist bumping Sheena and she was going to murder someone tonight, it was merely a question of whom.

“Aw, man! Pizza!” Greg cheered as Peridot and Amethyst lay out the remnants of their prize on his fold-down kitchen table. He’d upgraded from the van in recent years. Just a little RV, but there was an actual bathroom, bedroom, and the tiniest of kitchens. Most importantly, there was a year-round camping hook-up on the beach, where he was allowed to stay without having to deal with nosey cops tramping around and interrupting his beauty sleep. “Agh! One slice. Don’t let me have any more, okay?”

Amethyst frowned as the human creaked his way down onto one of the RVs benches. “You sure, dude? We got the Hawaiian because we know you’re weird like that.”

“Pineapple on pizza is a good and pure thing.” Greg said, taking a paper plate and carefully choosing the largest slice. I will not have you besmirching its name. It’s just my doc would skin me alive if I ate the whole thing. Hey, Peridot, in the fridge, get the big glass bowl, would you?”

Obliging, Peridot took out a bowl about as wide as her voluminous hair. Setting it on the table, she popped the lid and stared. She looked at Greg, frowning. “Leaves?”

Greg laughed, taking two plastic forks and scooping out a large pile of the greens. “Spinach. Try some, there’s all sorts of other stuff in there”

“Well, you know,” Greg said, shoving a huge portion of salad in his mouth, chewing vigorously and swallowing. “It’s kind of a thing humans end up having to do, when we get older.”

“Become herbivores?” Peridot asked, brows drawn.

Greg laughed. “No! Take better care of ourselves. Especially if you’re like me, eating all that junk when I was younger. I’ve got to be careful if I want...well.”
“Want what?” Amethyst asked, claiming 7/8ths of the combo pizza, leaving Peridot her single slice and the fruit-touched monstrosity. “To maintain your girlish figure?”

“Pshaw,” Greg said, flipping a hand at Amethyst and fluttering his eyelashes. “But no. I mean if I want to make it until Steven gets home.”

The pizza turned to mud and ash in Amethyst’s mouth. She let it gently slide from her maw back onto the plate, only slightly chewed. “W...wait. Greg, are you dying?”

“How high of a risk?” Peridot asked, numbers already whirling in her head. Gems didn’t die. She’d seen so many little animals and plants and even the occasional person pass on during her ten years on Earth, so she understood mortality in theory, but it had never been this...close.

“Well, I’m not on blood thinners or anything,” Greg said, poking at his food. “My doc is still talking in terms of ‘I will be very disappointed in you,’ and not ‘you have five years, Mr. Universe,’ so it’s nothing to really worry about.”

“Should...” Amethyst looked down at her half-destroyed meal. “Should we call Steven?”

Greg froze.

The gems watched him.

Gently, the man put his fork down on the paper plate, resting his forearms on the flimsy table. He sighed, and it was like he’d shrunk. Both down, but also in on himself. It was perhaps more noticeable for Peridot. Amethyst had known the man in his early twenties, and had seen him nearly every day as he courted Rose and then raised Steven. She’d grown used to the human changing. Peridot had only met Greg when he was in his mid-40s, and now, ten years later, the differences were piling up. The small lines around his eyes at 40 were deepening and sagging down. His sunburned skin had begun to mottle. His hair was nearly gone, no longer an odd mane and a smooth crown. And he looked so, so tired.

“No,” Greg said, pushing himself taller, looking to the two gems. “I’m going to be fine. We can’t just call Steven up because I’m on a diet. He’s working so hard, getting control of...well, whatever powers he has, by now. I’m not ruining that. And besides,” Greg picked his form back up, “if we call him now, we won’t be allowed to call again, if...if there really is a problem.”

The two gems looked at one another, and quickly away. They knew each other well, by now. They’d spent years on the road as one another’s sole companion. They’d shared a body, a mind. They both felt that flash of hope and then shame, and they both wished it could be denied, because some small part of them wished that Greg was ill enough to call Steven and make him come home.

“Woah,” Amethyst breathed, turning slowly, looking about the roof of the Burning Room. Or trying to look at the roof. She could only catch little glimpses of the red veins and brown stone. Most of it was hidden by pink bubbles stacked so deep that, even in their translucence, they obscured the room’s dimensions. It made the room seem so much brighter, and yet the fact that it meant they were now surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of captured soldiers was enough to send a chill through the quartz’s very gem. “You’ve been...busy.”

Garnet looked about at her work. “Hmmm.” She reached up and brushed fingers across a bubble
containing another ruby. It had been a creature of steam, causing mayhem near the North Pole. It had been exceedingly easy to capture.

“You, uh...you okay, Garnet?” Amethyst asked, edging reluctantly up to her companion and leader, laying a hand on the fusion’s thigh.

Garnet let her hand fall from the gems. She looked down upon Amethyst.

“No,” Garnet said. “I don’t believe I am.”

They sent off an eleventh transport. And then a twelfth. Then a thirteenth. And, finally, a fourteenth transport ship came down, and the gems stood together as they watched it rise up again with one final shipment. One year. Four seasons. 365 days and the next ship that touched down on the planet wouldn’t be there to take things away, but to bring something home.

But, for now, there was work to be done. After fourteen years of near-total disuse, the beach house had plenty of neglect to love away. A new roof, several new support beams, and an entirely remodeled interior were a must. Luckily, with gems not needing sleep and Beach City having absolutely nothing to do with zoning or safety inspections on the little bit of alien land, it was accomplished quickly. Once done, everything inside looked almost exactly as it had been once before.

They made a few small concessions. Steven’s little bed was replaced with a mattress which took up the entire width of the loft. Within the walls were cables designed by Peridot and Pearl, which far outperformed even the best of humanity’s fiber-optic cables. The fridge...well, that was something which didn’t so much keep food chilled as lock it in stasis, and if any Earth manufacturing company had been allowed even a moment’s glance at the interior, technological progress among humanity would have jumped forward by several decades.

It was familiar. It was comforting. It was a home waiting for its family.

And one night eleven months later, as summer began to creep over Beach City, a tall being walked down the streets of the tourist town, past the boardwalk and onto the sand. They were a little shaky, after so long on far more solid ground, but within a minute, they had regained a rhythm from childhood and moved quickly around the cliffside, up the little meandering path to the very lap of the immense statue and the stairs and the deck and then to the door.

The visitor knocked.

After a minute, the screen door opened, a thin, green face looking out and up, squinting through the dimming evening light. “Hey, Amethyst, were you expecting a pack….?” Peridot’s eyes went wide. “Aaaaaaaaaaage?

“Hey,” the visitor said, shifting a messenger bag about their shoulders and bracing for what was doubtless coming.

“A...Am...AMETHYST! GARNET!” Peridot screeched and flung herself at the visitor.

“CONNIE’S BACK!”

Connie Maheswaran nearly fell over as she was slammed by first the green gem, and then the far less restrained quartz and the powerful fusion. She was enveloped and lifted up and cradled with such passionate care that it quite literally took her breath away. Though that might have been mainly because of Amethyst’s too-strong hugs.
“H-hey!” Connie laughed, letting herself be carried into the beach house and settled on a new—
though still almost carnivorous—couch, where she continued to be smothered by gems. “I’m back,
I know, haha! Oh, you guys, it’s so good to see you! Oh, where’s Pearl? Where’s Greg? Is Lapis
still—”

“We’ll call Pearl and Greg,” Amethyst interrupted, the energy radiating off her compact body more
than enough to overcome the very brief chill that went through the gems at Connie’s words.
“Just...agh, you’re back! You’re home!”

“Yeah,” Connie smiled, wrapping her arms about the gems. “Just in time.”

“Oooooooh, let me look at you!” Pearl keened, holding Connie out at arm’s length. “Connie,
you’re so...how did you get so much taller!? You were already an adult when you left! This
just...oh, this is not allowed!”

Laughing, Connie broke free of the distancing grip, enveloping Pearl in yet another hug. It was
easily the sixth they’d shared since the reunion of mentor and student. It had felt a bit odd, at first,
with Connie no longer having to press her head into Pearl’s chest, but instead letting Pearl rest her
head on the human woman’s shoulder. By now, it was the most natural thing imaginable. “Call the
cops, then, huh? But I’ve got to tell you, I’ve got pull in City Hall, so I don’t think you’re going to
get anywhere there.”

“Oh, I’d heard!” Pearl cackled, stepping out of the embrace once more. “And thank goodness
someone competent is in there! I try to keep out of your human politics, but really, Beach City must
consider some term limits; Mayor Dewey has been in office for perhaps a bit too long.”

“Oh, he does all right,” Connie said, carding fingers through her hair, getting it back into place
behind her ears. There was so much of it now. Down to her calves, a thick black curtain which she
now had to keep in a braid, or else get it caught in absolutely everything. “Besides, it’s a nice, easy
first job, and I need easy after the last year of my thesis...ugh.” She squeezed the bridge of her
nose, easing out the deep line between her brows. “Mom is insisting I go straight for the senate, but
I just want a chance to relax a bit before I go leading any countries!”

“And it will provide a wonderful chance to form an alliance to a certain visiting dignitary,” Peridot
teased from her seat on top of the breakfast counter.

“Oh, well,” Connie shrugged, eyes glinting. “Forming an advantageous political alliance is only
prudent, right?”

“Nye-he-heeee,” Peridot replied, rubbing her hands together. “Oh, you’re going to have no
problems with that.” Her gaze roved over the human’s form, and her snicker deepened.

A deep flush came to Connie’s cheeks and she tugged at the bottom of her black blazer, putting
herself back into crisp order. She looked straight off a job interview, in a black skirt that showed
off just that perfect amount of leg and a teal blouse that matched perfectly to a pair of dangling
false-stone earrings. She could have easily been the one sitting in the mayoral seat, not merely
handling the mayor’s PR, as she would be in just a few days’ time. “Well. I’m sure we’re all going
to be very busy soon,” she said, masterfully showing off her finely-honed skills in political
deflection

“Busy? Or biz-zay?” Amethyst said, masterfully showing off her finely-honed skills in not taking a
hint.
“God, both, I hope,” Connie growled, sending the gems into a brief, shocked silence, and then tumbling down in peals of laughter.

“Have we been given an arrival day?” Connie asked a few minutes later, as things calmed down and everyone settled for a longer talk. Pearl had done the honors of providing coffee—showing off surprising skill as she frothed milk and brewed espresso shots and sketched little flowers on top of the drinks—and even Garnet admired a little cup, though she and Pearl both abstained from the treat.

“Not yet,” Pearl said, swirling her drink and studying the design. “There’s still some weeks until Steven’s birthday, and, as much as I’d love to see him touch down that morning, we shouldn’t plan too much. That might just be the day he gets to set out for home. But within a month or two, I’d imagine.”

“Garnet, have you seen him?” Connie looked to the fusion, who shook her head.

“My powers only work for variables within a certain distance. Out past the atmosphere, I’m pretty much blind. Once he gets back in, though, I’ll know.”

“And you’ll tell us?”

Garnet shot a finger-gun at Connie. “Keep your phone on vibrate, kid.”

“And other things off,” Amethyst said, nonchalant, once more bringing red to Connie’s cheeks.

“You guys!” The human set her cup down on the kitchen table, fanning her face. “Come on! Steven and I aren’t just going to...to...—”

“Star in a bodice ripper?” Peridot asked.

Connie stared at the short gem. “How do you even know what those are?”

Peridot shrugged. “The library.” At a look from Amethyst, she crossed her arms and muttered “Camp Pining Hearts fanfiction.”

“Yes. Well. Just because Steven is coming home doesn’t mean we’re going to run off and get married and...and...” Words failed and Connie just shook her head, looking down at the smudged heart in her cup. “It’s not going to be that easy. A lot has happened. We don’t even know what kind of person Steven is, anymore. He might be some high and mighty diamond, like the others!”

“Or,” Pearl hedged, reaching over to lay a hand on Connie’s shoulder, “he could be our Steven. And our Steven might not be some valiant bodice-ripper—”

“Pity,” Connie drawled.

“But,” Pearl laughed, giving Connie’s shoulder a squeeze, “he’s still Steven. And trust me, Connie, if he isn’t sweeping you off your feet, it’s because he’ll be tripping over his own once he sees you.”

“You think so?” Connie whispered, giving her mentor a small, nervous smile.

“Connie,” Pearl said, a little quirk to her lips, “keep your best dress ironed and ready. Let’s give Steven the welcome home he’s been dreaming of.”

“Yeah,” Connie said. Then, sitting up straighter and lifting her cup in the air, she proclaimed, “To
coming home!”

“Cheers!”

They had a little party on Steven’s birthday. Connie, Greg, and even Sheena, and four gems vibrating with energy. Cooking, talking, and laughing in the beach house. Every few minutes, one of them would peek out the front door, eyes scanning the horizon, but each time, they came back inside, quiet for a few tense seconds before being pulled back into the flow of conversation. The red wine which had been airing since three was poured out, mostly between Sheena and Connie, with Greg accepting a single glass, and the celebration turned to gentle reminiscences of the past fourteen years, and the fourteen before that.

Around two in the morning, Greg sprawled out on the couch, Sheena entered Pearl’s door on the Temple Gate with wide eyes, and Connie settled down on the loft bed, knowing full well that nothing there could hold the scent of the boy she once knew, but still certain that something lingered. She dreamed of deep laughter and large hands and an odd coolness against her belly where skin didn’t quite meet skin.

Afterwards, it was the weekend. They lounged together, discussion wandering beyond the topic of the man they all awaited, as if he was the proverbial watched pot and speaking of him would just delay his return. Connie sketched out the five-year plan for Beach City and her more personal reflections on the little local government as viewed from the inside. She spoke quickly, often pulling a tablet out of her messenger bag and flipping through city documents and school textbooks, alongside news stories and pictures from her time in England and what seemed the whole of Europe on her breaks.

Then it was Monday. It wasn’t unexpected, thanks to Pearl’s warning, but it was still somehow shocking to see Connie and Sheena pack up their bags and rush off to their jobs, assuring everyone that they would be back that night.

The week passed quickly—Sheena always had more than enough to do managing projects at her little startup just outside of recovering Ocean Town, and Connie had an entire local government to wrap her head around and then wrap around her little finger—and soon Friday night came. Another bottle of wine was opened to flavour the pasta sauce and to help the two women wash away the stress of the work week.

Then the second week passed, and Garnet sat within the temple, eyes closed, seeking, searching, stretching her powers to the limit.

And then a third, and Sheena apologized, saying she really needed to be home, she just needed to be where she belonged, and Pearl could stay behind if she liked, but Pearl lingered another few days before she returned to her lover’s side, though, of course, demanding she be called the second there was news.

And then it had been a month. And two months. And summer was fading away and the nights were getting longer and, finally, someone proclaimed they’d had enough.

It was a bit surprising that it was Peridot.

“That’s it. Garnet, get the communicator. This is ridiculous.” Peridot slammed her palms down on the kitchen table, jostling the salad and tilapia and curried cauliflower which Pearl had so carefully laid out. “He’s late.”
“Perhaps it’s just transit time,” Pearl suggested, though she was scowling as she took off her apron and hung it next to the gem-tech fridge. “Any minute now, he could—”

“Any minute now I could give a” and Peridot said a word that had Amethyst grinning.

“Hey, you used that one right,” the purple gem praised, ruffling Peridot’s hair.

“Whatever. It’s the easy one.” Peridot shook her head, breaking free of the infantilizing gesture. “We kept up our part of the bargain. We’ve been good for fourteen years. We deserve some news!”

“I think she’s right,” Connie said, looking to Greg on her left, and then to her right, seeking out the fusion. “Garnet, would you…Garnet?”

The seat to her right was empty.

Suddenly, the Temple Gate door 

fwished 

open and Garnet stepped out, a bubble cradled in her hands. “Peridot.”

Peridot sat up straighter.

“Thank you for being the one to break.”

Peridot frowned. “I didn’t break. I just suggested—”

“Shhh,” Garnet said, her smile large and wild as she popped the bubble and twisted the communicator until it clicked into place. “It’s ringing.”

The table and its food was abandoned in an instant. Four gems and two humans crowded around an evolving screen, holding their breaths as it first flashed pink and then resolved into a video feed.

A deep blue gem was leaning in close to the camera, for just a moment, as if she had been fiddling with the settings. A moment after the feed was live, she seemed to notice it on her end and leaned back to a proper distance, looking into the display, eyes darting about the many figures therein.

“H…hello?” Connie said.

“Hello?” The gem repeated back, tilting her head, her spiked pink hair describing a wide arc across the display. “Oh!” Suddenly sitting up straighter in her chair, the gem crossed her arms before her, wrists tilting back until her fingertips touched together. “This is Spinel 4-2JX, temporarily at command on the flagship Blade!”

The gems gaped up at Spinel. At her arms and hands tilted together 

just so 

into a perfect diamond salute.

Spinel looked back at them. After some moments, she let her arms down, raising a brow.

“Um…who is calling?”

“We…” Connie trailed off.

Pearl stepped forward, stomping a foot. “We are the Crystal Gems and we demand to speak to Steven!”

“The Crystal Gems?” Spinel squinted, her round features puckering as she puzzled over the words. Then she brightened, slapping her fists down on the armrests of her chair. “You! You guys! Those Earth gems! No wonder I didn’t recognize the signal origin!”
“Yes, those Earth gems,” Pearl repeated, fingers twitching. “Now, if you’d put through our call?”

“Oh. Oh man.” Spinel shook her head. “I can’t do that.”

Silence. Heavy silence.

And then Garnet spoke up, voice deep and deadly. “I’m sure you can make...an exception.”

“IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII really can’t. My diamond is addressing a...er...problem,” Spinel hedged, tapping her fingers on the armrests.

“And he’s going to be addressing a bigger one if he doesn’t get on the phone!” Connie shouted up at the screen.

“Oh man,” Spinel puffed her cheeks, “I really doubt it.”

Sputtering, Connie geared up for another threat, but found the words dying as a strange pattern of yellow lines flashed over the video feed, holding for a second before changing to a different array.

“Shards,” Spinel said, apparently getting the same overlay on her end. “There’s a timer. Look, we don’t have time for this, right now. I’ll tell my diamond his colony called when things calm down.”

“His colony!” Greg shouted. “We’re his family!”

“Yeah, okay, his ‘family,’” Spinel said, holding up her fingers in air quotes. “It’ll be a few days. More if this battle goes south.”

“Battle?” Amethyst repeated. “What battle? What’s going on up there!?”

Spinel took a deep breath. An odd sight, given that gems didn’t strictly need to breath. She shook her head, mouth opening, searching for words.

Suddenly, the overlay turned red, and Spinel’ eyes went wide.

She looked down on the gems.

“We made a mistake.”

And then the screen went blank.

The Crystal Gems brought up every single one of Earth’s remaining gem defenses. Monitoring stations and sentinels and communication towers. Peridot cracked her way into systems thrice as old as herself, bending them to her considerable will. Pearl drew up battle plans and strategies, and drilled the gems and Connie for another last stand.

And no one came.

A fifteenth year passed, and no one came.

And then a sixteenth.

And then a seventeenth and Connie was sitting silent one day, next to her mother and a far older woman, breathing in heavy perfume. On her hands, little drops of cool paste were being laid out in intricate patterns. Swirling lines and little dots and tiny flowers.
Connie looked down on her palm, half-obscured by the dark brown design.

She turned to stone.

“Take that off,” she whispered.

The old woman crouched before her scowled and looked up from her so-close concentration. “What?” It was less a question and more a challenge. She had dealt with far too many women on days like this to really care in the least what this young thing thought.

“That bit, there. Take it off. Change it.”

“Child, if I change the design now, we’re going to be here another hour, and I am not doing that because you dislike a little r—”

“Take it off!” Connie screamed, wrenching her arm free from the old woman and sliding her palm across her blue sari. A red-brown stain sunk deep into the fabric, sending the ancient artist and her mother scrambling to their feet, run off in search of damp towels.

Connie’s breath came out hot through her nose, warming the thick golden ring resting on her upper lip. She closed her eyes, false lashes tickling together, gathering up her tears.

When she dared open her eyes again, Connie looked at her palm.

It looked like she’d stuck it in mud, but faint hints of the old pattern remained where the henna had been scraped free. Particularly right under her right middle finger, where the offending paste had been fully rubbed away, but only after the stain had been given several minutes to steep.

A little rose, fully in bloom, now just a ghost on her skin.

Greg strummed his guitar, looking to the stars. The party was long-since over. He really should be going to bed, himself. The guests were all gone, even the sleepless gems wandered off to condo and temple. And Connie, of course…

He thought, for a moment, that he saw something there. In the starlit sky. But he knew it was just a dim hope. There hadn’t been anything there for seventeen years.

Sighing, Greg rose, his old bones creaking, and headed into his RV. Summer was over. He didn’t need to be out catching chill.

Sunrises and sunsets. Days and weeks. The city grew cold and then wet with rain and snow, and then a barest bit of warmth began to grow again.

An early summer morning came when the tide was low and the beach was covered in sand dollars. Tourist children woke their parents to go gather the little treasures, screaming in delight, their cries soon turning to complaints of hunger, and then requests for those great donuts from the place at the end of the boardwalk.

The sun burned unwary skin as it rose high above the tourist town. There was a banner going up in the middle of the boardwalk, “BEACH-A-PALOOZA ‘34.” A stage was in construction and street cleaners were hard at work. It was as if the city had hibernated just a bit too long, through the spring and up to this warm, bright day.
Up on the cliff, the lighthouse had turned off its warning beacon for the day. A light breeze ruffled the grass and small bushes. It was quiet. So quiet and calm.

And then a roar shattered the calm, echoing across the cliffside.

A great, blinding light appeared and swirled on the grassy field and, from within, a creature emerged. Enormous and powerful and so very tackily pink.

Four great feline paws crashed down on the grass and the lion leaned back, bracing itself as it came to a long, sliding stop. The path behind was bright and shining with crushed grass, the sharp smell of chlorophyll bursting across the field.

The lion lifted a paw, looking at the dirt and greenery caught under his claws. His tail lashed.

A hand came down to dig into the cat’s mane, giving the creature a scratch behind the ears. “Thanks, bud! How you doing?”

Lion huffed.

Then fell to his side and rolled onto his back, crushing his passenger underneath.

“MRRRPH! MUH-PUUURF! LION!”

Lion grunted and finished his roll, continuing on to another one, freeing his passenger and leaving himself to stain his pink coat with a little green, mane tangling up with plenty of tiny white flowers and three-leaf-clovers.

Sputtering, the feline’s rider sat up, looking to Lion with a glare. “You could have waited.”

Lion groaned, licking at the grass and taking a huge bite, yanking it from the ground and gnashing like he was considering conversion to herbivorism.

The passenger tried to keep glaring. But, after a moment, he looked down to the grass himself. Laying a hand on it, he rubbed his palm over the tiny blades, feeling them tickle on his skin.

He grinned. And the grin turned to laughter. Throwing himself back on the ground, the man writhed like his lion, grass tangling up in his own curly black mane. Some also got into his mouth, but he was a little less enthusiastic there, spitting it out and wiping his tongue on the inside of his red shirt, but then going right back to playing on the dew-damp field under the shining sun.

Then the man lay there. Just lay there, letting the bright light of day wash over his skin. It was only for a minute, but the embrace of the long-lost light of his home star seemed to fill him up. Warmed every little extremity which had been chilled these many years in the vastness of space.

Steven opened his eyes to look upon the bright blue sky. He grinned. “Okay, Lion. Enough messing around. Let’s go home.”
Find a way back home

Chapter Summary

“It’s a funny thing coming home. Nothing changes. Everything looks the same, feels the same, even smells the same. You realize what’s changed, is you.” -Eric Roth

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I wanted some gem curse words. I made some. They should be easy to figure out, in reading, but if you want an explanation, or just to see the list, it's here.

Chapter 3 theme songs.
“Captives Come Home” by Run Kid Run.
“Get Busy Living Or Get Busy Dying” by Fall Out Boy

Walking on dew-damp grass was actually a bit more...difficult than Steven remembered. Of course, it might partially be the lack of shoes—he was going to have to pick up some sandals or something, unless the local shops had rescinded on their “no shirt, no shoes” rules—or perhaps it was Earth’s very gravity, just out of sync with all the worlds he had walked across in the last eighteen years. He kept a hand on Lion’s mane as he half-slid down the steep back of the cliff. He thought there had once been a crumbling stairway around here, gone to disuse as the lightkeeper was replaced with an automated system, but either it had been removed or enough dirt had finally shifted to make it just another bit of the landscaping.

Steven tried to walk with some dignity, but pretty soon his backside was wet from numerous falls, his grey topcoat besmirched with far more brown and blades of grass than was in any manner fashionable. At his side, Lion purred, and Steven shot the cat an edged look.

“Haha, keep it up, Lion. Don’t forget, I’m the one that’s gonna be buying your Lion Lickers.”

Lion’s mane puffed and he stopped purring.

There seemed to be more houses at the base of the cliff than Steven remembered. Yes, definitely, there hadn’t been any houses on the east side of Thayer Street. In fact, squinting ahead, Steven was certain that intersection sign up ahead definitely did not say “Thayer.” Too short of a word. A few more steps and Steven snorted. “Gem Lane?” he read out, a little smile coming across his face. All those years trying to keep out of human matters, and here the town was, pretty much screaming “ALIENS OVER THIS WAY!” Pearl must have been livid.

Getting to the sidewalk was a definite relief. It was just warming up in the sunlight, comforting after the walk through the damp grass, though he was sure that sandal purchase was going to be doubly necessary by about noon. No scorching his feet on the first day back.
The streets were empty, driveways cleared of cars. So, people at work meant a weekday? Probably. Should be easy to figure out at his first stop.

And there it was, just one street over. The lot looked a bit dead, but that tended to be how things were on weekdays, if he remembered correctly. With most Beach City residents working a half-hour inland, no one was coming back to town for a mid-day car wash. Still, the new—or, well, now nearly two-decades-old—robo-dad over the office was in motion, waving people into “It’s A Wash.”

Steven paused on the sidewalk, his grip on Lion’s mane tightening until the cat’s tail came around and slapped the man on his backside. Mumbling an apology, Steven let up, stroking his companion’s fur until it settled back into place.

“I’m really rethinking this ‘don’t call ahead’ idea, Lion,” Steven said, leaning sideways onto his friend’s solid support. “Maybe we should jump back to the ship and—hey!”

Lion had turned his head about, putting his muzzle to the gem’s back and pushing him forward sharply, getting several good feet of distance between them, and several terrifying feet of less distance between Steven and the car wash. Looking back, Steven scowled at the cat, who flicked an ear and lay down on the sidewalk, shifting onto one hip and going about licking a paw and swiping it behind his ear.

Reluctantly, Steven turned his attention forward again. “Not, uh...coming with me?”

Lion yawned and switched to his other ear.

“Right...right, okay.” Steven took a deep breath, his barrel chest swelling before letting it out in a puff which seemed to deflate his entire body. Thus insufficiently fortified, he took the few steps to the office door, not allowing himself to hesitate there, just yanking it open, barging in, and holding his arms out wide as he proclaimed. “Dad, I’m ho-oooo are you?” Steven’s words shifted midway, dropping several octaves, and he stared, brain on the fritz.

The feeling was, apparently, mutual. Behind the checkout counter, caught in the middle of restocking an air freshener display, was a short, slightly chubby blonde man in the formless lavender one-piece uniform of the car was. He raised an expressive brow, eyes flickering across the intruder’s body, taking in black jeans, pink shirt, and grey coat, along with the riot of long, curly hair which was barely being kept in check by a scrunchie.

The attendant’s gaze went to the parking lot, and his frown deepened on finding no vehicle. Looking back to Steven, he raised a hand, pointing behind him to a sign, proclaiming the prices for wash, super-wash, and express wax.

“Oh, uh...no.” Steven shook his head. “I took my lion, today.”

The attendant’s mouth opened, upper lip curving up to display a little of his teeth. His brows drew down in confusion, and he looked back outside.

Lion’s back leg was up in the air, and that was not the diplomatic first contact Steven had been going for.

“Is, uh, Greg Universe still working here?” Steven asked, really, really regretting his decision to make this arrival a surprise.

There was a moment of deep silence. Then the blonde attendant’s head began to snap back and forth, from Lion to Steven and back again, his eyes going wider and his jaw slackening more with
each repetition. A good half-dozen repeats and, just as Steven was beginning to worry that his first contact back was going to result in one of the locals needing an ER trip for whiplash, the man disappeared behind the counter and there was the sound of frantic searching.

Alarm bells went off in Steven’s head. Shocked worker going behind the counter, oh crap, addendum to first contact: whiplash and a gunshot wound. “Iiii should get going....”

Just as he was starting to back away, hands raised, the chubby attendant popped up again and slammed something small down on the counter. Stepping back a few feet, the man held his arms out to the procured item, fingers waving in a flashy introduction.

Still a half-second from running for his feline transport, Steven took a glance at the man’s display.

He let out a laugh. “Oh, hey! Ranger Guy! I haven’t seen one of those in....”

Steven’s jaw dropped. Now he was the one shifting his gaze all too fast, from the old, scratched collectible to the attendant, whose smile was growing, brows waggling as the gem made his connection.

“Stars above,” Steven choked. “Onion!? ”

Thus exposed, Onion came out from behind the counter, first just grasping Steven’s hand, but soon being dragged into a powerful hug that had the shorter man’s back cracking in a half-dozen places.

“Oh man, Onion, I can’t believe!” Steven held Onion out at arm’s length, looking over his soft body, messy hair, and overalls. “You work here, now? Did Dad retire?”

Nodding, Onion raised a hand, pointing at a nametag on his lapel, which proclaimed him “General Manager.”

“That’s awesome! Hey, how’s your family? Vidalia, Onion, Yellow Tail?”

Onion had been nodding, eyes closed as he smiled serenely at each name, but on the last, he jerked, as if poked with an electrical current. When the charge had passed, he shook his head, slowly, head hung low.


Taking a steadying breath, Onion shook his head, again, but with a small smile on his face. He waved a hand over his shoulder.

Steven took a moment to puzzle this out, before venturing “A long time ago?” At Onion’s nod, he reached out, squeezing his old friend’s shoulder. “I guess I have been gone a long time.... Uh...is my dad...?” Steven bit his cheek.

Onion shook his head, and then nodded, and, knowing he wasn’t getting the point across, he reached up and squeezed Steven’s forearm, giving the immense man a calm smile.

Steven let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Oh, thank goodness. And Connie? And the Gems?” At more nods, the tension melted from his body, and Steven was unable to help himself from pulling Onion into another hug.

Breaking away again, Steven looked out the office window. “Gah. Man, I want to hear everything, but if one of them finds me chilling in the car wash instead of looking for them, I’m shattered. Any clue where my dad is?”
Onion began to shake his head.

And then he paused.

And his face did...something. It wasn’t a smile. No one would ever mistake that look for a smile. But his lips certainly curled up and his eyes sparkled as he looked at Steven.

It was enough to send the man’s gem glowing in preparation to manifest his shield.

But, rather than attacking, Onion pointing to the south, and then held out a palm face-up, walking two fingers from his other hand across the surface.

Steven hesitated a moment. Then the gesture clicked. “The boardwalk?” At Onion’s nod, Steven added “My dad’s at the boardwalk?”

Onion shrugged, still with the disturbing expression.

“Uh...o...kay.” Steven very seriously considered just bolting from the blonde man, but managed enough resolve to reach out for a final hug and a quick “see you later, man,” before speed-walking out the front door.

He’d never heard Onion laugh in all his life, and Steven desperately hoped the creaking sound at his back was not laughing. Please, stars, please no. “C’mon, Lion! We’re heading to the boardwalk!”

Lion looked up from his grooming, the tip of his tongue protruding from his lips.

“No, no looking cute, we’ve got to go.” Steven poked Lion’s tongue until it disappeared back into the cat’s muzzle.

Rumbling, Lion took to his paws, allowing the man to get astride, and then they were off at a trot which kept them just within the speed limit.

Trusting Lion to navigate, Steven took the time to enjoy Beach City, eighteen years later. “City” had always been a generous title for the area, which, despite being such an early settlement, had never become a nexus. Probably because of all the little disasters caused by the gems. It was the kind of place whose population tripled during tourist season, though perhaps that estimate was a bit high, now. At first, he thought his memory was just a bit fuzzy, but Steven soon realized that a few of the older houses were gone, replaced with three and four-story condos, the builders having apparently decided that, if there wasn’t enough space on the ground for multiple homes, there was plenty in the sky. There were several stoplights he was sure had once been just stop signs. The local grocery was rebranded to one he recognized as a chain from Keystone, and there were a damn lot of little coffee shops. Apparently that was one human obsession which had not faded in the near two decades of his training.

Coming up Main Street, Steven found one thing that seemed to have changed very little. Dewey Park was just as green and immaculately maintained as ever. Directing Lion through, he found that even the statue of William Dewey was in particularly good order, with just a little seagull poop on its head. Lion paused to have a sniff, which perked Steven’s suspicions, but the cat was moving on before he needed to be reminded that marking human things—or gem things, eugh, Yellow Diamond had been maaaaaaaaaad —did not actually grant ownership.

Across the street, the reason for the unusual cleanliness of the park and statue suddenly became obvious. Strung up above a temporary stage at the end of the little gathering square was a banner.
“Whaaaat!?” Steven beamed, patting the cat’s shoulder. “Lion! We’re back in time for Beach-a-palooza! Oh man, this is going to be great!”

Lion, huffing at the idea—the big cat had never been one for crowds, seeing as kids tended to be certain he was available for pictures and mane-pulling—bounded across the street, and then seemed to decide that it was time to be done. He at least gave Steven a warning, this time. He lay down and lashed his tail. Once.

Steven was off his mount in an instant, making sure he was well ahead of the cat, in case he decided on taking another roll and flattening the man out in the process.

Instead, Lion flicked his tail at Steven, faced the park, and took a few long jumps. Roaring, he opened one of his swirling pink portals, disappearing and leaving his something-like-a-master to fend for his own damn self.

At the end of the gathering square, to one side of the stage, a woman popped her head up from searching in the trunk of a small city-stamped car. Scowling, she looked towards the ocean, but, on finding not so much as larger-than-average waves, she returned her attention to the trunk. With a triumphant cry, a clipboard was pulled out and the trunk slammed closed, the loud noise catching Steven’s attention just as the lion roar had caught hers.

He turned.

He gasped.

Soft and low, not enough to alert the woman who was now mounting the stage and approaching a podium facing out to the ocean. He looked on her, and it was like nothing had changed. Eighteen years, and nothing had changed.

Laying the clipboard down, the trim, brown-skinned woman looked down on the beach and the distant tourists. Taking a deep breath, she spoke out with a smoothly inflected, carrying voice. “People of Beach City. Welcome guests from across the country. My dear friends. Welcome to Beach-a-palooza 2034!” Her arms raised up high in celebration, but no one below responded. No speakers boomed out. The nearby seagulls didn’t even shuffle at the large arm movements, being far too interested in the families returning with their ill-guarded donuts.

After a pause, the woman reached up to take a pencil from behind her ear, pushing a strand of pixie-cut brown hair out of her eyes. After a few notations, she straightened her back, pulling on the bottom edge of a maroon blazer and smoothing hands down a black a-line skirt. Thus composed once more, she went on addressing her imaginary crowd. “It has been a great honor to keep up this proud Beach City tradition. An honor and...a huge amount of stress.” The woman paused, allowing for unheard applause. “Beach-a-palooza has always been a day for our community to come together. To show the world what makes Beach City special. To form new bonds of friendship. And to...” She pettered off. A breeze swept down the boardwalk, ruffling the woman’s hair and her papers, forcing her to put a hand to each, to keep them in place. As it passed, the woman sighed, then took another steadying breath. Raising her head high, she started again. “And to welcome old friends home.”

Steven grinned. That was as good an introduction as he was going to get! Striding forward on long, thick legs, Steven waved an arm and called out to this so-familiar woman, “Doctor Maheswaran!”

The woman on the podium groaned, squinting eyes tight closed. Reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose, she turned around to face the man intruding upon her rehearsal. “Please, thank you,” she said, opening her eyes. “But I prefer just...”
She paused.

“Mayor,” the woman finished in a breath.

The breeze came back up, stirring short hair over deep brown eyes, and then swirling down to meddle with Steven’s own dark-black curls. A little whorl of sand danced between them, and gulls cried out on the waves.

“Mayor Maheswaran!” Steven crowed, climbing up the stage. “I...wow! Wow, I did not see that coming! Congratulations!” Holding out his arms, Steven found, once again, that there was no resisting a hug from the Steven. The woman almost seemed to leap into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, holding on tight enough to nearly restrict airflow. Certainly a choke-hold on a man of lighter build.

“Steven,” she rasped. “Steven Universe? You’re back? You’re...you’re finally back?”

“Yeah,” Steven said, holding the woman out to give her a good look. She was so much tinier than he was! How had he imagined she would remain bigger? It was ridiculous, with the size of his mother and father. Of course he was going to outstrip her. It had probably happened on his second year out, really. But, he soon realized, “tiny” was mostly limited to her height. There was a solidness to the woman’s build that he had very much not expected, but it seemed that surprises were the order of the day. “Stars, you haven’t changed a bit. Except, Mayor? I never thought you’d end up in politics.”

“Oh. Well.” Mayor Maheswaran sniffled, reaching up to wipe at her eyes with the heel of a hand, letting out a sound that was a mixture of laugh and sob. “The gems had the monster thing covered, and I just...wanted to help people.”

“Well, you’ve always been about helping people!” Steven said, letting the woman’s arms go and taking a few step back.

She had followed him as he went, leaning a bit before regaining her poise. Her cheeks could not have been that shade of red before. No one would put on that much blush. Biting her lower lip, the woman looked up into Steven’s eyes, her own wet and deep and dancing. “Really? You think so?”

“Yeah!” Steven laughed and slapped a hand to the woman’s back. “I mean, that’s what surgeons do!”

Mayor Maheswaran’s spine went rigid, her hair seeming to puff up at the shock of the impact. She let out a sound from back in her throat, a harsh “GRKH!” Steven had just begun to worry that he’d forgotten his gem strength and caused real harm, when the woman settled again, rolling her shoulders back, taking on a tall, ramrod posture. She smiled at Steven, showing off many, many teeth.

“Yes,” she crooned. “That is what surgeons do.”

“And I’m sure you’re doing great as mayor! Hey, if I’d been around, I’d sure have voted for you!”

“Why thank you,” the mayor said, voice dripping in syrup. “Say, Steven...have you seen any of your family yet?”

“No,” Steven answered, shaking his head. “I tried the car wash, but Onion is working there, can you believe it? I mean,” he laughed, crossing his arms, “you’ve probably seen him, so I’m sure you can. But I haven’t seen my dad or the gems or, hey, where’s Connie?”
“Around,” the woman sang. “How about you go to the temple and I’ll call everyone up, hmmm?”

“Aw, you’d do that? Thanks Doc...Mrs... Mayor.” Steven winked.

“Shoo.” Flipping her hands at the gem man, the mayor ushered him off the stage. “They’ve been waiting too long already, right?”

“Hah! Right! See you later!” Steven waved briefly before jogging down the boardwalk, heading to the temple. “It was good seeing you!”

Up on the stage, Beach City’s mayor crossed her arms and lowered her head until her eyes were shadowed from the sun. She gritted her teeth, growling out a single word as she watch the man retreat down the beach. “In... deed.”

Sand! Sand under his bare feet and grinding between his toes and STARS but he had missed this feeling! Steven wobbled and stumbled as he jumped off the wooden boardwalk, anticipating a far more stable bit of ground on his landing, but he kept his feet and soon was off again, laughing, pumping his legs to try and keep up his speed, but losing so much of his momentum in the shifting earth.

Oh, man, the ocean! The ocean! He’d forgotten that sound, the constant whisper of childhood. The first few weeks on White Diamond’s flagship, he’d had terrible insomnia, unable to rest properly without that susurration.

And the damp, salt-tang of the breeze which wafted the seagrass and ruffled his hair and coat! Oh, he hadn’t even realized that had been missing, as well! Air didn’t move on the flagships. Really, the gems had only bothered with air on-ship because it was necessary for heat dispersal, elsewise the many electronic systems would just melt together. They didn’t ever need it for communication, after all. He’d learned that when he’d been lost in space with the warmonger Ruby.

But here, on Earth, air was almost a living thing. Sometimes a soft companion, sometimes a destructive force. Just another part of the ever-changing planet.

Steven skirted the cliffside, turning left, and his reverie was brought to a sudden end.

Immense and ancient and unfathomable sat the Crystal Temple, just the same as when he’d left. As ever-changing as the city had been, this? This looked like he had only gone out long enough for donuts. Even the little wooden beach house, settled in the lap of some unknown gem warrior, seemed just the same. Maybe a little more lichen on the stone, a new coat of paint on the exterior, but that was it.

Steven grinned. “I’m back,” he said to the wind. Then, at the top of his lungs, he yelled up to the temple “GUYS! I’M BACK!”

Heart swelling, he bounded forward, defying gravity as he floated over the last of the sand, alighting on the deck as gently as a bird. Gravity kicking back in, he thundered to the door, wrenching it open, and just about sliding inside, arms held out wide, calling out again “I’m home!”

The beach house was empty.

Steven’s eyes darted around, wondering if there was at least one gem watching him, stuck in shock, but he was...alone. A small flush coming to his cheeks, Steven put his arms back to his side, coughing. “Uh...maybe they’re...out?” Tentative, the man walked further into the house, looking around.
Again, inside it was so familiar. There were small changes, yes. He was sure the countertop hadn’t been that color when he was young. The couch was definitely not red, before, and the coffee table had been much smaller. The fridge was....

Steven opened it and looked inside.

Yeah, that was not a normal fridge. Also, that was not normal food. At least he could be sure Amethyst was somewhere.

Closing the door, Steven looked back, past the wooden portion of the structure, to the old stone of the Temple proper and the five-pointed star on the Temple Gate. He squinted. Something didn’t look...quite right.

Approaching, gem letting out a small glow—half in preparation to summon his shield if faced with some surprise, half in resonance with his matched gem on the top of the star—Steven examined the door. Wrong...something wrong...what was wrong here? Four of the stars were glowing—at least that answered where the Crystal Gems were—in red and blue at the bottom, and on the arms above those baubles, a purple and a green.

Green.

Steven scowled. “What in the—”

A crack formed down the center of the door, light pouring out.

Steven leapt back, his gem going ablaze, a translucent pink shield forming on his forearm. He crouched down, shoulders hunching, keeping the shield over head and neck, looking out through the pink tinge at the new arrival.

With a soft *fwish*, the door parted, a great gust of wind blasting out, and a figure just tall enough to need to duck its head down came through. The light faded, and the gem stood before the Temple Gate, blinking slowly.

Steven stared.

The gem stared.

Steven...kept staring.

The gem’s hair, in a riot of swirled deep green and dark purple, puffed up from its short bob, suddenly more voluminous than even Lion’s mane when the big cat was startled. Four eyes blinked rapidly and a little bowed mouth fell open in a gasp as the gem stumbled back against the closed door. Then the gem’s body burst into light, shrinking down, shifting apart until two short gems stood in front of the Temple gate.

Steven’s shield dissipated as shock washed over his brain.

“It’s you!” The smaller green gem yelled and began running full-tilt. Peridot leapt at Steven, wrapping her arms about his chest, laughing as he overcame his shock and held her tight, spinning around, her legs rising with the centripetal force.

Steven staggered as the somewhat larger purple gem landed on his back, and Amethyst was sobbing, sobbing, “Steven! Steven, you came home!”

“You fused!” Steven replied, ceasing his spin and letting Peridot free of one arm, repositioning it
to press a hand to Amethyst’s face, pushing so they could rub cheek to cheek. Stars, she smelled awful, was that how she’d always been? Probably, but it was fine, it was them!

“She’s called Flourite!” Peridot supplied, scrambling up Steven’s body until he bent his arm and she sat in the crook. It was a little awkward—she was small, but she wasn’t a baby, after all—but with her arms about his neck, she was light enough to stay there forever.

“She uses a flail,” Amethyst added, laughing like a madwoman, holding out one arm so she could mime the destruction. “She’s pretty much the greatest.”

“That’s amazing! Does she have extra powers? Peridot, how’s your metal control? Amethyst, what did you get into, you reek!”

As expected, Amethyst took no offense to this. “Hey, we were out catching a corrupted gem last night. What have you been doing?”

“Yeah!” Peridot slapped Steven’s chest, the impact little more than a love tap. “Where have you been, young man!? We’ve been waiting! You’re late!”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” Steven said, tightening his grip on the two gems, hugging them closer. “And I’ll tell you all about it, but I am not doing this a bunch of times. Where’s Garnet? Pearl? Lapis?”

Peridot went stiff in Steven’s arms, but Amethyst pointed to the Temple Gate.

“Yo, Garnet’s in the Burning Room. Come on!” Tugging on two of Steven’s long curls, she directed the man’s head around to face the door. “Onward, noble steed!”

Not back five minutes, and already with the abuse,” Steven muttered, but he was smiling, mounting the warp pad and calling upon his gem.

The door glowed, the pink gem up top lighting up for the first time in eighteen years, and with another flash of light, it split apart, opening upon a view of a dim room of reds and browns and heat.

At a look from Amethyst, Peridot reluctantly joined the purple gem in letting Steven go, sliding to the ground, stepping back to watch.

Steven walked through the door and there, right before him, sitting in front of the magma chamber, legs crossed, hands laying on her lap, fingers laced together, two of three eyes closed and the one up top bearing into him, sat Garnet.

She smiled. “Welcome home, Steven.”

“Garnet,” Steven whispered, and he took the few strides to the gem, crouching down so he could fling his arms about her shoulders, pulling her in, ruining the meditation pose.

Chuckling deep in her chest, the fusion’s arms came up, wrapping around Steven’s chest and not quite reaching all the way around. “Goodness! You’ve grown.”

“I’d noticed,” Steven laughed, squeezing tighter. “I’m bigger than you, now!”

“Don’t get cocky,” Garnet chided, taking one of her arms back to poke the man in the chest. “I can still bubble you if you get out of line, young man.”
“Hey, hey!” Steven held his hands up, leaning back out of the poke. “Okay! No call for that! Besides...” Looking up and around at the ceiling of the Burning Room, Steven whistled low. “Looks like you might be about to run out of room for that.”

If he’d been standing, he could have reached up and brushed fingers on the lowest layer of gems. They jumbled together in the Burning Room, packed in as efficiently as possible, completely obscuring the ceiling. It was hard to tell which supplied more of the room’s dim light: the magma or the individual glow of countless bubbled gems. It was beautiful, and it was terrifying. Steven could finally look upon all these old soldiers, and he knew of each of them, reformed and well. A nephrite there, a feldspar next to it, a cluster of rubies and a trio of peridots. Heliodor, melanite, citrine, moonstone, and, stars, even an agate! Yes, they would look a little different from all those gems he’d come to know during his training, but he knew them.

“We’ve been gathering them up,” Peridot said, entering the chamber, her gaze locking onto her fellow peridots. “For when you got back. So you can heal them.” She looked to the young diamond. “Can you, Steven? Can you heal them?”

Steven tried to respond, but nothing would come. He hung his head.

“Oh,” Peridot whispered. “Then...the diamonds were wrong.”

“No,” Steven yelped, reaching for Peridot, taking her hand. “No! Peridot, I can do so much, now! I can make gems and lead them and heal them when they’re cracked, no problem! I’ve been learning all this time. I just...don’t have that down. Yet.” He squeezed the tiny gem’s fingers. “But White Diamond said I’m really close.”

“And you believe her?” Amethyst said, coming to her three friend’s sides.

Steven looked to Amethyst. “Of course.”

The little warrior scowled. “Why would you?”

“Because...” Steven trailed off. He looked about at the three Crystal Gems. Each looked upon him with some small bit of hope, but there was something darker in their eyes.

“Look,” Steven sighed, “like I told you two, I’ll tell you everything, but I want to wait until everyone is here. Stars, Peridot, your gem, the door, it’s where Pearl’s was! Is she even around?”

“Oh, she’s a bit outside the city.” Peridot waved dismissively towards the human habitations. “She just moved out.”

Steven stared at the techie. “She...what?”

“Living in sin,” Amethyst leered, laughing as Steven’s cheeks turned as pink as the bubbles above.

“Now, now,” Garnet chided, rising to her feet, offering a hand to help Steven up, as well. “That’s Pearl’s story. And she’s on her way. So is your father, Steven.”

“Dad?” Steven breathed. “He’s okay?”

“Just fine. Although, I’m not entirely sure you will be, in a few minutes.”

Steven blinked. “Eh?”

Garnet lay a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “I saw you on the boardwalk and...whew.” She shook her
head. “Good luck.”

Steven opened his mouth to inquire further, but suddenly, a creak came from the beyond the door as someone opened the beach house screen door.

“Steven?” a recently re-familiarized voice called.

“Oh, hey!” Steven turned to the door. “It’s Misses Maheswaran!”

Peridot tilted her head. “Misses? But doesn’t it change after a di—”

Garnet leaned over and pressed a finger to Peridot’s lips, setting the gem into a deep green flush.

Steven headed to the door, letting it part before him, once more revealing the so-familiar beach house and, now, another occupant.

Mayor Maheswaran was kicking off her shoes, careful to leave the sand of the beach behind. She scowled down at the little trail left behind by a less-careful entrant—Steven reminded himself that, oh yeah, dirt was a thing, wasn’t it?—and then looked up, catching sight of Steven and his three gem companions exiting the Temple Gate. “Hello, everyone.”

“Hey, MC,” Amethyst said, and then her mouth, too, was covered by a finger, though she responded by biting, not blushing.

Garnet didn’t so much as flinch, just brought her other hand down to squeeze Amethyst’s cheeks until her mouth popped open and the fusion was freed.

The mayor nodded to Garnet, and stood up straight, shifting a large gym bag hanging over her left shoulder. “Steven, I was so surprised to see you this morning. It’s been so long! And we expected you back, what was it, four years ago?”

“I know,” Steven said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Things...happened.”

“Oh. Things.” The mayor lay a half-lidded gaze on the gem man. “Well. I called Pearl and your father; they’re on their way.”

“And Connie?” Steven asked, bright, smile wide.

The mayor’s lips thinned. “Actually, Connie has a question for you.”

“Oh?” Steven came to stand before the woman, looking just slightly down upon her. “What is it?”

She looked up at him. Into his eyes.

And she whispered, “Where were you?”

Steven blinked. “What?”

The mayor moved as a blur. There was a flash in the air, a puff of wind, and Steven was looking down, eyes crossing, at a blade resting before his lips.

The human woman tightened her hand on the pink sword, and she growled, growled, deep and harsh and implacable, “Where were you, Steven?!”

Steven looked at the blade. And then down it to the delicate pink guard and handle. And then up to a face with burning eyes and gritted teeth and...
...and a small, light scar her right cheek.

“Connie?” Steven whispered, eyes going suddenly wide. “Connie...you....”

The house was silent. The gems looked on, unsure if they should be drawing their weapons and, to be completely fair, which side to be drawing them for. Steven didn’t seem to have even registered that he was at sword-point, instead devouring Connie’s face, and Connie was breathing hard, in spite of having only climbed a few stairs. Her work clothes were still immaculate, her brown hair held lightly in place, her eyes and cheeks and lips adorned with just that perfect public figure’s amount of makeup.

“Connie,” Steven said again. “I thought you were your mom.”

Garnet hissed. “Sssss...so this is the bad timeline, then.” Sighing, she pointed at the kitchen. “Amethyst, the flatware, if you would. Peridot, bedroom window.”

The two gems looked at their leader in confusion, but moved as they were told, with due swiftness.

Very wise, as, in the seconds they had taken to comply, Connie reacted to Steven’s words. At first, she took a deep breath, trying to center herself, to behave as the adult she was. Soon, however, she began a gentle laugh. Lilting and musical and very, very practiced. And then, her laugh cracked.

And she swing Steven’s mom’s sword at Steven’s stupid head.

“Yah!” Steven crouched to the floor, left hand bracing himself as his right arm came up before his chest. With a flash, his shield was out, just in time to catch a downward strike from the grinning human woman.

“I waited! ” Connie yowled, going to her own crouch, right leg coming out in a powerful kick, landing flat-footed on the shield, sending Steven staggering back, arms pinwheeling. “You said you were coming back! ” Leaping forward, she dragged the sword up, the tip catching for a moment on the wood flooring, cutting a deep gouge across the grain before hitting the Rose shield with another deafening clang. “Where WERE YOU!?” With a roundhouse kick, Connie hit the shield one more time, sending Steven flying back.

“Woah!” Amethyst yelped, going aglow and growing until her head touched the ceiling. The Purple Puma made a clumsy grab for the rocketing man, managing to catch him just before he obliterated every plate in the house.

“Thanks, Amethyst,” Steven whimpered as he was set to his feet. Rolling his right shoulder, sore from the onslaught, he looked across the kitchen at Connie, who once more stood sword raised, teeth bared, waiting.

“Thank me later,” Amethyst said and, when she got a confirmation nod from Garnet, the purple gem kicked Steven in the back, sending him hurtling at the point of the sword.

Connie’s eyes widened and she turned the blade aside, jumping back as Steven stumbled before her.

He fell shield-first, skidding for a few feet on the rounded surface, before being stopped as Connie set her foot onto the back of the pink dome.

She did something quick and complicate and wow that hurt, and then Steven was staggering back again, his shield wobbling on the floor, his right arm bare. Steven looked at it, and then to his opponent.
She rushed him. Screaming, like some sort of over-dramatic white guy in a samurai movie, except she was so not white and so not acting.

Yelping, Steven turned tail and booked it for the stairs to his childhood loft bedroom. He took them three at a time, and he felt the *woosh* of the blade under his right foot just as he lifted it off a step. Once up top, he found himself faced with Peridot, whose eyes were wide, looking past him and down the steps.

Steven turned to see Connie crouched at the base of the steps.

“C-Connie, wait a minute, I can explain!”

“I don’t care,” Connie sneered, and she leapt. Up the stairs in just two bounds, roaring, thrusting the sword in front of her, aiming at Steven’s left leg.

Yelping, he jumped aside.

Peridot also yelped, and then there was a quick blur of something dark flying past Steven’s head. Then a *screech* that assaulted the ears.

Steven turned as he jumped off the loft, just in time to see Peridot standing with her arms aimed towards the window, a cast-iron pan hovering in the air, the tip of the sword resting off-center, a deep gouge cut into the pan’s surface.

“Please don’t destroy my home,” Peridot whimpered.

“Rrrr,” Connie responded, pulling her sword back and spinning to look down on Steven.

“H-hey, Connie,” Steven shrilled, holding up his defenseless arms. “Let’s just talk about this.”

“I’d love to,” Connie rumbled.

Sighing, Garnet walked to the edge of the coffee table and pulled it about two feet back.

“Four years ago!”

“Oh shards,” Steven whispered, and then he was looking upon the dark, descending, avenging figure of a woman scorned.

Connie slammed feet-first into Steven’s chest, riding him down, going into a tumble as he fell back head-over-heels, landing in a nest of dust-bunnies brought to light by Garnet’s furniture rearrangement. She got her feet under herself after one somersault, stockings barely slipping on the hardwood as she reversed momentum with one powerful kick, rising into the air, bird-like, and falling again with her sword pointed down, aimed at Steven’s neck.

Steven looked up, gasped, screamed “Stop!” He lifted his left arm up, gem glowing, and there was a flash of light.

Connie’s sword-point stabbed into a pink shield and was stopped in an instant.

Peridot and Amethyst gasped. “What!?”

Connie looked down on the shield, her teeth gritted. Then her mouth morphed to a mou of bewilderment. Brows drawing down, her eyes darted across the shape. Pink and translucent, yes, but it was firm lines and sharp angles, not a gentle roundness. No decoration, just a flat surface. And, through that shield, looking back at her and flashing for just a moment, Steven’s pupils
emulated the shield’s shape.

A diamond.

Connie staggered back, sword crossing before her chest in a guard. “What...?”

Steven groaned, flipping to his front, rising to his knees and free hand, and then standing. He looked down at his left arm and the plain diamond shield. Flexing his fingers, it turned to light and faded away, and when Steven looked to Connie his pupils were back to their round, human shape. “Connie, I—”

“No.” Connie shook her head. “No. I don’t care.” She backed away. Reaching down, she picked up the duffle bag, which had been flung aside somewhere in the fight, and opened it up, pulling out the top of the sheath to Rose’s scabbard, sliding the blade home. Looking around at the Crystal Gems, carefully avoiding the face of her opponent, she sighed. “I don’t have time for this.” Turning her back, she walked to the beach house door.

It creaked upon when she was just a few feet away, and a new entrant came through, gasping on sight of the sword hilt still visible through the open duffle. “Connie! What’s attacking?”

“Nothing,” Connie answered, slipping around the thin gem and out the door without even a goodbye.

The new arrival looked after the woman, frowning.

And then she looked into the beach house.

She froze.

“Steven,” Pearl whispered.

Smiling, though tenuous after the battle, and still breathing a bit heavily, Steven held out his left arm, his right still aching from Connie’s attacks. “Hey, Pearl.”

“S... STEVEN!” Pearl sprinted across the room, flunging herself into the man’s arms, feet dangling in the air as she gripped around his neck. Soon, she was supported by a large, strong hand on her back. She clutched at him, nuzzled into him, smelled him, and she sobbed. Body racked, she whimpered into his neck, “My baby, my baby, you’re home, my baby.”

“I’m home,” Steven agreed, voice cracking. And, finally, he too dissolved into tears.

Garnet directed the reformed team down to the end of the beach access road to greet the final arrival.

“He’s fine, Steven, but he doesn’t like walking on the sand. His balance isn’t very good, and it can be a bit tiring.”

“Tiring?” Steven asked, looking down on the billion little granules as they walked back up towards Beach City. “It’s walking.”

“Yes. And he’s sixty-three,” Garnet said.

Steven stopped in his tracks.

The gems paused, looking back.
“I...I hadn’t really done the math, lately,” Steven said, looking down on his fingers, which twitched as he added up. “I just...you three didn’t change at all. No one on Homeworld changed. I just...forgot anyone here would, too.”

“I know,” Amethyst said, grinning. “You said Connie looked like her mom.”

Groaning, Steven buried his head in his hands. “I met her on the boardwalk! I said it there, too!”

“Oh man.” Peridot whistled. “You’re screwed.”

“Rather the opposite,” Amethyst sneered.

“Children,” Garnet said, drawing resentful looks from the tiny gems. “I suggest we not torment Steven on his first day home.”

“Day two?” Amethyst ventured.

“Oh, certainly.”

“Guuuuuuys!” Steven whined. “This isn’t funny!”

“No,” Amethyst agreed. “It’s hilarious!” She threw her arms up in the air. “I haven’t seen anything this funny since Peridot got arrested on the set of Camp Pining Hearts!”

Peridot screeched indignantly. “It was the final season and they were making terrible narrative choices!”

“Is that why you stole that inhaler from the guy who played Percy?”

“It was a souvenir!”

“Iiiiiiiis that why you shoved it in the face of the guy who played Pierre?”

“‘It was an indirect kiss!’”

Garnet gestured at the bickering tiny gems. “This is what I live with,” she intoned.

Steven grinned. “Wait until you meet the feldspars.”

The bickering stopped. All three gems focused on Steven. “Feldspars?” Peridot ventured.

But, before Steven could again put things off, there came a rumble from the road up ahead, and the crunch of tires on sand. A white car rumbled up, sputtering with age, and came to a jerking stop. The driver, quite audible through the rolled-down window, let out a small curse as he lurched forward in his seat. Muttering, he turned the engine off and began working his way out of the car. It seemed a slow process, complicated by both a round belly and stiff joints, with the car’s generally small dimensions not doing much to help the situation.

Sighing, but free of the Dondai, Greg straightened up, laying his hands on his back to stretch out the kink from driving. “What’s up, guys?” he asked, shuffling to the end of the beach access road. “Connie called, said there was a big to-do going on up here. You find another Wailing Stone or some...thing.” Greg drifted into silence as he lifted his head, finally gazing across the sand.

Steven was frozen. Right when he should be rushing forward, just as all the gems had done for him, he couldn’t bring himself to move.
Greg looked to Garnet. “No,” he said. “You’re joking.”

“I don’t joke,” Garnet said. Finding that none of the men present had the mental aptitude to move, she reached out and pushed at Steven’s back, sending him further up the beach, towards the sand-covered asphalt. “Get going, kid. He’s been waiting long enough.”

Steven looked over his shoulder at Garnet, as if she would take it back. As if she could give him another minute, another hour, another eighteen years to prepare.

She shook her head, flapping a hand to shoo her former charge away.

Steven faced forward again, coaching his breath to a normal rate, and began dragging his feet across the sand to stand before his father. His shoulders hunched as he was confronted with the aging human.

Greg’s hair had thinned and gone shorter as the hairs fell out faster than they could grow long. It was shock-white and brittle, as was his beard, which had, at least, kept up its thickness, though it looked far more wirey. There were lines, so many lines and wrinkles, all across Greg’s face. Deep pits on his neck and sagging, mottled skin on the underside of his arms. He was thinner, now, but it didn’t appear to be entirely intentional. More like he had just been unable to keep up his old weight and, more obviously, muscle tone. And he seemed to have...shrunk? Maybe? Just enough that Steven, standing easily a head-and-a-half taller, wasn’t entirely certain if it was part of the aging process, or just that a child’s father always looks like a giant when that child is only fourteen.

“You, uh,” Steven began, rubbing the back of his neck. “You got—”

“Old?” Greg interrupted, and laughed when Steven jolted, opening his mouth to deny the words. “It was gonna happen, kiddo. Would have preferred there not be an extra four years, but....” Greg shrugged.

“I...I’m sorry,” Steven whispered, hanging his head.

Greg looked over his cringing son, and shook his head. “Ah. Come on, Steven. Why aren’t you hugging me yet?”

Steven blinked and looked down on his father. “I...”

“Get down here, you behemoth!” Greg reached up, stretching, and Steven met him halfway, crouching to wrap his arms about his father. This time, his hug, while still fierce, was far more controlled. Still, it had enough power behind it to puff a bit of air from the elder man’s chest. “Oof! Easy, bud! I’m no gem!”

“Sorry,” Steven said, burying his head in his father’s neck. “I’m sorry, sorry, I’m so sorry, Dad!”


“It’s not okay,” Steven wailed, large tears pouring from his eyes, soaking into his father’s white tank-top.

“Ah, you are just like Rose,” Greg chuckled, patting his son’s back.

Steven shook his head, unable to speak. His voluminous hair whipped about, covering Greg’s face, and the old man spluttered as it snuck in between his lips.
“Gah! Just like Rose! Really, just like Rose! Steven! I mean, wow! You’re as big as your mom! Except, heh...” Greg poked Steven’s biceps. “I did not expect any son of mine to have these kinds of muscles.”

Steven squirmed away from the prodding, tickling touch, or at least as far as he could while still keeping skin contact with his father. Wiping at his eyes, the gem tried a smile. “Man, Dad, thanks for the sewing machine,” Steven laughed. “I was down to bathrobes and bedsheets by the time it arrived!”

“Rocking the Roman look, eh? Knew it. Greg leaned back to get his head free of the suffocating, fragrant hair. “So the shipments did get to you? Did they let you keep the photo album? What about the books? Oh! Were you able to open the wine? And the Cookie Cats! Did they make it through the trip?”

A yes, some nodding, a little smirk and oh, there must be a story to tell there, and then Steven jolted at the last item. His face broke into a grin, its radiance challenging the noonday sun overhead. “YES! Stars, Dad, THANK YOU! They were amazing!”

Greg puffed up with pride. “Good. They were my idea.”

“His entirely,” Pearl confirmed, smiling on the father. “I made more sensible choices for your nutrition.”

“Good, because once Jasper read up about food...” Steven rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Jasper,” Greg said. “You mean that big orange gem? The one you took from the Temple?”

“Yeah.” Steven looked back at the gems, finding that, of course, Amethyst was watching him avidly as he spoke of her Earth-born pseudo-sister. “She’s fine. She’s great, even. Gah, I don’t know if I should tell you about her now, or risk waiting until Lapis is around...” Frowning, Steven suddenly seemed to realize what had continued to be missing. “Wait. Did anyone call Lapis?”

Peridot and Amethyst exchanged looks. Pearl sighed, covering her face with a hand.

“We can’t really call her,” Garnet said.

Steven’s spine went rigid. “Is...is she in the Burning Room?”

“No,” Garnet shook her head. “She’s fine. I’ve been keeping an eye on her.” With a little tilt of the head, the sun blazed on Garnet’s visor. “Just not at the temple.”

“So she’s...at the barn?” Steven ventured.

Peridot winced. “The barn...it burned down a few years ago. Even then, she hadn’t been there since you left.”

“Really?” Steven frowned. “Then how do we tell her I’m back?”

Pearl hissed in through her teeth, holding up her hands and taking a step back.

Garnet nodded at the thin gem, clearly also not willing to play that game. “You’ll have to go get her yourself, Steven. She’s been waiting for you.”

Out in the middle of the Atlantic, the sun was beginning its fall down the horizon.
On the sea, there was a little uprising of land, set amidst shoals and jagged rocks. No human had ever dared step there. Far too many sharp edges and deceptive currents. Sailors had long told legends of ghosts on that rock, appearing from nowhere, looking up to the stars, and then disappearing in flashes of light. Even now, in this age of automated navigation, current-tracking maps, and constantly improving bathymetry charts, a time when the old Flying Dutchmen had long-since been put to port, there were whispers of a sea-witch on those rocks. Sailors caught in storms would see her looking out with glowing eyes, and would pray to her. Pray to be pushed away from the jagged spires. Whether she heard their cries and took pity, or just didn’t like a mess in her home, the sailors always found themselves drifting away, to sail or sink elsewhere on the waves.

Not even gems had dared to venture onto the Galaxy Warp for a decade and a half.

Steven warped in alone.

He looked about in silent appreciation. This was something that had definitely not changed. It probably hadn’t changed in the millennium before he’d been born, either. Steven imagined this monument to Gem society would stand until the very Sun itself exploded, and even then, he had to seriously wonder if some gem would one day try to warp in and find themselves standing surprised on a bit of rock hurtling through space. Hell, he’d been through less precarious warps during his training....

And there was another thing here which seemed unchanged. The gems had undergone small but noticeable alterations while he was gone—he’d squealed on noticing Peridot now sported the traditional star on her shoulder, and the green gem had vamped for several minutes—but this one? She looked exactly the same. Cyan skin and cobalt blue hair which shifted gently in the sea breeze. A loose dress, currently pooled about her as she sat back on her calves. A halter-top which exposed her entire back, and the gem in the middle, which began to glow, wings emerging, as the gem took note of the new arrival on the warps.

“I thought I told you,” Lapis said, serene, looking over her shoulder. On finding herself faced with a tall man, instead of the accustomed gems, she merely twitched an eyebrow up and continue speaking. “Stay away from me.”

Steven tilted his head. “Lapis, it’s...uuuuuuhhh.” Steven paused and looked at the ground about him. There was a great shadow covering his own.

He looked up.

The waves had risen far above him. They awaited command.

“Aw, man,” Steven whined. “Not again....”

The waves came crashing down, just a second behind the leaping diamond. They were a creature, not a mere fluid, sticking together and changing direction with the whim of their glowing-eyed mistress. The waves were a snake. A panther. A bear. A monster.

And they were coming for Steven.

“Shards shards shards !” Steven yelped, arms pumping as he fled in advance of the water, jumping over jets that came in from the side, dancing around geysers. “Lapis! Lapis, stop!”

“I’ll stop when you leave,” Lapis intoned, calm, waving a gentle hand, calling up more of the ocean, creating a wall around the Galaxy Warp. Bringing in more water, the wall capped itself with
a dome, thickening the cover until the light of the sun dimmed, and then went out altogether, and
the only light that could be seen was from a powerful teardrop gem and glowing, uncompromising
eyes.

“I’m not leaving! You don’t want that!” Steven spun, looking for an opening and, stars above, yes,
finding one. A path through the streams of water, leading right up to the ocean gem. A trap, no
doubt, but he’d faced worse. He took it, dipping and dodging, charging at the ancient gem.

Lapis laughed. He’d heard her laugh so many times, but this was not one he recognized. It was
deep and it echoed. She looked upon him and smiled, and her teeth were bright and sharp, rival to
any Great White. “Oh, really? How do you know that, little human?”

Steven’s heart was pounding. He hadn’t needed to breath like this since...well, he didn’t recall. But
the human bits of him were screaming in terror, telling him it was time to go, but he charged
forward. “Because it’s me, Lapis!” He was so close, so close, if he could reach her—

Lapis raised her arm, and a spear of water shot over her shoulder, aimed at Steven’s chest.

Steven held up his right arm and his gem became a supernova.

The spear glanced off the Rose shield like it was a squirt from a water gun.

Lapis looked upon the man and the shield and gasped, stepping back, wings spread wide.

Steven’s chest heaved as he fought for breath. He should have been looking for the next attack—
Jasper would surely have been yelling at him to finish things—but he couldn’t take his eyes off the
blue gem before him.

“It’s me, Lapis,” Steven whispered. “It’s me. I’m back.”

Lapis’s eyes went dark and her gem faded away. For a long moment, the only light was the dim
glow of Steven’s shield.

Then the dome of water sank back, letting in the last light of day.

Lapis’s arms fell to her side as the last drop of water settled into the ocean, leaving the Galaxy
Warp dry.

Her eyes roved over the man before her. His stature and wild hair and bearing, all so unfamiliar.

But his lips quirked up, and, oh, that smile.

“Heaven?” Lapis breathed.

Steven nodded. “Yeah. It’s me.”

She did not run to him. She walked, on delicate, bare feet. With each step, she seemed to examine
the new angle, head tilting as she looked at him, first from the left, then the right.

Steven stood, patient, letting her get her fill.

When she had closed the distance and was standing before him, inches away, head tilted back so
she could look into the man’s face, Lapis paused. Her lips pursed, mind deep in study. Rising to
tip-toes, she reached out with both hands, sliding them gently over Steven’s cheeks, holding his
face cupped between her palms.
“I’m not dreaming?” she rasped.

Steven let out a little laugh. “I thought you didn’t sleep?”

Lapis blinked, eyes blurring and wandering as she chased down the years. “It’s been...a long time.”

His heart seized. Reaching up, Steven lay a hand over one of Lapis’s, taking it from his face and squeezing ever-so-gently.

Lapis looked back up at the boy turned to a man, eyes sharpening once again.

“It’s been a very long time, Lapis,” Steven said, and he smiled.

The calm in the ocean gem’s face shattered. Her lips peeled back, teeth clenched in a grimace, and she closed her eyes, trying to fight back tears, to no effect. They poured forth, quick and hot, until her shoulders shook and Lapis, too, finally threw herself into Steven’s arms, wailing like a storm on the sea in the dead of winter.

He brought her home wrapped in his coat and cradled in his arms. Eighteen years on the sea, alone, fighting off all intruders, and the appearance of one man had sapped Lapis until she’d swayed while walking to the warp.

Greg and the gems had looked up from their positions around the L-shaped couch, jolting at the sight of the blue gem. There had been a brief flash in Garnet’s hands, but she kept them at her side, unadorned. Amethyst was a bit less diplomatic, though she tried to make her manifestation of a whip seem casual. She looked over the length, examining closely, as if the ethereal weapon might have developed a fray. Sitting at her side, Peridot leaned into her quartz friend until their shoulders just barely brushed.

Steven looked upon the gems and his father. He took a deep breath, and let it out in a great sigh.

“I guess it’s time to tell you where I’ve been.”
All the places that we have been

Chapter Summary

What could have happened in eighteen years? So, so much. It's time to just scratch the surface.

Chapter Notes

Apologies, but this chapter is really dialogue-heavy. Monologue-heavy, really. It is what it is.

Chapter 4 playlist:
"Tidal Waves" by All Time Low.
"Where We Belong" by Thriving Ivory.

"Alright, we’re recording,” Peridot said, resting one of her wristband limb enhancers on the coffee table, a half-second delay of the living room scene playing through a hologram hovering over the green torus. “Spill it, Steven.”

“Yeah,” Amethyst said, scooting to make room for Peridot as she settled down, their thighs pressing together. “Where have you been? And why are you late?”

Steven tried a smile, managing about halfway as he addressed the messy gem. “You’re asking me why I’m late?”

“Hey,” Amethyst shot back, crossing her arms, “I’ve never been four years late.”

“Aaaaaaactually,” Pearl drawled, earning a glare.

“That was one time!”

“Yes, but it was four hundred years before you emerged.” Pearl lifted her nose, a little curl to her lips.

“You want to lecture me, or you want to lecture Steven?” Amethyst jerked a thumb at the man in question, who cursed under his breath as the elder gem pinned him down with her gaze.

“Amethyst is right,” Pearl said. Then, just as Amethyst shimmied her shoulders in a small victory celebration, she added, “For a change. What happened, Steven?”

“Aaw, come on,” Steven whined, rubbing at the back of his neck, “can’t I hear about you guys, first?”

“Oh, certainly,” Pearl agreed. Then, so rapidly her words nearly melded together, she counted off on her fingers as she listed those left behind. “Connie is mayor, Greg is old, Garnet has been collecting gems, Peridot and Amethyst are insufferable in conjunction, and I’m a lesbian, now.”
Steven blinked. “‘Now’?”

Pearl paused, then raised a finger. “Practicing. Practicing lesbian.”

Amethyst snickered. “I thought for sure you were a pro.”

Pearl smirked and leaned back on the couch, crossing her legs. “You’ll have to ask Sheena.”

Amethyst hooted, elbowing Peridot, who joined her in snickers.

“Yeah, okay,” Steven said, and swept a hand to the far end of the couch, indicating Lapis, who hunched her shoulders under the sudden attention. “And what has she been doing?”

The gems went silent, looking at one another and most definitely not at Steven.

“Peridot,” Steven said, looking to the green gem, who hunched further down, “why weren’t you with Lapis?”

Peridot scowled, opening her mouth to respond, and closing it again as no excuses came. Her head was very pointedly turned away from the lazuli sitting wrapped in Steven’s coat.

Lapis was the one who answered, and it was the first words she had spoken since her arrival at the beach house. “I wanted to be alone. I was waiting. And now I’m done waiting. What happened, Steven?” She looked up at the man with eyes as dark as the sea just outside the window. “Are you a diamond or not?”

All eyes fell upon Steven as the troubling question—fear and hope in one—was finally voiced.

Sighing, Steven let the hand on his neck fall to his side. He seemed to search for his words, finally settling upon lifting his left arm, holding it before his chest. “You three kind of saw this already,” Steven said, nodding to Amethyst, Peridot, and Garnet, “but I think Connie was the only one that saw...well.” Steeling himself, eyes closed, Steven called upon his gem, and a diamond shield flashed into solidity on his forearm.

Pearl gasped, hands flying over her mouth. “S-Steven! That’s not...is your mother’s shield gone?”

“No, I’ve still got it,” Steven said, letting the round shield manifest for a moment before fading. “But it’s not the shield. It’s...shards.” With far more effort than he’d ever thought it would take, Steven opened his eyes and looked at the gems.

As one, they gasped. Even Greg, whose response was an immediate “I don’t think my optometrist will cover that,” seemed far more shocked by the diamond pupils of the gem hybrid than his new and far more obvious shield.

“Diamond eyes,” Peridot breathed. “That’s...but why don’t you always have them? None of the other diamonds can change their eyes.”

“I’m not changing them,” Steven answered. “Not intentionally. My eyes are normal unless I use the shield or I sing the diamond songs. Or if I’m not careful and I’m...” Steven swallowed. “Giving orders.” His new shield dropped, and Steven stood before the tense gems. He blinked and, when he looked to them again, he knew it was with the familiar, round pupils of any other gem or human.

Garnet, ever aware, settled a hand on Pearl’s shoulder. It caused something to shift. Just a small thing, but Pearl’s posture changed tight and compact to a more natural, graceful fluidity. She tilted her head to catch Garnet’s gaze and gave a small smile. It took her some moments to look upon
Steven again, and it was more sidelong than direct. “When did that start?”

“About ten years ago,” Steven said, then shook his head. “Gah. This is going to get all out of order. Can I just start from the beginning?”

“That would be a good idea,” Garnet said. “And I’m sure we will all do our best to not interrupt.” She didn’t need to pull down her visor to fix the other gems with her intimidating stare. Just a simple glance, and Peridot and Amethyst were nodding with exaggerated enthusiasm, Pearl at least doing so in a more natural fashion. Lapis remained still, but none doubted her ability to keep quiet through the coming explanation. She’d been managing well enough for the last eighteen years, after all.

Steven looked upon his left arm, where the shield had rested. “The shield is...honestly, kind of weird. Not because it’s new, but because...well, the other diamonds don’t have anything like this. Not a shield, not swords, not...anything. Diamonds don’t summon weapons of any kind.”

(“We know that,” Peridot muttered, and immediately jolted as Garnet this time did lower her visor to glare at the little gem. The fusion pointed to Greg, then the recorder, and then three fingers at her trio of eyes. Nervously, Peridot nodded, and got back to paying attention.)

“Which isn’t to say they don’t disagree. They....” Steven puffed out his cheeks. “Wow, they disagree. Woof. It’s just, if they can’t work things out, they don’t fight each-other with weapons. They make their Champions do it.”

“Champions?” Greg interrupted, leaning forward in his rocking recliner opposite the couch.

Garnet pursed her lips, eyeing Greg, the two halves of herself in a deep debate over the merits in staring the old man down until he melted into his high-waisted sweatpants. Before they could decide, however, Steven was responding.

“Did Mom ever take you to the sky arena?”

Greg frowned, searching the past. Then, with a deep chuckle, he nodded. “Oh yeah....” He rubbed at the wiry, graying hair on his chin, lost in fond, voluptuous memories.

Pearl squeaked, a hand flying to her chest. “What! That is—”

Garnet’s visor flashed.

Pearl coughed. “Neither here nor there.” But she added something very low, which sounded suspiciously like “bleach.”

“That wasn’t just a training ground. It’s a kind of a ritual site. If an argument between diamonds gets really serious, they pick their strongest gems to face one-another. Their Champions. Whoever wins the fight also wins the argument.

“I saw my first Champion battle the day I left, when Blue and Yellow Diamond fought over who would teach me first. It was....” Steven’s eyes went distant. “Beautiful. And brutal.” He seemed to suddenly snap out of the memory, shaking his head. “I thought their gems would shatter each-other. They just about completely destroyed the arena on White Diamond’s flagship. If she’d sent in her Champion, it probably would have, but she thought what she had to teach was the most difficult bit of being a diamond, so it should be last. She was right. Not that any of it was easy.

“Blue Diamond’s topaz beat Yellow Diamond’s onyx. So she taught me first. Which is probably a good thing, because what she taught me was just...the basics of gem society.” Steven shrugged.
“Reading and writing, at first. And then so much gem literature and art. And plays. And, oh em gee,” Steven grinned, looking to Pearl, “were there musicals when you were on Homeworld?”

Pearl snorted. “Musicals? That’s the lowest form of entertainment.”

Peridot looked to Pearl, raising a brow. It went unnoticed.

“There was just so much!” Steven grinned. “Philosophy and history, culture and law!”


As one, the other gems leaned forward in their seats, looking at the fusion.

A dark blush came to Garnet’s cheeks, and her lips pressed tight shut.

“Yeah. Law.” Steven nodded, sobering. “Blue and I argued about that. A lot. I...I tried, guys.”

Steven clenched his fists. “I told the diamonds about how things are here on Earth, and they just said you’ll understand when you have your own gems.” As Steven said those words, he lifted his head high in the air, neck stretching out and voice going terse in an impression of Yellow Diamond that had Peridot snickering in appreciation.

Steven smiled at the little green gem, but it was weak. His next words were even thinner, directed at her. “After four years with Blue, she decided I’d learned enough basics, and Yellow Diamond took on my training. She showed me...how to make gems.”

Peridot’s laughter broke off immediately. All across the room, gems and human leaned in, eyes widening. Greg’s especially seemed about ready to fall out of the deep wrinkles about his sockets.

“You actually made gems?”

Steven hesitated, chewing on his lower lip. Slowly, he nodded.

Greg reached up to stroke his beard. With some hesitation, definitely some trepidation, he addressed his son. “Does that...make me...a grandpa?”

Steven blinked.

Then he laughed, deep and booming, leaning over, hair shifting to halo black curls about his face.

“Hey, come on!” Greg grinned. “Am I or not!?”

“I-hai don’t even know,” Steven laughed, wiping at his eyes. Laying a hand to his cheek, he gave a little murmured sigh. “I think the amethysts would get a kick out of that. But maybe don’t try it with the feldspars? They’re...eh...particular.” Steven flicked a finger delicately as he said that last word, a little half-grin on his lips.

“Feldspars,” Peridot said, leaning so far forward on the couch she fell right off, going to her knees, bracing her hands on the coffee table as she tried to get closer to the burgeoning diamond. “What else? What other gems did you make?”

Steven crossed his arms. “Agh, please don’t be upset, Peridot, but Yellow did have me make a peridot first, since you’re the best kinder—”

“YEEK!” Peridot squealed. “You made—yes! YES! How many?” She leaned over the table, lips curling into an absolutely feline grin. “How many?”

Steven blinked, then smiled with the sudden relief of this enthusiastic response. “Just one, at first,
but she is...well...remember your old manager?”

Peridot quelled. “Y...yeah?”

Steven grinned, each tooth shining. “She is *super jealous* of L-DR1.”

Peridot sat up on her knees, spine rigid. But, slowly, she morphed down into a little crouched being of utter malice, palms rubbing together, a high-pitched snickering filling the beach house as she exulted in the misfortune of her enemies. “Nyeeeeehehehe! ‘Peridots only need to run the computers’ my gravity connectors! Tell me! Tell me *more!*”

Amethyst sighed, shaking her head at the little green gem. “Better give her the goods, Steven. Before she gets too excited and knocks herself out!”

“I would never!” Peridot shot a look at Amethyst, pouting.

“Ahem,” Garnet said, not actually coughing in any manner. Just the word, said in her slow, deep voice.

Steven laughed, waving his hands downwards in a staying gesture. “Okay, okay. There’s four other peridots—” (Peridot squealed even higher) “—and, Amethyst, the zoo gems take rotations, now, so they can get out for a while. I mentioned the feldspars, right? Yeah. Then there’s Pyrope and Spinel and Heliodor. Oh. And, um...well, Yellow insisted I make an agate, since there’s so many quartzes around, but she’s nothing like Holly Blue! I mean, she’s bossy, but since I’m already on the ship running things....” He shrugged. “Amethyst, your sisters actually kind of...like her.”

Amethyst raised a brow. “They *like* an agate?!”

“Yeah. Um.” Steven gently waved a hand, reeling out his words. “Like her.”

Amethyst raised a brow, then whistled. “I gotta see that sometime.”

“Well, you’ll see it soon,” Steven said, grinning. “They’re on their way.”

Sudden, stony silence, but for Pearl, who blinked rapidly, lips parted in surprise. “T...they’re coming here? To Earth?”

“Well...yeah.” Steven shrugged. “I couldn’t leave them behind, could I? I mean, Lion’s gotten better at his jumps, but he’s not going across the entire galaxy.”

“H-how long until they get here?” Pearl shrielled, standing and pacing. “Are the diamonds coming? Do we have time to raise the defenses?”

“Pearl. Pearl!” Steven came about the coffee table, grabbing the tall gem’s hands. “Pearl, calm down. The diamonds aren’t coming. Diamonds don’t just show up at one another’s colonies without at least sending a message first! You don’t need to worry!”

“Steven,” Pearl hissed, hair standing on end, “I *need* to worry. Even if the diamonds aren’t invading, you’re bringing a bunch of...strange Homeworld gems to Earth! Who knows what they’ll do!”

“Pearl,” Steven said, brows drawing down as he leaned over just a bit to get closer to the fretting woman. “They’re not ‘strange Homeworld gems.’ They’re *my* gems.”

“But...but....” Pearl whimpered.
“They’re good gems, Pearl,” Steven soothed. “I promise.”

From her spot next to the furnace, Lapis let out a deep growl. “Including Jasper?”

Steven went stiff, face morphing from its friendly smile to a deep, dark scowl. Letting Pearl’s hands go (the thin gem falling back to the couch on weak legs), he turned to Lapis. “Yes,” he said, the word quick and firm. “Including Jasper.”

“Then we obviously can’t trust any of your gems,” Lapis said, standing, Steven’s coat falling from her shoulders. “If you’re so deluded about that one, then we can’t trust anything you believe. Or maybe just anything you say.”

Bristling at the implications, Steven clenched a fist, but quickly loosened it once more. “Lapis. It’s been eighteen years. She’s changed.”

The ocean gem laughed, throwing her head back. “Eighteen years? Steven. She’s over five thousand years old! You think a little vacation back to Homeworld is going to loosen her up and turn her into a...a...an Amethyst!” Lapis thrust a hand at the purple gem, who frowned, but elected to hold back from the argument.

“It wasn’t a fractured vacation,” Steven shouted back.

“Steven!” Pearl gasped. “Language!”

Steven ignored Pearl’s tizzy, staring down Lapis. “You don’t even know what she’s been through!”

“I think I know exactly what she’s been through,” Lapis said, holding up her fists, close together before her chest, in echo of old chains. Then, yanking her hands apart, as if shattering those chains once more, she took a pounding step forward, coming nearly up against Steven’s chest as she snarled, “You can’t trust her.”

“I do trust her,” Steven returned, not flinching an inch from Lapis. In fact, he seemed to loom forward, without actually taking any steps closer. It was his height. While he hadn’t been slouching by any means, in that moment, Steven held himself taller, shoulders back, looking down upon the lazuli.

Lapis barely seemed to notice. She sneered. “Why would you trust that monster?”

Steven gritted his teeth. “She is not a monster,” he said. “She’s my Champion.”

With a gasp, Lapis’s gem went alight and she jumped back, wings exploding from her back. One wing slipped over the furnace as she retreated, dousing it and darkening the room. The damp and dying coals hissed, or perhaps that was the lazuli, staring at the new diamond, teeth bared as she floated before him and the other gems. “She... no. She’s just a jasper. Jaspers aren’t strong enough for that!”

“Yes,” Steven shot back. “She’s just a jasper. And she fought against Onyx and she won. Jasper thought she would be shattered, but she still fought. She fought for me. For the life of my gems, and she has saved them and she has saved me countless times and that is why I trust her, Lapis! That,” he said, and suddenly his voice went lower, calming, as his hands went to rest, gently, at his sides, “that is why she is coming home.”

Lapis closed her eyes, turning her face from Steven. She remained poised in the air, the toes of one foot nearly brushing the floor, as her wings beat gently, more from habit than to actually hold her
“Fine,” Lapis whispered. “But if she’s coming back, then don’t expect me to stick around.” With a twitch of wings, Lapis flitted over Steven’s head, out the door and long, long gone before anyone could react.

Steven watched as the screen door clattered closed, bouncing on its hinges, the sea outside becoming a brief maelstrom as Lapis fled. As the waters calmed and the waves smoothed out once more, Steven sighed, walking to the spot the blue gem had just vacated, slumping down next to the steaming furnace. He looked up, after some moments, to find the rest of the gems still watching him closely.

It was Amethyst, sitting with her legs crossed beneath her, who spoke. “It...sounds like Jasper really...changed?”

Steven nodded. Then shrugged. “I don’t know. You guys only faced her as an enemy. I’m seeing her as...her diamond. And that means a lot to Jasper. You two remember what she was like at the beta kindergarten, when she talked about Pink Diamond,” Steven said, focusing on Amethyst and Peridot, who both shuddered. “She tried to attack me again, when White healed her. But when she found out about me, it was like...everything changed.”

“Well, duh,” Peridot said. “You’re her diamond.”

Amethyst’s brows drew down, and she looked to the green gem. “Uh, Peridot, I didn’t see you fawning over Yellow Diamond when she came down.”

“Hey,” Peridot protested, holding up a finger, “she left me to be shattered. She cared more about having those rubies recover Jasper than saving me. But Steven?” She swept a hand at the man, who was listening with interest. “The worst he did is fight her, and, well...she is a jasper. I bet she thought it was a great ‘bonding experience,’ once she realized what he is.”

Amethyst rolled her eyes, but Steven nodded. “I mean, if anything, she was kind of...scared, at first.”

The gems, as a collective, stared at Steven. Garnet, in her so-even tone, repeated, “Scared.”

Pearl shook her head, bewildered. “What did she have to be scared about? The diamonds had just picked her up and healed her! Surely, she was in the best position she’s been in for years.”

“Except she’d attacked me,” Steven said. “She attacked her diamond. What would have happened to any of you if you’d done the same.”

Peridot had already begun wincing at the phrase “attacked her diamond,” and the rest of the gems —sans amethyst—were not far behind. Pearl cupped a hand over her mouth, nostrils flaring as she took in an entirely unnecessary breath.

Steven focused on Amethyst, who had developed a frown on seeing the other gems react so strongly. “The other Crystal Gems, they fought to get free of that. But you, Amethyst?” He smiled. “You came out of the ground free. So, let me tell you, a gem’s loyalty to their diamond? For almost every gem, it’s more important than their own lives. And for Jasper? It’s...it’s scary.” He paused, looking down on his hands. “She thought I was going to shatter her for fighting me, and she...she accepted it.”

Amethyst blinked, leaning back in her seat. “But she thought you were Rose, back then.”
“That didn’t matter,” Steven said. “Amethyst, she’d been told for millennia that she was a ‘defective Earth gem.’ That she was only kept because she was useful.”

“Well, if she wasn’t useful, she’d just have been sent to the zoo,” Amethyst said. “Probably would have been better for her, really.”

Steven’s lips parted, and he looked up at Amethyst. There was a thin sheen to his eyes. As he spoke, his voice didn’t so much crack—it had been ages since it had done so on its own, his body well settled into adulthood and a rich baritone—but it was strained, thin, as he told Amethyst, “They told Jasper she was the only one.”

Amethyst frowned. “Huh?”

Steven rubbed both hands on his cheeks. There was a brief catch on his skin from the beginnings of stubble. Putting both hands down again, he sat straight, gathering his emotions, and said it again. “Yellow Diamond told Jasper she was the only Earth gem that survived.” He shook his head. “She didn’t know about the others. She’d thought she was alone, all that time.”

Pearl gasped, a full, deep inhale, leaning back, arms coming up as if in a guard. “That’s...but that’s barbaric!”

Amethyst looked to her long-time companion, a brow rising. “Dude, it’s messed up, but you’re acting like the diamonds actually shattered the other gems. They were right there.”

“But...oh, Amethyst, you don’t understand.” Pearl ran a hand through her hair. “Quartzes are very social gems. You recall how quickly the other amethysts took to you, even though you were there to raid their facility! I mean...look at you.” Pearl thrust her hands at the purple gem. “We didn’t find you for a year after you emerged, and you’d made friends with a rock!”

“Hey. Don’t talk that way about Tom.”

“Exactly,” Pearl said. “You can’t just leave a quartz alone. They need other gems. They need to be with their geode!”

Steven nodded. “So when we got to the zoo, and Jasper found out that other Earth gems survived...”

There was a very long pause as all waited for Steven’s revelation. A breakdown? A declaration of war? A tearful, Disney-esque reunion ballad? All seemed so possible, but the one Steven went with...well....

Steven’s words sang, low and pleased, “She was maaaaaaad.” He grinned.

Amethyst beamed, laughing. “I bet she was!” Leaning over, she offered a fist to Steven, who bumped it forthwith.

“Oh, honestly,” Pearl muttered, but allowed a small smile. “Quartzes.”

“Jasper’s never acted quite like the gems at the zoo,” Steven said. “But when she realized they were there, and we were there to get rid of Holly Blue...I think that’s when she started to realize.”

“Realize what?” Greg asked. He was leaned far back in his plaid recliner, eyes beginning to droop. The sun was far gone, the first-quarter moon well past its apex and falling beyond the temple looming above them all.
Steven looked to his father and gave him a gentle smile. “That I wasn’t going to hurt her.” Settling his coat on his lap, Steven began to run his hands over the back of the cloth, clearing off the last of the grass and sand from his arrival. “When she realized the rest of the beta gems were there and that I was going to protect them, she...she was so relieved.” He smiled at the memory. “And when the other jaspers realized she was alive...” He chuckled. “Pearl is not over-exaggerating. I don’t think they could have been more destructive if they were running through the halls corrupted. And fused.”

“So Jasper got to chill with the fam,” Amethyst said, nodding serenely. “Good.”

“Actually,” Steven hedged, “she stayed with me.”

The little gem scowled at the young man. “Excuse me? You just said quartzes need to be with other quartzes.”

“I couldn’t get her to stay!” Steven protested. “The other quartzes wanted to stick with the humans—there’s kids, now! Well...teens, now, I guess—but Jasper insisted that I needed someone to...” Steven shifted, uncomfortable. “To serve me. So she stayed with me.” Swiftly, Steven shot a glance at Pearl.

Whatever he expected, it wasn’t the wide grin that stretched across the pale gem’s face. Putting both hands to her lap and stretching in a little squirm, her gem gave off a small, brief glow of pleasure. “Oh...oh, that is...” Pearl threw her head back and laughed, long and hearty. “Jasper! As a pearl! Oh, tell me you got her a fancy outfit.” Pearl leaned in towards Steven’s end of the couch. “Did it have a bow? Oh, tell me, Steven!”

A light tint of red went to Steven’s cheeks, but he laughed, shaking his head. “You know, the diamonds said about the same thing!” Sitting up straight, he placed a hand gently to his chest and took on a deep, clipped tone. “‘But look at her! She has to lean over to open the doors! She has no grace! And those atrocious manners!’” He trilled the last and feigned a swoon, falling sideways on the couch, head falling into Amethyst’s lap.

After a good round of laughter, with a dozing Greg snorting awake and smiling fondly at the gathered gems, all settled, Steven rising once more, though sitting far closer to the gems, now, one leg tucked under his body so he could sit sideways on the couch.

“No bows,” was the first thing he said.

Pearl pouted.

Chuckling, Garnet patted Pearl’s shoulder.

“Besides,” Steven said, “it’s not like I was a two-year-old. I knew how to cook and clean up after myself and all that stuff. I mean, we had to figure out appliances, at first, but that didn’t take long to work out. She was more my...bodyguard.”

“And Champion,” Amethyst supplied.

Steven nodded. “Yeah. But that came much later. After White finished teaching me.

“When I finished studying with Yellow, I spent some time with the new gems, looking for planets that could grow more gems. It was...really good, getting away from it all. We were able to start a bunch of small colonies—ancillaries—but at the end of the year, White called us back to Homeworld.”
“Homeworld?” Pearl breathed. “You...visited Homeworld?”

Steven grinned. “I lived there for five years. It’s...Pearl, you never told me. It was... beautiful. Stars, I’m so glad I learned from Blue first, all the architecture and the art and just...the gems! White’s court is enormous. I mean, I barely even have one court gem—”

“You do?” Peridot squeaked from her spot on the ground. “You managed a variant already!?"

Amethyst looked to her friend. “What’s a ‘variant’?”

Peridot looked to her friend, eyes wide at the purple one’s ignorance. “It...it’s... Amethyst, how long have you hung out with me and you don’t know that!?"

Amethyst shrugged. “About nineteen years.”

“Correct. But, whatever!” Peridot sat up straight, nose lifting and tone taking on an extra bit of nasal twang. “A variant gem is one which can not be deliberately made. In spite of whatever was programmed in the injector, they come out different. They are often quite strong, or have special powers. We’re talking onyx, topaz, serendibite, lapis, chrysoberyl, painite, and,” she gestured to Garnet. “sapphires. Among others, of course. Those are the gems that make up a court.” She turned back to Steven. “What is she? Oh, tell me it’s an emerald! I got to see an emerald emerge once—not one of my own, sadly—and she was just magnificent!”

Peridot was practically crawling up the couch into Steven’s lap by the end of this reverie, and the man chuckled, holding out his hands to keep himself from being bowled backwards into the cooling furnace. “Hey! I get to keep some surprises until everyone arrives!”

“But...but....”

“But Steven needs to finish,” Garnet said, leaning over and plucking the little green gem off the man’s legs, placing her back one seat further down, between Amethyst and Pearl. “Some of us don’t have your kind of energy.” Tilting her head, she gestured to Greg, who seemed to have lost the fight for consciousness, his chair no longer rocking, and just the smallest trail of drool oozing from the corner of his lips.

Steven’s brows drew, but Peridot, waved at her limb enhancer band, still recording on the table. “We were already making it for Connie, so I’ll just send him a copy, too.”

Steven looked upon the recording with sudden avid interest. But, when it did not miraculously transform into a screaming, sword-wielding mayor, he turned away, gathering the threads of the story once more. “There was just one thing left to teach me, on Homeworld. The songs of the diamonds. It’s not just Corruption,” Steven said, swiftly, on seeing Amethyst scowl. “There’s a lot that’s just for entertainment or...empathy, I guess? I mean, you all sing, but it goes so much deeper. Diamonds can soothe a gem or pump them up, they can actually sing a gem stronger. They can—”

“They can turn gems into monsters,” Amethyst snapped.

Steven paused. Then, slowly, nodded. “Yeah. They can corrupt.”

“Can you?” Amethyst looked sharply into Steven’s eyes, but only for a moment, for the man had quickly looked away.

“I...” After some time, Steven nodded. “Yeah.”

The gems looked upon Steven as any human would look upon an atom bomb which has been
invited into their living room.

“But you can’t heal it,” Amethyst sneered. “Figures. White Diamond teaches you just enough to destroy everything, and not enough to fix anything.”

“She did teach me the healing song! I’ve heard it a hundred, a thousand times, I’ve sung it, but I can’t...I can’t make it work!” Clenching his fists, Steven slammed them on his thighs. “I am so close, I can feel it in my throat, but when it comes out, it’s just a song, it doesn’t do anything!”

“So, what?” Amethyst growled, staring down the hybrid. “You just corrupted a bunch of gems and left them?”

“No!” Steven leaned in towards Amethyst, resting his hands on her shoulders. “No! Look, I didn’t want to learn to corrupt gems, but it’s part of learning to fix them, too! White always reversed things when I wasn’t able to do it, and I only ever did it to gems that volunteered.”

“How can they volunteer?” Amethyst snapped, breaking Steven’s hold and jumping off the couch. Fists balled at her sides, gem glowing as it urged her to draw out her whip, she screamed at Steven. “How can they actually choose when you’re calling them your gems!”

Steven leaned back from the sudden verbal assault, eyes widening. “I...I don’t mean it like that! I don’t own them!”

“Could have fooled me,” Amethyst said, spinning from him so fast her hair flew out, knocking Peridot’s limb enhancer off the coffee table. She stormed from the living room, to the warp pad, where she activated the Temple Gate before retreating into her room. There wasn’t strictly a door on that metaphysical portal, but it still seemed to slam shut with finality.

Steven looked after the retreating gem, mouth open, sputtering. When she was gone beyond his reach, he turned to the remaining three gems, his head shaking in minute jerks. “I don’t, he insisted. “You know I’d never—”

“We know you’ve been gone for eighteen years,” Garnet said, also rising from the couch. “You should have been back four years ago. She’s angry.” Garnet paused. Then, quietly, she added, “We’re all a little angry.”

Steven looked up on the fusion, stomach sinking deep down, past his toes and into the very core of the Earth. “Garnet, I....”

“What could—” Garnet clenched her fists, arms shaking with the effort.

Pearl was the one who managed to venture forth a full question. Quiet, almost timid, she whispered it. “What kept you, Steven? Why didn’t you come home? To us?”

Closing his eyes, Steven tried to fight back the tears, but it came on too suddenly. Several large drops rushed down his cheeks, and he croaked out a noise that was nowhere near a word. He stood there for some minutes, trying to coach his breathing.

It was more than enough time for Peridot to place the recording enhancer back on the table and retake her seat, this time one spot further down, at Pearl’s right. Reaching up, she touched Garnet’s palm, and the contact was enough to usher the fusion back down to Peridot’s other side. Once safely ensconced between the two warrior gems, Peridot lifted her feet onto the couch, wrapping her arms about her knees. “Go on, Steven. We won’t interrupt, this time. We’re listening.”

He didn’t spring into things forthwith. Sniffling, the enormous man wiped at his eyes, giving
Peridot an appreciative smile. The first time he tried to speak, his throat just let out a squeak, and he waved both hands at his face, cooling it down. His eyes, a little red and puffy from the crying, threatened to fill with tears once more, but soon he was either worn through or merely soothed. Placing his hands before his chest, Steven breathed in, lifting his hands as the air filled his lungs, letting them gently drift out and down as he exhaled.

Creakily, he began. “I tried so hard to keep my promises to you all. I made my gems the best they could be. I didn’t put any gem over another. I let them find out who they were, what they could do, not just assign them to the tasks Homeworld said they were made for. It was so good. They were so happy. And...

“And, on my ship, I let them fuse. Whenever they wanted, whoever they wanted, just so long as the gems and the ship were safe. It was normal, for them.

“That was my mistake. They knew the other diamonds didn’t allow fusion between different types of gems. They knew. When we were on Homeworld, they knew they couldn’t do it. For five years, they held off.

“Then my training was over. The diamonds threw this big celebration to send me on my way. Everyone was really enjoying themselves! Even the diamonds seemed...pleased with my gems. With me.

“Then...two of my gems fused. In front of every gem on Homeworld.”

Pearl covered her mouth, eyes going wide, and whispered a soft “no.” Peridot, too, had gasped aloud, but it was Garnet who looked most stricken. She reached up, removing her visor, and looked upon Steven, her eyes wide. Terrified.

“That’s when we called,” she said.

Steven nodded. “Just about. Blue Diamond said Moss Agate and Pyrope had to be shattered. I said ’no.’ Of course I said ‘no.’ But we were on Homeworld, and it was the law, and every gem was just...expecting it. I didn’t know what to do. I was...frozen.

“So Jasper challenged the diamonds to a Champion battle.”

“Jasper did?” Peridot broke in, eyes widening. “For a fusion?”

“For my gems,” Steven said, both a correction and a confirmation. “She said that the other diamonds couldn’t do anything to them. They were mad enough that they wanted to shatter Zoisite the second she formed. But it was a challenge, and the diamonds couldn’t refuse. So Yellow Diamond accepted Jasper’s challenge. Onyx against Jasper.

“Jasper thought she’d be shattered. She almost was. She took weeks to reform, but she won. She saved my gems.

“But the diamonds were...angry. I knew I couldn’t come back right away. I couldn’t bring that kind of attention back to Earth. So we went down the Orion-Cygnus Arm to make more gems. I figured just a few months, then we could head back, but things...they kept happening. We’d find a string of worlds where we could make a lot of gems, or there’d be a disaster on a mission and we’d have to repair the ship, then the variant came out and Jasper...wasn’t okay.”

“Because she was being replaced?” Pearl asked.

Steven shook his head. “She...no. Look, that’s not for me to say, but I think you’ll figure it out
when my ship arrives.” Steven looked between the three remaining gems. “I know I should have been home years ago, but I stayed away and I kept quiet because I thought it would keep you safe. The diamonds haven’t come back to Earth because it’s my colony. I didn’t tell any of them I was coming here. I didn’t want to come here, maybe make the diamonds reconsider, but....” Steven blushed. “Jasper made me. She told me that I can’t hide forever. And if I’m kind of a diamond, I’m also kind of a quartz, like her. And....” Looking down on the ground, Steven barely whispered his words. “And I need my family, too.”

The Crystal Gems looked to one another, searching for words, but it was the forgotten member of the party that spoke up.

“Yeah,” Greg said, grunting as he pushed himself out of the chair, walking to his son and at first trying to wrap an arm around the behemoth’s shoulders before settling on his waist. “And we’re glad you’re home. Garnet is right, we’re all still kind of mad,” and here he paused for a squeeze, easing some of the tension that had sprung up at his words, “but we’ve got years to yell at you, huh? So how about, for now, we call it a night, you gems can think this all over, and us dudes can get a little rest? I’m exhausted, and I haven’t even fought two of the most dangerous women on the planet.”

With a weak smile, Steven wrapped an arm around his father, pulling him in for a deep hug. “Fair enough.”

They settled Greg on the couch—which, despite its deep softness, had a strong enough structure to not totally kill his back, he reassured—and Steven, for the first time in eighteen years, lay down in his childhood bed.

And did not sleep.

He spent hours staring at the ceiling, urging his swirling mind to calm. But even the lessons from Garnet all those years ago and his own little hum of a soothing diamond song weren’t enough to lull him. He wasn’t surprised, though. He’d had trouble falling asleep for ages. Leading an entire ship of sleepless gems was enough to cause insomnia all on its own, and add in the revelations of the day and confessions and plans and...well, so many other things. He was in no way surprised by his lack of sleep.

Unlike eighteen years ago, this time Steven left a note. *On the hand*, it said, in awkward, barely-remembered Latin letters. He left it on the coffee table, next to his father. Garnet would be able to see him with her Future Vision, so she wouldn’t panic, and Pearl had opted to stay the night with her...stars, to her lover. Steven grinned at the idea.

As for Amethyst and Peridot...well, Peridot was logical enough to check the warps, and Amethyst was angry enough to forget how to read, so there wasn’t really anything he could do there.

He was a little startled on warping up to the hand and finding it bereft of laundry machines. There were a few red spots in the stone, ancient rust which hadn’t been scrubbed away by even Pearl’s best efforts. There was a bundle of twigs held together by mud between the hand’s middle and ring finger, but the occupants were long gone, leaving behind just a few sun-bleached feathers.

He settled down between the thumb and index finger, legs dangling over the edge of the hand, looking out on the ocean. Just there at the edge of the horizon, there was the smallest shift in color: a dawn beginning to advance, but still out of reach. The tide was nearly balanced between going in and coming out, small creatures darting about the waves, seeking out morsels. Steven looked across the beach and the waves and took in a breath of the cold, wet predawn air.
Closing his eyes, Steven let his mind wander. Not figuratively. In an absolutely literal sense. His consciousness drifted, floating on the sea for just a moment before rising up, through the atmosphere, into the depths of space, before snapping down onto another mind, familiar and welcoming.

Steven immediately looked down on his right wrist and confirmed, yes, the green band was there. It was okay. Granted, Spinel almost always wore the band, but he had to make sure he wasn’t invading, wasn’t settling her consciousness into the recesses of her own mind without at least some kind of warning.

Steven looked up from the communication console and spun his chair around, looking back on the bridge of his ship. Milling about him were a dozen gems, consulting their own consoles or conversing with one another or, in the case of the hulking figure seated in the middle of them all, looking very, very uncomfortable in the command seat. Even the pale blue gem laying a hand laying on the temporary commander’s forearm didn’t seem to be anywhere near enough to soothe in this trying time.

Steven smiled. “I’m here.”

Heads snapped up from their screens. It was a phrase Spinel never used. Even when she arrived somewhere, she picked some other announcement, because that was the signal that the one who had arrived was not, in fact, the one who owned that body.

Several gems leapt to their feet, crossing their arms and angling their fingertips into strict salutes, chorusing out “My Diamond!” A few of the old-guard amethysts—off rotation from the zoo and enjoying the less hectic task of running a ship, instead of catering to a bunch of whiny teen humans —waved, not bothering to rise, some calling out “Steven,” a small few using “Rose Quartz,” and still others providing a litany of nicknames.

But the gem seated at command didn’t even bother with a greeting. Jasper leapt out of the chair, taking two long strides to Spinel, taking her hands as she demanded, “What happened?”

Steven laughed, the notes a fraction too high in this body. “Pretty much what you expected.”

Jasper’s banded face paled. “They... we will be there in three minutes, just hold on.”

“Gah, no!” Taking Spinel’s hands from Jasper’s grip, Steven waved them before the panicking gem. “Calm down! Please, I can’t sing you calm like this, Jasper. I just meant they’re...kind of mad. But it’s okay, they’re glad I’m back. I’m fine.” Reaching out, he smoothed one of Jasper’s more unruly strands of hair back, trying to flatten it down with the rest of the locks being held up by the universe’s most over-worked scrunchie. It proved ineffective, the hair immediately going back into the gem’s eyes, but the touch—even filtered as it was through the body of a different gem—was enough to soothe.

“And...and the other thing?” Jasper creaked, eyes darting away, back towards the command seat.

Spinel rolled her eyes. “Lapis, ” Steven said, then felt a little twinge as Jasper flinched. He once again reached out with Spinel’s hands, smoothing them over the large gem’s cheeks, “Lapis is very...combative, like we expected. But I think it’ll work out fine.”

“You always think it’ll work out fine,” Jasper grumbled.

“And you make sure it does, my jasper,” Steven said, and through Spinels’ hands, he felt the rumbling that came from deep in Jasper’s chest.
“Yes, My Diamond,” Jasper breathed, reaching up to squeeze Spinel’s hand before brushing it back down and stepping away. There was always some awkwardness between the two of them when their interactions had to be conducted through a third gem. A little anxiety for that gem, and a little embarrassment at the idea of a witness, even for something so simple as a touch of reassurance.

Spinel’s smile was a small acknowledgement of this. She looked about at the on-duty gems and Steven gave his update. “The plan stays the same. You have about twenty-four hours on ship to do whatever you please, but once you’re on Earth, it’s best behavior. Fusion is fine, but don’t damage anything, especially in the town. If you want something, you have to ask, first, no eating whatever looks good. And Moss?”

A tall, pale-green gem with a fantastic amount of green-streaked white hair, all contained in a tight bun, looked upon Steven and once-again saluted. “Yes, My Diamond?”

“Don’t...try and order the humans around,” Steven said, with a little whine to his tone which revealed that he knew how utterly futile this particular order actually was.

Moss Agate opened her mouth to answer, but a grey-blue gem, a fraction smaller in stature, spoke up from the console at her left. “He didn’t say anything about me, Mossy.”

Moss Agate cut her eyes at the gem and edged out a terse “Chalcedony...” Which only earned a waggle of brows in response. Huffing, the agate addressed her leader. “I shall do my utmost.”

“I’m sure that will be enough,” Steven said. Looking about at the rest of the gems, all of whom were watching, but none of whom seemed to have the same rigid focus and need which had overtaken Jasper, Spinel’s head gave a little nod. “Okay. Get it out of your system, guys. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Spinel closed her eyes.

Steven opened his eyes and instantly hissed, lifting a hand to shield his gaze. But, after a moment, the sight before him snapped to a memory, and he lowered his hand again, looking out on the ocean in growing wonder.

The sun peeked over the Eastern horizon, sending a bolt of fire down the waves, setting the beach aglow. Tide was nearly out, the sand covered in shells and seaweed and enterprising gulls.

Steven smiled. He’d forgotten how much he’d missed the sunrise.
Steven warped back down to the beach house to find Pearl bustling about the kitchen and humming, her soft sounds backed up by a faint hiss from the shower. A wave of nostalgia rooted Steven to the warp pad for some moments, just long enough for Pearl to respond the the sound of his arrival on the pad, looking over her shoulder as she scraped egg off the bottom of a pan.

“Steven! Good morning. Did you rest well? Is the bed big enough? How about the blankets, do you need the winter set? I’m not sure what sort of environmental controls you maintain on your ship, so we have thicker covers, if needed.”

“The bed is fine,” Steven said, jogging down the warp and coming up behind Pearl, wrapping his arms about her waist. It had only been a few hours since they’d said goodnight, but he found his skin already demanding physical contact. “Garnet told you where I’d be?”

“Oh, yes,” Pearl said, leaning back into the man as she gave the pan a gentle jerk, flipping the omelet over into a neat half-circle. “Though she was a bit confused about what you were doing up there. She said you were...meditating?”

“Kind of,” Steven said, looking down at the little—well, not little, but her head only came up to his chest, and he’d become so used to Jasper and her quartz sisters—pale gem in his arms. “I was contacting my ship.”

Pearl tilted her back, looking up at the hybrid’s face, her brows nearly in her hairline. Taking a moment to attend to the stove, she turned off the gas burner and slid the finished omelet onto a plate already adorned with apple slices and a ramekin of yogurt. The meal saved from her distraction, she turned about, the movement enough to break Steven’s grip. “I don’t recall that being a diamond power.”

“Nah,” Steven grinned, glad to not be subjecting the woman to more of his near two-decades of changes. “Remember that dream thing I used to do? I just got better at it.”

“Apparently,” Pearl said, grinning. “What about Rose’s healing? And plants?”
“Eh, the healing is just a bit faster, now,” Steven said, shrugging. “Plants I kind of try to steer clear of unless I’m eating. I didn’t want the diamonds to see a bunch of veggie Steven’s running around. Seemed like a bad idea.”

“Fair point,” Pearl agreed. “Well, if you want to see any of my new skills, I have vastly improved my cooking repertoire. At least, according to Sheena.” A small but bright smile graced Pearl’s face. “Though, I will admit, we’ve only been keeping around food for Greg, and his diet is a bit...limited.” Pearl held out the plate she’d prepared, raising a brow. “I’m afraid it’s egg whites and nonfat yogurt, until I’ve time to hit the store.”

Steven looked down on the healthy, nearly all-white meal and felt himself become suddenly far less hungry. And he hadn’t really been hungry to begin with.

“Orrrrrr,” Pearl said, a little laugh in her words as she took in the man’s face, “Greg thought to set out some money before he showered, if you wanted to go bring some breakfast home.” Pearl tilted her head, lips quirking. “I do believe it’s opening time at the Big Donut.”

Steven perked up in an instant, his stomach suddenly deciding that, yes, it was time to growl. Long and loud, the sound almost seeming to shake the man’s belly.

Laughing, Pearl flicked a hand at the coffee table. “Go on. I always expected you’d leave us again the second the nearest batch of dough was out of the fryer.”

“Just for a few minutes,” Steven promised, putting his hands on Pearl’s shoulders and giving her cheek a peck before darting away from the threat of health food.

There was an odd relief on finding that the bills looked roughly the same. A few minor changes. He was pretty sure there hadn’t been a woman on the twenty when he left, and the colors were not so vibrant in his memories. Jogging out the front door and down the stairs, he wondered how much the pricing might have changed. His dad always liked to talk about the “good old days” of gas under a dollar.

Reaching the sandy ground before the house, Steven put two fingers to his lips, letting out a piercing whistle. After a brief pause, the silence of the beach was broken by a deep roar and, through a swirling portal, a massive pink lion bounded, stopping at Steven’s feet.

Steven looked on Lion mane. It was covered in white feathers and grass. Steven sighed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I’m not gonna find any suffocated pigeons in there, am I?”

Lion blinked at Steven, tail lashing with impatience.

“Oh, did I interrupt something?” Steven said, rolling his eyes. “Well, apologies. Let me just get changed and you can get back to murder most fowl.”

Lion groaned, flopping to the sand, even his tail going limp.

Terribly pleased with himself, Steven took a running jump into Lion’s mane, disappearing in a brief flash of light. There was stillness on the beach for a good minute before another glow emanated from the feline and Steven popped back out, this time attired most traditionally: red shirt with a yellow star and blue jeans, though still topped with his gray jacket. After years on a climate-controlled ship, the ocean breeze was somewhat of a shock, and kept sending him into tiny chills.

Pulling out the little fold of cash, he addressed his lion companion. “What do you think? Enough to keep you in Lion Lickers for a bit?”
Lion looked at cash and flicked an ear.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steven said, putting it away again and giving the cat a scratch behind the ears. “I’ll make sure to stock us up. Let me just find a pawnshop or something to sell that gold from Cepheus-3, okay? Or a few pawnshops. I doubt anywhere around here keeps enough cash on hand to feed a glutton like you.”

Grunting, Lion pressed his nose into Steven’s stomach, bringing out a chuckle and further scratching.

“Well, you want to indulge that sweet tooth, or are you going back to....” Steven flicked a feather off Lion’s mane.

Rising to all paws, Lion walked by Steven, leaning against the man as he went, nearly bowling him over, before pelting down the beach to the waterline, where he stirred up a flock of very angry-sounding birds.

“Please don’t let those be endangered,” Steven muttered. Then, recalling that Lion himself was, in at least some portion, an endangered species, he shrugged and continued up the beach and into town.

Thinking back, having his nearest food option be deep fried and made of sweetened dough was probably not the best thing for his formative years. Even now, after years in space with fairly limited food options, he still had plenty of pudge to his stomach, but it was stretched over the muscles of a fully-grown quartz warrior. Excepting his arms, there wasn’t much definition to his shape, but there was enough real power in him that he didn’t care. Besides, he had been surrounded by similarly-shaped gems. Not like an amethyst was going to body-shame for a bit of fat.

But it was time to ruin all that. Just a little. After all, Jasper would be in, soon, and she had her own ideas about his diet, made all the more irksome by the gem not having any actual experience with eating.

A little bounce to his step, Steven walked past the last remnants of the beachside cliff and turned into the Big Donut parking lot.

And froze.

Sitting under one of the outdoor sunbrellas, Mayor Maheswaran looked up from her phone and cup of coffee, eyes going to slits as she recognized the alien arrival.

Steven was sure he only took a single step back. Surely, he caught himself after that retreat. But, given the smirk that came across Connie’s lips, that was enough.

That smirk was swept away as a second human made herself known. Sitting across from the mayor, a far older woman called out excitedly. “My goodness, it’s true! Steven Universe! Get over here!”

That seemed like a very bad idea, but, on looking at the woman, Steven found his misgivings fading. He sent a smirk back to Connie as he took confident steps towards the pair. If anyone in Beach City was going to keep him safe from the mayor’s wrath, it was this woman.

“Doctor Maheswaran,” Steven greeted, extending a hand to Connie’s formidable mother, nearly engulfing the woman’s entire wrist as they shook. “It’s good to see you!”

“That was a very bad idea,” Priyanka laughed, patting the man’s hand. “Now that you’re sure it’s me, and not my...”
“Ah...hah. So you heard about that,” Steven creaked, fighting to keep his smile. In retrospect, confusing the two was an obvious mistake. After all, Connie was in her early thirties, and she looked it. Just a few thin lines about the eyes, a couple gray hairs, but her body was still trim and quite obviously capable. Priyanka, looking down from the far side of fifty, wasn’t nearly so frail as Steven’s own always out-of-shape father, but her long hair was nearly white, and her arms seemed to be thinning down, not from dieting, but from the simple deterioration of age. Still, she was quite recognizable from his youth, if he’d just thought for a moment when he’d seen Connie.... “I, uh...didn’t think it was such public knowledge.

“Young man,” Priyanka said, shaking her head, “the entire town has heard you’re back. Perhaps pick an indoors venue if you want to have a dramatic, tearful reunion, next time. Though...” Grinning and shooting her daughter a look, Priyanka let a little song into her voice, “I’d rather you had a medical exam before trying that.”

“Mother,” Connie hissed, face going a deep maroon.

“I’m just saying, there is the matter of space-borne pathogens to consider. Who knows how they might affect a se—”

Leaning over, Connie pressed a palm over her mother’s face.

Delicately, Priyanka reached up, pinching the wrist of Connie’s blue button-up, placing her daughter’s offending hand on the table. The pair of women locked eyes for a moment, the atmosphere suddenly thick and intense, but breaking quickly as Priyanka turned her smiling visage on the gem. “Steven, since it’s your first morning back, let me treat you. Chocolate cream-filled, and do you do coffee, now? Latte?”

“Um. Sure.” Steven smiled. “But you don’t have to; I have money for—”

“Oh, hush,” Priyanka said, standing, putting her hands to Steven’s forearm and pulling. “It’s my pleasure. Just take a seat while I go in, will you?”

Steven found himself unable to protest in the face of the Maheswaran matriarch. She just barely nudged the backs of his knees, sending him toppling down onto the metal bench, the sudden landing jostling table, umbrella, and Connie’s drink, which just barely managed to avoid spilling.

Connie glared at her mother, grip tightening on her paper cup. “I’m sure Steven can get his own —”

“Be polite,” Priyanka snapped.

Connie’s mouth clicked closed, obedient, though, after a second, she did hunch her shoulders, glower deepening.

“Now, I’ll be right back, you two,” Priyanka said, flitting into the donut shop, leaving her daughter and her daughter’s childhood friend alone together on a fine summer morn.

Connie groaned, crossing her forearms on the table and burying her face in them. “I should have known better when she asked to meet here.”

Steven looked to the beleaguered mayor and frantically searched in his brain for an appropriate topic of conversation. “She, uh...she seems to be doing well. Is she still in the surgery?”
“Semi-retired,” Connie grumbled, tilting her head just enough to look upon the man. “She keeps saying she’s done, but she can’t stop meddling at the hospital.” Brows lowering, she added, “And elsewhere.”

“Huh. She’d probably like Heliodor.” Steven smiled, pleased with himself. Perfect conversation starter. Heliodor was the closest thing to a doctor the ship had; evaluating the gems, checking for scratches and cracks, referring them to either Moss for training or Steven for healing. Not to mention she was the ship’s main instigator of gossip. He’d just talk about her for a bit, bring in Priyanka when she got back, have a friendly conversation, mend fences, maybe invite Connie to the arrival—

“She’s one of the gems in the invasion?” Connie said, bringing Steven’s brain to a juddering halt.

Steven stared at the woman. Open-mouthed, breath coming out in a dim keen, eyes about ready to escape their sockets entirely. “I... what?”

“The invasion,” Connie repeated, sitting back up, tilting her head so she could look down her nose to Steven’s panicked face. “I watched the holo Peridot sent. You’re bringing your gems to Earth. Without invitation. In a ship called the Blade,” Connie sneered at the martial name.

“‘It’s for ‘Lonely Blade,’” Steven yelped.

“Oh, cute,” Connie said, rolling her eyes. “We’re being invaded by a c-rank samurai franchise.”

“I’m not invading Earth!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Connie said, flicking a hand in the air, the movement disturbing a tuft of her short hair. “I forgot, it’s not an invasion. We’re your colony, after all.” Curling her hand into a fist, she placed it under her chin, giving Steven a look somehow both soft and venomous. “Tell me, do you plan on releasing the Cluster, or are you just going to reactivate the kindergartens and suck Earth dry like you diamonds originally planned?”

Steven gritted his teeth, hands coming to the edge of the metal table, squeezing down. Dents formed under his fingers and the metal gave off a little squeak. “Don’t you dare accuse me of...of that! You know I would never.”

Connie’s gaze flickered down to the distressed table, then back into Steven’s face. Smiling gently, she pointed just below her right eye. “Careful, Steven,” she crooned. “Your diamonds are showing.”

Ice slammed into his gut. Letting the table go, Steven leaned back, blinking rapidly, looking about for something reflective to check.

Nothing was nearby, however, and by the time he got his wits back, Connie was rising, tossing a messenger bag over her shoulder and downing the last dregs of coffee. She scowled down at the cup and tossed it casually across the parking lot, making her shot into the nearby dumpster. “Maybe work on that,” she drawled, turning from the table. “You’re going to have a hard time convincing people you’re not here to hurt them, otherwise.”

“Connie, no,” Steven cried out, rising to his feet, rushing after the woman. “I’m not going to hurt anyone!” He reached out, seeking her hand.

Swiftly, Connie spun around and slapped his hand away. She settled in a familiar, low stance, one leg far out front, a fist tucked to her waist, the other palm in a flat blade, ready to strike again.
Taking a quick step back, Steven held up his hands. “I—”

“You already did,” Connie growled and, with a final glare, she turned and stormed down the boardwalk, not so much as glancing back.

Steven held out a hand to the retreating woman, considering, briefly, trying to follow again, but he jumped and turned about in surprise as the door to the Big Donut swung open, the bells tied to the handle jingling as Priyanka stepped through.

“So,” the doctor said, walking to Steven’s side, watching her daughter disappear down the boardwalk, “you’re two-for-two, huh?”

Groaning, Steven buried his head in his hands. “I can’t say anything right! Why does she have to be so angry?”

“She has every right to be angry,” Priyanka said, rolling her eyes. “She waited around for you for fourteen years, and then you fail to show up? I mean, Doug stood me up for dinner once, and it nearly ruined a two-year courtship. You, boy, are so deep in the doghouse you might as well be a wolf.”

“What do I do,” Steven whimpered, head falling back to beseech the sky above, arms falling limp at his sides.

“Well, as a doctor, I’ve got one bit of advice I’ve had to give most of my patients, over the years.” Priyanka thrust the baggie into one of Steven’s large hands, a hot cup of coffee into the other. “Suck it up and take your medicine.”

Donuts are not medicine. But, damn, they helped a little. He’d managed to replicate a lot of food back on his ship, but when you’re going a faster-than-light speeds, it’s generally ill-advised to do anything that involves boiling-hot oil. Besides, how did they even get the cream into the donut? It was a mystery. A delicious, emotion-damping mystery.

Coffee...a bit less-so. But it was warm and it melded well with the pastry, so Steven sucked it down as he trudged back to the beach house.

He opened the door to an old and familiar greeting from his father. “Hey, Stew-ball! Bring me a donut?”

A brief flare of panic rose in Steven’s chest as he looked down at his little handful of trash. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t be sorry,” Garnet spoke up from the kitchen, where she was in the process of putting away the last of the dishes. “If you’d brought one, Pearl would have reminded him that he wasn’t allowed donuts, and Amethyst would have eaten it.”

“So feel guilty,” Amethyst spoke up from the little living room nook, where she sat beside Peridot and before one of green gem’s limb enhancers, which was displaying the last bits of his talk the night before. Holo-Greg was rising, urging everyone to settle down for the night as the real Amethyst reached out, poking some invisible button on the side, shutting the display off in a crackle of static. Rising, she came up to Steven and, after the briefest pause, wrapped her arms about his waist.

Steven smiled down at the purple gem. “Does this mean you’re not angry with me-ah!”
Amethyst removed her fist from Steven’s right kidney and continued her hug. “Still angry.”

“Shards, okay,” Steven muttered, rubbing his side.

“Gimme the bag,” Amethyst grumbled, petulant.

Laughing, Steven dropped both donut bag and coffee cup, which swiftly disappeared into Amethyst’s unending maw.

“Mmmm, sugar paper,” she said, smacking her lips.

“I will get you all the sugar paper you want,” Steven said, only half serious. Well, fully serious if it would get her to stop being mad at him.

“Don’t try to bribe me,” Amethyst growled, but with affection. Letting go, she stepped back from Steven, crossing her arms. Somehow, she managed to remain fairly intimidating while also having to crane her neck far back to look up into the man’s face. “I mean, do try and bribe me,” she said with a grin, “it’s just not gonna work.”

“So you say,” Peridot cut in, slipping her band back on and coming to stand beside her companion. “It always works with me.”

“Well, that’s ‘cause it’s you, Peri-berry,” Amethyst said, throwing an arm about Peridot’s shoulder and nuzzling into the gem’s hair, earning a small laugh and squirm.

Brows rising, Steven studied the two gems. Looking up, he caught Garnet’s gaze.

Garnet shrugged.

Looking back down, Steven ventured “Are you two—” before being interrupted by a very, very sharp glare from Amethyst. For the second time that day, Steven retreated from a dangerous, angry woman. Was this going to be his entire trip back on Earth? Running from pissed female warriors? Jasper was going to be...well, delighted, really.

The kitchen work done, Garnet and Pearl came out from the little nook, Pearl addressing the small gathering. “Well, now that we’re all fed and settled, I do believe that we owe Steven something.”

“Oh, do I get to kick his butt, finally?” Amethyst perked up.

“Later,” Pearl said, to Steven’s relief and horror. “I meant that he told us what’s been going on, so now we should give him a little update, don’t you think?”

“You gave him an update,” Amethyst said. “You’re a lesbian.”

Pearl rolled her eyes. “I meant something with a bit more detail.”

“Like how you like getting your hair pulled?”

“AMETHYST!” Pearl shrieked, face turning a brilliant blue. “That is inappropriate!”

“Then you shouldn’t have been canoodling with Sheena outside your room,” Greg cut in, leering. “Multiple times.”

The pale gem, already not very large to begin with, seemed to compact into an even smaller mass. “B...but it was her idea,” Pearl keened, her distress only amplifying Amethyst’s laughter. “A-and Steven doesn’t want to hear about that!”
“I really don’t,” Steven agreed. He was fairly certain he’d be more okay hearing about his dad’s partners than Pearl’s.

“Then what about that time we caught you on the beach?” Amethyst said, elbowing Pearl, who let out a high-pitched squawk. “Didn’t you two get sand—”

“COFFEE!” Pearl screeched, high enough to startle even the normally so-cool Amethyst. “I made coffee!”

There was absolutely no smell of coffee in the beach house, so Steven’s look of confusion—though mixed with relief—was certainly called for.

Pearl seemed to notice this, as she collected herself enough to clarify. “I...had a job. As a barista.” A pause, and a shrug. “For about two weeks.”

It was...almost impossible to fathom. Even more-so than the gem’s romantic entanglement with a human, or her moving out of the temple. “I...would not have expected that from you, of all gems, Pearl.” Even if he she had always been the one to rectify the thieving ways of Amethyst, Pearl? Taking a job? With the public?

“Oh, well, it seemed only fair, after I moved in with Sheena,” Pearl said, seeming to finally get back to comfortable, the blue of her face now back to its normal, barely-there tinge on her cheekbones. “I didn’t want her paying for everything, so I thought I’d chip in. That is,” Pearl smiled wryly, “until she showed me her paycheck. Minimum wage seemed a bit...ludicrous, after that.”

“So you’re a kept woman, now,” Amethyst said, leaning against her friend’s waist. “And the only thing you got out of it was learning how to make an okay cup of joe!”

“My coffee is far better than okay,” Pearl said, nose rising in the air. “And I got a lot out of that position! I learned the pride of a job well-done, the value of a dollar, and the utter joy of completely ruining your manager’s life.” She beamed.

Steven blinked. “That...sounds like a story.”

And oh, it was. The gems and Greg settled down about the couch once more as Pearl regaled them with a well-rehearsed recount of her stint in food service. Garnet and Greg joined in on the reminiscence, having been in town while Pearl was utterly destroying the reputation and career of a very opportunistic and disrespectful manager (“And he was never heard from again,” Pearl said, ominously). By the end of the tale, Peridot and Amethyst were practically squirming, ready to tell of their own concurrent adventures traveling across the globe. Steven got the distinct impression that, while the pair had ruined far fewer lives, they might have cause a fair bit more chaos on their trip. By the end of that tale, he was certain that, with a careful look through newspapers, he would be able to reconstruct their exact path.

Garnet tried to assert that little had happened with her, but, after some pushing, she regaled her audience with stories of hunts and battles, of nearly having to retreat into her gem a half-dozen times, of recovering forbidden artifacts and exploring ruined architecture.

When one particular fight was brought up, against a raging, corrupted agate, Peridot had jumped to her feet on the couch cushions, thrusting an arm into the air, and proclaiming, “And then I took her out with one shot!” On her wrist, her thick torus bracelet split into five pieces, the curves straightening out and arraying themselves before her hand, four making cross-hairs and the fifth, in the middle, taking on a bright red glow.
“Peridot!” Pearl cried out. “What have we said about *lasers* in the house!?"

Peridot pouted and reluctantly answered. “Advanced weapons systems based on light and heat do not mix well with wooden architecture....” Her arm fell to her side, the five bits of bracelet coming back together, meeting seamlessly.

Steven leaned forward, trying to get a better look at the strange bands. “What are those? Did you make them from your old limb enhancers?”

Peridot snorted, waving the idea off. “Those things? They’re probably RUST, by now. *These,*” she said, holding both wrists up. “are all my own design! Admittedly, I took inspiration from Homeworld limb enhancers, but those were all about *replacing* skills that Era-2 peridots lack. My enhancer bands *compliment* my abilities! They’re activated using my ferrokinesis, rather than touch input. It allows for more precise motor controls and quicker response, making me far more capable than other Era-2 peridots.”

“She’ll keep going like this,” Amethyst said, with a little smile to Steven. “Well, it’s something to be proud of!” Peridot said, chest swelling. “I have surpassed Homeworld in all ways! Nye-hehehehe!”

“No, I agree,” Steven said, holding out a hand to Peridot, who eagerly handed her own over, allowing the hybrid to look over her band. “This is amazing. Elder would love to talk to you about these.”

“Elder?” Peridot broke out of her self-congratulatory reverie.

“My first gem, the peridot,” Steven said, turning Peridot’s hand over to get another angle on the band. “L-DR1. She’s big into development, finding new ways to make gems, trying to increase the instance of variance. But she also likes tech.”

“A-ah,” Peridot said, gently pulling her hand back, recovering it from the diamond with little fuss. “I mean, th-these are nothing, I’m sure an Era-1 style peridot could make something much better.”

“I don’t think she could,” Steven said. “She wouldn’t be able to think of all the stuff I’ve seen those things do.”

“She wouldn’t need to,” Peridot muttered, settling back to a seated position. “She’s whole.”

“Hey,” Amethyst said, laying an arm about Peridot’s shoulders. “We’ve been over this, Per. You’re better than all those stuck-up, old, stubborn Homeworld peridots!”

“Yeah, but what about Steven’s gems? If his *first* gem was better than VX-9....” She shook her head.

“VX-9 isn’t the gem you want to judge yourself on,” Steven said. “And neither is Elder. Or, well, any gem. I mean, Peridot, Elder and the others are excited to meet you.”

“Why?” Peridot muttered. “They want to see what they avoided becoming?”

“Hey, hey, P.” Amethyst scooted in closer to the little green gem, putting a hand to her cheek, making Peridot turn to face her. “What they avoided? Look at you! You’re amazing. If they avoided being like you, then they’re the gems that lost out. Steven said it himself: those peridots wouldn’t have even been able to think up what you did! They should be the ones nervous to meet you! Right, Steven?” She looked to the man, who dutifully nodded.
“You’re only saying that because your geode already met you,” Peridot grumbled. “And they liked you. I’m not one of them.”

“True,” Garnet said. But, before Peridot could curl up into a ball of misery, the fusion lay a hand on the smaller gem’s shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze. “You’re one of us. You’re a Crystal Gem. And that’s better.”

Peridot braved a smile at her house-mates. Then, after a moment, she forced it larger. Obviously fake, but trying. “Y-yeah. Okay.”

“Peridot, trust me,” Steven said, a little twitch at the corner of his mouth, “Elder and the others are really excited to meet you. All of you,” he added, looking about at the four gems. “They’ve heard so much about you. About Beach City. About Earth. And Amethyst, your geode? They had to duke it out to decide who was coming along! The zoo is on a skeleton crew, so as many of the prime and beta quartzes as possible can be on the ship. This is...this is coming home. And not just for me.”

The gems looked to one-another, still so visibly tense at the idea of these new gems, but thrumming with another kind of energy. Anticipation.

The reverie was interrupted by a little short, trilling sound, which had Pearl perking up in an instant. Reaching into the folds of her sash, she produced a small phone. She smiled at the message there and looked to Steven. “Well, speaking of meeting new people and coming home, I don’t believe you’ve ever met Sheena. She’s cutting out from the office early, and she has a very important question for you, Steven.”

Steven sat up straighter. Meeting Pearl’s girlfriend? Of eighteen years? Should he call in Lion, take out a nicer set of clothes? Go out and get a gift of some kind?

Pearl grinned. “What do you want from Fish Stew Pizza?”

Steven blinked.

Then the poor, deprived man let out a whoop of joy.

Sheena did not need to present the diamond of Earth with the offering of a double-deluxe stuffed-crust from Fish Stew Pizza. Steven was kind. He was benevolent. He did not require tribute.

But stars above, he wasn’t going to refuse it.

And he didn’t refuse the handshake offered on the woman’s arrival, instead transforming it into yet another hug, pulling the woman—only a bit smaller than himself—into his body the moment that the precious pie was safe in Garnet’s hands. “So you’re the one who took such good care of Pearl all these years!”

“I think she’s the one taking care of me,” the woman said as she stepped back out of the hug, immediately reaching out to take Pearl into her own arms, leaning down so they could rest heads together.

Steven’s brows shot up as Pearl pressed her gem into the human woman’s forehead. It was an almost shameless display. Unheard of on Homeworld, and rare enough on his own ship. Amethyst seemed to agree, standing at the sidelines and sticking a finger down her throat, well in view of the taller gem, who steadfastly ignored her.

“So, tell me, kid,” Sheena said, shifting the embrace so she merely stood side-by-side with Pearl,
an arm about the thin gem’s waist, keeping the pair in contact, “what’s my angle, here? Cause if you’re coming down and bringing us humans into the space age, I gotta know what stocks I need to be selling off, if I want to keep spoiling Pearl.”

“Sheena,” Pearl chided, narrowing her eyes at her teal-haired lover, “are you using Steven for insider trading?”

“Hey, he’s coming from another galaxy, here; I don’t think that counts as insider to any commission.”

Steven laughed, shaking his head. “Technically I never left the galaxy; just went to the other spiral arms for a bit. And I’m not interfering with humanity like that. You can keep your portfolio as-is.”

“Awwww,” Sheena pouted. “I wanted to take Pearl on another Europe trip.”

“Oh, really!” Pearl rolled her eyes. “It’s not like you can’t just come with me through a warp, Sheena!”

“And lose every lunch I’ve had this month? No, thanks.” Sheena shuddered. “Besides, it’s not nearly as much fun if it’s some day trip.”

“And you call me spoiled.” But Pearl was smiling fondly at the woman, drinking in the sight of her.

Steven joined Pearl in examining this human woman. She didn’t look so much like Steven’s mother, anymore. And not just because her hair was down to a crew-cut and so nearly the exact color opposite of Rose’s bright curly riot. Like so many others, she had wrinkles, now. Not a lot, but certainly more than the woman in the painting above the beach house door could have ever had. Glasses, as well, thin black frames which no gem would ever need. She wasn’t in the one outfit Steven had always imagined over the years—her grungy concert clothes of nearly two decades prior—but instead wore jeans and a loose-fitting gray shirt with a stylized side-view of a butterfly, done in straight lines.

She looked...well, like any other adult Steven had seen all his childhood, excepting the piercings and hair color. Normal. Not what he’d ever imagined for Pearl in the least.

“This your vacation, kid?” Sheena asked, snapping Steven’s attention back.

Steven sighed. “I wish. I feel like there’s more to do here than when I’m out trying to find new colony sites.”

Peridot, who had been in the process of sneaking into the pizza box—doubtless to fail, with Garnet standing nearby, waiting to strike—popped up from behind the cardboard-encased deliciousness, scowling. “Why? You don’t need to do anything here. Earth is fine as it is.”

“Earth is fine,” Steven agreed, then gestured towards the Temple Gate, “but there’s the corrupted gems for me to heal, gem artifacts that were left behind, and I don’t even know what to do with the fusion experiments, and....” Sighing, he shook his head. “The diamonds didn’t do me any favors by cutting and running like they did.”

“What’s the alternative?” Amethyst hopped up on one of the breakfast nook stools. “Five-thousand years of clean-up crews while Rose and us hid?” Subtly, she morphed her arm into a noodle, hand snaking towards the pizza box.

Garnet reached out, taking Amethyst’s hand gently, like a casual embrace was what the purple gem
had been seeking all this time.

Amethyst scowled at the routing, but accepted the hand-hold with grace.

“I would have preferred it if they didn’t turn Earth into their experiment,” Steven grumbled. “No interfering with sister-colonies’ my foot.”

“Well, whatever you’ve got going on this week, try to keep the weekend free,” Sheena advised. “There’s this big party coming up.”

Steven grinned, eyes lighting up. “Beach-a-palooza! I know! I can’t believe I came back so close to that! You guys remember that time we all played in it?” Steven looked to the gems. “Oh man, you think sign-ups are still open?”

“Hmmmm...no,” Garnet intoned. On noticing Steven’s sudden wilting, she smiled, tilting her head. “But I don’t see the town letting you get away without a performance.”

“Really?” Steven asked, eyes shining.

Garnet’s visor flashed. “Not a chance.”

“Just remember the clothes, this time, kiddo,” Greg said, laying an arm about his son’s shoulders.

“Daaaaaaaaaad!” Ducking his head, Steven flushed. “That was just one time!”

“Oooooo, is it embarrassing childhood story time?” Sheena asked, grinning. “I’m all for this.”

Steven’s protests went unheeded, and the entire house was soon brought into a reverie of pizza and family tales. An alarming number focused on Steven’s penchant for nudity, and he found himself having to explain, several times, that he’d been a kid! Which didn’t seem to help matters in the least.

To be fair, Greg and Sheena offered their own tales of childhood exposure, though Steven suspected they were heavily edited, to make the stars seem a bit more dignified.

Once more, other stories followed. Steven wondered how long it would take before they managed to tell him all he’d missed. Then he realized that there was no way it could ever be managed.

Details would be forgotten. Little daily dramas deemed inconsequential. Of course, the same could be said for his time with the diamonds, but in this moment, he cared far less for himself and his story, and far more for those of his loved ones.

At the same time, he realized there were details he didn’t want to hear. Pains and sorrows and loneliness. And, to be fair, there was also plenty of his own story that he didn’t wish to tell.

The evening wore on. The pizza was consumed—despite Amethyst’s urging, Pearl refused even a small bite, leaving it to two humans, the box itself left for the voracious quartz—alongside a salad and baked fish for Greg. The old man gave Pearl a most piteous look, but it was to no avail. Even the most casual reach towards the greasy dinner main was warded off with slitted eyes that even Garnet would not have dared defy.

The evening darkened and, even through the bright lights inside the beach house, Steven could look out the front window and catch a few of the brightest stars in the sky. Then, for just a moment, the stars winked out and back.

A knock came from the front door.
Pearl frowned. “Who in the world could that be? We’re all here.” Rising, she went to the door.

“Lapis?” Peridot ventured, earning a scowl from Amethyst.

“I rather doubt she’d bother knocking,” Pearl said, pulling the screen open and twisting the knob, revealing the new visitor.

She proved to not be Lapis. Very much not Lapis. Steven stared in perplexity at the arrival. Dark skin—even darker than the Maheswaran women—and dark hair kept down tight to her head in dozens of thin cornrows. Jeans marred by splotches of flour and a shirt with a very, very familiar nearly-whole pizza logo. She looked into the house, immediately catching Steven’s eye, and the smile she already sported turned even larger and brighter. “Hee-eeeey! Can Steven come out to plaa-aaaaay?” she teased.

It took just a moment longer, but the voice was nearly unchanged, and that made it all click into place. Steven’s jaw dropped. “K...Kiki?” And, after a pause, with a bit more hesitation, “Jenny?”

“You got it right the first time,” Kiki laughed.

“Oh my stars, Kiki!” Steven rushed to the door and outside onto the porch, picking up the woman and twirling her about, eliciting a little squeal of surprise and pleasure. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Speak for yourself, kid! Wow! You turned out niiiice,” she crooned, leaning back in the embrace to look the man up and down. “What they feeding you up in space? Cause it ain’t pizza.”

“Not like your family makes,” Steven agreed.

“Well, I’m glad Sheena fed you up, then,” Kiki said, finally getting free of the embrace. “But me and some of the other kids were hoping you’d join us for a little treat, eh?”

“Kids?” Greg spoke up from within the beach house, having risen at the raucous arrival. Hoisting himself from the chair, he lumbered over, shaking his head at the youngsters. “You all are in your thirties, Kiki.”

“That’s still young,” Kiki protested, hands going to her hips.

Greg paused. Then, chuckling, he nodded. “Indeed it is.” Reaching out, he patted Steven on the back. “You should go, Ste-man.”

“But what about you all?” Steven asked, looking to the gems.

“Eh, I can’t take another night on that couch,” Greg said, rubbing at his back. “But I’ll be back to see these grand-gems of mine in the morning.”

“And I’ve got an early call with the Japan office,” Sheena said, standing and looking to Pearl. “Cold bed again?”

“Oh, well...” Pearl looked between her lover and her surrogate son. “I mean—”

“Don’t let me get in your way,” Steven said, raising his hands.

“Smart man,” Sheena said, giving Steven a wink before offering her hand to Pearl. “Shall we?”

With a grateful look to Steven, Pearl accepted the hand, rising smoothly and joining the general exodus to the doorway.
“Kid got a curfew?” Kiki teased, looking to Garnet.

“Ten,” Garnet said, evenly.

“Gaaaaarneeeeet,” Steven whined.

“Nine-thirty,” Garnet corrected.

Steven groaned, but Kiki just laughed, pushing at the man’s back, ushering him towards the stairs. “I’ll keep him out of trouble!”

“Don’t bother!” Amethyst shot back just as Steven started heading down the steps towards the beach.

“So, how’s space?” Kiki asked as they both hit the sand, pausing to dart under the stairs. “Big and empty?”

“More and less than you think,” Steven replied. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” Kiki said, turning back around and holding out a cardboard carrier with six bottles. “I didn’t want Pearl to see. Hurry, before she comes down.” Jerking her head towards the city, she set off at an easy jog, leaving Steven to scramble after her, wobbling as his heavy steps sent him sinking into the sand.

They rushed down the beach, past the temple and the Big Donut. Running together, they went parallel to the boardwalk full of tourists, and beyond, past the city lights, into the darkness of a seaside night. Steven had just begun to huff when he noticed a single light up ahead, a lantern dimly illuminating two figures. One, the wielder, was quite visible as Onion, out of his car wash scrubs and holding a little four-pack of drinks in his other hand. The figure beside him took a little more focus.

“Hheeeey!” the unfamiliar one called out, waving. “Is that—holy shit, Steven, you got huge!”

A few steps further, into the light, and Steven recognized the figure instantly. “Wh—PEEDEE!”

“Welcome back!” Peedee Fryman grasped Steven’s hand, pulling in so they could slap one-another’s backs. “Geeze, man, what, does no gravity mean you don’t stop growing? Shesh!”

“Look who’s talking!” Steven laughed, touching the edge of his hand to his forehead and reaching out to match the blonde man. It wasn’t nearly equal—he had at least a good six inches on the full-human—but Peedee was towering and lanky, with a deep voice to match. He sported a goatee which was obviously tended with some pride, not a hair out of place. And, wow, he smelled extensively of french fries. “Whew, I don’t need to ask if you still work at the fry shop!”

“Yeah,” Peedee rubbed the back of his neck, a little pink to his cheeks. “Dad retired, so I run things now.”

“What about Ronaldo?” Steven asked, and then felt a flare of panic. Not another one.

But Peedee just scoffed. “Him? Manage anything? Nah, he’s up in Empire City, doing real work.” Peedee rolled his eyes.

“Looking for sneeple?” Steven ventured, hands going to his hips. It figured that Mr. “Call Me Bloodstone” would head off to bigger mysteries.
“Aaaaaactually...accounting.” Peedee grinned at Steven’s little jolt of surprise. “I know, right? I mean, he hasn’t given up the conspiracy junk. Just turned it into a career. Forensic accounting. Looking for the ‘power behind the throne.’” The youngest Fryman boy held his hands up, marking out air-quotes.

“Huh. That actually...sounds about right.”

“Eh, it keeps him out of my hair,” Peedee said, reaching up to flip a hand at his thick yellow locks. “At least until Beach-a-palooza.”

Steven grinned. “He’s coming back?”

Leaning into Steven’s side, Kiki laughed. “Steven! Word is out that you’re home. Everyone is coming. Even my sister is closing up shop to come down.”

Raising his brows, Steven looked to the woman. “Jenny has a shop?”

“First Fish Stew Pizza location in Empire City,” Kiki beamed. “Doing pretty good.”

“What about the rest of them? You know, Sour Cream? Buck?”

Kiki’s eyes flashed for just a moment to Peedee and Onion, then back to Steven. Her voice was just a few notes higher as she responded, “Oh, they all went up together, about a year ago. Took over Ronaldo’s place for a few weeks before getting the shop open.”

“And I never heard the end of it,” Peedee moaned. “‘Sour Cream used all my conditioner! Jenny stole my best pillow! Buck’s band blew out the fuses again! Waaaah!’”

“Whaaaat?” Steven bounced, the sand squeaking under his toes. “Buck has a band?”

“Yeah, man! He really took to those lessons with your dad. He’s bringing his crew down to headline at Beach-a-palooza. Although, I mean, I’m not sure why Mayor Connie would let him, after what happened last year.”

Steven froze.

“Oh,” Peedee said, noticing Steven’s sudden intensity. “Right. I heard about the thing with Connie. Yeah, uh...sorry, man. But, hey, I’m sure things’ll work out when she gets h—”

“A little time to think things over and loosen up, for a change,” Kiki broke in, narrowing her eyes at Peedee, who snapped his mouth closed. “And I, for one, am ready to loosen up, myself.” Looking to Steven, she held up her case of drinks. “They got micro-brews up in space?”

Steven looked to the lightly clinking bottles, brows drawing down. “No. And isn’t alcohol not allowed on the beach?”

“Damn right it’s not allowed,” a new voice came from behind them all, making each of the thirty-somethings jump several inches, turning to face the intruder. “Now, whose idea was this?”

Steven felt his blood slow, going cold. It took just nanoseconds for his brain to recognize that particular blue outfit. That looming stance. The glimmer of cuffs on a belt and the shine of a badge on chest and cap. This was very much not what he needed right before his gems arrived. Jasper would be pissed if she had to bust him out of jail.

“Oh no,” Kiki drawled, rolling her eyes, “it’s the fuzz.”
Steven shot her a wide-eyed look. “I-i don’t think they like being called that.”

“Kid’s right,” the deputy said, nodding to Steven as he saunted up. “For that, the fee is double.”

Fee. Fee? Even worse, the police had stated taking bribes? Oh, he was not getting out of this unscathed.

“Oh, go screw yourself. It was your turn to bring the beer to begin with.” Kiki plucked a bottle from the six-pack and tossed it to the cop.

He caught it with ease and, with a little flick of the wrist next to his handcuffs, snapped the cap off. Steven watched, flabbergasted, as one of Rehoboth County’s finest took a long swig, the bottle popping as it came off his lips. Sighing in pleasure, the deputy reached up, removing his cap, and gave Steven a familiar, cocky grin. “Well. What about you, Steven? You gonna take up the slack?”

Steven stared.

And stared.

He stared at the thin, almost waifish body, only made formidable by law-enforcement blues. The orange hair, cut down to a close crew. That terrible, almost infuriating grin. And he just...couldn’t.

“Lars?” Steven gaped. “You...but....”

“Can’t believe I joined the blues?” Lars grinned.

“No,” Steven replied, a slow smile spreading across his face. “If it lets you extort people, I totally believe you’d do it. Come here!” Holding his arms, out, Steven went in for the hug.

Lars danced out of the way, but only on the first try. The man was thin, yes, but he wasn’t nearly so light on his feet as the gem-hybrid, and he soon found himself crushed up against Steven’s chest, lifted from the sand. “Woah, woah! Careful, I’m gonna spill! The sheriff does not like his officers coming in smelling like they started the club brawl, instead of breaking it up!”

“Ah, sorry,” Steven said, letting the deputy go. “You good?”

“Yeah, man,” Lars said, looking down on his button-up, which remained dry, but for a few spots from condensation. “I’m good. And look at you!” He held out his hands, taking in Steven’s enormity. “What happened to the kid that kept coming in for donuts! I mean,” reaching in, he patted Steven’s stomach, “you still look like you’re getting them somewhere, but man! Do all you gems wind up this big?”

“Nowhere near. But you. You. I mean, no offense, Lars, but I didn’t exactly imagine you going off and...well—”

“Becoming gainfully employed?” Lars supplied. At Steven’s splutter, he waved it off. “It’s been eighteen years, man! A lot can change.”

“Stars. I guess so.”

“Don’t be too impressed,” Kiki broke in, setting her drinks down on the sand, but for a single bottle, which she handed over to Lars, who obediently popped it up, handing it back. “He’s only been on the force for five years. It took him thirteen to get his act together. We all thought he was going to wind up on the other side of the bars, ya know?”
“Yeah? What changed?”

Kiki looked to Lars, jeering. “His laaaaady.”

Perking up, Steven looked to Lars. “Your lady? You mean...?”

Lars held up his left hand. Under the moonlight, a thick gold band glinted in his third finger.

“DUDE!” Steven grabbed Lars’s hand, looking at the ring. “No way!”

“Dude, way,” Lars said. “Three years, now.”

“Who? Who?”

“That,” yet another new voice chimed in, striding forward from the darkness, “would be me.”

Steven spun to look at the latest arrival.

Then he looked to Lars.

Then to the woman.

Steven pressed his hands to his cheeks. “Oh em gee,” he whispered. “My OTP is canon.”

“Nerd,” Sadie said, right before she was swept into Lars’s arms.

“Saaaadie, my lady,” he crooned, planting a quick kiss on her lips, earning a giggle.

“Hey,” Steven protested, “that’s my line.”

“No anymore,” Lars said with a grin as he settled his short wife back on the ground. “My line. And my lady. Although...” Looking down on Sadie, the deputy’s face took on a far more sinister aspect. “You can have her, for a moment.”

Sadie blinked, lips twisting into a frown, but it was quickly wiped away as Lars spun, tossing his wife at Steven, who caught her with surprising alacrity.

“Steven hug!” Lars cheered.

Sadie gasped as she was treated as such, but she took the gesture with far more grace, squirming until she could wrap her arms around her long-lost friend’s neck. “Heya, kid! Man, the rumors are true.” She poked at his arms. “I don’t see why the boss has herself all twisted up. If I wasn’t a married woman....”

Steven blushed, then ventured, “Boss?”

“You’ll meet her, soon,” Sadie said. “I had to make sure we brought something a little stronger for you.”

Balking at the suggestion, Steven let Sadie back down to the sand, stepping back, hands raised. “Woah, guys, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’ve only drunk once, and....” He shook his head. That time had just had to coincide with the gravity systems going on the fritz. Nothing like cleaning up vomit in zero-g. Nothing like a hangover in zero-g, either....

“She’s just messing with you,” Lars said. “We’ve only got enough for a bottle each.”
“Two for me!” Sadie cheered.

“Yeah? Then what’s Onion got?” Steven jerked his head at the second of the packs.

Grinning, Onion produced a can from his container, holding it out for inspection.

All present stepped away from the cursed Guacola.

“Stars and shards,” Steven gagged at the mere memory of the tincture before him. “They still make that?”

“I’m pretty sure Onion keeps them in business all on his own,” Sadie said, wincing as the man popped his can open and began to chug. “Ugh...here.” Bending down, she retrieved a bottle, popping the cap off with an opener on her key-chain and handing it over to Steven.

Steven looked at it, wary. Then, looking to Peedee, he held the bottle out. “Uh, how about you?”

Peedee’s eyes flashed wide in alarm and he stepped back, hands up. “No thanks,” he said in one quick blurt.

Blinking, Steven inspected the beer, then focused back on his childhood friend. “Uh...you all aren’t trying to poison me, are you?”

“No, no, it’s just...” Sighing, Peedee shook his head and fished in his jeans pocket. He produced a shining bronze coin. “Ten years sober.”

It took a moment for that to click. When it did, Steven shoved the drink behind his back and stammered. “A-ah, sorry, Peedee! I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s cool, man,” Peedee said, smiling, only a bit strained. “Turns out alcohol is a very bad substitute for proper medication and counseling.”

It seemed like the kind of thing the blonde man wanted you to laugh at, but all Steven could produce was a high-pitched “heh.”

“It’s cool,” Peedee repeated, reaching down to fetch a bottle of water from Onion’s pack. “Besides, it means I get make sure no one does anything stupid in the ocean.”

“Like you could stop me if I tried,” Lars declared, raising his drink in the air.

“I could,” Sadie said, leaning into her husband’s side.

“True.” Lars, nodded. “True. But come on, we need to toast!” He shook his drink high again, awaiting a response.

“Not yet!” Sadie hissed, pulling the man’s arm down. “We’re still waiting for—”

“Something stronger?” Peedee said, pointing past the couple, towards Beach City. “It’s here.”

Steven turned, wondering if this new arrival, this boss of Sadie, would be yet another reunion which had slipped his mind.

He quailed. “Sadie,” he keened, looking out across the sand, “you didn’t tell me you worked for the mayor.”

“No,” Sadie said, lifting her beer to her lips, “I did not.”
Connie glared at the little gathering. And, of course, at one member in particular. “Sadie,” she growled, a fist clenching, “you failed to inform me this gathering would involve drinking. I’m afraid I’ll have to call the sheriff’s office.”

“Don’t bother,” Lars said, turning about, placing his cap back on at a jaunty angle. “I’ve conducted a thorough investigation and determined that Kiki has, once again, brought damn near water.”

“Hey!” Kiki scowled. “How about you pick up the beers next time, like you were supposed to today?”

“You...I...Lars!” Connie stomped a foot into the sand, her bare feet sinking deep into the grains. “I pay your salary, Lars!”

“No you don’t,” Lars said. “The citizens of the county do. How am I doing, citizens?”

Sadie, Peedee, and Onion lifted their drinks high, the former two letting out enthusiastic cheers.

“The citizens have spoken,” Lars said, giving Connie a shrug.

“I...” Connie sighed, stomping forward and crouching, grabbing a beer from the pack. “My constituents have turned against me,” she muttered, turning the beer upside-down and pressing it to the remaining bottle, jerking quickly. The upright bottle’s cap popped off, and she claimed the drink, leaving her original tool behind as she stood and walked to Sadie’s side, as far from Steven as she could get and remain within the group. “I don’t know why you all voted for me if you’re not going to even listen to me.”

“Hey,” Lars interjected, “I didn’t vote for you.”

“The hell, Lars?” Peedee stared at the deputy. “You voted Ferrin?”

Snorting, Lars shook his head. “Nah. I didn’t vote. Doesn’t make a difference.”

Connie glared at the deputy, but her disapproval could not even come close to matching the disdain coming from the man’s own wife. “It’s because of people like you that we had that asshole in D.C. for two months.”

Lars threw his hands in the air. “Hey, he was assassinated!”

“That’s no excuse!”

Steven’s head jerked around rapidly during this interchange, each response sending him into deeper confusion. Finally, he saw a break in the bickering, and managed to edge in with “Ferrin?”

“Prick,” Connie spat.

Steven shrunk.

“No, I don’t mean—” Connie began. Then, recalling who she was speaking with, she let it hang.

“This corporate bigwig who moved to Beach City when the first rumors began about Dewey retiring,” Sadie supplied. She seemed nearly as irritated as the mayor herself had been, though her language remained cleaner. “He threw a bunch of money into the campaign, trying to get in so he could open up the city to some hotel developers.”

“God, you remember his campaign slogan?” Peedee asked. Holding his nose high, he spoke in a nasal twang surpassing even Peridot. “Vote Ferrin, the down to Earth candidate.”
“Down to...” Steven blinked. He looked to Connie, who was busy drinking her beer and ignoring him. “Did he really—”

“Attempt to win a political campaign with personal accusations rather than a focus on platforms and actual political experience? Yes. Yes, he did.” Connie smirked, lifting up her beer. “I crushed him,” she said and took a long pull.

Sadie nodded. “Yeah! You should have seen the town hall debate! Like, what kind of idiot do you have to be to base your entire political campaign on ‘at least I wasn’t best friends with the city’s favorite missing child!’ Man, it was poetic, I tell you.”

“Really?” A tentative smile came to Steven’s face.

“Yeah! I think I have it saved on my phone...” Sadie began rooting in her pockets, but was halted as Lars tossed an arm about her shoulders, knocking her a little off-balance.

“Sadie, dear, you can show Steven that later. I need you to check out something Peedee and I found on the beach. Down there. Away from here.”

Whether one drink was enough to ruin Lars’s ability to make up excuses or he just didn’t really care, it did not matter. He ushered Sadie along at his side as they retreated further from Beach City. Peedee came with, taking the lantern with him, likewise not bothering with a good excuse for why he took Onion’s hand and pulled him behind, the scent of Guacola fading on the sea breeze.

Steven looked after the four retreating humans. Then to Connie. “This...was a setup,” he declared.

“Astutely observed,” Connie replied, then tossed her head back, downing the last of her drink.

Steven suddenly realized he hadn’t taken as much as a sip of his. Bringing it from behind his back, he sniffed, nose wrinkling, and took a tentative sip.

“BLEH!” He spit out the foul liquid, dragging his tongue along the inside of his shirt, trying to banish the taste.

In the darkness of the night, Connie snickered. “Yeah, it’s an acquired taste.”

“Why would you acquire that?” Steven spat again. “I thought wine was weird.” Narrowing his eyes, seeking out the smallest bit of light in the night, he managed to catch the glint of the moon on the cap of the final bottle, and he placed his own back beside.

“You should try scotch,” Connie said, a little smile in her voice, though her actual face was obscured by the darkness.

“Does it taste like vomit, too?”

“Oh. no. It tastes like getting punched in the throat.”

“Oh, great,” Steven said, throwing his arms up towards the stars. “That’s an improvement on all fronts.”

“Well, yeah. Last night I wanted to stab you. Punching is very much a step up.”

Steven could hear the amusement in Connie’s voice, but it was nowhere near sufficient to ease the man. He groaned, head hanging low. “I can’t...ugh. Look.” He turned to the mayor, who stood silhouetted in the moonlight. “I’m...sorry that I thought you were your mom.”
Connie tilted her head. Her eyes were just little glints in the light of the moon, but there was enough of them there for Steven to know they bore into him. She studied him for almost a half-minute before sighing, shaking her head. “Steven. I’m not mad that you thought I was my mom. I like my mom! She’s smart and successful and I dream of accomplishing half of what she has. You want to know what I’m upset about?”

“Yes,” he said immediately, desperate for this thin, brief opening.

“I’m mad...” Connie began, then paused. Sighing, she looked out to the ocean, to the spot where the reflection of the moon above shifted, breaking up in the waves. “I’m mad that you weren’t around to know the difference. You left us, Steven.”

“I had to,” he protested. “Connie, I had to do it to protect Earth.”

Connie slammed a foot down to the sand. “But we were supposed to protect it together!”

It drove him to silence, this sudden outburst, somehow so different from the attack in the beach house. That had been quick. Passionate. Anger exploding outward. This was...something else. Something which had been left to itself for too long.

“I...I missed you,” Connie whispered, and it shattered him inside.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed back. He wanted to say it a million times, but she was already speaking again.

“I waited for you.” She breathed in, quick and shallow, a hand rising to rub one of her eyes. It was too dark to see her face. Too dark to see if the squeak in her words, the shaking of her shoulders, was accompanied by something else. Something he longed to reach out and wipe away.

All he could do was repeat himself, “I’m sorry,” one more time, head hanging down low.

“You don’t even....” She trailed off, shaking her head. “I can’t...I can’t deal with this, right now. I’ve got too much work to do.” Turning, she headed down the beach, steps steady, unaffected by her late-night drink.

“Connie! Connie, wait!” He half-expected her to turn on him as she had this morning when he jogged up behind her, but this time, at least, he was wise enough to not grab at her. He just tried to get close, close enough so she could see him in the darkness.

The mayor paused, looking over her shoulder at the diamond. He was close enough now to see that she looked tired. Tired and worn and further away than she had ever been when he had traveled the stars. “What, Steven?”

“I...would you....” He took a breath and rushed in. “Would you come meet my gems? They’ve heard a lot about you. They want to meet you.”

Connie sighed, deep and long, letting her head fall back so she could stare at the stars far overhead. She took her time, considering the man’s request. Long enough for Steven to lose hope, certain that the best he could expect was another sudden attack on the sand.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, looking back down again. “But I can’t be taking off to go on... adventures with you, Steven. I have a job. I have responsibilities.”

“I know,” he said. “You’re a leader, too.”
She considered this. Then, slowly. Nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I am. And I have things I need to do. Good night, Steven.”

“Night,” he returned, weak, yet just a bit hopeful. He waved at the woman’s back as she turned away and walked up the beach, back towards the lights of Beach City, which had begun to turn out, one by one.
It was impossible to tell who was in a greater frenzy on Wednesday morning: Steven, awaiting the introduction of his gems to his family, or the Crystal Gems, trying to reassure themselves that this was not another Homeworld invasion and Earth was not, in fact, doomed. Of course, the Crystal Gems trusted Steven and knew he trusted his gems, but...it had been so long. And Steven was always a little too trusting. What if he’d made some mistake? Could they really allow an entire ship full of untested gems to land on their precious planet?

The Crystal Gems had tried to pass the night in their rooms (or, in the case of Pearl, with her lover), but rest was not forthcoming. By the time all gave up and filtered back into the house proper, the light of an early summer dawn still an hour off, Steven was already sitting up in his bed, looking out the window onto the beach.

No one really spoke, too trapped in their own minds, their own worries. Peridot especially seemed tense, to the point of actually accepting Amethyst’s silent offer of a bowl of sugar-filled cereal. She munched on the little baubles of sucrose and “other natural flavors” one by one, fiddling with her enhancer bands between bites. The click and whir of miniature machinery and the crunch of cereal was the only sound for a good half-hour.

Greg arrived just as the sky was beginning to lighten, puffing and swearing as he came up the stairs. Steven, broken out of his reverie, jumped down from his bed and assisted the man inside, looking on with drawn brows as his father took several minutes to get his breathing back to normal. Greg smiled weakly at his son and waved a hand dismissively.

“I’m fine, Steven. Just not used to all this running around. Ugh...though maybe I should be. Can’t see how I’m gonna keep up with all these young gems of yours.”

“Well, it’s not like you need to watch them or anything,” Steven said, trying to make subtle gestures for his father to take a seat and further cool down. Gestures which were not heeded. “Gems aren’t like humans; they come out pretty self-sufficient.”

“Self-sufficient doesn’t mean anything,” Greg replied, crossing his arms. “They need to be taught the ways of the world if they’re going to fit in on Earth!”

Steven’s mouth opened for a reply, but quickly closed again.
Well, we can help with that,” Pearl said, coming up beside the two men. “After all, Garnet, Amethyst, and I have spent thousands of years on learning about this planet. And Peridot has integrated herself rather well, for as long as she’s been here.”

“Yeah!” Amethyst cheered, coming to bump up against Pearl’s hip. “I’ll teach them about food, you teach them how to put the smooth moves on the local ladies.”

Pearl flushed, waving a hand at Amethyst. “Oh, really! I’m not that smooth an operator, Amethyst!”

“Yeah, I know,” Amethyst said, grinning. “I meant you should tell them what Sheena does.”

Pearl’s lips thinned and she took a sharp breath, nostrils flaring. “I don’t know why I even....”

“So, when does your ship arrive?” Peridot asked, setting down her empty bowl. A little bit of vibrant orange cereal stuck to one canine, which she poked at with her tongue, trying to lick it free. “You said morning?” She glanced out the front window, as if expecting a ship to be waiting casually on the beach.

“Yeah, probably any minute now,” Steven said, likewise glancing outside. “Hey, Garnet? Is there any chance of Lapis showing up?”

Garnet let out a small laugh. “She’s been here for hours.”

“What?” Peridot sat up straight, looking about the house, as if her old companion would suddenly materialize, along with an entire spaceship.

Jerking her head at the ceiling, Garnet clarified, “Up on the lighthouse. I don’t see her coming down. Perhaps when the ship arrives. It’s too far off for me to see how that will affect the future.”

“Oh.” Peridot’s limbs went loose and she slouched to a more neutral position. “Okay.”

“What happened with you two?” asked Steven. There had been far too many moments of almost electric tension between the pair of gems, all the more noticeable after the ease he had known in them so many years before.

“Nothing,” Peridot muttered, twisting the band on her right wrist. “She just decided she didn’t want to be around anyone anymore. You saw. She wanted to wait on the Galaxy Warp.”

Amethyst snorted, crossing her arms. “Oh, yeah. That’s all. Now, how about you tell Steven how you got your star.”

“Got your....” Steven looked to the little green gem, who had gone still and silent. “Peridot?”

“So, you see those gems yet, Garnet?” Peridot said, voice high and fast. “Can’t wait to meet those gems, yes sirree!”

Garnet set her hands to hips, looking down on the new Crystal Gem. “Peridot. You can’t just deflect like that. Steven deserves an ex—”

And then she froze. And her visor flashed.

Peridot, who had steeled herself for the full lecture, tilted her head at the sudden silence. “Uh...Garnet?”

The fusion did not answer her companion. Neck turning in sudden degrees, as if on large,
misaligned gears, Garnet turned her head to look upon Steven Universe. “Y...you...you have...they gave... ” Each word she said had a little inflection, a little tilt up in the octaves. Seeking. Wondering. Almost... almost...questioning.

Almost.

Before she could actually voice any real inquiries, the warrior went alight. Garnet’s body turned almost liquid, widening, then splitting down the middle, dimming and solidifying again, leaving two gems—red and blue—staring at Steven.

“ What the heck, Steven?” Ruby screamed, the hardwood floor under her darkening and starting to smoke. “ Why didn’t you tell us? Did you think you could hide her? Why did you even allow it? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH TROUBLE YOU’RE IN, YOUNG MAN!? ” Then, with a final howl of rage, Ruby took Sapphire’s hand, pulling her into a tight spin, glowing and melding and rising up until Garnet stood before them once more, breathing heavily as she ripped the visor from her face.

She glared down on Steven with three intense eyes and hissed out “What...she...said.”

As one, Greg and the rest of the gems looked to Steven, who stood, ashen-faced under Garnet’s terrifying focus.

He swallowed. “Uh...guess...they’re here.” He took a step back. Then another. “We should...go welcome everyone!” Spinning on his heels, Steven sprinted for the front door, convinced he could feel Garnet’s fingers reaching for his neck.

He yanked the door open and took a step outside, chest colliding with a hand which had been raised to knock.

Connie yelped in surprise, jumping back, fist still raised. “S-Steve!”

“ Don’t wanna be late!” Steven barked, grabbing Connie’s raised hand and fleeing down the stairs, dragging her behind.

“W-what?” Connie nearly fell on the first few steps, her modest heels not up to both stairs and being dragged, but then her feet were under her, a little leap to every step as she tried to keep up with the man’s long strides. “Steven, wait, what is—”

But her words were cut off by an immense roar and a flash of light in the sky.

Steven stopped at the tideline, nearly at its lowest reach, and looked to Connie at his side. He grinned, wide and bright. “They’re here.”

Connie gaped up at the clouds and watched, in wonder, as a shape began to emerge.

There was a thump behind the pair, and Steven looked over his shoulder, finding that the gems had leapt down from the temple, Greg cradled in Garnet’s arms, though soon set down. Her visor was back, and she carried the man with due care, but Steven could almost feel the heat of Ruby emanating from her glare.

The rest of the gems, however, seemed to have forgotten the outburst, looking to the sky with anticipation and no small measure of fear.

The angle of the risen sun obscured it, for just a moment. Then, from the clouds the ship descended. Large and spherical and the customary pink.
Amethyst tilted her head, brows drawn. “Okay...anyone else surprised that it’s not, like, a foot?”

In unison, Pearl, Peridot, and Greg raised their hands. From the corner of his eyes, Steven noticed movement, and turned back to Connie to find she, too, had raised her free hand.

“Oh, come on,” he muttered. “Not even Jasper wanted that.”

The ship descended with a slow grace and, now that it had passed the Earth’s protective atmosphere, nary another sound. It came to the very edge of the tideline, settling on the water-firmed sand. Despite the bulk and obvious weight, it did not sink into the ground in even the smallest measure.

They waited in the cool early-morning air, Crystal Gems and humans and Steven. Light goose-pimples rose on the arms of the humans, courtesy of either the sea breeze or merely the moment.

With no sound to accompany its flight, it was hard to tell if the ship had truly gone dormant, but, a half-minute after it touched down on the damp sand, there was a small change. A tall rectangle appeared on the bottom hemisphere of the ship’s unmarked surface and, with a soft hiss, it fell out and down, forming into a ramp, leading up into a bright hallway.

And standing there, in the doorway, lit up from behind, looking down on the gems below, was Jasper. Tall and broad and intense. For a moment, it seemed she should be flanked by a disdainful peridot and a terrified lapis lazuli. But it was just her, shoulders held back, a bright pink diamond on her left breast and a thick pink band, as wide as her hand, encircling her neck. She held her head high, flaunting that adornment as she looked down upon the Earth.

The Crystal Gems took a collective half-step back, hands rising, gems glowing in preparation.

Jasper’s gaze was drawn briefly to the movement, but soon flicked away. It fell instead onto the pair standing before the others. First she looked to Steven, and she seemed to...loosen. Her narrowed eyelids widened to a more natural openness and her brow relaxed. Then she looked to Steven’s right, at Connie. And then, her gaze fell between them.

She let out a small, snorting laugh, lips quirking.

Steven followed Jasper’s gaze, and found Connie had done so, as well.

Between them, their fingers had become intertwined.

Swiftly, Connie pulled her hand away, crossing her arms and turning a glare up on Jasper.

Tilting her head, Jasper’s little smile faded. With a shrug, she set the moment aside and took a step down the ramp.

Gems came fully to life and weapons were summoned as Earth’s protectors crouched down, ready.

Steven looked over his shoulder to his family and sighed. “Really? Really, guys?”

A flash of light high in the sky drew his attention and, tilting his head far back, Steven saw that it was not just four gems which waited. Far above, on the cliffside, almost just a speck from this distance, Lapis Lazuli stood, wings outstretched and shining in the sunlight.

“I think I told the wrong gems to behave,” Steven muttered and, turning, he walked away from the armed veterans, up the ramp, to stand before his Champion.
“How did the survey go?” he asked, looking for some subject, any subject, which might ease the tensions.

“Very well,” Jasper replied, words coming out in that accustomed, deep rumble. “We identified ten planets with potential for hosting gem life. Pyrope has an initial route plotted, whenever you’re ready to leave and—”

“Maybe we say ‘hello’ first, Jasper?” Steven smiled.

Jasper paused. Her shoulders slumped. “Ah. Right.”

“Come on.” With a little nudge to the gem’s back, Steven lead her down the ramp, onto the sand, to stand once more before the Crystal Gems.

“Guys, this is—”

“We’ve met, Steven,” Pearl snapped, spear aimed quite precisely at the orange gem’s crystalline nose. “You don’t have to go through all the social niceties.”

Steven took a calming breath, raising his eyes to the starless sky, seeking strength. Focusing back on Pearl, he spoke again. “This is Jasper Facet-B3M Cut-JZ3, Champion to Pink Diamond.” He turned his gaze to Jasper, giving her a fond smile. “And my most trusted gem.”

“Is that supposed to mean anything to us?” Peridot growled, the vehemence in the sound enough to draw a shocked glance from Amethyst. “Are we supposed to forgive her for everything she did before she rolled over for you?”

Steven glowered, opening his mouth to respond, but found himself preempted by the gem at his side.

“No,” Jasper scoffed, crossing her arms. “Why would you?”

Peridot blinked. “I...uh—”

“And I don’t care,” Jasper snapped, eyes rolling. “You’re not one of Steven’s gems. You’re not in my geode. Your opinion of me means less than the dirt you’re made out of.”

“Jasper,” Steven interjected, but she did not appear to be done.

“The only one of you here that I have any business with is you,” Jasper growled, leveling a massive finger at Amethyst.

The small gem tightened her grip on her whip, steeling herself. “Yeah?”

Jasper looked upon the battle-ready gem and smirked. “Runt. Your geode is driving. Me. Crazy.”

Amethyst blinked. “My...wha?”

In a voice that boomed out across the sands, deep and resonant, Jasper issued her order. “Go get her, troop.”

It was like an earthquake. A thundering, screaming, hairy purple earthquake. They swarmed out of the ship at a full sprint, leaning forwards, arms held stiff at their sides as they thundered past the champion and onward to the small, missing member of their family. As one, a dozen gems slammed into Amethyst from all sides, crushing her between arms and chests, smothering her in hair and hugs.
“8XM!” One in the crowd crows, managing to get her arms around her geode-mate, squeezing until the little gem was forced to shapeshift a noodle waist, lest she be poofed.

“Wh—Sharky?” Amethyst wheezed, the strain in her voice alerting the other quartzes to her general need to not be shattered.

They eased up, just a fraction, but nowhere near enough to let their missing sister free.

Amethyst looked about at the others, smile widening. “Twist! Chip! Oh man, I can’t believe—I missed you guys so much! Who else is here? Did Carnelian make it?”

“Heck yeah, I did,” a gem announced from the ship’s entrance, taking her time in sauntering down the walkway, one quite familiar gem and two strangers at her side. “I won the battle royale to get a place coming along!” The plump red quartz brushed a hand over her left shoulder, summoning a boomerang from her gem, spinning it in the air with nonchalance.

“You tied the battle royale,” a shorter and far thinner version of the jasper they had greeted on arrival responded, tossing her head, short hair ruffled by the sea breeze. She felt no need to arm herself, striding with the simple confidence of a victor.

“I would have won, if Steven didn’t call things early.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Skinny chirruped, stopping at the Champion jasper’s right side. “Whatever makes you feel better.”

Growling, Carnelian moved to ram her shoulder into Skinny’s hips, but was stopped by the jasper’s hand coming to rest casually on her forehead, keeping her at a distance. A swipe with the boomerang got Skinny to take her hand back, but Carnelian was left huffing with mild irritation.

Jasper rolled her eyes at the pair, but her lips twitched, especially when she looked upon her thinner counterpart. “Short gems, short tempers.”

“Say that to my face, next time,” Carnelian snapped back, “if you monsters can get down here.”

Jasper raised a brow, but was saved from having to respond as a new gem, tall and pale green, came to stand at her left.

“Carnelian, really. Is this the impression you wish to make on our hosts?” Reaching up, the gem patted at her hair, ensuring that every bit was still held in its tight bun. Finding all well, her hand came down to rest on her collarbone, just south of a milky-white, green-pricked gem. She tilted her head just enough to look down on Carnelian, blinking slowly, long eyelashes seeming in imminent danger of tangling and trapping her eyes closed.

Carnelian’s red face turned even darker. “N-no, Moss Agate.” She faced forward, heels clicking together, spine going straight, chest puffed out. Her weapon disappeared in a flash of light, and Skinny copied the pose, with just a little twist to her lips.

The grey-blue gem to Moss Agate’s left rolled her eyes, standing with a hand to her canted hips, defying the general military posture of the other four lined-up quartzes.

Amethyst, still ensconced in the arms of her geode, had gone to a razor focus on hearing an agate identified. Her eyes narrowed in on the gem, a small flash of teeth visible in the beginning of a snarl. Reaching out, she tapped on the shoulder of the gem currently embracing her, jerking her head towards the quintet of varied quartzes arrayed on the beach. She was obligingly set down on the sand, and the Prime Kindergarten geode stood back and watched as their little sister stalked up
to their new agate, her fingers twitching for a whip.

“So. You the one bossing my sisters around, now?” Amethyst snapped, stopping at Moss Agate’s feet, head tilted back so she could glare up at the supervising gem. Despite the difference in size, she seemed to feel no compunctions about having to crane her neck back.

“Indeed I am,” Moss Agate said, dark green lips curling up into a smile.

The glow to Amethyst’s gem brightened, an instant from re-summoning her weapon. There was a definite growl to the small gem’s voice as she asked, words slow and precise, “Why would they ever listen to another agate like you?”

With a slow sigh, Moss answered, “I have no idea....” Rather than continuing to loom over the Earth gem, Moss went down to one knee, meeting Amethyst on her level, looking directly into the purple gem’s eyes. Slowly, but not at all tentative, she reached out to this stranger, tapping a long-nailed finger to Amethyst’s nose, before taking her hand back to rest on her own face, smiling serenely with those full, dark lips. “Do you have any... ideas?” She waited there, observing Amethyst, her white and green gem letting out a soft, pulsing glow.

Amethyst stared at the agate for several seconds. Then, something seemed to click. The dark, dangerous glint in her eyes vanished, its disappearance accompanied by the emergence of a flush striking her cheeks and nose in a wide band. She took a step back, looking over her shoulder to the Prime geode, which was observing the exchange with wide, amused grins. One—Twist, the amethyst with the single curl to her hair—nodded slowly, that little addition seeming to fluster Amethyst far more than the collective notice of her family.

“I’m curious,” Moss crooned, snapping Amethyst’s attention back to find that Moss was again, and now quite overtly, resting her hand so close, so delicately close to her striated gem, whose glow intensified further. “Do you think we’d make a smaller Aventurine? Normal size? Or perhaps a new gem altogether?” She hummed, low in her throat and blinked slowly, serenely, despite the direct intensity of her eye contact with Amethyst. “I’d love to find out, if you’re...amenable?”

“I-I-I—” Amethyst tried, taking a single step back.

“Mossy,” the chubby, blue-grey gem to Moss Agate’s left spoke up, leaning down to press a hand to the managerial gem’s shoulder, pulling her just a fraction back from her flustered prey. “Stop. You’re scaring her.”

“I’m not scared!” Amethyst yelped, her blush spreading from cheeks to her entire face and shoulders, hands coming to fists at her side. “I-I’ll kick your butt!”

“Oh, you probably would. She’s pretty useless,” her would-be savior answered, earning an irritated “Chalcedony!” from the agate. “I’m more worried you’re gonna overheat and poof yourself. Just tell her to stop and she will. She knows the rules.”

Sighing, much put-upon, Moss Agate nodded, rising up to full height, and Amethyst couldn’t figure out why she was less unnerving when standing tall than down at her level. “Yes, I suppose,” Moss said, brushing a hand at her shoulder, ushering away Chalcedony’s touch. Then her lips twitched and her head tilted just so. “But if you’re ever at all curious—”

“She’ll give you a spin like she’s given everyone else,” Chalcedony broke in, shouldering forward, bending over and offering her hand to Amethyst. “She’s shameless. I’m Chalcedony. Quartermaster.”
“Uh...Amethyst,” the gem responded, accepting the hand, tentative in the contact, but easing at the quartz’s strong grip. “I don’t have a job.”

“Of course you do!” Chalcedony grinned, freeing Amethyst from her grip and standing, looking to the rest of the Earth residents. “You’re a Crystal Gem!”

Amethyst paused. Then grinned, standing taller, chest puffing out. “Yeah! Yeah, we are! Welcome to Earth!”

It didn’t stop being entirely awkward, and it was only saved from being horrendously tense by Jasper continuing to hold back, at the edge of the quartz cluster, to simply watch the introductions and reunions. But there was too much to do to let things derail forever. Steven stepped forward for more formal presentations—which seemed to please Pearl and Moss Agate immensely—giving full designations and nicknames alike, alongside ship duties and small snippets of stories from their explorations of the local galactic arm. With all the permutations and details, the Crystal Gems trying to focus on learning all they could about these visitors to their beloved planet, it was little surprise that a new pair of gems was able to get down the ship’s ramp undetected.

Greg, the first to notice, did seem surprised to find they hadn’t approached the crowd. He broke from the group to go to the two light-brown gems, crouching down and holding out a hand enthusiastically, already well into the swing of greeting aliens. “Hey there! The name is Greg! Greg Universe! I’m Steven’s dad!”

One of the gems—the one with her gem on her right shoulder, rather than her left, for little other distinction could be made between them, both wearing identical dark-brown jumpsuits with the customary pink diamond on the left breast, their hair in an identical series of tight braids held back with ties at their napes, identical frowns on their identical faces—looked up at Greg, eyes flickering from hand to gut to face and then back down to the tablet she held, which displayed a rapid scroll of gem script. “Feldspar,” she said, tapping on snippets of information.

Greg blinked. After a rather lengthy pause, he looked to the other gem—this one sporting her square-cut brown gem on her left shoulder—and shifted his hand to offer it there. “Uh...Greg Universe?”

The second gem looked up, repeating her companion’s inspection, before again looking to her data. “Feldspar,” she said.

Greg stood there, hand raised, wondering on the intricacies of gem manners and how he might have offended.

Steven, finally noticing the new arrivals, walked over to rescue his father from social awkwardness. “Ah, you two. Dad, these are the feldspars. QR-57a and QR-57b.” Looking down on the gems—which only came up to about his knees—Steven raised his voice just a fraction, less in command, and more like any parent trying to get a teenager’s attention. “Would you like to say ‘hello’ to my father?”

“No,” they said, in perfect unison. There was no echo in their words. Just a rise in volume, as they matched cadence and timing perfectly.

Sighing, Steven looked to his father. “They’re...not so good with others. Other gems and, apparently, with humans, too.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Greg said, putting his hand down and taking a step back. “Gems of the Corn, you got there. How’d they do that?”
Steven tapped at his forehead. “That’s their ability. They’re linked to each other, somehow. Heliodor and Elder had a field day figuring them out. We know they have separate minds, they’re individuals, but...well, you can have one of them on the ship and the other downside on a planet, and they still know what the other is doing. Pretty useful for syncing things up, actually.” Studying the pair, who had continued their work, despite being talked about quite closely and audibly, Steven sighed. “Though getting them to tell anyone else what’s going on....”

“Glad it’s not just me,” Greg muttered, though his shoulders hunched.

With a little laugh and shake of the head, Steven wrapped an arm about his father’s shoulders, ushering him away from the preoccupied pair of gems, and back to the more friendly crowd. “Come on. They must have finished landing procedures, by now. The rest should be out any minute.”

True to Steven’s word, there was a sudden emergence of several gems from the ship’s walkway. A good dozen, and it was all too much to take in at once. Heliodor, Citrine, Pyrope, a pair of kunzite, their gems on opposing eyes. At the back of the crowd, came one gem that those left behind on Earth recognized instantly. It was a gem they had each burned into their memories, unable to forget her or the worst night of their lives.

“Yes, Spinel,” Pearl said, crossing her arms as they were introduced. “We’ve met.”

The dark blue gem paused just out of reach of the pearl’s hands though, if she’d known of the lithe gem’s proficiency with the spear, she might had hesitated further back. Perhaps on the Moon. She attempted a friendly smile, but it faded as none of the resident gems returned the gesture.

It took some moments for someone to break. It was Connie who gave a sigh, stepping forward. “Oh, I suppose you did the best you could. It’s not like he could call back. Or bothered to....” She held her hand out for a welcoming shake, and found it swiftly enveloped in thick fingers.

“I’m glad you’re all okay! I gave a recording of your call to my diamond the moment he was back on ship.” She bowed her spiked pink hair nearly impaling Connie in the eye. “He was so frantic, he thought someone was hurt. I think he watched it fifty times that day, once he realized you all were going to be okay! And a bunch of times every day since. He’s got it on his tablet, he keeps it on his bedside table, he—”

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“The...team?” Peridot squeaked, but she didn’t have time to agree. Or run away, as she would have preferred. Some silent signal had been given and, as she turned her gaze to the ship’s doorway, they stood there.

They seemed, at first, so similar to the enhanced gem who had marked the beginning of the Homeworld invasion. Tall, thick-limbed, bright green. But where Peridot had joined her natural
form to synthetics, these peridots flowed smoothly, thighs and upper arms thicker to match their wide calves and forearms. Their torsos were rounder, more barrel-like than the angular Earth resident.

It was the hands that caught your attention, however. Each finger was narrow and long, a dark green almost to black. And there were far, far too many. One of the peridots, standing just a bit out front, had gathered the dozens of whip-thin appendages together, twisting them into five sets which approximated fingers, but these, even from this distance, did not come anywhere close to resembling the normal grip of any other gem or human.

They looked down the ramp and to the peridot of Earth, and their eyes were uncovered and sharp.

Peridot stood frozen.

Steven grinned at his old friend. “So...what do you think?”

Swallowing, Peridot tried, and barely managed, to eek out a reply. “They’re...perfect.”

That made Steven laugh, softly, and turn a fond gaze to his four creations. “They are. And they’ve been waiting to meet you.”

“Why?” Peridot muttered, clenching her fists, head lowering as she tried to hide behind the rising sun’s glare on her visor. “They’re everything a peridot should be, and I’m just—oh stars, they’re coming.” Squeaking, Peridot tried to step back, but found her limbs would not cooperate. A doubly-unfair betrayal, these inadequate appendages marking her as lesser all her life, and now refusing to save her the indignity of being recognized as imperfect by these...replacements.

The four tall peridots only needed to take a few strides on long legs to get down the ramp and stand before Peridot. The tallest of the quartet—the only gem with the pink diamond insignia on the right of her chest, the left side occupied by her gem, just visible through a hole in her jumpsuit, the borders of which was embroidered in thin strands of silver and metallic green thread—took an extra half-step forward. She tilted her head, examining this so-close and yet so very different echo of her form.

“You’re...her,” the tall gem ventured. “The one Steven talks about?”

“I...yeah.” Peridot tried to stand taller, but her legs shook so much that it was a serious miracle she didn’t topple over entirely. She couldn’t take her eyes off the tall peridot’s writhing hands.

“F...Factet-2F5L Cut-5XG.”

Amethyst, who had been watching the meeting closely, took a step forward, ready to cut in, mouth opening for some sort of reassurance, when the lead peridot spoke once more.

“You beat Jasper,” she said, grinning widely.

Despite being a good thirty feet away, in the middle of a discussion with one of the amethysts, Jasper snapped her head around, glowering at the peridots. A low rumble issued from her chest, and her conversational partner took a step back.

5XG either failed to notice or found that her sister-gem was far more intimidating than a diamond’s champion. With just a hint of hesitance, she answered “I...did?”

“Stars above!” With a hoot of laughter, the tall green gem enveloped Peridot’s entire forearm in a hundred-fingered shake, pumping up and down hard enough to jerk the gem about at first, before she noticed the effect she was having and went more gently, though with no diminishment in
enthusiasm. “This is—this is amazing! Team, get over here, it’s true. She beat Jasper!”

“That runt,” Jasper snarled, clenching her fists, “just struck the final blow. I was beat by a fusion.”

“Oh, technicalities,” the tallest peridot said, letting her miniaturized counterpart go, flicking her writhing fingers in one sinuous wave, banishing the quartz warrior’s protests. “Don’t you quartzes always assign points in your little scuffles based on who finished things, anyways?”

“They’re not scuffles,” Jasper snapped. “They’re training exercises!”

“Right, right,” the peridot said, shrugging. “But, oh, where are my manners!? 5XG, I’m Peridot Facet-3HN Cut-LDR1, but Steven calls me Elder. This is my team. Sol, Swift, and Hush.” She gestured to each in turn, first to a thick-limbed, stocky peridot with a gem on her right cheek. Then a gem nearly as tall as herself, limbs markedly thinner than her companions, as if what she’d gained in height had been lost in girth, gem resting on the small of her back. And, finally, to one who seemed merely a scaled-down version of Elder herself, but for the gem resting where a nose might have been.

“I can’t believe we’re finally meeting you!” Hush said, taking Peridot’s hand for a shake, her voice somehow even higher and more nasal than the rest of the team.

“It’s such an honor,” Sol added.

Swift grinned, nodding. “Jasper gets so mad when you bring up the fact that a little peridot beat her!”

“We love doing that.”

“Oh, yeah, totally,”

“Did you get it on video?”

“Oh, if I saw that, I’d just POOF!”

Arms covered in about three hundred wire-like fingers, Peridot looked between the trio of babbling gems and their own recently-babbling leader. And then, slowly, she turned her head to look to Amethyst.

Amethyst raised a brow in clear question, shifting her feet, edging just a fraction closer to the five gems.

Tentative, at first, Peridot gave her companion a smile. Then it grew, brightened, and she focused again on her sister-gems, body alive with a sudden energy, and soon she was babbling just as swiftly. “Oh, man, that was the most boring part of that year! Has Steven told you about how we built the drill together? About the barn? About bubbling the Cluster?”

“Yes, stars!” Swift said in a rush, pressing each of her hundred fingers to her cheeks. “With just wires and gears, no modern technology! Is it still around?”

“Can we examine it?” Swift interjected, fingers twitching, spreading wide, little beams of light coming from their tips, projecting a screen with a vague, and quite inaccurate schematic of the drill. “I’d love to see how an electric motor works!”

“And a manual control interface!” Hush swooned, voice a bare breath.
“Amethyst put what’s left of it in her room, so you’d have to ask her,” Peridot said. Before the four gems could abandon her in pursuit of primitive—if effective—technology, Peridot shook her right wrist, limb enhancer splitting into five pieces, four squaring up to create a screen of her own, the fifth gesturing at projected schematics of the old drill. “But I can show you, in detail, how it worked!”

“How it worked?” Elder said, leaning down, reaching out towards the five prosthetic digits, eyes sparkling. “How do these work?”

With a flash, the schematics of the drill disappeared, replaced by an intricate, shifting outline of Peridot’s own enhancers, which she began to expound upon in exhaustive detail, her four attendants listening with a razor focus, the gems of Elder, Sol, and Hush forming little screens, Swift sticking to her own arrangement, her gem unable to project from her back to her front. They took careful notes, nodding every few seconds to encourage the Earth resident along.

“I told them she’d be excited,” Steven said, crossing his arms as he watched his four gems and his old friend. “Told her, too.”

“Peridots are easily impressed,” Jasper said, rolling her eyes grandly. “Motors, really.”

“Well, if you want impressive...” Steven ventured, looking to his second, speaking softly to keep their privacy, “she’s been waiting....”

Jasper’s muscles went taut. Each stood out in vivid relief, ready to fight, to spring, to help her flee. If she’d been a human with all the blood that entails, her veins would have popped up from her skin, struggling to feed a racing heart. As it was, she just waited, tense, as she looked down upon her diamond, eyes wide. “I...does that...really seem wise, Steven?”

“Oh, not at all,” Steven said. Then, laughing at the darkness that came into Jasper’s eyes, he reached out, laying a hand on her shoulder, for which he barely had to reach up. “But you know she’s been waiting for this just about since she emerged.”

“She...yeah.” Jasper nodded. Her eyes flickered up, to the sky, but, finding nothing, she returned her focus to the ground and to the ship waiting at shoreline.

First giving a gentle squeeze to Jasper’s shoulder, Steven stepped away from her side, walking to the ship’s ramp, waiting at the base. His movement away from the group caught the eye of nearly every gem, and, within moments, the focus of those he had not claimed was brought on by the focus of the rest, and all had turned to gaze upon the diamond standing before his ship.

Steven looked up the ramp and nodded. “Alright. Ready to say hello?”

A laugh. Light. Gentle. And just vaguely familiar. “Yes! I’ve been waiting.”

The gem almost seemed to float down to the sand, her steps were so light. Or perhaps she did float, her bare toes just brushing the ground as she came to wait before them all, smile bright, eyes wide, wings outspread and shining with reflected sunlight.

“Everyone,” Steven said, grinning at the suddenly stunned expressions on his family’s faces, sweeping an arm out towards the blue gem at his side, “I’d like you to meet Laz.”

The gem smiled, nose scrunching up, little bursts of light reflecting on the gold flecks across her nose and cheeks. She opened her mouth for some sort of greeting, but it was drowned out by a sudden sonic boom, sand and sea-foam spraying into the air around her.
Lapis Lazuli stared at the gem before her, wings flapping wildly as she fought for composure. She shook her head, less to clear it and more to deny, but, as all looked upon the pair, there was no way of denying what was being seen.

A mirror gem, an ocean gem. Two lapis lazulis.

Laz let out a little squeak, wings flitting once, sending her into the air, onto Lapis’s level, the edges of her thinner, more membranous wings glittering in the sunlight. After a moment, she overcame her shock at the sudden appearance of this near-twin, and began to return the avid stare, tilting her head to see this other blue gem from new angles. “You...wow!” Her wings flapped once, powerfully, sending her head over heels—modesty protected by light palazzo-line slacks, rather than Lapis’s more traditional skirt—and back again to float upright before the elder lazuli. “I can’t...I can’t!”

Apparently, neither could Lapis. She did a quick spin about the younger gem, looking her up and down, stopping in front once again, though this time far closer, looking down on the actual gem of the being before her, situated just below Laz’s collar bone, shaped into the same blue teardrop.

“You hair,” Laz chirruped, reaching out to Lapis’s head.

With the sharp crack of a far smaller sonic boom—more a whip than a missile—Lapis jolted back, out of reach. Her wings quivered, edges sharpened in alarm.

“Oh, sorry,” Laz said, a dark blue coming to her cheeks. “I just...I thought we’d be identical! Although,” she snorted, shaking her head, the long sweep of her dark-blue braid brushing against her calves as the movement transferred down the rope of hair, “that’s silly. The amethysts all look different; why shouldn’t we?”

Lapis had no answer. She merely looked upon her counterpart, mind working in slow turns.

Others were less hindered by the shock. Others, in fact, had processed everything within moments of the new gem’s arrival, growing quickly frantic at the possibilities. Others held their little green hands together in almost prayerful supplication, bouncing on their tip-toes, trying to get that little bit closer. “Steven,” Peridot keened, looking upon the pair of water gems with wide, sparkling eyes. “Why didn’t you say that your variant was a lapis lazuli!? ”

Steven held out his hands, shaking them like a showman. “Surprise!”

“Surprise, indeed! Oh, please, can I see you?” Peridot reached out to the young blue gem, biting her lower lip, awaiting refusal.

Lapis turned to Peridot, eyes narrowing, teeth bared, but before she could respond, her counterpart had flitted over, settling down on the sand before the kindergartener. At rest, her wings folded back against one another, braid nestled between, their combined thickness still not enough to really obscure anything seen through them.

“I’ve only ever seen two other lapises before,” Peridot said, darting in circles around the gem, looking her up and down. She closed one eye and held out her hands, visually measuring the gems proportions, nodding with enthusiasm at the span of her wings, the width of her shoulders, the curve of her legs. “The first one I saw had a lot of pyrite inclusions, very weak. She could barely move a creek. And Lapis over there, she doesn’t have any, but you! Such even spacing! Quite fetching!”

“Why, thank you,” Laz said, taking a little curtsey. The specks of pyrite on her shoulders and chest
and across her nose glittered in the sunlight, adding an extra spark to her eyes. “You must be the peridot Steven always talks about! And you!” Turning, she addressed the rest of the crowd. “Amethyst and Pearl and my goodness, Garnet is far larger than you described, Jasper! Were you trying to play her down?”

On the mention of the quartz, Lapis’s wings flashed wide and she turned, rising into the air so she could glare down at the banded warrior, her eyes shadowed.

Jasper stared back up at her, shoulders held back, chin high, jaw clenched.

“And you’re Steven’s father!” Laz flitted to Greg, hovering before him and taking his hand before he even thought to offer, shaking it firmly. “You’re the one that sent those ice cream things! They’re delicious, thank you!”

“You’ve eaten those?” Greg asked, brows rising. “You eat?”

“Oh, well, when I manage to—”

“Steal them from me?” Steven interjected, crossing his arms and looking up at the gem. He tried to be stern and imposing, but there was just the barest twitch to the corner of his lips as he chided his gem.

Grinning, Laz flicked her wings back, sending a spray of water into the air. “Well, nothing else tastes good!”

“You won’t try anything else!”

“Well, if I already found something I like, why do I need to try other things?”

“Seriously, Laz,” Steven sighed, shaking his head, “that’s your philosophy on everything.”

Looking to the quartzes, Laz smirked. “Only because I have good taste.”

From the sidelines, Pearl followed the lazuli’s gaze, brows rising as she looked upon the cluster of quartzes, bored at the proceedings and engaged in small tussles, Moss Agate keeping careful watch and speaking out when some gem made a small mistake, encouraging them to raise guards or take advantage of openings. Lips twisting up, Pearl looked to the lazuli and said, with a little laugh to her words, “I think we’re going to get along quite well.”

Wings flicking at the gem’s notice, Laz returned the smile. “Steven’s told me all about you,” she trilled, brows waggling. “And we really are.”

With a barking laugh, Pearl strode up to the blue gem, offering her hand, which was accepted enthusiastically. “You most certainly are a surprise, but really, Garnet, she is nothing to be upset about!”

“No. She isn’t,” Garnet said, teeth clenched, just as were here fists. “She is not the problem.”

“But...” Pearl let go of Laz’s hand, turning to her friend. “Then why were you so angry?”

“Steven, you...” Garnet hesitated for a moment and, in her pause, she came forward to stand beside her oldest friend, laying a hand on Pearl’s shoulder, encouraging her to face Steven and his ship. “You can’t keep delaying this. She’s the only one left.” Nodding to the ramp, she spoke with her old authority as their leader, her words no longer a simple request. “Bring her out.”
There was something in that tone that caught the attention of the other gems on the beach, but before anyone could come to their diamond’s aid, Steven sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Just....” He looked about at his family. “Just don’t freak out, okay? Just let me explain?”

“Explain what?” Greg asked, tilting his head. “You got a kid or something?”

“*What?*” Connie snapped. She looked to Steven, eyes wide. “Did you—”

“No,” Steven barked, stepping back, hands coming up to stave the woman off. “No, that’s not it! It’s....” Groaning, he let his neck go limp, head hanging back so he could look to the stars for guidance. “I just... *please,*” he reiterated, steeling himself so he could gather enough energy to meet Connie’s gaze once more. Then Garnet’s. And finally Pearl’s. There he stayed, swallowing down nerves. “*Please* just...listen, okay?”

Glancing about the assembled gems—Steven’s gems; his wild, confident creations—Pearl smiled. “Of course we will, Steven.”

The man hesitated just once more, and this time, it was to look to Jasper.

Whatever alternative or reassurance he hoped for, it wasn’t with the massive orange gem. She just gave him a stern nod of affirmation before jerking her head towards the ship. “*You’re* the one that insisted you do this,” she said, adding, after a pause, “*My Diamond.*”

He flinched at the title. While it had been spoken several times that day by these newly arrived gems, this was the first when it had been uttered with such firmness, such formality. But it was just what was needed. A reminder of his position. Of his duties as the leader of these gems.

Turning his back on the Crystal Gems and the temple, Steven strode to the ship’s ramp, walking up halfway before stopping, looking down the hallway, holding out his hand. “Coral,” he said, as calm, as natural as he could manage, only the smallest quaver in his voice, “would you like to say ‘hello,’ now?”

“Yes, *My Diamond,*” the gem answered, her voice such a contrast to his. High and light, pronunciation clipped, each syllable almost a song. “I thought you’d never ask.”

When Laz had greeted them, she seemed to float, but this gem? This gem danced. Each step elegant, precise, beautiful. She glided across the floor on small feet in pink slippers. Coming to stand beside Steven, placing her hand in his, the pair continued on down the ramp and across the sand to stand before the Crystal Gems. Up close, it became apparent that it wasn’t just her feet that seemed small. Her pale pink hands nearly disappeared in the man’s gentle grasp, her head barely reaching up to his ribs. It was only in proportion to herself that parts of the gem seemed large. Long legs and arms, a thin neck, and, on her stomach, seeming almost too big for the girl herself, a bright pink gem, perfectly round, without a single facet. Not cut and polished into a shape, but grown to perfect smoothness.

Slowly, Pearl shook her head.

Steven smiled upon the gem at his side, tentative, and earned a wide, bright smile in return from the creature. She tilted her head just so, bending her knees in a curtsey, the back edges of her asymmetrical tiered skirt just brushing the sand.

The pair faced the Crystal gems and Steven—trying to meet Pearl’s eyes, but unable to catch any fraction of her attention as she stared on this last gem—spoke, shakily. “I wa-want...I want you to meet Coral. She...she’s...”
Coral offered the Crystal Gems another of those little bows, closing her eyes in a slow, demure blink. “My diamond’s pearl.”

Pearl put her hands over her mouth, shaking her head. She took a step back. And then another. “Steven...”

Amethyst reached out to her friend, but the movement just made Pearl flinch back further, tears coming to her eyes.

“Steven,” Pearl said, voice harsh, creaking, barely audible. “What...did...you... do?”

Shaking his head, Steven tried to reach out a staying hand. “Pearl, I didn’t—”

“You promised me, Steven!” Pearl shrieked, the sudden harshness of her voice making all jump.

Coral especially seemed shocked, eyes widening, stepping back so her right side was hidden behind Steven’s bulk, leaving just enough of an angle for her to look out around him at her counterpart. She had to look up just a bit, smaller than the veteran gem. Smaller and younger, and not just in actual years. There was a roundness to Coral’s face that didn’t seem to match up with Pearl or the few servants of the diamonds they had seen. Her nose was flatter. Her bright pink hair far longer, coming down in a thick braid to her waist. “M...My Diamond?” she whispered, looking to Steven, taking another step closer to his side.

“Pearl, listen, please,” Steven said, but his plea went ignored.

“You have her calling you ‘My Diamond!’”

“She doesn’t have to!” Steven protested. “No one does! I told them, ‘Steven’ is fi—”

Ignoring the nods across the beach and Steven’s attempt at explanation, Pearl broke in once again. “You told me you wouldn’t, Steven! You promised me! I knew you’d have to make gems, but you promised me that you would never make a PEARL!”

“I didn’t!” Steven shouted, letting Coral’s hand go, taking a step towards Pearl, hands outstretched. “Pearl, I didn’t make her!”

Crowding in on the woman was a mistake. With a bright flash from her gem, Pearl once more produced her spear, advancing on Steven in a single, long-legged step, the point of the blade coming up against his neck. Across the sand, gems shouted, producing their own weapons in flashes of light, but Pearl ignored them as she screamed, “Then why is she here, Steven? If you didn’t make them as she screamed, “Then why is she here?”

“Because she was a gift!” Steven screamed, reaching up and taking hold of Pearl’s spear, wrenching it to the side with enough force to stagger the warrior.

Before she could fall, Pearl let the spear go, staring for some moments at her lost weapon. Then she looked up to Steven, just as confused at his words as at her disarming. “A gift?”

“Yes,” Steven said, voice struggling for an even demeanor. “I wouldn’t make a pearl, I didn’t make one! But Yellow Diamond did. She made Coral.”

“Just because the diamonds made her, doesn’t mean you had to...to accept her!”

“I did,” Steven insisted. “She was made for me. For a diamond. If I hadn’t taken her, Coral would have been harvested.”
Pearl let out a small gasp, gaze turning away from the man before her, and back to her sister gem.

Coral held her hands clutched before her, just over her gem. She watched Pearl, legs tensed, ready to leap. Most in the crowd would have expected the small gem to jump to safety, away from spear or swords or any of the other dozens of weapons Pearl could summon. But Pearl could read the set of her muscles, the angle of her legs. Coral was ready to move, yes, but she was leaning forward, prepared to rush between her diamond and this strange, foreign gem.

“I didn’t ask for her, Pearl,” Steven said, holding out the hand which held her spear, palm up, relaxing his fingers. “But when they brought her out...what choice did I have?”

Pearl looked to the spear. Rather than accepting it, however, her gem flared and the weapon faded away.

Sighing, Steven let his empty hand fall to his side. “I saw...so many pearls when I went with the diamonds. I know how other gems treat them.”

At these words, Pearl flinched. “You...know?”

Her former charge nodded. Slow, somber. “Yeah. And I knew you’d be angry about Coral Pearl, but I swear, I don’t treat Coral like Homeworld would. She’s like any of my other gems.” Looking to his side, Steven smiled down at the small gem, and when he spoke to her, it was with a great gentleness. “Right, Coral?”

The little pearl looked up to her diamond, with just a little hesitance remaining, and then smiled, the look bright and wide once more. Turning her gaze to the elder gem, she nodded, enthusiastic. “My Diamond treats me very well!”

“Your....” Pearl sighed, shoulders slumping. “Why do you call him that?”

Coral answered swiftly. With confidence. “Because I want to! Duh!”

“That’s...” Pearl sighed, shaking her head. “That’s messed up,” she muttered.

“Oh, thanks,” Coral snapped, hands going to her hips. “I’m sorry I’m not appropriately aggrieved about my situation for you. Tell me, would groveling be sufficient for you, or do I need to cry and sing a little song about all this?” She rolled her eyes, resting them on Steven.

Pearl blink, cheeks going deep blue. “N-no, of course not.” Addressing Steven, she inquired, “Is she always like that.”

Coral’s lips curled, canines displayed. “No. I’m not. Only when other gems talk over me.”

“I—I—” Pearl’s face went a pure blue, just for a few moments. Then, shaking her head to clear it and regain some portion of her normal complexion, Pearl collected herself. Stepping forward, she extended her hand, offering it to her younger counterpart. “I’m sorry. I, of all gems, should know better. Please. I’m...well, I’m just Pearl. It’s...well, it’s unsettling to meet you, but I hope you like it here on Earth.”

“I’m excited to try it out!” Coral answered, accepting the handshake. “Beach City and the ocean and oh!” Spinning, the pearl looked out towards the sea. “Reefs! My Diamond, let’s go see the reefs! I want to see the coral!”

“No reefs off Beach City,” Steven answered and, as Coral wilted at the revelation, he quickly added “but I know some good ones not too far off, on this great little island. And, hey, we can see
those watermelon people I told you all about!” Steven looked about at the assembled crowd, grinning. In particular, he focused upon his gem family and Connie. “Everyone up for a little sightseeing?”

“AAAH!” In a trice, Laz flitted before Steven, resting her hands on his shoulders, wings glittering in the sunlight. “Can I fly there? Please, My Diamond, you said I could fly on the ocean!”

“That’s why I suggested the island,” Steven laughed. He gestured out to sea. “It’s about five-thousand kilometers south south-west. It’s small, but there should me some maps on the ship, so you don’t miss it.”

“Or I could get a local guide,” Laz said, turning to look upon Lapis. “What about it? Ready for a little tour?”

Back up a step, Lapis shook her head to the side, but stopped after a half-second. Looking towards the quartzes, she narrowed her eyes. “That sounds...like a good idea. Give us a chance to talk.” Turning her attention back to the other ocean gem, she smirked. “ Alone.”

“Awesome!” Laz grinned, spreading her wings to their full breadth, the air on the beach going tense as the very humidity responded to her control. “Try to keep up, old timer.”

Lapis blinked, mouth opening, but what words she might have managed were drowned in a sudden sonic boom as the other gem shot off across the sea, her slipstream sending two columns of water up in her wake. A split-second later, wings flashing open and then down in a powerful stroke, Lapis followed after, the pair of gems lost over the horizon in moments.

Jasper sighed, looking after the settling wakes of the two gems. “You’re never going to get her to travel on-ship down here, you know.”

“Good,” Steven said. “She needs to work off her energy. Now, as for the rest of us, we can take the ship.” With a little bow to the side, an arm stretched out to the spherical ship, Steven addressed the mass of gems on the beach. “Shall we?”

There was a general movement towards the ramp from Steven’s collective. Amethyst was carried along by her geode, wrapped up in tales of training matches and final pranks against the deposed Holly Blue Agate. Peridot also joined her counterparts, though their conversation was far more rapid and generally incomprehensible to all but perhaps three other gems on the shoreline.

However, one figure in particular just sighed, reaching into her pocket to produce a small phone. “I’ll have to decline,” Connie said. “Beach-a-Palooza is in three days and I’ve got... endless things to do.” Connie rubbed at the deep line forming between her brows. “I really need some coffee. Or scotch.”

“What? Really?” Steven’s shoulder’s slumped. “I-I mean, we can make it quick. An hour? And I can show you the ship and—”

“Steven,” Connie broke in, putting her phone away, “I’m sorry, but I can’t. Don’t forget: we are both leaders.”

“I....” Steven sighed. Nodded. “Yeah. I’ll...see you soon?”

“Saturday. I doubt anything would keep you off the stage.” With the smallest of smiles and a wave to the Crystal Gems, Connie turned from the crowd and headed inland, soon turning the corner around the side of the cliff and out of view.
With surprisingly soft steps for such a large gem, Jasper came to stand at Steven’s side, looking along with him at the path of the mayor’s retreat. Crossing her arms, she looked to her leader—she had to tilt her head down, but just a bare fraction—and tried for something crooked and awkward with her lips. It was unpracticed and a bit unsettling. “Well...there’s always Saturday,” she said. Then, after a pause, she frowned, and that expression, at least, fit her face. “What’s a ‘Saturday,’ again?”

“I think it involves cartoons,” said Coral Pearl.

“Oh.” Jasper’s frown deepened. “Great....”

With a small smile and shake of his head, Steven turned to his gems. “Most times. This time, it’s a party.”

“A party!” Coral clapped her hands together, eyes shining, hips shimmying so her skirt flared up. “Oh, perfect! Is there a theme? What level of formality is expected? I’ll need to see documentation of current fashion trends on Earth, of course, but there should be plenty of time to design suitable attire. Oh! Is a gift expected? Is—”

“Calm down, Coral,” Steven said, laying his hands on the pearl’s shoulders. “It’s not for us. There’s no protocol. We can just relax.”

“My Diamond,” Coral said, with a long-suffering sigh, “there is always protocol.” Reaching up, she brushed at her shoulders, urging Steven’s hands off. Thus freed, she turned on her heel, marching across the sands until she stood before a gem so similar, and so separate.

“Crystal Pearl,” Coral began, but, before she could continue, her words were halted by an upraised hand.

“Oh, no, it’s just ‘Pearl,’ for me,” Pearl said. “‘Crystal’ would imply...well, it would be incorrect.”

“Ah. Very well.” Coral nodded and set her shoulders back, standing tall, though still an entire head shorter than the elder gem. “Pearl, my diamond is being useless.”

Choking on air, Pearl snapped a glance at Steven.

“Would you please assist me? I would rather this event end in success, in spite of his lackadaisical approach.”

“I...” Pearl blinked and shook her head, to clear it, rather than in negation. “Well. I suppose that would allow me to...learn how you do things on the ship.”

Coral raised a single brow and crossed her arms. “And after you have determined that I am not being ill treated in some manner, you will actually help me?”

Pearl’s cheeks turned blue once more, only darkening as Jasper chuckled at her disorientation. Giving a little glare to the large gem, she answered the smaller with an even “Certainly.”

“Excellent.” Offering a crooked arm to Pearl, Coral gestured with the other hand towards the ship. “Shall we?”

Laying her hand in the bend of Coral’s elbow, Pearl allowed herself to be led along, up the ramp and into the depths of Steven’s ship, looking about in appraisal all the while.

Finding the beach emptying out fast, Greg shuffled up to his son, feet not lifting enough to clear the
sand, pushing little piles ahead of him as he went. “So, uh...this ship....” He looked at it with a dark scowl. “How, er... far are we going?”

Laughing, Steven lay an arm across his father’s shoulders. “We’re not going off-planet, Dad. Promise.”

“Oh. Well.” Greg grinned and moved towards the ship, his son following along to keep up the contact. “Then that’s okay. Garnet?”

Looking about at the beach, empty of not only foreign gems, but also her own ad hoc family, Garnet sighed. “I suppose so,” she answered. “Someone is going to have to keep that Spinel from bringing a watermelon Steven on board.”

Steven went a bit pale at that, and proceeded to urge his father on-board a bit more swiftly.

On rising up the ramp, Greg looked down the long, brightly-lit and pink-tinged hallway, and chuckled. “Bigger on the inside, huh? Original.”

“Well, yeah,” Steven said, grinning. “Where you think the Brits got that from? Come on. The bridge is this way.” He paused, pressing his hand to a panel on the wall. In response, the panel flashed bright, and a sliver of light cracked down the wall, widening to reveal a doorway and, just beyond, a large, circular room, rather reminiscent of every sci-fi television show that Greg had watched in his long life. And, this being Greg, that was a lot.

“Woah, captain on the bridge,” Greg said, giving out a low whistle. “Where’s the transporter?”

From one of the many stations in a secondary ring about the room, one of the Feldspars lifted her head, looking upon Greg with flat, bored eyes. “The warp pad is on the other side of the hallway. Though it’s useless here, with Earth disconnected from the Galaxy system.”

“That’s not a...” Greg paused. He shrugged. “Okay, fair.”

Around the room, gems snickered or just smiled, excepting the two Feldspars, standing on opposite sides of the room. They merely continued tapping at their wall screens.

This room, like the hall outside, had a definite pink coloration, though it was muted. A dusky rose, rather than the bright pink of the diamond each gem wore upon their breast. The ceiling was domed and, while there was no visible lighting anywhere, not even Greg, with his old eyes, had trouble seeing anything.

The gems were arranged in two rings, one set standing next to the walls, working on screens embedded in the ship. Gem text—composed of branching lines forming intricate patterns—crawled across screens, segments occasionally passed between stations with a flick of fingers. In the second ring, gems sat at desks and before projected screens, likewise deep in analysis, though these mostly worked in small teams—pairs and triplets—at single stations, pointing out bits of data, chattering excitedly to one another as they picked out details and constructed their documents.

And, at the center of the room, there was a trio of chairs, blocky and rather identical, but for size. Sitting in the smallest of the three was Coral, speaking with Pearl, who sat on the chair’s arm, looking about the bridge in speculation, barely paying attention to Coral’s screen, which flashed through sketches of Steven in a wide variety of attire. Standing in front of the opposite and largest chair was Jasper, who came forward to rest at-ease before Steven, nodding down on him and, just a fraction to either side, to Greg and Garnet.
“The Feldspars have confirmed, all systems came through atmo in perfect condition. We’re ready for takeoff, on your order.” Thus announced, Jasper took a step back, inclining her head just so, sweeping an arm back towards the central chair. Not quite so large as Jasper’s, nowhere near as small as Coral’s.

Grinning, Steven followed his gem’s invitation, coming to stand before the seat of command, crossing his arms as he looked out across the bridge. He surveyed his gems, who, one by one, paused in their work to focus on their diamond. “Pyrope,” Steven said, nodding to a dark-red, nearly black gem, who sat directly before him, at a console all her own. “How about we let down the top?”

The dark gem grinned, her rows of sharp teeth enough to put even Sharky the amethyst to shame. Reaching out to her console, she pushed a single button.

Up above, five cracks formed on the ceiling, forming a pentagon in the center, extending beyond and down the dome, up to the wall stations of the second line of gems. There was a faint whir, a soft mechanical clicking, and the cracks slowly rotated and parted, wider up top, as the ceiling seemed to curve and fall away. The sections arrayed themselves in a delicate, organic design, leaving the sky clear. For a moment, it seemed as if there was nothing between the gems and Earth’s atmosphere once more, but a soft spray of seafoam where the dome had once been confirmed that, while the view was utterly clear, something invisible—far more unobtrusive than even glass—remained.

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” Amethyst said, looking about at the final shape of the ship before setting Steven with a flat expression. “A rose.”

Steven shrugged, and sang out, “Traditiooooon.”

Chuckling, Greg nodded about at the interior view of the mechanical rose. “Much better than a foot, kiddo.”

“To be honest, that’s not what was first suggested,” Steven said, taking his seat and easily finding a comfortable position to settle in, despite the unyielding angles. “The original designs were...well...the best of them was a belly.” He slapped a hand to his stomach, next to his gem. There was a great hollow “thud” at the impact, and a little jiggle. “They just got worse, from there.”

“I can’t see how,” Amethyst replied.

Skinny leaned over, whispering in Amethyst’s ear.

Amethyst’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull. “Wh...” She looked to Steven, waving her arms in the air. “DUDE! Why didn’t you go with Blue Diamond’s suggestion! I’d have paid so much to see you come flying in on a gigantic sch—”

“Pyrope,” Steven barked, voice shrill, “lets go!”

The ship jolted up into the air with no further warning, the movement just abrupt enough to send Amethyst toppling from her seat beside Skinny and Carnelian. Rather than protesting, however, she just laughed, still caught up in the idea of Steven’s arrival on a ship of a particular design.

Greg had wobbled, as well, but fell back against Garnet, who had, of course, been ready for this abrupt turn of events. Rather than showing any irritation at the lack of notice, however, she just smirked at Steven. “I second Amethyst.”
Steven glared at her. “Not helping.”

“I wasn’t intending to.”

What little attention Pearl had reserved for Coral was lost as the view of the outside world shifted. Sitting up straighter, craning her head to get just that little extra sliver of sightline, Pearl watched as the Temple and the beach receded into the distance. “Ah, such a smooth acceleration! I assume we will be breaking the sound barrier, yes? Oh, it’s such a pity that the Mask Island warp has been broken all this time. We might have beaten those lapises, if we could just warp in! Though I imagine this ship can far outstrip them in space. What speed does this ship reach, by chance?”

“Well, by chance,” Pyrope began, grinning at Pearl, bright red eyes flashing in the sunlight, “about three parsecs a minute.”

“Three parsecs a...my goodness.” Pearl pressed a hand to her chest, leaning in towards the pilot. “You’re kidding me? Homeworld had only just broken light speed when I arrived on Earth! Three parsecs...that is...how do you not dissipate your form!?”

“Through the wonders of science,” Pyrope cackled, running a loving hand along her control panel. “You want to see what this little lady can really do?”

“Oh, would I,” Pearl purred, squeezing her shoulders up, beaming at the dark-red gem.

“Maaaaybe when we’re not in atmo,” Steven edged in, looking between the two gems. “It, uh...probably wouldn’t be good for the planet.”

“Ah, true,” Pyrope sighed, slouching in her chair, kicking one leg out to cross over the other. “The quantum-crystalline pathway is somewhat disruptive towards dense collections of atoms.”

“Says the gem that exploded a T Tauri star her first week on duty,” Spinel interjected, cutting her eyes sideways to her neighbor.

Pyrope growled, long-nailed fingers twiddling above the touch-input of her console. “Says the gem that transferred White Diamonds last call directly into Steven’s toilet.”

“Why do we even have that screen!?” Spinel shouted, throwing her arms in the air.

Steven covered his face, which had gone bright red. “Not for that,” he said, causing Spinel to wilt.

“Apologies, My Diamond,” the dark-blue gem whispered, but Steven just waved a hand at her.

“White doesn’t understand biologics, she didn’t even notice.”

“Yeah, but Steven couldn’t go in there for a month without warning you not to forward his calls,” Pyrope snickered, earning a glare from Spinel. “‘Call waiting, My Diamond, whenever you’re done urinating.’”

“‘Oh, Steven,’” Spinel responded, her voice canted just a few notes up, a little nasal harshness added to the tone, her words suddenly matching Pyrope’s cadence with such precision that even Garnet jolted in surprise, “‘should I punch a wormhole through the WR binary system, or should I curve around a bit and save us all?’”

“Oh my stars,” Chalcedony spoke up, rubbing at her face, “will you two just go somewhere and fuse already!”
“ExCUSE me!” Spinel yelped, leaning back in her chair. Her discomposure was not helped by the wave of snickers that went across the bridge. Nor, it seemed, did these help the black blush on Pyrope’s cheeks, extending back and along her nape.

“Please tell me we’re almost there,” Steven groaned, rubbing at his forehead.

“Y-yes, Steven,” Pyrope creaked, tapping at her console. Up above, the rapid passage of the clouds slowed to a more reasonable pace, and then dropped away as the ship descended, passing a few startled birds as they came to rest, once more, on the edge of waves.

“Okay...okay.” Steven took a deep breath and stood, shoulders held back, as he struggled for some sense of authority amidst the madness that was his gems. “Spinel, Pyrope, can you behave, or do you need to stay here on the bridge?”

“No, Steven,” and “No, My Diamond,” were the mumbled responses, with the surrounding gems laughing softly to one another.

“Good. And Spinel,” Steven said, looking to the comms gem, “you know we have to leave things as we found them on this planet, right? What’s the rule?”

Spinel sighed. “If it moves on its own, I don’t get to move it.”

“Exactly.”

“That fern wasn’t moving,” Spinel muttered.

“I missed that,” Steven drawled, looking to the gem, who stood up under his scrutiny.

“Nothing,” she said, syllables clipped, and darted away from her station, leading the exodus of gems.

Greg, who had watched the entire exchange with a little grin on his face, came to stand by his son’s side. “You sure I’m not their grandpa? Cause you sure sound like their dad.”

Groaning, Steven looked up to the sky. “Pyrope,” he said, voice just a bit deeper than normal, “I will turn this ship around, so help me....”

“Oh yeah,” Greg said, nudging his son’s ribs. “You are so a dad.”

“Ugh. Then tell me when they’ll start behaving, will you?”

Greg snorted. “In my experience, never, and then they’ll go off and become some sort of space-emperor.”

“At least they’ll go, then,” Steven said, but it was with a smile. Jerking his head to the bridge’s doorway, he urged the remaining few gems—himself, Garnet, Pearl and Coral—to join him on the walk outside, which they dutifully did.

“How has the watermelon tribe been, by the way?” Steven asked Garnet as they entered the curved hallway. “I know you made sure they were okay after all the destruction from the Cluster, but, well. Been years. And I honestly hadn’t expected them to survive past the first plantings.”


“Wait,” Steven said, pausing at the top of the ramp, looking down on the beach. “Wait, what?”
Down below, three dozen gems stood on the sand, weapons drawn, tense and growling as they focused on the treeline, where easily thrice their number of little melon people stood, fruit-teeth bared. Pairs of melon Stevens stood beside tree-trunk canons, one waiting at the rear of each weapon, the other holding pairs of coconuts, ready for the reload. Others held sharpened bamboo poles or rocks and slings, and a group of were tying off a vine rope, which strained to hold up a dangling, grinning gem.

“Oh my stars,” Spinel said, eyes shining with tears as she spun slowly. “They’re so cute.”

“Someone shatter me,” Steven muttered, walking down the ramp. Raising his voice, he called out across the sand, “Hey, calm down! It’s me! Ah, shards, how many generations has it been for you all, I bet no one here even remembers—”

“Rah rah!” One of the watermelon women—or nominally a woman, with a belt of flowers about her round waist—shouted, pointing her spear not at Steven, but to one of the quartzes. “Rah!”

“I think they remember,” Jasper drawled, looking down upon the weapon, nonplussed. “Shall I—”

“No, no,” Steven interrupted. “Stars, I had nightmares about coming home and starting a war. This is not the one I envisioned.” Shaking his head, he addressed his gems, voice slow, soothing. “We don’t want to attack them. It’s not like they’ll be able to hurt Spinel. Just so long as they don’t get spooked, we’ll be—”

“My Diamond!” A voice called from the treetops, and Laz launched herself over the melons, landing beside her fellow gems. And landing rather close, in particular, to one large, orange gem. The female melon leader looked to the ocean gem. To the quartz warrior. Her beady black eyes seemed to enlarge, and she jumped back, screeching. “RAH RAAAAAAH!”

Across the sands, the other melon people took up the call. Whatever was said, half of the creatures ran back into the trees, abandoning weapons and comrades, but one melon boy, shorter than the rest, yelped in panic and re-aimed his cannon. With a yank on the string trigger, a roar rang out across the beach and something exploded forth.

Jasper had seen the shift in aim, and her eyes went wide. “LAZ!”

Jumping forward, the champion reached out, an arm coming up to encircle the blue gem, pulling her in close as she spun them both about.

There was a sharp crack and a grunt from Jasper as a coconut slammed into the quartz’s back, the impact cracking the fruit open, soaking and tangling her hair with fibrous strands.

“Jasper!” Laz called out, wings flashing wide as she pushed her arms against the orange gem’s wide chest, trying to examine over her assaulted companion. “Jasper, are you okay?”


“Something scared it,” Laz said, peeking over Jasper’s shoulder, to the little melon boy, who had fallen over as the canon went off, and who was now trying to crawl backwards, away from the blue and orange gems. “It’s alright, little guy. What spooked you?” she called out after the creature, voice low, trying to soothe.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you,” a rather similar voice replied, and Lapis fell from the sky, landing beside Jasper and the lazuli in her arms. She glared at the large gem, though she spoke to her counterpart. “There’s a lot of history on this island to cover.”
Scowling down on the intruding gem, Jasper loosened her grip on Laz, letting her fall to the ground. Once free, though, rather than focusing on the other water gem, Laz darted around Jasper’s side, brushing at her back, dislodging little chunks of coconut and tsking at the mess.

“Well, I mean, if this is about that Malachite incident—” she began, but was quickly cut off by Lapis’s shout.

“Incident. That...that wasn’t an incident,” Lapis said, fists tightening at her sides. “That was a year of torment, trying to keep Steven safe from that...that... menace!”

“Menace?” Jasper snapped back, looming over the elder blue gem. “I wasn’t the one who lied and trapped someone in a fusion! Tell me, Lapis, how long was it before you were taking Peridot for a spin?”

“How dare you!”

“Don’t even try to act high and mighty, Lapis. If anyone here is dangerous, it’s you.”

“Damn right I’m dangerous,” Lapis growled, spreading her wings, their edges glittering and sharp. “And it’s past time for everyone else to realize that you are just a scared, weak gem who has spent the last five thousand years strutting about and taking your failures out on others!”

Jasper opened her mouth to shout back, but Steven beat her to it, calling out, deep and commanding, “Jasper!”

Clenching her teeth, Jasper turned slitted eyes on her diamond. A low rumble came from her chest.

“You didn’t expect anything better,” he reminded, and waited.

Jasper growled once more, holding it long, then sighed. With a final slit-eyed look at Lapis, she stepped back, into the crowd of quartzes, who obliged by surrounding their leader, keeping their eyes on Lapis, who had also shifted, placing herself between Jasper and the younger lazuli.

“Don’t let your guard down around her,” Lapis hissed, staring down her old prisoner.

“She’s my diamond’s gem,” Laz responded.

Lapis snorted. “You think that means you can trust her?”

Shaking her head, Laz answered, “That’s not why I trust her.”

Snapping her head about, Lapis stared at her younger counterpart. Wings quivered. “I’m trying to help you.”

“I know,” Laz said, crossing her arms. “And I think you need to stop.”

Lapis leaned back, a little muscle in the corner of one eye twitching twice. “Fine,” she hissed. “But I’ll be waiting for when that beast gives herself away.” With a final edged glare at Jasper, the ocean gem shot into the sky, flying out over the waves, leaving the beach only a bit less tense as just one battle remained brewing.

“Bitch,” Jasper muttered, earning a glare from the remaining lazuli. There was no apology, and Laz turned her back on the orange gem, wings fluttering in dismissal.

“I regret everything,” Steven muttered, but, this major crisis averted, he turned back to the great watermelon-gem war, ready to address the more minor issues of the day. “Spinel, could you
possibly help us out by doing your job?"

Spinning slowly at the end of her vine, the dark blue gem gave her leader an upside-down, cross-armed salute. “Aye aye, My Diamond!” Twisting her hips, she spun back around to face the few remaining watermelon villagers and, opening her arms wide, proclaimed “Rah rah!”

The watermelons stared at the suspended gem.

“Rah rah!” Spinel reiterated. Then gesturing about wildly, she spoke rapidly, though, still, in that single sound. “Rah rah! Rah! Rah rah rah! Raaaaah rah rah! Rah!”

The leader of the watermelon people stared at Spinel, blinking rapidly. Tentative, she replied “R...rah?”

“Rah!” Spinel confirmed. Pointing to Steven, she said “Rah rah rah!” Then she gestured at Jasper, and back to Steven. “Rah rah rah rah!” Pointing to Jasper, she hulked over, baring her teeth, booming a deep “raaaaah” before hanging straight down again, cutting her arms and negating with “Rah!” She then pointed to Laz, and, in a high-pitched voice, sang “raaaaaah rah rah rah.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks, fluttering her eyelids, then snorted, rolling her eyes and flipping her hand back to the gems, dismissive. “Rah.”

With measurable skepticism, the leader glanced at Steven, then back to Spinel. “Rah rah?”

Spinel nodded, the gesture jostling her. “Raaaaaaah!”

“Rah rah rah?”

“Rah!”

“R...rah?”

Spinel twisted her hips to spin about and address her diamond. “She doesn’t believe you’re the Creator. You don’t look like these guys anymore.”

“Fair enough,” Steven said. He considered, lips pursed, then snapped his fingers. Looking to the watermelon people, he pressed a finger to the side of his nose.

Instantly, the leader followed suit. At her back, the remaining Stevens also perked up and copied the gesture, until one final creature was left, looking about at his fellows in confusion.

Steven looked upon the remaining watermelon being—the same one who had fired upon his gems—and sighed. “Sorry, buddy. I’ll make it quick.” Then, closing his eyes, the diamond went still.

The chosen watermelon blinked, and, as his eyes opened again, his posture changed. Subtly, but noticeably. He stood, and looked out upon the watermelon tribespeople. Raising his arms, he proclaimed “Rah rah!”

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Pearl muttered, but her objections were ignored as the true Watermelon Steven-Steven went into a brief, but impassioned proclamation.

“You should have seen him trying to make peace when the quartzes had a fight over who got to have the single room on the trip out,” Moss Agate said, shaking her head at her fruit-composed leader.

“That room was mine by right!” Skinny shouted.
“Ex- cuse me?” Carnelian responded, bristling, and the two gems faced one-another, muscles tensing and popping into relief.

Smacking her lips, Moss looked to Pearl. “Can I stay in that Temple place with you?”

Pearl laughed, a little shrill. “I live with my girlfriend, actually.”

“Oh,” Moss said, grinning. “I can share.”

Eyes widening, face a bright blue, Pearl not-so-subtly stepped away.

“Ah. Well.” Moss shrugged. “If you ever change your mind, I’ve been curious about fusing with a pearl for ages....”

Pearl keened, but, once more, it was the gray Chalcedony who came to the rescue, coming forward and wrapping an arm about Moss Agate’s shoulders, pulling her in close.

“You’re done,” the quartermaster said, and Moss just sighed, nodding.

“Rah raaaaaaaaah!” Watermelon Steven-Steven finished. He closed his beady eyes and, a moment later, opened those of his gem-human body, shaking his head to clear it.

Steven’s host pressed little nub hands to his mouth and looked out upon his fellows.

There was a pause. Then, slowly, the watermelon leader nodded her head. Turning to the diamond leader, she raised a hand in the air and bellowed out “Rah raaaaaaaaah!”

“Rah raaaaaaaaah!” As one, the watermelons rushed upon Steven, repeating their leader’s cry, and raised him up, not high, but rather low, his head significantly closer to the ground as he rested upon their shoulders. Chanting, the villagers marched into the jungle, taking their creator along with.

Jasper watched the retreat, brows high. “What...just happened?”

“Diplomacy!” Spinel proclaimed, wafting back and forth in the breeze, mohawk dragging in the sand, creating a little spiral pattern. She looked up, towards her bound feet, and frowned.

“Oh...could someone let me down?”

Pyrope grinned. “Oh. With pleasure. Flexing her right hand, the gem on the back of her hand glowing briefly, a dagger flipping free of the crystal and landing in her palm.

“Wait, no!” Spinel shouted, holding her arms out. “I meant gent—”

With a flick of the wrist, Pyrope threw the dagger at Spinel’s feet, the blade slicing just a hair above her soles, splitting the vine rope before thudding into the tree trunk behind.

“—leeeeeeeee!” Spinel screamed as she crashed into the ground, face-first.

Smirking, Pyrope flounced forward, taking the direct route to the tree, which meant walking over Spinel’s awkwardly angled back. Pulling the dagger from the tree, she brushed it along her pants legs to clean off the sap. Then, tossing the dagger into the air, she held her right hand out, allowing the weapon to fall until the split-second before it would have impacted with her gem, at which point the dagger turned to light and was sucked back into the liminal space.

“You suck,” Spinel said, into the dirt.

“Aw,” Pyrope pouted. Stepping once more onto Spinel’s back, she leaned down, patting the gems’s
head on one of the bare sides, next to the pink mohawk, and traipsed off to rejoin the gathered crew as they followed their diamond into the jungle of Mask Island.

“For a species with no written tradition and such a limited lifespan, they have managed to preserve an admirable number of old ceremonies,” Coral said, preening under her flower crown, playing with the little shells which had been woven into her braid, and in particular with the bright pink bit of coral threaded onto her hair tie. It had taken the watermelon people remarkably little time to adorn the pearl—especially considering their lack of fingers—and she had hummed in great satisfaction during the entire procedure.

“I think they’re making it up on the fly,” Pearl responded, ducking her head as yet another orchid was woven into her short hair.

“Oh, well.” Coral shrugged. “It’s still rather nice to have one of the species on this planet greet their diamond with due courtesy. That ‘mayor’ woman was rather...lacking.” Sniffing, Coral lifted her head up high, allowing a watermelon man to brush a large purple flower over her cheeks, leaving a trail of pollen under each eye.

Pearl looked to her younger counterpart, eyes roving over her face and her long, braided hair. “Right,” she drawled. “It would be best if you didn’t voice that opinion around her.”

“Why?” Coral asked, raising a shapely brow. “She’s just a human.”

“She may be a human, but she’s quite accomplished. After all,” smirking, Pearl sat up straight, nose raised high, “I trained her alongside Steven. She’s quite a warrior.”

Frowning, Coral faced forward again, across the fire, to where her diamond sat, surrounded by watermelon attendants, constantly thanking and demurring and apologizing.

“Pearl, Pearl!” Sol called out, rushing forward and sliding on her knees to stop beside the pale gem. “What’s this?” The gem on her right cheek set up a glow, a projection beaming out before her, showing a full-color video of the jungle floor, where a pair of eight-legged creatures faced one another. The smaller, more brilliantly-decorated of the two shuffled back and forth, two of its legs raised high, waving in the air, its rump shimmying to almost a blur, despite the high frame-rate of the peridot’s gem. The rapid movement seemed to make one of the false eyes on the spider’s backside close in a rapid wink. “Are they trying to fuse?”

“Oh!” Pearl clapped her hands. “No, not fusion, but it is a dance! That is the Mask Island peacock spider! The one performing is the male of the species. The female appears to be seeking out a strong mate to fertilize her eggs. If he impresses her with his dance, she may choose to mate with him. If he fails...she will eat him.”

“Oh man,” Chalcedony said, leaning over to observe the performance. “Same.”

“Are there any tigers here?” Sol asked, her projection disappearing. “Or, oh, what about a sabertooth tiger!?”

“Oh, this island is far too small for that,” Pearl replied. “And the last pride of saber-toothed cats died off a few years after I arrived on the planet.” She paused, then added, “That was...unrelated to gem arrival.”

“Oh!” Hush bounded in to join the conversation. “What about a tyrannosaurus!?”

“Seconded,” Skinny grinned. “T-rex is goals.”
Coming forward, Swift laughed, nudging her younger team-member’s shoulder with a knee. “They don’t have dinosaurs running around, rookie,” she said.

Pearl nodded in agreement.

“Those are only in the zoos, anymore.

Pearls nod morphed to a shaking of the head. She looked to Steven. “I think perhaps Steven should have spent a bit more time clarifying what is fiction in the media we sent along.”

Hush wilted. “So...no tyrannosaurus?”

“No tyrannosaurus,” Steven confirmed, giving his gem a sad smile.

Swift considered this. She looked to Pearl. “Okay. Then the platypus. That’s fake, too?”

“Oh, no.” Pearl called to her gem, projecting an image of the duck-billed mammal, swimming among gently waving underwater weeds. “Those are quite real.”

Swift and Sol watched the video. Sol shook her head. “This planet is fractured.”

“Language,” Elder chided from her place at Steven’s side. The tips of each of her hundred fingers was wrapped around the stem of a flower, in a hundred unique species and shades, elbows on knees as she held up her two bouquets.

“Sorry, Elder,” Sol mumbled. “Just...why is that a thing, but a big lizard isn’t?”

“Oh, there’s big lizards here,” Amethyst broke in. “We should go to Africa! You can see my favorite!” Glowing, Amethyst shifted, turning into a long, dark-green, powerful reptile. “The crocodiiiiiiiiile!”

“Perhaps you should show them the pig, next,” Pearl sniffed. “You’re already a total ham.”

Grinning, Amethyst complied, turning into a little round creature with big eyes and dainty hooves and the curliest tail in the local galactic arm.

“Oh my stars,” Spinel whispered, scooting over and wrapping Amethyst up in her arms. “That’s so cute!”

“Wait until you she puts on the cat,” Peridot said, grinning at her companion.

Squealing at the suggestion, Amethyst morphed once more, becoming a fluffy, purring creature in Spinel’s arms.

“Oh no,” Spinel breathed, pressing a hand to Amethyst’s fur. “I want one!”

“You want a t-rex, too,” Chalcedony snickered.

“I do!” Spinel sobbed, pressing her face into Amethyst’s coat.

Jasper looked to Steven. “You know we’re not getting off-planet without getting her an animal, don’t you?”

“I am beginning to realize,” Steven sighed. “Maybe we should try to distract her. Head out somewhere else....”
The suggestion apparently was all the assembled gems needed. They turned upon Steven with shining eyes, and shot out their suggestions.

“Empire City!”

“The Big Donut!”

“I wanna see rain!”

“No! A hurricane!”

“Oh, oh, can we go to a dance club?

“No, a rave!”

“Ocean Town!”

“What, after what Steven told us about that place? No, thanks, I prefer my gem intact.”

“The MOON!”

“Jersey!”

“Woah, we’re trying to not start a war.”

“Funland!”

“The battlefield,” Skinny said, drawing silence from the collective quartz geode. She looked to Steven. “I want to go back to the battlefield.”

Steven’s lips parted, but no sound came. He turned to Jasper.

The warrior looked to her hands. Slowly, she nodded.


There weren’t many open spaces to land the ship. The strawberry overgrowth covered almost all available ground, the little patches barely enough for gems to stand on. It took Pyrope several silent minutes to find an adequate bare patch, and she descended slowly, careful to cut out the engines just a little early, to keep them from kicking up dirt. They landed with a small jolt, but no one complained. Even Greg was quiet, looking out at the towering weapons and berries.

There was some hesitation to disembark. It was Jasper that took the lead, her smaller, thinner counterpart following close at her side. Their footsteps crunched audibly in the silence of the other gems, joined by the dozen amethysts and Carnelian. Chalcedony and Moss Agate held back, beside the ramp. This was not their place. It was a place for old quartz warriors.

And Crystal gems.

Skinny fixated on an enormous axe, embedded blade-down amidst a pile of bright-red strawberries. The wind disturbed her hair, and she whispered, “That was ours.” Turning her head just a bit to the side, she looked to Jasper. “Remember? We were fighting that one gem. I guess...it must have been a fusion, huh? It was so big....”

“Yeah,” confirmed Jasper. “We needed Kicks to help us.”.
Skinny suddenly grasped at her right shoulder, nails digging into her flesh. “Yeah...yeah. Idiot,” the little jasper creaked, closing her eyes tight.

“You’ve never mentioned a ‘Kicks,’” Steven said, marveling at the axe. It was easily four times his size. The gem that must have wielded it...only a fusion. He knew gems of the same type often fused, but the power needed for Jasper, of all gems, to be lumped in with others of her type....

“We didn’t,” Jasper said. “She was shattered.”

Skinny grabbed her shoulder tighter. “Wh...while we were...” The thin gem couldn’t finish. Amethyst gasped, turning pale.

One of her geode sisters, Chip, pointed towards a spot on the horizon, where a spear thrust up towards the sky. “That one. That’s 8XO and 6MT’s.” She sighed. “I...did anyone give them a nickname, before the battle?”

Gems all across the clearing shook their head, murmuring.

“Does...does anyone see a...” Carnelian swallowed thickly. “Is there a claymore?”

“A big one?” Steven asked.

“No. I mean, not really big. It was...it belonged to just one gem.”

Sharky sighed. “Fire Agate. I think...I think she was over there.” She pointed southwards. “Remember, fighting that crazy gem? The one with the hammer and that...” She shuddered. “That laugh.”

Garnet and Pearl looked to one another, mouths open in shock.

“I didn’t think everything would keep growing this long,” Skinny said, walking forward, laying two hands on one of the monstrous strawberries. “Didn’t seem like there were enough of us for all this energy.”

“There wasn’t,” Garnet said. “Most of it is from shattered Crystal Gems.”

As one, the quartz warriors turned, looking upon the last two remnants of a five-millennium-gone enemy army.

Pearl pointed to the east, where a thick pike of strawberries rested. “That’s where Moonstone and her cavalry was shattered. And there.” A few degrees north. “Rhodonite. And Sodalite. Sphene. Chrysocolla. Serpentine. Sanidine. Schorl.” She pointed all around the battlefield, to weapons and to piles of strawberries, until her hand began to shake and she let it fall to her side. “W...we had a pyrope, too. And a battalion of peridots. And this little siberite. She didn’t even come up to my knees, and we told her to stay back, but she...” Pearl pressed a hand to her mouth, tears suddenly streaking down her face. “I tried...I tried to get her back to Rose, but she...” Pearl shook her head, two tears flying from her cheeks. “I told her not to go.”

They stood there. Two opposing armies, their war so long-ended that the land had healed over, and the only marks left were the ones they had given one other.

Pearl looked to Carnelian. “A...a claymore, you said? Did it have a pink diamond on the pommel?”

Carnelian nodded and made to respond but Pearl held out a hand.
“Wait,” she said. “Just...wait one moment.”

The warp pad was not far off. In just three bounds, Pearl had alighted on the surface, her toes barely making contact before she turned to light and was whisked into the aether.

Skinny looked to Garnet, brows drawn. “Your pearl is very strange.”

The fusion shook her head. “She’s no one’s pearl. And...” A little smile, a little pain. “She has her reasons.”

Before the lithe jasper could respond, the warp pad lit up again, bringing Pearl back to the two armies. She moved back as swiftly, stopping to stand before Carnelian. But, in spite of her hurried movement, there was a certain precision, an extra degree of care as she settled. Perhaps it was due to being a bit off-balance, as in her arms she held something long and sharp, shifting green metal shining in the light of the sun.

The red gem gasped, lunging forward, wrenching the object from Pearl’s outstretched hands. She held it out, looking it over, examining the claymore, from its tapered tip to its broad blade and up to the single crystal—nowhere near large enough to ever be deemed a “gem” by the ancient race—flashing pink on the pommel. Carnelian’s hands clenched on the sword’s grip, and there was enough space there for another two hands to help her with the burden.

She looked to Pearl, and her voice shook. “You...why do you...did you rebels loot every shattered gem on this battlefield!?”

“No,” Pearl replied, serene. “Just the ones I shattered myself.”

Chip shook her head violently. “I know there was a foolish little pearl that fought in the war, but you could never shatter my agate!”

Pearl stepped back from the quartzes. Just far enough to return to the side of her last comrade.

Garnet did not need to be asked. She held out her hand, and Pearl laced their fingers together.

They glowed and melded and rose high above the quartz battalion, and Sardonyx was oddly silent. As she summoned forth her war hammer, there was no silly spinning or tricks. The fusion merely stood before the last of her enemies.

Then she shrank and split, and Garnet and Pearl took her place, meeting the eyes of the army, one by one.

“Siberite. She said it was an amethyst that got her,” Pearl said, looking to the prime gems. “Do...do any of you...do you remember her?”

The quartzes looked to one another, and each shook their head in turn. It was Twist that replied, “We lost a lot of gems that day. She probably didn’t make it, either.”

Pearl let out a soft laugh, hanging her head. “Of course,” she said. “It wouldn’t matter, either way. That was the last battle.” She looked out across the battlefield. “They’re gone. They’re all gone.”

“Not...not...all of them,” one gem replied.

The veterans turned, to find a little gem standing just to the side, equidistant from the armies.

But Amethyst was not looking to her two families. She looked to Steven. “They’re back home,”
He didn’t recognize the gem he held, bubbled, in his arms. The only ones he could recognized by name would have been Jasper or Centipeetle. The former sat next to him on the steps surrounding the Burning Room’s lava pit. The latter was somewhere else on this planet, resting beside her crew, waiting for him to do this one thing. This one thing that he had left his family, his friends, his world behind to learn.

But he knew this gem’s designation. His quartzes had told him. Carnelian Facet-5MJ Cut-3TW. Stone on her right eye. A whole head taller than his own carnelian. Though, of course...this was his own carnelian. One he had never seen before, one he did not make, but one who would feel the same tug, the same connection to her diamond as he already felt holding her gem in his arms.

He could feel it a hundred times over, from the gems hovering above him. Not all of them. Many up there must have belonged to his fellow diamonds. Certainly that little cluster of rubies was not his. The feldspar hovering so low to the ground she almost brushed it, she had a little glow, a little energy that reminded he so much of Peridot that Steven was sure she must have been part of Yellow Diamond’s forces. Twist had even pointed out a sphenite, called her “an old battle-axe, and a dull one at that,” and proceeded to describe the gem’s unending efforts to ingratiating herself to White Diamond.

But this one...this one was his. And, with his gems sitting beside him, looking on, Steven held her close and opened his mouth in song.

It was wordless. It was soft. It was beautiful.

And it was wrong.

Always. It was always wrong. He had a second, a half-second of hope, power rising from his diaphragm, through his barrel chest, up his throat, and the notes that came forth from his mouth were just a melody. Pretty. But trite.

They knew. Before he even stopped singing, his gems knew that, once again, their diamond’s song had been just a song. Not a metamorphosis, not a renewal. Just a song.

Coral leaned forward, taking the bubble gently from her diamond’s hands. “It’s been a long day,” she said, releasing it to float alongside the other bubbled corruptions. “Perhaps it is best if we all retired.”

Steven wanted to negate, but Jasper lay a hand on his shoulder, and, as he looked to her, she gave a small nod. “I think all of us could use some time to process things.”

Steven’s gaze shot over to Skinny, who sat with the claymore in her lap, her fingers idly tracing its pink diamond insignia.

“Yeah,” he said. “Moss, make sure everyone settles down. I doubt anyone wants to sleep, but no training. Informal fights are fine.”

“Why don’t you make sure they settle down?” Jasper asked, a tiny growl edging into her words. “You know you could soothe them.”

“Sure,” Steven grunted. “That’s about the only worthwhile song I have. But there’s one more thing I need to do.” As Jasper prepared to protest, he held up a hand. “It won’t take me five minutes, with Lion’s help. In and out, real quick. I just need to get my atmo suit.”
“Atmo suit?” Pearl broke in, her voice earning a glare from Skinny. “You’re not going into space right now, are you?”

“No, no.” Steven shook his head, and hung it low. Or, not precisely hung his head. He looked down. “I need to go check on them.”

Lion wasn’t precisely “trained,” now. It was more that the man and the beast had come to certain understandings. Most of the time, the feline did as he willed, be his actions mysterious or simply lazy. Other times, there was work to be done.

This bit of work was easy. Just a single jump, only a few miles, not the leaps of light years that had been required of him on the way back to the planet. He arrived with a roar, allowed Steven to slide off his back, and was gone again a bare second later. Steven could remain here, protected by an atmosphere-regulating suit as he was, but Lion...well, no one was sure of the range of the cat’s abilities, but it seemed best to not test them overmuch.

Steven had to turn his entire body to look about the chamber, as twisting his head would have just let him look at the sides of his helmet. Somehow, he was shocked that it was so bright. Why was he so shocked? It had been bright the first time he was here, over eighteen years ago. Bright to almost blinding. But perhaps it was the pain and the fear which had shaded his memories, made this place into a pit of darkness.

He stepped carefully. Now was not the time to disturb this bubble. Yes, it was strong, made not just from his own power, but from that of a thousand, a million nameless gems, but releasing them all would be foolhardy. And likely cruel.

Steven knelt, pressing his gloved hand to the shimmering bubble which encompassed the Cluster.

“Hey,” he whispered. “How you all doing?”

It didn’t answer. They didn’t answer. They slumbered. Waited. Dreamed? Jaser had never spoken of any passage of time while she was trapped in the Temple, but Jasper was a private gem, and he had not thought it right to press.

“I don’t know what to do for you,” Steven said, tracing his fingers along the bubble, picking out the outline of a shard of chalcedony just below. It felt...blue. Yes. That had been one of Blue’s gems. And next to it, a little trio of shards from Yellow Diamond’s forces, a bare pebble from White’s, and so, so, oh so many gems which shined pink in his eyes.

“Would you want to form?” Steven asked. “You’re big, but not too big. We could dig you out. Take you to space. Let you form out somewhere you can’t hurt anyone.

“But...you said it hurt. Would it be worth hurting, for a while, if you’re... alive, in the end?”

“Stars, I just...I just wish I could talk to you!” He slammed his fist to his knee. “I just wish....”

Steven looked at his hand. He pressed it to the bubble. He felt the smooth, crackling material that formed the final barrier between his skin and the vacuum of space. Or, in this case, the deep underground void that surrounded the Cluster.

“I wish I could fix everything,” Steven said, and the Cluster blurred before him as the inside of his helmet was fogged by tears.
Did you make it to the Milky Way, to see the lights all faded?

Chapter Summary

A diamond's duties never end. Steven needs to take a quick trip off-planet to evaluate injection sites for new gems. This time, he decides to take a few old friends along.

"Oooh! Oooh! Hi hi hi hi hi. Where we going? Where we going? Hey. Lady. Where we going? Where we going? Let's go to space!"

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7 theme songs:
"We Know the Way" (from "Moana") by Lin-Manuel Miranda
"Drops of Jupiter" by Train

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Steve? Are you awake already?” Peridot peeked her head around the corner of the couch. Despite the early hour—the summer sun just tipping over the horizon—she seemed as alert as if it had been noon. Her hair was a little flattened on one side—had she been sleeping?—and her visor was askew, but her eyes were sharp as they roved over Beach City’s prodigal son, seeking out signs of the human weakness known as “tired.”

“Hmmm? Oh!” Steven glanced up from his screen, perking up as he realized whom was speaking. “Yeah. Pyrope sent over a flight plan for me to check out.”

“Flight plan?” Peridot repeated, frowning. “You’re not leaving us, are you?”

“No, no,” Steven said, waving the concern off. “Not for more than a few hours, I mean. But it really looks like there’s an ideal route opening up today.” Sighing, he passed a hand over his tablet, the holo-display blinking out. “If we don’t go check out these planets, it might be weeks before we can hit everything as easily.”

“‘We?’ As in, you and your gems?” The little green gem’s fingers twitched. “Setting up...new kindergartens?”

“Ah, well, not sure if you can call most of our setups ‘kindergartens.’” Steven shrugged, rising from the deep couch cushions with some effort. “The most we’ve managed on a planet is four gems, and even that one was monitored remotely until emergence time.”

“But you’re going to inject new gems.”

Steven looked down and immediately leaned back, just a fraction. He had not noticed how close Peridot had gotten in the last thirty seconds. She was just a hair’s breadth from pressing up against him, and she looked ready to climb. “You, uh....”
Peridot’s eyes shone. She held her hands up, clasped before her chest.

“You wanna...come along?”

“I-I don’t want to get in the way of your team!” Peridot stammered, but she was already calling up a display on her enhancer bands and examining some sort of list, on which the name “Elder” featured prominently. What focus she’d had for the diamond was now spent entirely on her own concerns, and there seemed to be many of those. Just a few seconds in, and there were already six highly-detailed bullet items, full of annotations and the gem equivalent of double-underlines and bold-font. Apparently, what Homeworld had denied the gem in physical advantages had not been similarly skimped in terms of mental acuity; Elder herself could not have worked faster than this frantic kindergartener. “I’d just go along to observe your methods, compare them to Era 2 Homeworld practices and records of Era 1 procedures, nothing major, just for my own curiosity, you know. However, if you have any questions you want to throw my way, I’d certainly be happy to give some advice, just speaking as a Peridot with two thousand years of experience. I mean, that’s nothing in the grand scheme of things, but I’d be entirely willing to help improve your colonization methodology!”

“Just like a peridot,” Steven said, soft enough that even he could barely hear the words. Reaching out, he settled a hand on the gem’s shoulder.

It worked. Derailed, Peridot looked up from her outline, blinking in confusion as she reconnected to the world.

“We’d love to have you aboard,” Steven said.

Peridot gave him a tentative smile, cheeks turning deep green. She ducked her head to hide her momentary reaction. “Wow,” the gem murmured, reaching up to squeeze Steven’s forearm. “Thanks.”

“We head out in about an hour,” Steven said, letting his friend go. “Meet you on the beach?”

“A-an hour?” Peridot squeaked. “Oh my stars! That’s not enough time! Nyeeeeeuh!” She darted off, vaulting the coffee table and nearly tripping on the warp pad stairs.

Just before she could sort herself out and activate her door on the Temple Gate, the portal began to glow on its own, splitting down the middle and allowing an entirely different gem to enter the beach house.

“NYEEEEEEH!” Peridot danced about in her rising panic. Thrusting an arm to the side, she commanded the new arrival, “GARNET! OUT OF THE WAY!”

Garnet’s brows rose, but she made no comment as she took a step to the left, the Temple Gate solidifying behind her for just a split-second before Peridot’s arm on the star lit up and the door once more turned to light. The elder gem turned her head to watch as Peridot flung herself through the barely-open door, which seemed to slam shut behind her.

Slowly, Garnet turned to look at Steven. Though her visor obscured her eyes, Steven could imagined she was rolling them. “Don’t let Peridot eat anything on your trip,” Garnet advised, coming to join the man in the living room. “She throws up if she gets too excited.”

Steven frowned. “Gems don’t even have stomachs; how does she throw up?”

Garnet sighed. “Magnificently.”
Nodding solemnly, Steven replied, “Noted. How about you? You want to come along, see how we do things?”

Garnet considered, but it wasn’t long before she shook her head. “I don’t like the idea of leaving Earth undefended, in case we missed a corrupted gem or if the...if something were to happen.”

“If the Diamonds invade,” Steven said, finishing Garnet’s statement. At her silence, he sighed. “Garnet, I told you, they won’t come here. Diamonds don’t interfere in another’s colonies.”

“Diamonds do what they want,” Garnet snapped.

Steven scowled, but made no reply. Any defense he might make would still be a defense of the Diamond Authority, and there was no making Garnet listen to such words.

She, too, seemed to realize the fight was best forgotten. “I suppose it goes without saying that your father wouldn’t be interested in going into space, even to see his ‘grand-gems’ being made.”

“Well, that’s some awkward phrasing,” Steven said, fighting down the color in his cheeks. “But yeah, I was just going to leave him a communicator. Which reminds me!” Turning about, Steven crouched next to the couch, rooting in the bag he had taken off his ship, producing a fist-sized cube, which he handed over to the leader of the Crystal Gems. “This one can make multiple calls,” Steven said, grinning.

“How thoughtful,” Garnet drawled, but there was a quirk to her lips.

“One for Dad, one for Pearl—since she isn’t around all the time—and one for...” Steven paused on removing a fourth crystal from his bag. He looked at it a moment, and held it out to Garnet. “Er...maybe you should give this one to Connie for me? Or Pearl could? Or...anyone?”

Chuckling, Garnet reached out, pushing on Steven’s hand, ushering it back in towards the man’s body. “Oh, no. No. I am not going to be your messenger. You need to talk to that girl, Steven.”

“Do I have to?” Steven whined. He let his eyes go wide and watery, lower lip quivering as he tried, once more, to avoid his responsibilities.

“Yes. Now stop it.” Garnet snatched the other two crystals from Steven’s hands. “I will take these to Pearl and your father. Don’t worry, neither is particularly concerned with you going off-planet; not with Peridot and Amethyst going along.”

“I hadn’t invited Amethyst, yet?”

Garnet snorted. “You invited Peridot. They go together, nowadays. Now, before you ask,” Garnet said, placing her free hand on Steven’s open mouth, “it’s not my place. And that’s none of your concern, right now. Right now, you need to go talk to Connie.”

Groaning, head lolling back, Steven griped, “She’s not going to be happy to see me.”

“Oh, she’ll be fine. Just...hmmm...” The fusion tilted her head just a bit to the side. Her visor flashed. She grinned. “Just make sure you mention ’fifty parsecs out.’”

“Why?” Steven grumbled. “Is that how far she can throw me, now?”

With a chuckle, Garnet pushed at Steven’s shoulder, ushering him towards the front door. “Further, I think. Now, go. The walk to the mayor’s house will do you good.”
“Yes, Garnet,” Steven muttered, and headed out the door.

It was good that he left so early. Steven was ten minutes into his walk before he realized he was heading towards Connie’s childhood home. It was absurd to think the woman might live there, especially given her position in the city, but it was an old habit.

Luckily, it was nearly the same route to Beach City’s odd little combination of City Hall, government offices, and mayoral housing, so he just stepped over a street and continued on his way inland.

Steven had never quite understood what Dewey did for Beach City, besides constantly running for reelection, driving around in a modified ice cream truck (which had caused him no end of heartache as a toddler), and making public appearances that were as likely to end in heckling as cheers (and most often both). But he must have done something for the little seaside city to provide fairly lavish accommodations for their civic leaders. That, or the original mayors had managed to entrench themselves pretty well, and it was just easier to let the mayors of the city live on in paid-off housing, rather than compensate them in some other manner.

Steven had a little moment of disorientation on arriving at the mansion and finding no security guards, as there had been in his childhood. And hadn’t they been another odd quirk of Beach City? Although Steven supposed they could have been around to deal with the frequent gem incursions, rather than more human threats. Still, it seemed Connie Maheswaran had eschewed hired protection in favor of her own abilities and, to be fair, that was likely the wiser choice. After all, she had nearly beaten a diamond just three days ago. Corrupted gems were probably just a nuisance.

It was early in the day, and it seemed that City Hall wasn’t quite ready for business. Still, the door opened shortly after Steven knocked, and while some part of him expected the door to be answered by a decidedly British man in a full tuxedo, Steven was far more delighted when he was greeted by the stocky figure of Sadie Miller.

...Sadie Barriga? Miller-Barriga?

“Steven! You’re up early!”

“I am no longer bound by your earthly ‘sleep schedules,’” Steven replied with a grin.

“Ah. Insomnia, huh?” Sadie patted Steven’s arm. “Lars gets that.”

“Oh? How does he deal with it?”

Sadie grinned, brows rising.

Holding up his hands, Steven took a half-step back. “I rescind the question.”

“Truly, the years have made you wise.”

“Well, not wise enough, it seems,” Steven said, reaching into his bag to pull out the final crystal communicator. “I need to give this to Connie. Do you think she’d see me?”

“Oh, not if I asked, she wouldn’t,” Sadie said. Then smirked. “Good thing I’m not asking. Come on in. You should catch her before her second coffee. It’s when she’s at her weakest.”

“Well, that seems hardly fair.” But, despite his objection, Steven replaced the crystal and followed
Sadie’s advice, stepping into the front end of the mayoral mansion.

He’d been here a few times, in his youth. Mostly in the company of Buck Dewey, but the boy’s father, Mayor Bill Dewey, hadn’t been a stranger, either, and Greg had taken his son along on several errands, as well. From filing the business license for It’s A Wash to town hall meetings to that one time the man had gone before one of the city judges to deal with a particularly expensive speeding ticket, courtesy of Pearl’s night chasing Sheena.

(The judge had tried to issue a warrant for Pearl, once the situation was explained, but gave up on realizing there was no way to establish proper jurisdiction for someone who had lived on Earth for several thousand years preceding the first written human language, not to mention the first laws. Also, that the alien could kick his ass, and gladly. That had been an educational day in court.)

So Steven wasn’t overawed by the large entry room or ornate furnishings. He was, however, floored by the easily four-foot-tall portrait of one Mayor Connie Maheswaran which was displayed at the top of the double staircase. Blown up that large, it would have been all too easy to notice the flaws on the woman’s face, but every bit of her was presented to perfection, from black suit and expertly applied makeup, to the little shine in her eyes as she seemed a second from laughing at her photographer, and the arresting sight of her hair cascading down her shoulders, past her waist, until it almost touched the floor. The photograph seemed to have been a candid shot, with the woman in the middle of gathering papers from an overflowing stack on her desk, but Steven highly doubted it was chosen for this display without extensive consideration. Bill Dewey’s portrait in City Hall had been dignified and distant; a symbol of power. Connie’s portrait put her in the middle of work, but not overwhelmed by the burden. Capable, enthusiastic, always engaged as she supported her city.

Sadie paused at Steven’s side, looking up at the photograph of her boss. She snorted out a laugh. “Connie hates that thing.”

“What?” Steven looked down to the woman at his side, frowning. “Why? She looks great.”

“Oh, yeah.” Giving a shrug, Sadie dismissed such petty considerations as self-consciousness. “She just thinks it’s weird to come home and see a big-ass picture of yourself. She tried to convince city council to switch it out for a painting of old-town Beach City or the boardwalk, but, well...” Sadie gestured at the photograph. “As you can see, even Connie can’t win all her battles.”

“Guess not,” Steven said. He knew that feeling.

Still, something in the photo kept holding his attention. “Her hair was...wow. That must have been a lot of work to grow. Why’d she change it?”

“Ah.” Sadie punched Steven’s arm. “You have not earned enough friendship points to unlock this dramatic hair cutting backstory. Try again next level.”

Frowning, Steven made a show of rubbing his arm. With a final study of the portrait, Steven followed Sadie up the right-hand staircase, leaving the friendly gaze of Mayor Connie Maheswaran behind.

“So, you never mentioned exactly what you do in City Hall,” Steven said, looking about the as-yet unlit hallway, peeking into the few offices whose doors had been left open overnight. “I’m imagining it’s not donut delivery.”

Sadie snorted. “Oh, what? That job? I left that place years ago.” She paused a moment, then sighed at herself. “Granted, years after I should have left, but still.”
“Somehow, I always imagined you’d just, like, become district manager. Then regional manager. And maybe CEO. DEO? Donut Executive Officer?”

“Ah, manager was enough, for me. And I was only sticking around there because of...well, Lars.” The woman made no effort of hiding her blush as she glanced at Steven.

Steven grinned. He was always willing to hear about his OTP. “You gave up when he did?”

“Oh, no,” Sadie snorted. “I fired his ass. And then I put in my two weeks’ notice.”

Steven halted in his tracks. He gaped at Sadie. “You fired your husband?”

“Technically,” Sadie hedged, settling hands to her hips, “I fired my coworker-with-benefits.”

“But...but....” The gears of his mind had become stuck. Steven could no longer brain.

When Sadie laughed, it was loud and deep, and Steven had a sudden flash-back to the woman’s mother, in all her large, boisterous enthusiasm. Barbara’s daughter had never grown to match her mother’s height, but it seemed some little bits of her—that laugh in particular— had been inherited down the matrilineal line.

“Ah, it was the kick in the ass he needed. Well, that and his parents evicting him a couple years later. I can not tell you how he managed to get into the police academy, with his work record, but he seems to fit there.”

“And then you got maaaaaaaaa-riiiiiiiiiied,” Steven teased, making kissing noises.

“Yes, Steven,” Sadie drawled. “I am aware. We actually reconnected in City Hall. Right after he got into the academy, I got a clerking job here, and then I took over as Connie’s sort-of secretary when she was elected.”

“Sort-of secretary’?” Steven tilted his head. “What’s that even mean?”

“It means my job is less about managing the Mayor’s schedule, and more about yelling at her to get out of the office and go eat dinner before the city shuts down entirely.” She paused a moment, then shook her head. “And failing, half the time.”

“You’d think, after all those years managing Lars....”

“I know, right? But, well, Connie. She’s on a whole different level of stubborn.”

“I’d noticed,” Steven muttered.

Sadie snorted, dismissing the man’s pain. “You made your bed, Steven. Now you’ve got to lie in it.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Alone.”

Arching back, Sadie stared up at Steven, her mouth hanging open. “Whoa!” She shook her head, trying to clear it. “Whoa! I can’t—hah! Lars is gonna love this!” Grinning, she leaned in and elbowed the man. “Steven made a dirty joke.”

“I-It wasn’t dirty!” Steven yelped, flinching back. “I-I didn’t mean it like—”

“No, no,” Sadie soothed, holding out her hands. “Let it gooooooo, Steven. Please. Let me have this.”
He tried to give Sadie his best Authority Scowl, but it appeared the woman faced far more effective expressions in her average workday, for her only reaction was to snicker and turn, gesturing for him to follow past the last few offices and down to the very end of the hall.

These final doors here were far larger than any of those on the offices elsewhere in City Hall. Two enormous slabs of solid oak, stained just a bit off-color from their fellows. Or, the other doors were off-color, unable to live up to the rich red of these original installations of the old house. They looked heavy. Official. Imposing.

“Maaaybe I should just give you this,” Steven said, once more reaching into his bag, ready to retreat if it meant staying alive a little longer.

“Suck it up, kid,” Sadie barked, once more channeling just a bit of her mother in that firm tone. Grabbing her old friend’s forearm, she thrust one of the doors open, striding inside with surprisingly long steps for someone so short.

Sitting at the same desk that had been in the portrait—now with significantly less paper, replaced by a holographic display and a large crystal decanter full of deep amber liquid—was Mayor Connie Maheswaran. She jolted at the sudden entrance into her office, glancing over from her screens before looking back to her work.

And then snapping her gaze back once more, eyes narrowing as she fixed them, for just a brief moment, on Steven, and then on Sadie.

“You’re fired,” Connie growled, pressing her fingertips down on the edge of her desk. The pressure traveled up into her arms and shoulders, muscles coming into slight relief.

Steven wondered where his mother’s sword was. Perhaps in the umbrella stand?

“No I’m not,” Sadie chirruped, pulling Steven along to stand in front of her boss’s desk. “Here’s a wild idea: you two have a nice talk, and I’ll go get you some more coffee!”

Connie pressed her hands to the sides of a wide mug, glaring at her secretary. “I am more than capable of getting my own coffee.”

“Yes,” Sadie replied. Then, leaning over the desk, she hooked her fingers in the mug’s handle and yanked hard, wresting it from the mayor’s grasp. With a triumphant smirk to her employer, Sadie turned her back on the most powerful woman in Beach City and flounced back down the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Steven looked at the retreating witness. He repressed a whimper. He would not look weak. He was a quartz. He was a diamond. He could talk to an old friend.

He could also throw up. It was something he considered. Very carefully.

“Are your gems like that?” Connie asked, sighing as she leaned back in her chair.

Steven looked back around to address the woman. Not fainting in the process, he was proud to note. “Not nearly so overt, no.”

“Hmmm. Now how do I replace all of Beach City with gems?” Connie murmured, kicking at her desk so her chair swiveled back and forth.

“Ask Ronaldo?” Steven suggested.
Connie winced. “Pass.”

“Wise.” Steven had to congratulate himself. Several seconds of witty repartee! Truly, he was a master of diplomacy. A true diamond.

Connie leveled her gaze on Steven.

He was dead.

“Steven. Why are you here?” She sounded...not tired, but certainly overused. How long had she been in the office? With such a small populace, most departments wouldn’t open until later in the day, or perhaps not on a Thursday at all. Connie, however, had all the appearance of being firmly entrenched in her grind. And ready to return to it, it seemed, as she sat forward in her chair once more, eyes darting across her screen. “Beach-A-Palooza is in two days, and I do not have time for this.”

“Ah...I...I just....” Shaking his head to clear it, Steven rooted about in his bag, producing the communication crystal. He held it out, and tried again. “I have to head off for a few hours. But I wanted to make sure everyone can contact me, in case there’s any problems.”

The mayor’s attention barely flickered to the crystal. She frowned. “Taking the gems to Disneyland or something?”

“That seems like a terrible idea,” Steven said, mind readily supplying images of Spinel going to the Secret Underground Jail after assaulting a costumed mouse. “And, no. Further. But there shouldn’t be any lag in the signal, or anything.” He set the crystal down on the desk. “We’re only going, uh...fifty parsecs out?”

“Uh huh,” Connie said, dismissive.

Then her lips pursed.

She turned her head to focus closely on Steven. “Fifty parsecs?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. “I think that’d be about—”

“One hundred and sixty-three light-years,” Connie interrupted. At Steven’s jolt of surprise, she snorted. “Oh, come on! My best friend was abducted by aliens and you don’t think I earned at least a minor in astronomy?”

“I...hadn’t considered it,” Steven confessed. “You did that because of me?”

“Whatever,” Connie said, waving a hand in dismissal. “You are telling me that you are going on a fifty parsec joy ride around the galaxy?”

“It’s not a joy ride,” Steven protested. “We need to evaluate some planets for potential colonies.”

Connie gaped. “P-planets?”

Steven shrugged. “And a moon.”

Connie was up and out from behind her desk with frightening speed. Grabbing the front of Steven’s shirt, she pulled down, bringing his face to her level. “Steven. You come here, tell me you’re going to other planets, and all you do is give me a space cell phone?”

“I...” Steven swallowed. “Yeeeeeeeesssss?” He tried, subtly, to straighten his back, but all he
succeeded in doing was to dig the collar of his shirt into the back of his neck.

Connie growled, tightening her grip on the shirt’s star. “Steven Quartz Universe, you are the 
*stupidiest* man I have *ever* met!”

“To be fair,” Steven said, “I have no idea what’s going on.”

Connie howled in frustration.

Steven knew he needed to think. But it was very, very hard to do that when Connie had brought his
face down so close to hers. The scent of her shampoo—something with jasmine and vanilla—was
making his heart flip. He could feel her breath on his lips. There was so much gorgeous *rage* in her
eyes. And, shards, he shouldn’t be having these thoughts, but he just wanted to find a way to get
her back on his ship, in his quarters, laid out on his bed, adorned with the light of a million stars
and nothing else. How could he do it? How could he get her to go with him, into space, into his
arms, she would never—

Suddenly, Steven’s brain supplied the answer. Not how to bring this woman home and claim her as
his own, as he had imagined on a thousand lonely nights so far from Earth that the light which
reached him from her star was already older than the entirety of gem civilization. No, not that
blessed answer. Instead, with sudden clarity, Steven realized why the woman had gone suddenly so
*frantic*.

He smirked. Raising a brow, trying to keep the smugness from his voice—for surely she would
notice that and hide back behind a stern facade—Steven asked, for the second time that day, “You
wanna come along?”

Connie squeaked, spine going rigid.

“It’ll just be six hours,” Steven said, shrugging. “Nothing exciting, really. I only ask because
Peridot and Amethyst are coming, and—”

“*YES,*” Connie exclaimed. “What direction are we going? Do you know the names of the stars!? Are you actually going to go *down* on the planets?”

“Well, how else are we going to evaluate them?”

At this answer, Connie reached maximum energy levels. She keened. She bounced on her tip-toes.
She cried out in joy, wrapping her arms about Steven’s neck, her feet dangling several inches off
the ground. “Ah! I can’t! I can’t! I—”

She went still.

“I can’t,” Connie whispered. Arms going limp, she slipped down the diamond’s body, settling back
to Earth. “I...Beach-A-Palooza. I have too much to *do.*”

Steven barely had time to lose all hope before a dismissive laugh came from the office doorway.
Turning as one, Connie and Steven watched Sadie walk in, holding out a travel mug.

“You’re kidding, right?” Sadie asked, stopping before the mayor. “Connie. I went over your
schedule this morning. You’re functioning as a glorified event-planner, today.”

“Look, I know it’s not meeting with city council or anything, but all that still needs doing,” Connie
protested. “There’s deliveries to confirm and I need to get the last food orders in from the
restaurants and—”
“And I am more than capable of using a phone,” Sadie interjected. “Seriously, Connie.” She thrust the travel mug into her boss’s hands. “Go. To. Space.”

Connie looked to her coffee. To Steven. To her secretary. “But—”

Sadie had had enough. She leveled a glare on Connie. A glare which Steven had previously thought only producible by a diamond. It sent a dart through his heart.

“You get out of this office right now;” Sadie growled, “or so help me, I will send him the video.” The last two words came out low, as Sadie’s voice dropped a full octave. The words seemed to echo back from the office walls, reverberating in the brain.

Connie paled. “You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t test me, woman,” Sadie snapped. “Go. To. Space.”

“This is blackmail,” Connie shrilled. “You are blackmailing a government official.”

“Go call the cops, then,” Sadie sneered. “Lars hasn’t put me in cuffs in way too long.”

Steven choked on air.

Walking about to the opposite side of the desk, Sadie settled down on the chair and picked up the phone. Cradling it between shoulder and ear, she addressed the vacillating politician. “Now, if you’ll get out of my hair, I’d like to get this all done early, so I can take Lars out tonight.”

Connie clenched her fists. “Misses Miller,” she hissed, “I don’t believe you’d stoop so low as to—”

Sadie tapped at the keyboard, and a TubeTube video sprang up on the screen.

On it, Connie Maheswaran stood upon a stage, her long hair sweeping the floor. She used no microphone, but her voice still rang out across the crowd. “Are you ready, Beach City!? It is my pleasure to present to you Beach City’s very own B—”

Connie leaned over the desk, slamming a finger down on the space bar, pausing the video on a particularly unflattering frame.

Sadie rested her elbow on the desk, cradling her head in her hand.

Connie stared her secretary down.

Sadie smiled.

Connie growled. “You are terrible and I hate you.”

“See you tomorrow, boss,” Sadie said, tabbing back over to the day’s to-do list and dialing up the first of the weekend’s vendors.

“Come on,” the mayor snarled, grabbing Steven’s wrist as she spun away from Sadie and stalked out of the office, down the long hallway to the entrance of city hall.

“It’s...a rose.”

“Don’t judge me.”
“I’m not judging,” Connie said, raising her hands. “Just observing.”

Steven cut a sidelong glance at his old friend.

Connie met his eyes. Her lips quirked.

“Get your own spaceship and you can ridicule mine,” Steven said, looking back to his ship.

There was a gem wandering about around the base of the ramp, consulting a tablet, fingers moving rapidly, constructing complex gem glyphs. She failed to look up as Steven approached, and Steven didn’t try to fully gain her attention as he addressed her.

“Is everyone loaded up, Feldspar? Peridot and Amethyst should be joining us.”

“Which ones?” Feldspar monotoned.

“Um. The ones from here. 5XG and 8XM.”

“Affirmative. The only gems not on board are you, myself, and Lapis L—Laz.” The little gem paused in the middle of her sentence, correcting to the blue gem’s nickname. There was no hesitation or change in inflection as she rectified her error, nor a slow-down in her work. “She’s over there.” A vague gesture out towards the sea was the last they got from the pale brown gem before she got back to her work.

Steven looked out to the sea and, despite the similar coloration of gem and water, quickly caught sight of his terraformer. She lay on her back several yards out, right at the line where ocean swells turned into waves. With no visible effort, she drifted between the rolling waves, rising up the crests, bobbing up and down without once going under. Her arms were folded above her head and her eyes were closed. There was the smallest smile on her lips as she took in the warmth of the sun on her face and the coolness of the water at her back.

Raising cupped hands to his mouth, Steven called out to his gem. “Hey, Laz! We gotta move out!”

Laz frowned, but made no further movement.

Frowning, Steven settled his hands on his hips. “Laaaaaaaaz...”

The ocean swells seemed to grow larger, the dips deeper, hiding the gem in the valleys between waves.

“Laz, come on! We’re coming back in a few hours, and we don’t have anything else to do for a month after this mission.”

“Stubborn thing, isn’t she?” Connie opined, grinning.

Steven sighed. “We don’t get to spend much time planet-side. Not to mention planets with this much water. Ugh. Jasper was right. She’s going to be unmanageable.”

“Well, how would you normally manage her?”

“Bribery,” Steven sighed. “I didn’t want to do this.” Once more raising his voice, he called out over the waves. “Laz...I’ll give you a Cookie Cat.”

With a pop of the sound barrier breaking and a burst of wind, Laz appeared before them, grinning. “Two,” she said.
“You’re here already. One.”

The blue gem sunk down to the ground, wings wilting.

Steven held strong.

For three seconds.

Sighing, he added, “And you can have first round off rotations.”

Instantly, Laz perked up, wings fluttering. “Deal,” she said, turning from her diamond and shooting up the ramp into the ship, a thick trail of water droplets falling from her braid as she went.

“You were always such a sucker,” Connie laughed.

“Oh, you think,” Steven said, sweeping an arm invitingly towards the ship and striding towards the ramp, his childhood friend following close at his side. “There’s nothing for her to do on Earth, so she was getting first rotation off anyways.”

“Oooo, I like!” Connie laughed, but cut it off quickly as she reached the end of the ship’s ramp and looked into the long corridor beyond.

She frowned and took a few steps backwards, into the open air. Connie cast her gaze over the ship. Then she looked down the corridor once more.

Grinning like a fool, Steven waited.

Connie considered for a few more moments before shrugging and walking into the ship.

“Aw!” Steven pouted, following at her heels. “Come on! It’s supposed to be impressive!”

“Steven. I spent the last nineteen years being mentored by Pearl.” The woman held her head high. “I’d guess that I know the equations for dimension modifiers better than you do.”

“Yeah, probably,” Steven said, laying his palm on the bridge door lock, the door splitting open before them. “But don’t pretend you weren’t surprised!”

Connie snorted and smirked at the man. “Hardly. It’s going to take a lot more to surprise me.”

Squaring her shoulders, Connie stepped onto the ship’s bridge.

And boggled at a forty-foot-tall peridot.

Connie’s jaw dropped and she took a large step back, colliding with Steven’s chest hard enough to draw out a soft “oof” from the diamond. “Wha...?” she squeaked.

Steven tilted his head back and beamed at the green giant. “What? You lot dragged her into this already?”

“It was my idea!” The giant peridot said. Then, blinking, she added, “Her idea? Whatever! STEVEN! This is amazing. I’ve been Fluorite a bunch of times, and that’s great, but I just go away when I’m fused with Amethyst! But I’m still here! We’re all here! I’m me, and I’m so big! Heh....”

Reaching up, the peridot rubbed at her chin. “This big, I bet I could beat Jasper in a fight.”

“Oh, try me,” came a growl from the bridge entryway, and Jasper stalked in. She smirked up at the giant fused gem. “I’d grind you into chalk.”
“Promise?” The peridot said, raising a brow.

A moment later, she frowned. And then she stepped back, cheeks turning a vibrant green. “I-I mean, I—”

But, before she could clarify anything, the giant peridot’s five stones—forehead, chest, back, nose, and cheek—glowed bright, and began to pull apart. With a flash of light, the giant peridot’s form split, and five separate green gems fell to the ground, only Swift managing to gather herself enough to land on her feet.

Despite the long tumble, it was only a heartbeat before Peridot 5XG of Earth was on her feet, rushing to Steven, throwing her arms about his legs. “That was amazing! Homeworld generally prohibits peridots from fusing—after all, unless it’s for physical labor, two gems can do more work than one!—so I’d never fused with another peridot before! That was...wow!” She looked to the ship’s four peridots, who had gathered themselves and were now grinning back at their Earth-bound counterpart. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Oh, pshaw,” Sol said, flipping her many-fingered hand. “We were glad to have you.”

“Yeah,” Swift grinned. “We’ve never been that big before!”

“Yes you have,” Hush protested. “What about Elbaite?”

“Oh, her.” Swift shrugged. “I mean, that’s not me; that’s just a cross-fusion. It’s not the same.” She looked towards one of the gems standing at a wall station. “I mean, no offense, Mossy; being Elbaite is still great!”

“Oh, no,” Moss Agate said, fanning her face. “Don’t worry about little old me.”

Snickering, Swift bestowed a little wink on Moss Agate, who pressed a hand to her blushing cheek.

“Are they always like this?” Connie asked, speaking from the corner of her mouth.

Steven tilted his head just enough to look down on the woman still leaning into his chest. “Do you mean so energetic, or the random fusion thing?”

Before Connie could ask, Jasper came to stand at Steven’s side, crossing her arms and letting out a long sigh. “The answer is yes, to either.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” Swift said. “Flouncing about with—”

“That’s enough,” Jasper growled, jaw clenching.

Holding up her hands, Swift took a step back. Rather than seeming in any way apologetic, however, she just rolled her eyes, her head and body following the movement as she turned in a prolonged, sinuous arch, marching to her station, her fellows following behind.

All but for Peridot herself, who narrowed her eyes at Jasper. “‘Flouncing about?’”

“Get off my cut, Peridot,” Jasper growled, one hand flexing open and then tight closed again in a ready fist.

“Yeah, sure,” Peridot said, turning her back quite deliberately on the large gem, sauntering off to join the other kindergarteners at the console.

“My Diamond,” Jasper said, looking to her leader, “are you sure I can’t just shatter them?”
Connie jerked sideways, away from the gem, but Steven just laughed.

“Can’t handle a few peridots, Jasper?”

“Oh, I can handle peridots,” Jasper said. “I just don’t know what kind of gems you’ve created.”

Chuckling, Steven leaned sideways, bumping his shoulder into Jasper’s upper arm. “Says the Champion jasper.”

Rather than glaring at the man, as Connie expected, Jasper just tilted her chin up, more prominently displaying the plain pink band which circled her neck.

“I think we’re all-aboard that’s going aboard,” Steven said, looking towards a dark-red gem seated at one of the consoles. “Pyrope, you’ve got our heading?”

“Entered in the system and ready to go,” the gem confirmed, her hands hovering over a long touchscreen.

“Alright! Time to put the top back up and head on out.”

“Aye-aye!” Pyrope clicked on a few buttons and, with a faint hum, the five petals about the dome roof began to spin back in and up, blocking out the sunlight.

Connie scowled at the darkening sky and turned, looking up to Steven. “What, do you fly around blind?”

“But of course not; that would be highly dangerous,” Pyrope spoke up, her frown only darkening because the petals had finished falling back into place, the interior lights of the ship taking an extra second to ramp up their glow to something suitable for human eyesight. “We’ve already analyzed the route to ensure it’s clear.”

“But what about a window? To actually see things coming?”

Pyrope snorted. “Visuals would be worse than useless for faster-than-light travel. By the time you could see any danger, you’d either be through it or shattered. Our route is constructed even before take-off, using data transmitted from monitoring stations placed throughout the galaxy, extrapolating the data to identify any—”

“But what if you want to see things?” Connie broke in.

“Oh, well.” Pyrope shrugged. “Then you’d probably want to go to the observation deck.”

“Yes,” Connie said. Then, turning to Steven, she repeated, “Yes. Let’s go!”

“Jasper,” Steven said, looking to his champion, “can you take the bridge?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jasper said, flapping her hand at the diamond. “Go entertain the girl.”

“Girl,” Connie snapped, but Steven was turning away from her, walking to the bridge doorway, and all the woman had time to do was shoot a glare at the gem, who just snorted, dismissive, and strode forward to stand before the largest of the three chairs at the center of the room.

“Pyrope,” Jasper said, looking down on the dark gem, “take us out.”

“Aye-aye!” Pyrope said once more, and hovered close over her screens, settling in on her work.
Connie had just a second more to look at the gems on the bridge before she took a little jogging step to come back to Steven’s side, lengthening her natural stride to match up with the man’s as they headed down the corridors.

“You actually leave her in charge of things?” Connie asked, looking a bit sideways to observe the diamond.

“Oh yeah,” Steven said, taking a wide right turn down a forking hallway, the floor sloping up just slightly. “I mean, she’s always a bit jumpy if I’ve got to go off-ship without her, so she really prefers to come along and leave Mossy or Chalcedony in charge, nowadays; but if I’m just going elsewhere on-ship, she’s fine.”

“Well, I’m sure she’s fine,” Connie said, scowling. “But what about your other gems? She asked if she could shatter the peridots, Steven.”

“It was a joke,” he said, looking down to the woman.

“Then it was a bad one,” Connie snapped. “You know she shattered gems in the war. Hell, she almost shattered Amethyst that time we fought on the beach!”

“Look, Connie, it’s...” Steven sighed. “Things are different, now. Jasper would never shatter another gem.”

“Why? Because she knows right from wrong?” The woman’s upper lip curled up at the very notion of the quartz expanding her morality.

“No,” Steven said. “Because I told her not to.”

“You think that’s enough?” Connie swung her arm out in what she thought was the general direction of the bridge, but, now that she considered things, they had taken so many turns and the incline of the hallways was in no way matching up with her mental map of the size of this ship, even given what she knew of extra-dimensional mathematics.

“For Jasper, it is.”

“Just because you’re her diamond?”

“Well, not just that. Yes, diamonds command a lot of obedience from their gems, but it’s not necessarily loyalty. Look at the Crystal Gems. Especially Peridot! A gem can break from their diamond, if they’re given a reason. And a gem can serve their diamond poorly. Like...ugh.” Steven shook his head. “Holly Blue Agate. I’ve never seen a gem that wanted to be gifted to another diamond so bad.”

“Gifted?” A little shudder ran up Connie’s spine. “A gem can be...given away?”

“Well...yeah,” Steven hedged, jerking his head to the right to indicate a sharp turn, the pair nearly doubling back on themselves as they went up a widening hall. Widening so swiftly, in fact, that shouldn’t it be overlapping with the hallway they had turned off from? “The diamonds will sometimes give each other gems. It’s a way of...well, earning a favor in the future.”

“So who have you given away?” Connie asked, and found herself suddenly walking alone. She turned about and took a minuscule step back.

Steven glared at her, his gem flashing. “I have never,” he hissed. Then he blinked, looking down to his left arm, as if he expected it to already be adorned with his diamond shield. Finding it bare, he
took a deep breath, rolling his shoulders to throw off the sudden weight of his anger. “I have never,” he repeated, voice calmer, but still deep, “given away a gem.”

“Yeah?” Connie crossed her arms. “Doesn’t seem very diplomatic.”

“Well, you’d know better than me,” Steven said, heading down the hall again. “You’re the one with the degree, Doctor Maheswaran.”

Connie groaned, going back into stride alongside the man. “Do not. I swear, if I’d known how weird that would sound, I’d never have continued with school.”

“Fine, fine,” Steven said. “Madame Mayor.”

“Thank you,” Connie drawled. Then, smirking, added, “Your Radiance.”

Steven tripped over nothing, stumbling several steps before getting his feet back under him and turning to look at his old friend.

Connie expected another angry glare, but instead had to face down the strongest and most devastating of Steven Universe’s pouts.

“Please don’t,” Steven whined.

“Whoa, whoa,” Connie laughed, reaching out to pat the man’s cheek. “Okay! Damn, what’s the deal, Steven? I mean, you’re fine with that ‘My Diamond’ stuff!”

“It’s debasing,” Steven said. “Even Peridot didn’t talk to Yellow Diamond that way, and she was trying to convince her to save Earth! ‘Pink Diamond’ is like one of my names now, but ‘Your Radiance?’” He shook his head. “No. Please.”

Connie took a few moments to consider this, but soon she shrugged, taking in a deep breath before letting it out in sharp sigh. “I don’t get how all this is different, ‘your gems,’ ‘My Diamond,’ but not ‘Your Radiance,’ but okay. Steven.”

He smiled, shoulders slumping. “Thank you,” he said. And, after a pause, added on, “Connie.”

She rolled her eyes, but felt no need to address the moment. Instead, she tilted her head, indicating the corridor they were walking down. “Now, come on; don’t we need to be seated and everything before takeoff?”

Steven’s brows rose. “Before....” He laughed. Pausing before another of the door locks, he turned his head just enough to look back at his old friend. “Connie. We took off five minutes ago.”

Steven pressed his palm to the lock, and the door before him split down the center, sliding open without a sound, and Connie looked through to a million stars.

The human woman stood for a second, frozen under the dark and bright immensity of space.

Then, gasping, she rushed forward, through the door, and into an enormous room with yet another dome roof, the view out to the cosmos spreading to each extremity of the circular observation deck.

“Why is it...?” Connie looked up, mouth hanging open, brows drawn in contemplation.

Half of the dome, to her right, was speckled with short, bright lines and a general soft glow, but the other half, on her left, was pure blackness. She looked between the two sides.
Steven stepped into the wide room, leaning back against the wall, just...watching. It had taken him weeks of explanations to understand this peculiarity of space travel, but he’d been fourteen. And this was Connie. He didn’t think it would take long.

It didn’t. With a gasp, she turned, looking to Steven. “The light! If we’re going that way, then once the light hits the ship, it would be interrupted. So we wouldn’t see any light radiating behind us, because the path behind is empty and no other light can keep up with us!”

“Yep,” Steven said, grinning. “The math of it is kind of meh,” he waved the idea off, “but that’s about it. Space travel. It’s half pretty, half utterly boring.”

“It’s not boring,” Connie said. “I mean, if I had the free time, when I got home, just this information alone would be enough to occupy astronomers for dec-WHOA!” With a yelp, Connie threw her hands up over her eyes as one of the stars came in close. The view of its bright blue light expanded until the entire forward-facing half of the dome was taken up by its light, and then the dome went dim once more.

“Cutting it a bit close, Pyrope,” Steven muttered, pushing off from the wall and coming to stand before Connie, holding his hands out, ready to steady her. “It’s okay. Just blink a bit, it’s no worse than a camera flash. The filters on the dome keep out harmful radiation.”

“It is way worse than a camera,” Connie said, her hands coming down, waving about as her balance shifted from the shock. Her hands brushed against Steven’s, and she latched on tight, automatically threading her fingers with his. Blinking rapidly, she squinted up into Steven’s face, her vision slowly returning.

Steven swallowed, looking down at the stars in Connie’s eyes.

It seemed the last of the shock had faded, and Connie looked back into Steven’s eyes, as well. Maybe it was just an odd glow from a red dwarf, but it seemed there was a little tint of color on the woman’s cheeks. “Steven, I...”

She suddenly broke their shared gaze, looking down, and bit her lower lip on finding their connected hands. “I lied,” Connie blurted out. “A-about your eyes.”

“My...what?”

“You eyes!” Connie suddenly threw her hands in the air, breaking off even that contact. Crossing her arms tight over her chest, she took a step back. “At the Big Donut. When you got mad. I lied, I said your eyes had done the diamond thing, but they hadn’t. I just...I was so angry at you, Steve! And I’d seen the video Peridot sent; I knew the thing with your eyes upset you, and I just...I wanted to—”

“It’s okay, Connie,” Steven said, wanting to reach out to the woman. To hold her hands again. “I mean, the diamond thing doesn’t bother me so much, unless I do it and affect one of my gems—”

“Well, it bothered me!” Connie shouted. “You go off for eighteen years, and you come back, acting like nothing has changed, but it has, Steven! Everything has changed!”

“I know that, Connie.”

“No,” she croaked. “You don’t, Steven. You come back, acting like we’re still best friends, but I’ve...I had to—”

Without so much as a jolt, the stars above shifted from lines and darkness to a million pinpricks
and, straight above, a large, gray sphere turned slowly.

The pair of humans looked up at the planet and, while Connie’s gaze remained riveted, Steven easily tore his away, focusing instead on a face that he still knew so well, after so many years. Alight with wonder and excitement at the unknown, she looked just the same as that girl he had left behind.

“Of course things changed,” Steven said. “I had just hoped that you...that we...hadn’t. Or that....” He hesitated a moment. “T-that we....”

Connie finally looked down from the planet and to her lost friend.

He couldn’t take her gaze for long. Turning away, Steven rubbed at the back of his neck. “W-we should go to the shuttle bay. Pyrope will never stop complaining if we fall behind schedule, now.”

Connie was ready to respond, to pull the man back into their confrontation, but suddenly she squeaked. “Shuttle? Like, for going up there?” She pointed at the planet.

Steven glanced up and shrugged. “Well, down there, technically. Ship’s upside-down. But yeah.”

“You are...going down there,” Connie breathed.

“Oh, no,” Steven shook his head.

He waited until some of the tension in Connie’s form began to ease.

Then, grinning, he said, “We are going down there.”

Connie’s pupils blew wide and she gasped. She snapped her head up, gazing at the little gray planet, then down at Steven.

“I mean,” Steven shrugged. “If you wa—”

“COME ON!” Grabbing Steven’s hand, Connie ran to the open doorway, back down the hallways, following the reverse of their winding path with complete accuracy, only stopping in her mad dash when, laughing, Steven pointed down a different corridor. From one step to another, she switched directions, whipping a laughing Steven along behind as they made their way to the shuttle bay.

“My Diamond, are you sure taking the human along is wise?” Coral asked, lips thinning with each word. “You are high-risk enough to warrant consideration, but a creature like her, who is virtually guaranteed to be in danger if her suit fails? A suit which, I remind you, is not expressly made for her?”

“Oh, Connie will fit in one of Kunzite’s suits just fine,” Steven said, waving off the pearl’s protests. “And the readings you all got from the initial survey said this was a pretty stable planet.”

Coral turned her gaze to Connie, eyes flickering up and down the woman’s body. She frowned at what she saw there, which Connie certainly did not appreciate “She may have a similar frame to a kunzite, but she does not have a kunzite’s abilities. You yourself told me that humans are rather...delicate creatures.”

Connie frowned at such a description, but, before she could respond, Steven replied to his gem.

“I also told you all about Connie, Coral,” Steven said, looking sidelong at his childhood ally. “I’d trust her to handle a crisis down on a planet just as much as anyone else on the away team.”
“You trusted Jasper to handle things, as well,” Coral grumbled, catching the attention of one large, orange gem.

“I’m sorry,” the Champion rumbled, tugging on the wrist of her tight atmo-suit, clenching her fist to ensure that it moved easily, “was that a criticism of my leadership, little pearl?”

With a little “hmph,” Coral lifted her nose in the air, ignoring the enormous gem in favor of fetching a pile of dark-pink fabric and a matching helmet from one of the cubbies along the walls.

“Well, it is your decision, My Diamond,” the pearl answered, coming to stand before Connie. She gave the woman another visual inspection before sighing and holding out her burden. “This should fit relatively well,” she breezed, letting her hands fall away from the suit the very moment that it was in Connie’s grasp. Perhaps a little early, in fact, as the human jolted forward a half-step to keep the suit’s helmet balanced on top of the pile. “Changing rooms are over there. Now,” Coral put her back to Connie in an efficient heel-turn, back to addressing her diamond, “allow me to assist you, My Diamond.”

“I’m fine, Coral,” Steven said, fetching his own, rather larger suit from another of the cubbies. “I’ll just need help with my hair.”

Coral rolled her eyes. “Yes, very well, My Diamond.”

Connie looked down at her space suit—a space suit!!!—and hesitated. Coral had indicated she change in the same area where Steven had just disappeared, but would there be a lady’s side? But, no. That made no sense. Steven was the only being on this ship that didn’t follow the gem’s strict female presentation—not precisely feminine presentation, Connie noted, glancing at Jasper, whose muscles were even more well-defined in her form-fitting suit—so why would there be a division? Pushing back her awkwardness, the human woman went to the little changing area, chose a door at random, and pushed inside.

The gem inside went stock-still. For a half-second.

Then Moss Agate shrieked, spinning about to face the intruder, clutching a rather inadequate-looking suit to her light-green and black-lined bosom. “O-out! OUT!”

“I-I’m sorry,” Connie barked, backing up. “I didn’t know anyone was in here, I—”

“Can’t you read!?” Moss Agate snarled, reaching out to grab the door handle. “It says ‘occupied!’” And, with a reverberating WHAM, the flustered gem slammed the door in Connie’s face.

“Stars above,” Laz whispered, cheeks doing a deep navy. “Did you catch that inclusion on her thigh?”

“I heard that!” Moss Agate screamed from her changing room.

Jasper snickered, earning a glare and a stuck-out tongue from the flushed ocean gem. Jasper just grinned, brushing a thumb along her crystalline nose in a gesture that made Laz’s eyes go wide and dart away.

Ears buzzing from Moss Agate’s screaming, Connie looked to the three doors before her. There was definitely gem writing on them, but she’d only ever learned a few phrases from Pearl. “Danger,” “keep out,” and “the Diamonds can eat my entire ass.”

(The latter was, admittedly, useless, but Connie had taken to scribbling it in the margins of her notebooks.)
She couldn’t tell if the script she was seeing before her said “occupied,” but it hardly mattered. Each of the three doors had the same script. Unsure what to do, Connie was about to address the arrayed gems for help, when the door on the right swung inwards and Peridot stepped out, prancing in her pink atmo-suit.

Amethyst followed after.

Connie’s brows shot up.

Grinning, Amethyst bowed, ushering Connie towards the changing room.

“Am I gonna need a mop?” Connie asked, blandly.

Peridot blinked up at the woman. “Why would you need a mop?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Connie sighed, entering the changing room and making sure to lock the door behind her. She was relieved to find nothing...untoward.

Getting into the suit took a bit more finagling than she’d imagined, and she suddenly understood why Amethyst’s help might have been warranted. Apparently, Kunzite was a very good match for her figure. As in, if Connie had gone for that second donut on Tuesday, there might have been an issue. And Connie really, really hoped that they washed these suits regularly, because there was no way she was fitting into this with any of her work clothes—or, well, any clothes—still on. But, with a little squirming and jumping about, she managed. She spent a few moments wishing there was a mirror to check on things, but that would probably have made her unable to brave going back out among the gems. So, gathering up her clothes and helmet, Connie brazened her way back to the planet-side team.

“Oh, good!” Steven said from where he knelt before the ship’s pearl, glancing up at the new arrival. “It fiiiiiiiiii...”

Connie was very thankful there was no mirror. Especially when Coral glanced up from her work combing back Steven’s hair and scowled. The pearl looked back down to her task, yanking hard on the comb, drawing a yelp from her subject.

“Ah!” Steven’s face flinched, but his body remained still under the pearl’s ministrations.

“Apologies, My Diamond,” Coral said, tying off the man’s hair at the base of his neck, wrapping the length of his ringlets with the rest of the ribbon. “That should do it. Helmet.”

“Yeah, sure,” Steven said, tearing his gaze away from Connie and handing up the last bit of his suit.

With just a little finagling, Coral managed to feed the diamond’s hair inside and settle the helmet down over his head. With a press to little buttons on the side, there came a hiss and a puff of condensation to the clear front, which faded quickly away, once more letting Steven look through.

He rose and turned again to Connie, and, behind the barrier of the helmet, he seemed a bit more composed. “Okay,” he said, his voice coming out from overhead speakers, “we put an air scrubber in your helmet. The gems don’t need them, since they don’t breath and all; their suits are just in case the atmosphere is caustic or there’s something we need to clean off before getting back on the ship. And the material is pretty strong, in case there’s any sort of disaster.”

“Disaster?” Connie repeated, not so much alarmed as alerted. “Have you ever had a problem on a mission?”
“Oh, man, yeah!” Laz cheered, fluttering her wings, which she had projected through her suit. “About two years ago, I was on an away mission with Feldspar and Jasper, and this storm came down on us, no warning! Trashed the ship, poofed Feldspar, we had to hide in a cave! Then there was an earthquake and the roof caved in, storm almost sucked me out, and Jas—”

“And the suit kept you from cracking a dozen times over,” Jasper broke in, looking down on the little blue gem. “Which wouldn’t have been an issue if you hadn’t actually stowed away on the shuttle.”

“Heeeeeeey,” Laz said, holding her hands out wide. “It all turned out good, right?”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Jasper drawled, earning a pout from her crew-mate.

A new, nasal voice issued from the overhead speakers. “Look, you all want to keep polishing each other, that’s fine,” Pyrope said, earning an outraged gasp from Laz. “But can you do it on the shuttle? Elder’s picked out the best site for injection, and the shuttle needs to leave in ninety seconds, unless you want to cut your time down on the surface in half.”

“Get on the shuttle,” Connie snapped, glaring at the gems before shoving her helmet over her head and pressing the sealing mechanisms.

With a flash of reflective wings, Laz zipped across the room, through the open door which connected ship to shuttle, and sat primly on one of the long benches. Hands on lap, wings folded together, she looked out at the away team, the model crew-member.

Then, she specifically focused on Jasper. “Okay,” she ventured, “so maybe it is a thing about Champions.”

Jasper jolted and shot a glare down at Connie.


Laz hummed, kicking her feet in complete nonchalance.

“Gems,” Connie muttered, following along behind Peridot and one of her green fellow-gems—Swift, it seemed, given the little bump of a gem below the tight material covering the kindergarten’s back—in boarding the shuttle. Hands on lap, wings folded together, she looked out at the away team, the model crew-member.

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“Gems,” Connie muttered, following along behind Peridot and one of her green fellow-gems—Swift, it seemed, given the little bump of a gem below the tight material covering the kindergarten’s back—in boarding the shuttle. Steven and Jasper followed behind, both ducking their heads as they went through the doorway. Finally, Moss Agate took up the rear, sliding her hand over the door’s sensor, and the shuttle’s door finally slid closed.

Connie looked to the benches on the perimeter of the shuttle’s walls. “Seat-belts?”

“Seat-belts?” Peridot snorted. “This isn’t some crude automobile! Gem ships are made for comfort and elegance of movement! Observe!” Holding her arms out to the side, Peridot lifted one foot, balancing on the other as she waited for the shuttle to disembark.

There was a brief pause. Then a small hiss of air as the locks holding the shuttle against the bay let go.

Then there came a sharp jerk, which had Peridot shrieking, arms cartwheeling, before she finally lost the battle for balance and fell face-first onto Jasper’s left boot.

Jasper looked down at the little green gem, a brow rising. “Hey,” she rumbled, voice perfectly clear through the helmet radios, “this is familiar.”
“Go pound sand,” Peridot groaned, pushing herself up, trying to rub at her head, but only touching helmet.

“Sorry,” Pyrope’s voice came again over the speakers. Then, after a pause, there was a shrill laugh. “Ah, you know what, nah? Not sorry.”

“Can we please keep the rest of the flight smooth?” Steven asked, taking a seat, a pouting Peridot and her ship counterpart following suit to his left hand side. “We’ve got guests.”

“Yes, Steven,” Pyrope said. “Touchdown in forty-five seconds. Grav should start kicking in soon. Please take your seats. Or, if you don’t, I remind you that it was Spinel’s turn to mop the shuttle floors.”

“Lies!” Another voice echoed over the intercom, as if the speaker was not using the main microphone, but merely shouting their response from nearby. “Pyrope, you know **full well** that you —” And then their helmet speakers went silent.

Moss Agate had already taken a seat between Laz and Swift, crossing her legs and steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the peeping tom on the shuttle.

Connie looked to the two remaining seats. A rather narrow spot to Steven’s right, or spacious accommodations at the side of Laz.

Laz’s eyebrows rose as she looked to Connie, disappearing under the solid top of her helmet. Connie was somehow convinced that those eyebrows had become permanently embedded in the ocean gem’s hair. Laz patted a hand on the seat beside her.

Connie hesitated, but, even if she had moved immediately, she might not have been swift enough—and, admittedly, never powerful enough—to bypass Jasper as the orange gem stormed over, crashing down on the seat next to Laz.

Jasper narrowed her eyes at Connie.

Deciding it was best to ignore the old warrior, Connie took the last seat, at Steven’s side. Right up against Steven’s side. Their thighs pressed together as she sat, shoulders bumping, despite his attempts to shift away and give more space.

“Oh, sorry,” Steven said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck, only succeeding in touching his helmet. “We normally have a much smaller crew.”

“No, no,” Connie said, breezy as she tried to dismiss the discomfort. “It’s just another, what, thirty seconds?”

“Yeah,” Steven agreed, looking down at his hands, clasped together on his lap.

Connie looked to the ceiling.

The ship dropped through the atmosphere. Far, far too slowly, it seemed. Connie longed for a watch. Or a countdown. Or a parachute which could withstand the burn of atmospheric entry.

She didn’t even notice the moment they touched down. She almost flinched when Peridot and Swift stood, going to stand by the door.

Swift took a tablet from a recess on the wall, flipping through a rapid scroll of data, Peridot looking over her shoulder. “Yes, excellent, no signs of life from any of our drones. The northern
continent is a bit unstable; lots of volcanic activity. There was a big meteor strike on the north pole about five hundred years ago, might be some interesting ore deposits there, if we need to resupply sometime. But, yeah.” She looked to Steven. “About what we expected. A bit too much helium in the atmosphere for humans, but your suits should hold up, no problem.”

“Does that mean we can...” Connie looked to Steven. “Can we really go out there?”

Steven stood, sweeping a hand towards the door. “Want to do the honors?”

Connie followed his gesture, blinking. “The honors? Wait.” She jumped to her feet. “You mean I can go first!?”

“Swift said it’s safe,” Steven confirmed. “Go on. Guest’s privilege.”

Connie needed no goading. She barely needed permission. Heart racing, she rushed to the door, looking at the lock, wondering how to activate it. Before she needed to ask, however, Swift reached out, tracing a simple pattern, and the door hissed open.

Connie Maheswaran looked out upon a new world.

It was an empty expanse. No skittering animals, no breeze-ruffled plants, not even a startled insect skittering away to hide in the cracks on the ground. Just gray rocks and dust, an orange sky above, a tall, purple cliff to her left and, slowly falling down the horizon, a small, red star, dim and distant enough that she could look upon it while squinting.

It was sterile and cold and Connie screamed in joy as she jumped out of the shuttle.

Her feet hit the ground far earlier than she expected as the planet’s gravity yanked her down, the violence of the impact jarring her knees. “Dammit, ow!” Connie pressed her hands to her abused joints.

Then she gasped in horror.

“Oh, no! No no!” She backed up, trying to step back onto the shuttle, stumbling as the planet’s greater-than-Earth gravity set her off-balance once again. “No! I didn’t say that! That is not the first thing a human said on another planet, no no no!”

“No, it’s not,” Jasper said, elbowing her way past the panicking Connie, landing with far more grace on the planet, her gem body already adjusted to the stronger gravity. “I believe that was ‘Unhand me, Rock Monster; my chief will lay waste to you and your kin.’ Or, at least, that’s the first record we bothered making.”

“I...hnnnn,” Connie whined, looking down on the no-longer-virgin planetary surface. There was a little divot where she’d landed, and two long furrows from her retreat, alongside Jasper’s more confident strides.

“Also,” Laz said, crouching at the edge of the doorway, leaning in to speak to Connie, even though her voice carried through the helmet communicators, rather than the alien air, “Steven has been on, like, fifty planets already, so unless you’re disqualifying him...” She shrugged and, with a little flick of her wings, exited the shuttle, going to flutter at Jasper’s side.

“That cliff, right?” Peridot babbled, jumping after the blue gem, Swift a step behind. “Nice. Sheer. What kind of deposits are you getting?”

“Looks pretty rich in borosilicates. Probably a few howlites. Maybe a schorl, if there’s some good
iron and aluminum veins. And, if we get lucky—"

“A kornerupine!” Peridot crowed. Then she laughed, patting Swift on the back. “Or, unlucky, huh? I’ve never seem more stuffy gems than kornerupines!”

“Yeah, but their designs are phenomenal,” Swift said. “A damn sight better than what Coral can do.”

“Fine,” a terse voice came over their radio. “From now on, you can make your own formal attire.”

“Ah, Coral, I didn’t mean it like that,” Swift whined. “You do great, really.”

“For a pearl,” Coral sniffed.

“No, no, don’t be like that,” Swift said. “I just mean, compared to a korn—”

“Isolate comms,” Moss Agate said, and instantly the apologies cut off.

Connie looked up, to find the quartz supervisor standing at the doorway, looking down on the visiting human. Sniffing with great dignity, the pale green gem stepped down planet-side, joining Jasper and Laz in a walk about the ship and cliff.

Connie seriously considered just taking her seat again and waiting until everyone was ready to go. Then there was a slight shift in the shuttle’s center of gravity, and Steven sat at her side, long legs nearly touching the dusty ground below. Reaching out to the woman, he tapped the side of her helmet, and there was a sudden near-silence over the speakers.

“There,” the man said. “Just us, now. Even the ship’s blocked out, unless there’s an emergency.”

“Thanks,” Connie sighed, pushing against the shuttle, standing straight. Or as straight as she could, with her body not quite finding its equilibrium under a greater gravity. Still, she wasn’t in danger of falling, though she found herself appreciating Steven’s presence at her side as he, too, slid out of the shuttle and onto the planet’s surface. “I feel more than a little silly. The entire ‘first human on another planet’ thing.”

“Ah, nah,” Steven said, ambling towards the cliff-side, Connie matching his slow pace. “It is pretty cool. I mean, the last human before you would have barely understood what a bow and arrow was. You have context. Makes it a bit more impressive.”

“Last human except for you,” Connie reminded, crouching down to pick up a little stone, rolling it over between her fingers. It seemed rather sharp, but the material of her suit didn’t so much as catch a thread on the jagged edges of the rock.

“Oh. Yeah.” Steven nodded. “For, you know. Certain definitions of human, and all.”

“Are you still on about that?” Connie asked, looking to her childhood friend.

“Well, it’s not like nigh-on two decades hanging out with the other half of of my species makeup made things any less confusing,” Steven said. “Especially what with the diamond stuff to add in. Sometimes, I feel a bit more like I’m half-quartz and half-diamond, not half-human, half-gem.”

“Seems a bit alarming,” Connie opined.

Steven barked a laughed. “You have no idea. I probably should have come back to Earth a lot sooner than I did. Might have made that a bit easier. And probably would have made...you know.”
He gestured between their two bodies. “This a lot easier.”

“This?” Connie said, wishing she could lift her head and flip her short hair. All she could do was toss aside her stone, and then she immediately missed it. She wondered if Steven’s prohibition against moving things included rocks.

“This,” Steven insisted, repeating the gesture with a bit more energy. “You. Me. I know that failing to come back on time didn’t really...help matters between us.”

“Leaving didn’t help matters, Steven. I know you didn’t think you had a choice, but, well...you didn’t leave the rest of us with any choice, either! The diamonds didn’t even let you talk to us.”

“Look, I’d much rather they have let me call in on occasion, too! I was...really alone, out there. But they were worried about you all influencing me.”

“Influencing you?” Connie snorted. “Steven. It wasn’t an election. It was your life. Your childhood.”

“Yeah, but to the diamonds....” He sighed, looking out across the horizon. There seemed to be a dust storm brewing out in the direction of the sunset. “I’d been gone for over five thousand years. It took going to the Zoo and having the systems there evaluate me for them to even start believing that I was fourteen, not ten-thousand-years old. And then you all sent the photo album, and....” He shook his head.

“Did they...take it away?” Connie’s gut twisted. She remembered that night, with Greg and the gems, picking out the few memories they could send to their lost loved one. She had kept her own copy of the photo she’d chosen of Steven and herself in her wallet for ages. Up until credit cards and IDs had all gone digital, and she’d propped the worn, beloved thing on the lamp next to her bed.

She had the digital copy, of course, but she’d never bothered printing out a new one, either to replace the worn-down image or to give herself something a bit larger to hold as she sat through another long, sleepless night in Oxford. Just that creased, fading picture, waiting for her when her mind started whirling at three in the morning, through the years up until....

Well. She’d put the photo in the drawer of her bedside table seventeen months ago. It was buried now, under receipts and chap-sticks, business cards and square foil wrappers.

Steven’s voice brought Connie back from her thoughts. “They considered it. But no. It was really only Blue that had a problem, and I made sure to put it away whenever we had lessons. Although...” He chuckled. “She was a lot more irritated about the books.”


“Human books,” Steven said, turning his face from the sunset, to smile upon his friend. “She didn’t get them. Nothing about human books makes sense to a gem! Especially not to a diamond. And fantasy? That’s not a gem thing. I mean, I spent a week trying to explain what a familiar was to her, and then I had to try and explain falcons, and when Lisa’s daughter is introduced, I had to explain parents again, and....” Steven trailed off.

Connie waited, expecting some tangent on his father, or the diamond’s feelings on their student being somehow the child of the woman who had killed his former self (and how had that even worked; how was Steven a diamond, and yet the child of a quartz?), but instead he whipped about, reaching out to lay his hands on Connie’s shoulders. He looked down on the woman with bright,
dancing eyes, and he *keened*, body full of a sudden bolt of energy.

“Connie,” Steven said, “Lisa’s daughter is so *cute!*”

Connie gasped, indignant. “Kaisa isn’t *cute*! She’s a badass! She challenged the entire Council of Familiars at age *thirteen*! Even her *mother* didn’t try that!”

“Yeah,” Steven laughed, canting his hips and resting his hands on his waist. “And she *also* kept putting *bows* on her familair’s *quills.*”

Connie thrust a finger into Steven’s chest. “Barthos *asked* for that, she was just being a good companion.”

“Oh, so is that why she always wore matching bows on her doublet?”

*“She was being a very good companion!”*  

“Kaisa is a precious cupcake, and you *know it,* Connie.”

“Steven, I will *fight you,* I swear—”

A movement at the corner of Connie’s vision caught her attention, and she looked just enough sideways to find that Swift was waving both her arms, her mouth open wide as she tried to shout at the pair of humans, thwarted by the limited radio settings in their helmets.

“This isn’t over,” Steven growled playfully, and tapped the top of his helmet, and then Connie’s.

There was no squeak or static, as might be expected for a human speaker being pushed to its limits, but Swift’s voice was still loud enough to make the both of the humans flinch for the first few words. Then the peridot, finding she was finally being paid attention to once more, lowered her voice. “My Diamond, readouts indicate there’s enough energy here for three gems. There’s definitely the material for howlites, and, if, we pushed, we might get a schorl to fit in the iron deposits, but she might be a bit lacking in power.”

Steven tilted his head, considering, but soon shook no. “You know the rules; we do our best or we don’t bother at all. Howlites it is. You have the injection sites picked out?”

“Yes, My Diamond. Shall we proceed?”

“Sounds good,” Steven agreed, smiling as his kindergartener and Peridot skittered off to the shuttle. “And then maybe we have time for a little walk about the planet?” His head tilted to the side and a bit up, as if speaking with a being in the sky.

Which he seemed to actually be doing, for Pyrope’s voice came over on the radio. “Very little. But it looks like there was a thunderstorm about a quarter-kilometer to the north, just recently. Might be able to pick up some interesting fulgurite there.”

“Ten-four, there, Pyrope.” Steven sent a little salute—a more traditionally human type, just two fingers pressed to his temple—towards the slowly emerging stars.

“Laz, we need a cut out over there, where the rocks are a bit loose,” Swift said, jerking her head towards the south-end of the cliff-side, below which rested a large pile of dislodged stones. “The rock underneath looks plenty stable, and it has the kind of mineral deposits Elder has been wanting to experiment with. I sent you the plans; think you can handle them?”
The ocean gem tapped on the side of her helmet, and glowing lines appeared before her face. She looked upon the cliff, lining things up, flitting about as she inspected the proposed cut from several angles. “Hmmm. Shouldn’t be difficult.” Looking to the rest of the away team, she flicked her hands, urging them back. “Keep clear; I don’t want anyone catching chips. Especially you, miss.”

Connie obediently took several steps back towards the shuttle. She looked over to Steven, who, while complying with the request, seemed none too concerned with Laz’s caution. “There’s no ocean around here. What’s she going to even do?”

Steven laughed as he stopped his retreat. “Lapis Lazuli is pretty strong, among lazuli’s, but moving that much water around isn’t generally what they do.” He jerked his head towards his own water gem. “Laz here prefers to work with a bit more precision.”

Brows drawn down, Connie followed Steven’s gaze.

Laz settled down on the ground, her wings melting away from her back, the water contained in them coming to float in a constantly undulating bubble before her. She took a few steps to the right. A half-step back to the left. Shuffled forward. Tilted her head as she eyed the cliff-side. Sticking her dark-blue tongue just a bit out between her lips, she took aim.

Before her, the bubble of water flattened into a five-foot-wide disc with several dozen spikes on the perimeter, and it began to spin. First slowly, but soon ramping up, until the disc rotated so quickly that the spikes seemed to be moving backwards. And then they became just a thin blur on the edge. If the helmet speakers hadn’t been dampening sounds from the outside, Connie was certain Laz’s aquatic circular saw would have shrieked loud enough to blow out eardrums.

With a casual flick of an index finger, Laz threw the blade at the cliff-side.

There was a puff of steam and an ooze of silt. And then, the cliff-side fell away in one long sheet, revealing a perfectly flat, gleaming surface below.

Laz smiled at her work, and held a hand over her head. The steam and little droplets of water remaining on the cliff-side came away, reforming into a bubble which seemed just the same size as she had held before.

“Nice,” Jasper said, nodding at the polished cliff-side

Laz smiled and let the bubble flow around to her back, the purified water reforming to fluttering wings. “Why, thank you.”

“Injectors are ready,” Swift said, coming forward, holding two long tubes under her arms, Peridot at her side with the last of the three.

“Alright then. Go to,” Steven said, waving the gems on.

Connie watched in fascination. These injectors were quite evocative of the monstrous devices left behind on the Earth kindergartens. The same red tops and unsettlingly organic-looking innards, the same mechanically grasping claws and piercing drill. But so much smaller. Swift didn’t even need to set her spare down as she pressed the first into the newly-cut cliff-side. The four legs of the injector seemed to respond to the proximity of the rock, pulling back before striking down, into the stone, each flexing just a few degrees inward to lock the device in place.

The drill began to spin, ramping up to speed in moments. It waited just a half-second after it reached full power and then, with a sudden jab, it struck down, dust and chips of stone flying as the injector worked its way into the planet.
The work seemed to only take a minute, but the little build-up of debris around the site gave Connie the definite impression that the drill was somehow even longer than the length of the actual injector would indicate. And, once the drilling ceased, there was hesitation and a shudder within the injector as...something began to seep into the ground.

Connie shuddered. “That’s...unsettling.”

Steven blinked and looked to her, then back to the work being done, Swift already picking out and setting up a second site. “I guess it does look a bit weird, the first time.”

“I don’t see how you can get used to that.”

Steven smiled. “You know, that’s exactly what Blue said, when she read that...uh...human development book Dad sent.”

“What?” Connie snorted. “You really aren’t comparing creepy alien planet injection with childbirth, are you?”


“Other thing?”

Jasper looked back at the two humans and said, evenly, “Mating.”

Connie’s face instantly began to burn. “Oh. Well. Fair enough.”

Steven tried to rub at his face, but only succeeded in brushing a dusty hand-print onto his helmet. “Yeah. Uh, Swift? Peridot? You got this?”

Peridot looked up from the tip of her injector, which hovered just inches from the cliff face. She grinned. “No problem! It’s like riding a bike!” She looked down at the miniature injector. “Well, maybe one of those tiny ones for clowns...but I’m good!”

“Good, good.” Steven returned his attention to Connie. “Want to go check out that lightning field? Fulgurite isn’t a gem or anything, but it would make a pretty cool souvenir.”

Connie looked upon her old friend with great dignity. “You bet your ass.”

“All your suits appear to be still be in optimal condition,” Feldspar said, looking down at her tablet readouts, rather than at any of the other gems or humans in the shuttle bay. “You’ll just want to clean off your screens, and the Connie should switch out her air scrubbers. She seemed to be breathing quite heavily down on the planet.”

“Yeah,” Connie muttered, “because Steven is wrong about Kaisa.”

Steven removed his helmet and rolled his eyes. “You’re just mad about her treaty with the Angel of the Mountain.”

“It was a clearly one-sided arrangement and she could have easily overthrown him with the Genus Spear!”

“And alienate the Third Order?”

“The Third Order is a dying organization and has no place trying to take over the duties of the Council of Familiars!”
“I can’t wait until Belacqua Wyatt puts out the last book and proves you wrong.”

Feldspar looked between her diamond and the human woman. “Personally, I think Kaisa’s next move should be to take over the Third Order and lead it herself.”

Connie blinked down on the little brown gem. “That...would actually fit her character arc very well.”

“Obviously,” Feldspar droned, returning her attention to her constant stream of numbers.

Connie looked to Steven, who just shrugged.

Everything about the gems and the ship and the mission was odd, and the little Feldspar was the least of these, in the end. Connie had been surprised at how soon they left the first planet. She’d expected some mining, some sample-taking, at least some photography, but all they had bothered with was picking up a few lightning-melted bits of dirt and ore. It seemed such a small, random thing to take back from an entire other world, but Connie had cradled the little nodules in her hands as the shuttle took off, glad to have something by which to remember this desolate planet.

She was still holding them ten minutes later, when Pyrope announced their arrival at the next colony site. With her helmet and suit already in good order, she sat on the floor beside Steven, who was once more having his wild hair tamed by Coral.

It seemed like a constant battle, taming the quartz-sized coiffure into something that could go into the helmet without any stray bits breaking the airtight seal, but Connie understood why Steven hadn’t left his helmet on. Her face felt oily and somehow dusty from its half-hour confined in the helmet, and that wasn’t even taking into account the prodding sense of claustrophobia it had caused. The reprieve as they traveled to the next planet—the next world, as unexplored and full of potential as the last—was a blessing.

“So, your peridot. Swift. She said there the planet had energy for three gems. What does that even mean? Is there going to be no more lightning there, now, or something?”

“Oh, no,” Steven shook his head, earning a frustrated hiss from Coral, who yanked his head back into position. “Oh, sorry. It’s...well, energy is probably not the best term. More like...life potential?”

“Life?” Connie leaned back. “But she said there wasn’t any life. Did you just kill—”

“No.” Steven reached out, placing a hand on Connie’s shoulder.

“My Diamond, stop fidgeting,” Coral growled, pulling hard on the comb, moving Steven back towards her ministrations, his hand falling off Connie’s shoulder and down to his lap.

Steven winced, then repeated, “No. We don’t do anything on a planet where there’s already life. But injected gems do need planets where life could exist. A hundred-thousand, a million years from now, that planet might have had something like, well...bacteria? Really basic stuff.”

“Might have had,” Connie ventured. “But not anymore?”

“Yeah...” Steven let out a long breath. “At least, not for a long time. Twenty, fifty, maybe a hundred-thousand years, things’ll come back around again, so long as the star holds out. And it was a pretty young one, and small, so it should burn a long time.”

Connie looked down at her melted souvenirs. “And then you gems can go back and do it all over
“Stars, we better not need to, by then,” Steven said. “If we haven’t figured out how to make new gems without destroying things, I don’t see how we can keep going.”

“Probably about the same as you have been, already,” Connie said. “There’s a lot of stars out there. And most of those have planets. If it’s all a question of how many planets you can find that fit the bill, and gems have already found so many, it seems like you could almost set up a rotation.”

“We, uh...we haven’t found that many,” Steven said, looking down at his hands.

“But look at your crew!” Connie waved about at the room of watching, oddly silent gems. “Look how many of you there are already!”

“Connie, no.” Steven shook his head. “Look. Elder was my first gem. She was injected twelve years ago. Since then, we’ve had twenty-three gems emerge, and there’s ten developing now, with what we just did.”

“That’s a lot!”

“That’s what the other diamonds produce in a day,” Steven said. “Each of them.”

“Well, you’re just...starting up,” Connie struggled, a cold ball forming in her stomach. “You know, exponential growth? Eventually, you’ll have enough for two crews, two ships to go out searching for planets, then four, eight, sixteen! Before you know it, you’ll have gems popping out every hour!”

“Not this way,” Steven said. “Not hopping around, like we have been. If my crew is finally big enough to split once, the diamonds’ forces will have done so a hundred times over. Because the diamonds don’t distract themselves with little planets like that one.” He waved vaguely towards the back of the ship, indicating the planet which was already a dozen light years behind them. “They find better ones. Planets where they can grow tens of thousands, millions of gems. Planets with a lot more...energy.”

“For...life,” Connie said.

Steven nodded.

Connie licked her lips. Her mouth felt so dry. “Like...Earth.”

Slowly, Steven nodded again.

“...oh,” Connie breathed.

“Yeah,” Steven agreed. “Oh.”

Connie almost didn’t want to get on the shuttle for the next planet inspection. In fact, she considered asking Steven to take her home, away from this...process of picking out the most insignificant backwater planets with which to eek out a few instances of gem life. But Pyrope had been quite firm about their schedule and the extensive delays that would be faced if they didn’t keep moving, and she couldn’t do that to this little, lonely crew. So she gathered her wits and courage and tried to recapture that feeling of wonder she’d felt on going to her first alien world.

Her efforts were destroyed the second Hush—taking over for Swift, as the three junior members of
the kindergarten crew braved their first solo planet-side missions—spoke up on inspecting the data screen next to the door.

“Hmmm...My Diamond, these readings are...borderline.”


“No, borderline...troubling.” She picked the tablet up and came to stand at her leader’s side, pointing out several jumbles of gem text. “We didn’t detect a large percentage of water on this planet, but there are some wet zones across the surface—nothing too big or permanent, like an ocean, or even a lake—but some of them are showing indicators of having phospholipid concentrations.”

“Phospho...shards.” Steven reached up, pressing on the buttons on the side of his helmet, removing it and creating work for Coral, once more. And making it suddenly impossible for this little shuttle to open out onto the planet’s surface. “Okay, then. That’s it. Pyrope will be glad to know she has more leeway in the schedule.”

“That’s it?” Jasper said, scowling. “We’re not even going to double-check?”

“You mean inspect every single pond and puddle on this planet? You know we don’t have time for that.”

“We don’t have to look at everything,” Jasper argued. “Steven, it’s ridiculous to pass this planet up! I saw those readouts; there’s beryl concentrations. We need beryls. We can’t pass up on making a half-dozen of them just because there’s some barely-there possibility of—”

“Life?” Steven interjected. “Oh, no, Jasper. We very much can pass up on making those gems.”

“Those beryls,” Jasper insisted. “Steven, if we’re ever going to develop a core to your empire, we’ll need the the proper temples and bases, and for those we need beryls, and we can make them here.”

“We can make them on less-developed planets, once we find the right deposits,” Steven countered.

“You’re going to delay us by decades because you’re too concerned that you might hurt a few bacteria?”

“YES!” Steven thundered to his feet, startling Hush, who backed away from the man. Glaring down on the still-seated jasper, he hissed, “We are not going to kill off everything on this planet just to make a few gems!”

The shuttle went still and silent. Laz’s gaze was darting between Jasper and Steven, and her wings twitched, unsure if she should come between the champion and her diamond.

“This is no longer up for discussion,” Steven growled. “Do I make myself clear, Jasper?”

“Yes,” Jasper growled, looking Steven directly in the eyes. “My Diamond.”

“You will not be going down to any more of the planets, today.”

Jasper scowled, sitting up straighter. “Steven, you cannot—”

“I won’t be, either,” he said, and that seemed enough to stop the quartz’s protests. “Moss, can you handle things on your own?”

“Yes, My Diamond,” Moss Agate said, inclining her head.
“And you’ll follow the protocols?”

“Yes, My Diamond,” she repeated, grave.

“Good.” Steven rubbed at his face and turned to address Connie. “Moss is a good mission leader; you’ll be safe with her for the rest of the trip.”

“No offense to you, Moss Agate,” Connie said, “but I think I’ll skip.”

Coral had groaned in frustration at the sight of her diamond’s free and wild hair, but Steven had just waved her off, throwing his helmet into a cubby and stalking out of the shuttle bay, leaving it to Moss Agate to explain why not only Steven, but also Jasper, were off the planet-side crew.

Connie wasn’t entirely sure where her clothes had gone—they weren’t in any of the cubbies—so she left the shuttle bay in the same dark-pink, form-fitting atmo-suit, wondering how it could feel so restrictive, yet also move so easily with her limbs. She also wondered if the ship had any showers. She was certain there was a thin, evenly-distributed layer of sweat all over her body. Oh, what she would do for good water pressure....

She almost took a wrong turn on her trek, but a little tingle of memory, a feel of wrongness down a hall, and Connie took the correct turn, soon rising up the ship until she was back at the observation deck. Steven had left the door open.

He was laying on the hard floor, arms folded up above his head, palms serving as a pillow as he gazed up at the shifting stars. She walked up to him, and he tilted his head just a bit to look at her. His eyes darted up and down, but he swiftly looked away, cheeks reddening.

Connie smirked, and very seriously considered commenting on the ‘view.’ Instead, she settled down on the floor herself, copying Steven’s pose, looking out on the brightness of the galaxy approaching and the blackness of the galaxy receding.

In just a few minutes, the sky above went still again, and they looked up at not just one sphere, but two: an enormous green and gray planet in the background, and, far closer, one of its moons, smaller and of a vivid purple.

“Connie?” Steven ventured, steadfastly looking to the planet and moon above.

“Mmmhmm?” The woman’s eyes tracked the little blip of the pink—always pink, he really needed to branch out a bit—shuttle dropping down, it soon becoming no more than a memory of a shape against the immensity of the alien world.

“When I yelled at Jasper...my eyes...did they—”

“Yeah.” Connie sighed. “Yeah. They did.”

“Shards.” Steven thumped his heel against the floor. “I didn’t want to...she knows the rules!”

“To be fair, I think I would have considered wiping out some bacteria to save humanity. Hell,” she shrugged, “that’s kind of one of the things my mom is always trying to do.”

“Medicine is a bit different from planetary genocide, Connie.”

“I know,” she acknowledge, words even, almost cajoling. “I’m just saying, if it had been me that was the diamond, and you that was left behind on Earth all these years...I don’t think you’d have
been as impressed with me as I am with you.”

Now he did turn his head, looking upon the face of his childhood friend. “You’re...impressed with me?”

“Well, yeah,” she laughed, and the sound of it brought a light to his eyes. “Look, I know gems have this weird loyalty thing going on for their diamonds, but everyone on this ship is just so...comfortable with you. They’re not just taking orders. I can tell they’re listening.” She rolled her eyes. “Hell, makes me a bit envious. I was voted in by a supermajority, and still most of the people in town can’t name who the mayor is.”

“At least they had the chance to choose you,” Steven replied. “For all I know, my gems might prefer to be part of Yellow or Blue or White’s court. At least then they wouldn’t be so alone.”

“Steven,” Connie chided, smirking at the man’s fatalistic thoughts. “They’re not alone at all. They have each other. And they have you.”

“Don’t you mean that I have them?” he muttered, seeming to shrink in on himself.

“I’d probably have said it that way yesterday,” Connie agreed. “But, well...look. Think of it this way: Peridot broke away from her diamond ages ago. She’s proof that a gem can choose to leave. And the Crystal Gems have spent so long on Earth without a diamond to order them around, I think it’s pretty obvious that gems don’t need diamonds.”

She paused a moment, attention caught by a sudden burst of light in the atmosphere of the planet below. A meteor burning up on entry? Distant lightning in an alien storm?

“But, Peridot,” she finally went on, almost casual, meandering, using her words to reel Steven in. “I think, if someone offered her the chance...she’d be more than ready to pick a new diamond.”

Steven blinked, and let his head tilt to the side, looking full into Connie’s face. “I never considered doing anything like asking....” He trailed off, unable to fathom such an arrangement. After some moments, he tried again. “It doesn’t seem right. I mean, the Crystal Gems aren’t just waiting around for to belong to some...new diamond.”

“Of course they’re not,” Connie agreed. “But, I’ve got a bit of news for you, Steven.”

He frowned. “What?”

“The gems on this ship?” She waved an arm about, indicating the entirety of the vessel and even those down on the moon below. “They don’t belong to a little tender-heart like you.”

Steven turned to his side and propped himself up on his elbow. His brow drew down sharply as he tried to understand the strange, lounging woman speaking so dismissively of his gems and their loyalty.

Grinning, Connie reached out, poking Steven’s wide chest. “Their diamond belongs to them.”

Steven moved his hand over Connie’s, pressing it against his chest so she could feel the rumble of his laughter under her fingertips. “You know...I think I’d really prefer things that way.”

“Then why not let it be that way? I mean, don’t let them go out and dry up planets to make pearls for everyone or anything; it sounds like your rules are good, there. But you also don’t have to go about thinking you have to make all their decisions. Just listen to what they want. Then help them get it.” She shrugged. “That’s my job as mayor.”
“Hmmm.” Steven nodded slowly, considering. “That sounds...nice.”

“Oh, it sounds nice” Connie breezed, her smile taking on just an edge of malice. “Just wait until your first election.”

Steven raised a brow in inquiry, when, up above, there came the voice of Moss Agate, sounding just the smallest bit...flustered.

“My Diamond, excellent news,” she said, speaking with rapidity. “The planet is stable, with enough energy for a full five gems, and there are no signs of life from any of our scans. But it appears that there are three suitable locations for injection sites.”

“Oh no,” Steven whispered. Then, louder, he called out, “What are the site makeups?”

“Pyrite on the northern continent, nephrite on the south, and it appears there are some nice jasper formations on the largest island in the southern ocean.”

“Shards,” Steven groaned, smacking his face. He looked to Connie, seeking guidance, but she just held up her hands and smiled.

He looked to the dome—or perhaps to distant and unfeeling gods in the stars beyond—and asked, tentative, “Is everyone listening?”

Gems began to call out affirmatives, amethysts calling in chorus, the peridots not far behind, and, after some moments, the familiar, yet edged rumble of Jasper confirming, “Yes, My Diamond.”

“Uuuuuuuuhhhbbb.” Steven dragged his hand down his face, his lip stretching an inch towards his jaw before it snapped back up again. “I’m gonna regret this,” he whispered, just low enough for Connie to hear and nod in confirmation. Then, raising his voice, he called out to his gems, “How about...you all decide?”

There was a long silence over the intercom.

And then the fighting began.

Chapter End Notes

There has been some confusion about the scene where Connie is picked up from the party, and I’d like to reassure everyone that Connie completely consented to sex; she just had a very emotional response. There's a longer discussion of this here on my Tumblr.
She's got her secrets

Chapter Summary

Conflict resolution, alien creatures, opinionated pearls, and lots and lots of pink. And, perhaps, something that two people have been dreaming of for eighteen years.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 8 theme song: "Dirty Laundry" by All Time Low.

I highly recommend you start listening to it at the point where you see the word "Neptune." (Do skip the long intro of the music video.)

Steven had expected the debate to go on for an hour. Two hours. Given that these were gems, perhaps a couple millennium.

He hadn’t expected one of his gems to step forward and demand order so swiftly. He, furthermore, had not expected that gem to be Pyrope, instigator of so much drama. But, as the debates threatened to turn to pure chaos, the pilot had watched her carefully constructed flight schedule be put in jeopardy, and she screamed for order.

Most surprising of all, the gems had listened. Even the excitable peridots, who were frantically calling for an even distribution—but how did you distribute five gems over three locations, unless they could maybe make those jaspers a bit smaller, a notion which had Skinny crying foul—deigned to go quiet.

With commendable efficiency, the gems came to an agreement: two pyrites, one nephrite, and a pair of jaspers. It would mean three trips back to the planet over the next year, each of the gem types having markedly different incubation rates, but no one on the ship seemed to mind all that much. In fact, given the number of times they would be returning, several of the crew members asked to see the scans of the planet, hoping to find suitable spots for downside leave.

Moss Agate, Laz, and Sol had to rush to meet the demand for three injection sites, but Laz was precise and Sol, as it turned out, was short for “Solid,” and the stocky peridot showed none of her sisters’ penchant for panic. She just picked out the sites and set to work, and, with only thirty seconds to spare, the shuttle was back in its bay and the small away team exited to raucous cheers and embraces from all who weren’t needed on the bridge. Even then, the intercoms carried those cheers to them, and the ship reveled together in the anticipated arrival of five more to their numbers.

None seemed more pleased than Jasper and her little counterpart, Skinny, who graciously allowed the other quartzes to slap their backs and punch their shoulders, while they pretended such friendly assaults were as little more than caresses, even though more than a few marks were left behind.
“Turn our backs too long, and the ship’s going to be just crawling with you behemoths,” Laz teased as she came to stand beside Jasper.

Jasper chuckled and smiled down on the ocean gem. “You say that like it’s a bad thing, Laz.”

“Oh, no,” she breezed, pressing her hand just south of her gem. “I’m all for a little variety, you know.”

Snorting, Jasper leaned just a bit sideways, bumping the blue gem’s shoulder with her hip. “You? Variety? I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Chuckling in response, Laz pressed back, until both gems seemed to be holding each other up, ready to fall if they left one another’s side. They did not.

Connie narrowed her eyes at the two gems. “Steven,” she ventured, but, before he could respond, Elder and one of the gems Connie had yet to see running about on the ship—Heliodor, a dark-yellow gem flaunting an hourglass figure with an extra fifteen minutes on the bottom—came to stand before their diamond.

“That last mission just about cleared out the injectors,” Heliodor said, tilting her head to the side, so the chartreuse oval-cut gem embedded on the right of her bald pate flashed briefly under the recessed lighting. “Unless there’s only one more gem to start up on the last three planets, we’re gonna need more, and Pyrope would probably appreciate it if we had everything ready to go, instead of cutting things so close, this time.”

“Got that right,” Pyrope interjected through the comms. “My Diamond, you’ve got ten minutes to start up those injectors and get them loaded. Move it.”

“Well, aye aye, Cap’n,” Steven laughed, giving a little diamond salute to the ceiling, which made some of the surrounding gems gasp, while others laughed with only a hint of nerves. “You got a lineup ready for me, Heelie?”

“Of course. And will our guests be coming along?”

“Couldn’t stop me,” Connie said, reaching out to hook her elbow about Steven’s arm.

“Or me!” Peridot affirmed, copying Connie on the other side.

One of these additions made Steven’s face flush far more than the other.

“Guess I could come along,” Amethyst added in, coming to stand with Peridot, giving quite the unconvincing shrug.

“Excellent,” Heliodor said, clasping her hands before her and giving a little bow. “If you would all please follow me?” And, turning, she moved out of the shuttle bay and glided down the corridor. Quite literally. Her feet, while certainly touching the ground, did not seem to shift at all as she went.

Connie blinked at the disconcerting sight. “Gems are weird,” she muttered.

“Oh yeah,” Steven agreed. “That’s a given. But come on. You haven’t heard me sing.”

They went just a few doors down, not even needing to turn a corner. Yet, when the door here opened, Connie was certain that, in any standard conception of Euclidean geometry, it would have been necessary to place a room like this far, far further down from the shuttle bay.
Dozens upon dozens of those portable injectors stood in rows of shelves, stacked two-injectors high. Perhaps well into three hundred, each ready and gleaming, with not so much as a speck of dust on their bright red heads. But those weren’t what kept your attention. All along the walls, looming, were those devices far more familiar to gem and human protectors of Earth: full-sized injectors, perhaps fifty of them, each easily forty feet tall. There was no movement in this room, but it was hard to shake the feeling that those devices waited with some sort of intelligence.

“Okay...I may have changed my mind,” Amethyst said, looking about, taking a small step back. “Uh...what are you...going to do in here?”

“It’s okay, Amethyst,” Steven said, tone light and unconcerned as he—with marked reluctance—freed his arm from Connie’s grasp, stepping forward to a table upon which lay two dozen of the mini-injectors, each cradled in a padded divot. “The injectors are dormant; they can’t make gems on their own. If we want them to actually be useful, then I need to do...this.”

And Steven closed his mouth and began to hum. Slow and gentle, rising up and down the scale, until a tension built in the air, pressing into each of the gems, and even Connie began to feel a tightness on her skin.

And then Steven opened his mouth and sang out a harmonizing polyphonic note, his gem breaking into a soft glow.

There were no words to the song. It felt as if there was no pattern or rhythm, either. But it flowed around them, and Connie watched as first Heliodor’s gem, and then Peridot’s and finally Amethyst’s began to flicker in response. Steven kept his eyes open, visage peaceful, though still intent upon his work. He reached out with one hand and touched the first of the injectors.

It glowed. Bright, almost blinding, and Connie thought, for a moment, that the components inside throbbed. Beat like a heart.

And then Steven’s hand moved along to the next injector, lighting it up, and the first dimmed and went still once again.

One by one, he moved down the line, never seeming to breath, just keeping up his strange call as he caressed one injector and then another, imparting the song of a diamond upon each. Until, finally, he came to the last, and the music faded from his mouth. The room—and the gems of his companions—dimmed once more, leaving behind a quiet, welcome silence.

Steven stood beside the table for some moments before he opened his eyes and looked to his friends.

He smiled, and two pink diamonds shone upon them.

But then they faded, and the man’s eyes were so familiar, once more. Just with an added bit of calm, which had been so lacking on this intense day.

Heliodor came to stand beside the table, brushing her hand over each of the injectors. They glowed—almost imperceptibly, especially compared to the response given to the diamond song—and she nodded, satisfied. “Just right, My Diamond. These will easily get us through this mission. And perhaps the next.”

“How’s to hoping it won’t get us through the next, eh?” Steven asked, leaning down and plucking four injectors off the table, one going under each arm, one held in each hand. “You all want to bring some along? We should be able to refill the shuttle in one go, between us.”
“What if we drop one?” Amethyst asked, biting the corner of her mouth. She made no move towards the fragile devices.

Steven shrugged. “Well, you’re not on cleaning rotation, since you’re a guest, but it would be polite to help.” He smiled, tilting his head. “Don’t worry, Amethyst. It’s not like they’re babies or anything. It’s just goo.”

“Oh, well.” The quartz tried for a laugh, but it came out with a bit of strain. She didn’t try again, but came forward, picking up another four of the injectors. “I know all about goo.”

Steven chuckled. “Indeed, you do.”

The shuttle was ready for the fourth planet in plenty of time, and, this time, Hush was able to try her hand at injecting gems without supervision. Just a pair, likely to become simple siberites, but, when the shuttle docked once more, the youngest of the peridots swaggered off like she had produced the most magnificent of emeralds. Her gem nose was high enough in the air that even Jasper’s amusement did not get through to her.

Just before arrival at the fifth planet, Elder came down to the shuttle bay and informed her three proteges that they would all be going down together, and she would be shutting off her communicator. It was time to see what they could do without her.

The trio had looked to one-another with wide, frightened eyes, and then to Peridot 5XG. But the formerly Yellow-allied kindergartener steadfastly ignored them, turning to her amethyst companion and prattling on about the upcoming Camp Pining Hearts ten-year reunion.

Amethyst tried her utmost to look interested. Luckily, Peridot didn’t seem to notice her friend’s failure.

It took Pyrope barking about the schedule for the young peridots to muster enough courage to shuffle onto the shuttle and depart.

The moment they were gone, Elder’s gem ignited and she pulled up a video feed direct from the shuttle’s interior cameras. She began pacing and biting her nails, watching the video which moved before her with each step. “Was that a bad idea? Are they ready? Hush has only been out of the ground for a year; I didn’t even touch an injector until I was six months older! What if they pick a weak vein, what if all the possible sites are on fault lines, what if there’s an quake, they could be crushed—”

“Elder, calm down,” Jasper cut in. “Those three didn’t even need to call you on the rest of today’s missions, and I haven’t heard a peep of criticism from you about their technique. And, if there is a problem, Moss Agate and Laz are more than capable of handling a crisis.”

“By doing what?” Elder shouted, turning and throwing her hands in the air, her hundred fingers jerking about like snakes on a live electric line. “Poofing my team and fusing while they wait for rescue!?”

Jasper rolled her eyes. “A duty I’m sure Moss Agate would be happy to perform.”

“YOU ARE NO HELP, JASPER.”

“And neither, it seems, are you,” Jasper shot back, grinning. “But that’s your decision this time, isn’t it?”
“NYEEEEH!”

“Okay, now this is familiar,” Peridot muttered, and Jasper shot her a wide, sharp-toothed smile.

There were no attempts to call in from the away team. Perhaps this meant what all was well, but despite the live feed, Elder grew more and more tense by the second, digging her hands into her hair as she watched her students consult one-another about scanner readings and mineral concentrations and injection sites. When it came time to actually perform the injection, one of the amethysts had suggested that Elder sit down, to which the peridot had all-but collapsed on the floor, whimpering as she watched.

Five minutes later, the shuttle was easing back into its dock, and Elder shut off her screen, stood up straight, patted down her uniform, and folded her arms behind her back, her fingers weaving together into a complex and rather beautiful braid.

Jasper, kindly, leaned forward and smoothed a ruffled bit of the senior gem’s hair back into place. The green gem made no move to acknowledge the quartz, too busy watching the shuttle dock.

The door hissed open to reveal three smaller, but no-less stern peridots waiting right in the doorway. They stepped out as one, with Swift, the senior of the three, taking the forward position and addressing her supervisor with great solemnity. “Peridot LDR-1. I am pleased to announce that the Blade will be returning in six months to welcome a bismuth on board.”

The arrayed gems gave a cheer, and Elder let out a significant sigh of relief. Finding her composure duly lost, she reached out and pulled the three younger peridots to her side. “I was watching the entire time,” she said, soft, fond. “You were spectacular.”

“Damn right, we were,” Swift laughed, mashing her hand down on Hush’s hair, ruining the gem’s pyramidal coiffure.

Then the ship was off again, and arriving at the final planet, all awaiting the announcement of yet another coming addition to their crew. However, the shuttle wasn’t confirmed on the surface for a full minute before Moss Agate radioed up, a little edge to her voice.

“My Diamond, this one is...very much not happening,” she said, and sighed. “It looks like we might need to redefine our scans somewhat. I can’t believe we missed all this.”

Steven tilted his head. “What do you mean, ‘all this?’”

There was a pause on the line. And then, Moss Agate gave a soft laugh. “Pyrope, is the schedule a bit more flexible, now?”

“Oh yeah,” the navigator responded, and Connie had the distinct impression that the dark gem was lounging with her feet up on her console, in defiance of all safety protocols. “We’ve got safe, clear paths all over the place going back to Earth. Take your time.”

“Well. In that case, My Diamond, I really think you should get the second shuttle and come see for yourself. And...bring Spinel along.”

Steven’s brows rose and he opened his mouth to respond or perhaps to summon the suggested gem, but then she was there. Appearing in the room so suddenly that even Jasper startled.

“Mossy,” Spinel snapped up at the ceiling, “this had better not be like last time; just because a rock formation looks like a big bird does not mean you can fool me like that.”
“I think we categorically proved that statement false,” Moss Agate drawled. “Now get on the shuttle, girl. You want to be down here.”

Spinel squeaked and rushed over to the cubbies, fetching her atmo-suit and crashing into one of the changing rooms. So frantic was she, she forgot to lock it, and a bump of her bare backside against the door sent it careening outwards again, earning hoots and whistles from several of the nearby gems. Spinel didn’t even bother being indignant, just slamming the door shut once more.

With such an intriguing message from the agate, there was no way Connie was staying behind on this mission. Despite the generally clammy feel of her suit, by now, Connie was glad she hadn’t removed it during the previous missions. She doubted she could drag it back on. This way, all she had to do was pop her helmet in place once more and sit around, waiting for Steven to have his hair wrapped and stuffed into his helmet.

“Ever consider cutting it?” she asked, examining the voluminous curls. Just looking at all that hair had her wanting to buzz her two inches down to the skin.

“I have,” Steven sighed, then paused as the helmet was slid into place. When he spoke again, it was over the radios. “It grows back in three weeks, tops.”

“Three weeks?” Connie barked. “How aren’t you all strangled with that much hair around?”

“Well, it stops when it’s like this,” Steven said, turning to give Coral a nod and a smile for her help, earning a little beam of pleasure in return. He rose and faced towards the mayor once more, and they made their way onto the shuttle, Elder coming in alongside them. “About all I can do is tie it back. Guess this is one really strong gene I got from my mom.”

“No kidding, damn.”

“On the plus, I never had to think too much about how I want to do my hair every day!”

Connie laughed. “Given that we’re talking about you, I feel like that’s more of a downside, actually.”

He sighed. “Yeah...but, hey! There’s always accessories!”

The shuttle trip down to the planet’s surface was rather short, this time. Their final destination on the trip was significantly smaller than Earth, and so its gravitational pull far less, allowing the diamond flagship a closer orbit and the shuttle a more aggressive descent.

Once the shuttle had settled, Elder called up the data from Moss Agate’s ship and whistled low. “Well well well!” She snickered, turning to look to her diamond. “Apologies to Coral, but it looks like all that primping was unnecessary. The air here looks great for humans! Got a bit more ambient nitrous oxide than Earth, no methane registering, some other differences, but there’s nothing at toxic levels, and the oxygen and nitrogen balance are pretty much the same as Earth.”

“Wait, does that mean...” Connie looked to Elder. Then to Steven. “Does that mean we...we don’t need the helmets?”

“Correct!” Elder cheered.

Over the radio, Coral let out an oath involving “skipping stones,” which Connie didn’t quite understand, but which had Jasper roaring with laughter.

“And everything out there isn’t even carbon-based, so there’s probably no need to worry about
contamination.” Elder tilted her head. “Maybe don’t go throwing up or bleeding on anything, but otherwise, you’re good.”

“Carbon-based,” Connie repeated.

“Yeah,” Elder said, scrolling through the readouts. “Looks like they use silicone, instead. Which, I got to say, at these temperatures, surprises the the dust outta me. Most silicone life is on planets too hot for gems to form.”

“Life,” Connie breathed. Spinning, she looked to Steven. “T-there’s life out there!?”

“That’s what the gem said,” the man affirmed, reaching up and removing his helmet, sighing in relief at the freedom. “You, uh...” he jerked his head at the door. “You gonna go check it out?”

Connie hesitated.

Spinel...did not.

It seemed the gem would almost rip the shuttle door off its runners, she pulled it open with such ferocity. She took just a split-second to make sure there was nothing skittering about on the ground before she flung herself outside, screaming with joy as she landed in the midst of a living world.

Connie took slow, hesitating steps, until she stood in the doorway, just on the verge, and she looked upon it all in awe.

There was little variety—well, to be fair, the sky was a deep green and the sun on the horizon a bright white, which was significant variety for an untraveled Earthling—but there were plants as far as the eye could see. Or what this planet had created to approximate plants. Instead of long stems and broad, flat leaves, the ground was covered in thin, branching tendrils in a hundred different shades, from deep, dark purple to a delicate chartreuse. Whatever chemicals in these plants made the color, it was used sparingly, with the ground below still quite visible through the flora. Here and there, tendrils of different colors came together and melded, forming bulbous nodules, a swirling mixture of liquid color within. Connie noted, with interest, that no tendril ever passed over another. Somehow, these plants seemed to know how to not overcrowd themselves, allowing for maximum absorption of sunlight.

Connie sat down on the edge of the shuttle and, already rethinking her decision, followed Steven’s lead in reaching up and pressing on her helmet seals.

There was a hiss of equilibrating air, and Connie took a testing, tiny breath.

The air smelled...normal. Perhaps even a bit...clean? Was that the lack of methane Elder had spoken of, or was it more likely to be the general absence of fumes and contaminants she had adjusted to since birth on a planet just in the beginning stages of abandoning combustion as a source of energy?

A few more breaths, and she felt...fine. Perhaps even more clear-headed than normal. Another benefit of an untouched atmosphere? Whatever it was, Connie decided that, at this point, there was no difference between testing the water and jumping right in. She took off her helmet, tucking it under one arm, and leaned out of the door.

There was a breeze. A small, tender thing which ruffled her short hair and dried off the thin sheen of sweat that had built up during her confinement. It brought strange, thin scents, perhaps unidentifiable even if they had come to her in greater concentrations. What might exist here, on this alien world, where even the basic biology stemmed from a different base element than her own...
Earth?

She hesitated to step in among all these strange growths, but, looking down, here and there she found uncovered patches of ground. Spinel seemed to have noted the same, as she leapt and danced further and further from the ship. The gem seemed to be facing no dangers, so, with only a little trepidation, Connie eased herself down to the nearest bare patch of ground and began picking her way through the overgrowth.

“Huh. We don’t normally find developed planets that look so...uniform,” Steven commented as he, too, descended from the shuttle and began to explore. He took easy fifteen-foot jumps between bare spots, and Connie wasn’t sure if that was due to the planet’s low gravity, his powers, or some combination. But he certainly seemed more graceful than she felt as she pinwheeled her arms with each step, constantly expecting the planet to pull her down as hard as Earth would have.

“Oh? How does everything normally look?” Connie took a few calculated leaps towards Steven, but she overshot. She yelped a full second before she landed, well aware that she was about to crush several inches of these strange plant-like tendrils under her feet.

But, instead of killing off her first bit of interstellar life, there was a slithering shift on the ground, and her feet touched down on bare, slightly damp soil.

Steven and Connie looked down to the woman’s feet. There wasn’t even a bunching of the tendrils nearby, which they might have expected if the plants had somehow drawn themselves back. Instead, it was all just...gone.

“Well, that isn’t ominous at all,” Connie said, clutching her helmet tighter to her side.

“How in the world did it do that?” Steven pondered, crouching down, examining one of the bulbous growths at the intersection of the tendrils. Slowly, he reached out, curious, ready to test the reaction speeds of the alien life. “Did it go into the ground or—”

The vines exploded around them.

Or, not precisely exploded. They rose. They leapt. They flew into the air, and there was a cacophony of almost robotic roars and puffs of bright blue flames.

Connie didn’t think. Nor did Steven. They rushed to one another and spun about, pressing back-to-back, knees bent as they crouched, ready to spring once more. Steven’s rose shield appeared in a flash, and Connie cursed herself for not bringing some sort of weapon on a planet which she had been explicitly told had life! All she could do was shove a hand into her helmet and grab onto a strap within, holding it before her chest, ready to use it as bludgeon or shield.

Around them, the creatures which had lain so patiently on the ground now flapped a dozen fibrous wings each. Each wing sported a different color, creating a shifting halo, but for a small gap directly above the bulbous growths which seemed to form the creatures heads. They had no eyes, but they certainly had mouths. Mouths which opened into unadorned, gaping holes, producing first a brief clicking, and then another roar and bout of blue flames, these bursts now far smaller than the first, startled response.

“Oh my stars,” a voice called from the edge of the alien gathering.

“Oh no,” Steven groaned.

“They’re dragons!” Spinel cheered, rushing in among the creatures.
With a flurry of chromatic wings, the vine-dragons flitted out of Spinel’s way, letting out tiny pops of flame. But they did not go far. In fact, they seemed to position themselves precisely out of arm’s reach of the gem. As if...taunting. They clicked and popped flames at her and circled about, inspecting, just as Connie realized they were doing to Steven and herself.

“Those clicks,” Steven said, his shield still at the ready. “Are the talking, Spinel?”

“Huh? Oh.” Spinel tilted her head, the sharp spines of her mohawk startling one particularly close vine-dragon, who went into a dive in front of the gem’s face, popping out a ball of blue flame which dispersed right before it touched her nose. Spinel smiled and puckered her lips at the aggressive thing, making kissing noises. “Not really,” she finally replied, her gaze following that little attacker—and little it was, only about six inches in wingspan, a seeming baby against the three-foot spans of some of the other creatures. “It’s just basic stuff. Like what that flying dog said in those movies you showed me? I’m getting ‘big,’ ‘scary,’ ‘eater?’ That last one is definitely a question. Hmmm. Might not want to stick around too long, then, if there’s predators out here. But they’re calming down. Hah! My Diamond, they like your shield.”

“My shield?” Steven looked down on the translucent pink gem weapon, and then up to find one of the largest of the vine dragons hovering before him, its wings flapping wide as it fought to keep its position in the air. He considered the strange animal, then held the shield out, twisting his forearm about so the shield moved just slightly back and forth.

The dragon popped out a flame and landed on the shield with a pronounced _whump_ as each of its many tendrils impacted at once. It clung on tight about the shield’s edges with a few of its tendrils and began to bop its head onto the shield, bouncing back a bit on each impact.

“Uh...is this thing...” Steven trailed off.

Connie glanced over her shoulder and snickered. “Oh my. Well, none of these things are pink. I suppose your shield is quite..._exotic._”

“Gyah! Shoo!” Steven barked, waving his hand at the vine-dragon. “Shoo!”

He got a pop of flame for his trouble, just barely singing the hairs on the back of his hand. The dragon showed no signs of leaving, just clicking rapidly at the shield, rustling its tendrils enticingly.

“Oh, _fine!_ You leave me no choice!” Steven growled and, with a brief glow, his shield dissipated, retreating into his gem.

The courting dragon let out an indignant roar as it fell halfway to the ground before recovering. Rising up again, it spun about, whipping Steven quite deliberately across the face with its blue tendrils before going back to join its fellows, most of whom had begun to settle back down upon the ground some distance off. They stretched out their wings, vines rearranging until only a few empty spots were left between them.

All but for one of the smaller animals, who seemed far braver—or more foolish—than its kin. This one flitted before Connie for several seconds before landing delicately on her helmet. Rather than attempting to court it, however, the dragon lifted its head and opened its featureless mouth, pointing it at the woman.

Connie flinched, expecting another burst of flame, but instead there was just a puff of warm air.

Connie took in a relieved breath and laughed. Sharp and explosive. And then another bout of
laughter, longer and deeper in her chest. Throwing all caution to the wind, she lifted her helmet closer to her face, leaning in to nuzzle the absolutely adorable little dragon. Oh, she just wanted to cuddle it so bad.

“Oh, look at you!” The woman cooed, bouncing on her heels. “You are my favorite thing ever, come here, yes you are the best!”

Steven turned about to look down on Beach City’s beloved and accomplished mayor. He blinked, brows rising high towards his hairline. “Uuuuuuh...Connie?”

“Look at her, Steven!” Connie crooned, spinning to face the man, leaning into him. Giggling. “Look at her ugly little head!”

As if in agreement, the dragon let out another little hiccough of breath, and Connie squealed.

“E...Elder?” Steven called out, looking towards the ship. “I need a scan. Like, now.”

Elder poked her head out from the interior of the shuttle, frowning. “Hmmm? Oh. Yes, let me just pause these tests and....” A few flickers of a dozen fingers on the screen projected before her chest, and the display changed to two pie charts. “Huh...uh huh...yeah, interesting. Guess that explains it.” She looked at her three companions.

Connie was playfully snapping her teeth at the dragon, pretending she intended to devour the animal. The dragon opened its mouth once more, letting out another puff of warm air.

“Yaaaaaaah,” Elder drawled. “Those things aren’t breathing the same way you humans do. And that little one doesn’t appear to be old enough to start the fires, so it’s letting out some, uh...chemicals.”

Steven looked to Elder in alarm. “Chemicals?”

“Oh, nothing too troublesome,” Elder said, waving off her diamond’s concern. “A little oxygen, a little carbon disulfide—very little, luckily for your friend—and a lot of nice, pure nitrous oxide. Explains the atmospheric readings.” She grinned at the ecstatic mayor. “Hey! Maybe we should bottle some of that up, in case the humans back on Earth start getting testy. Works well on this one.”

“Nitrous oxide?” Steven said, looking from Elder back to Connie. “Nitrous...oh, shards. Off! Off!” Safe from the dangerous flames of the adults, Steven was a bit more aggressive in shooing away the immature dragon on Connie’s helmet, actually pushing it off and to the ground when it remained stubborn. He had a momentary pang of worry, but the dragoon was soon hopping back into the air, chattering at him in reproach and flitting away to claim its own sunny spot on the ground.

“Aw, Steeeeeeeen!” Connie whined, pouting up at the man. “You scared it away!” Her lower lip trembled and her eyes watered.

“Oh, give me that,” Steven grumbled, snatching the helmet from Connie’s grip and pushing it back over her head. A press on the seals, a few seconds of waiting as the woman took in the scrubbed air from her filters, and....

“I wanna throw up,” Connie whined.

“Just breathe deep, the scrubbers will help with the nausea.”
“I’m not nauseous,” Connie said, covering her helmet visor with her hands. “Wait...wait, never mind. Now I am. Dammit. I did not just try to kiss some sort of...alien plant-dragon.”

“Fungus-dragon, it looks like,” Elder responded. “Steven, can we leave the scanners behind here? The chemical processes of these creatures are fascinating.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steven replied, laying a gentle hand on Connie’s back. “But let’s get out of here, okay? We shouldn’t be disturbing living things, anyways. Come along, Spinel.”

“Awwwwwww...but My Diiiiiamooooooond!”

“No arguing,” her leader chided, pushing Connie towards the shuttle, his gem obediently following behind.

“I need...a shower,” Connie declared on stepping off the shuttle and removing her reputation-saving helmet. “And a mind-wipe....”

Steven gave his companion a bemused smile. “We can agree to never speak of this again?”

“Oh, can we?” She let out a deep sigh. “Yes, please.”

Chuckling, Steven took the helmet from Connie’s hands, placing it and his own back in their cubbies. “Consider it done,” he declared with all the authority of a true diamond. “And the same goes for the shower. I’ve got to wrap up things here, but there’s a spare room down the hall to the right, fourth door.”

“Um...” Connie looked to the mostly-empty cubbies. The helmets had been returned, but it appeared the suits needed some sort of cleaning and maintenance. None of what was left in the cubbies in any way resembled her slacks and blouse. “And my clothes?”

Steven followed Connie’s gaze and frowned. He looked about at his gems, as if expecting one of them to be strutting about in business-casual attire.

“Your garments are being seen to,” Coral spoke up. “I shall bring them to the guest accommodations.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Connie protested automatically. She did not want this pearl acting like a...well, a pearl, for her.

“Oh,” Coral said, her tone light, breathy. “You mean you would prefer to remain...inappropriately attired?” There was a little lilt, a tease to the question which made it obvious that Coral was not referring to the wearing of the atmo-suit.

Connie felt her face burn, and she stammered, “N-no! Of course not!”

“Then I shall bring your garments to you,” Coral said with finality. “Now, in the meantime, My Diamond, if you do not allow me to untangle that hair...” She passed a hand over her gem, which glowed, producing a pair of long, silver-bright scissors, which she opened and shut menacingly, the wicked blades emitting audible shinks as they slid metal-on-metal. “We really will need to cut it all off.”
“Right, right,” Steven sighed, following the pearl’s prodding and settling down on the floor before a chair, with the little pink gem taking the seat behind him, allowing her to work on his tightly curled locks in comfort (and without scissors) while he and Elder went over the day’s data mining, Peridot edging in close and leaping into the conversation almost immediately.

Connie allowed herself a brief moment to feel at loose ends. But that was all. Her skin itched enough to break her out of any paralysis. Destination firmly in mind, she left the shuttle bay and took the longer-than-anticipated trek down the hallways and to a plain, if wide, door. She worried, for a moment, that the gem locks would force her to go back for assistance, but her hesitating presence before the door was enough to trigger some sort of sensor, and the two panels slid aside, allowing the woman entry.

If it was a spare room, it was a plain one. Though, given what Connie had heard about the living arrangements of the quartz soldiers at the human zoo, it was probably luxurious to most gems. A two-seat couch, a small desk, a bare shelf, and another door, which led into a yet plainer box of a room. The shower, it seemed? Examining the ceiling, Connie found hundreds of tiny holes, and the same on the floor for drainage. There were no noticeable controls, but as she reached an arm into the box, water began to stream down from overhead. Not steaming-hot, as she preferred, but manageable.

Less manageable was the process of removing her atmo-suit. If it had been tricky getting it on, that was nothing on removing the thing after she’d moved about and sweated and apparently...ugh, pruned up in the close confines. There was an unsettling schlick as she peeled the fabric off her chest, and she cursed at the none-too-pleasant sensation of the rubbery material sticking for just a moment too long on her breasts. The sensation on her thighs and between them...even less welcome. But, eventually, she was freed, and, after a moment’s consideration, the suit was folded as best she could manage and laid atop the desk.

Connie stepped into the shower and...bliss. Bliss. She hadn’t realized precisely how clammy and sticky she was, but just a few seconds under the spray and she could feel the grime melting away. There was no noticeable soap dispenser in the cubicle, but, with how quickly Connie felt the very life force re-enter her bones, she thought perhaps there was some solution in the water itself. She wanted to stay here...forever....

Perhaps this was a common sentiment, for about fifteen minutes later, there was a brief break in the water falling from above, mildly startling the woman. A minute later, and it happened a second time, and, after another ten seconds, the water shut off, and Connie pouted.

And then wondered how in the world she was supposed to dry off. There had been nothing remotely resembling a towel outside. Even the couch was more the shape of a seating area, rather than anything of fabric and padding.

The shower itself supplied the answer. With no warning, a strong blast of air shot from the ceiling, pushing all the water off Connie’s skin in a half-second. She yelped in surprise, and then stood there, naked and startled, but clean and completely dry.

“Warn a girl next time, Steven,” she muttered, shaking her head to clear it. Reaching up, she smoothed a hand over her short hair, which had puffed up after being so suddenly dried. A little work, and it settled down smooth again.

Which left the problem of...no...clothes. And, if Moss Agate was anything to judge by, these gems still possessed some level of nudity taboo—odd, given how flagrantly and randomly they fused, which Connie had always assumed was a quite intimate act.
Ready to retreat back into the safety of the shower’s cover, Connie cracked the door open and poked her head outside.

She almost immediately did retreat, catching sight of Coral placing a pile of fabric on the desk, just a bit to the left of where Connie had left the atmo-suit, which had already been cleared away. But, before she jumped back, Connie registered something odd about the clothes and she frowned.

They were...pink.

“Those aren’t mine,” Connie said, and Coral jumped in startlement, landing facing the human.

“O-oh,” she said. Then, seeming to gather herself with swiftness, Coral clasped her hands before her hips and gave a small bow. “Yes. I took the liberty of making something for you, this evening. Your attire this morning was unsuitable for an audience with my diamond.”

“An audience?” Connie scowled. “I’m sorry, but he invited me here; I think that means my attire was fine.”

Coral sighed, flipping a hand to dismiss the human’s protests. “My diamond isn’t nearly so conscious as he should be of his position. These clothes will be perfectly suited for meeting with him in his chambers.”

“His chambers?” Connie squawked, mind stumbling over every over-dramatic showdown between damsel-in-distress and sinister dictator she had come across in fiction. “I-I am not going to his chambers.”

“Do as you like,” Coral replied, shrugging. “But my diamond indicated that you would likely be hungry, at this time, and he has laid out a meal for you both. If you would rather wait until we arrive back on Earth, Pyrope has informed me that our final transit back to the Sol system will take just under an hour, at which point we will take a more leisurely sight-seeing approach to your planet.” Once more giving that little bow, Coral turned her back on the shower-trapped woman, taking delicate, dancing steps to the door. “If you would rather pass on the view, then, by all means, wait here, and I will return your clothes on landing.”

Connie growled mutinously. “Why don’t you bring them now? Aren’t you pearls supposed to do whatever you’re told?”

Coral paused, her hand on the door lock. She look over her shoulder, lips curled up in the softest of smiles. “Just what one gem tells me to do,” she breezed. “And he only told me to inform you that his chambers are three doors down, and dinner will be ready in five minutes.” Curling one hand in a sinuous wave, Coral, turned to the door once more, passing through the opening with a pronounced flounce to the long back of her dress.

Connie waited until the door was fully closed.

And then she set to swearing.

It wasn’t...bad. It wasn’t some skimpy gold bikini and chains, like on the cover of one of Greg’s old sci-fi novels. And it wasn’t an ornate corset or fifty layers of tulle and brocade, as she’d thought the pearl would produce. It was just a plain, unruffled A-line dress with a wide tie about the waist.

But it was so pink. So brightly, tackily pink. Pink was a terrible color for her dark skin, and this much of it?
She was never going to trust Coral again. Never, never.

But, again, it wasn’t...bad. And, if Coral had been telling the truth about Steven’s orders—and perhaps his loose demands of the pearl was a bit less of a wise strategy than the man thought, if Connie’s clothing was any indicator—then it wasn’t his fault. And, well...it had been a long day. Her stomach was clenching in on itself, responding with enthusiasm to the idea of being filled.

Taking only a few minutes to consider defying the pearl entirely and actually sauntering into Steven’s bedroom in the buff, Connie decided that clothed-ness was the better part of valor. She got dressed and left the guest room.

And almost immediately collided with the side of Moss Agate, who was leaning over—no, looming over a blue-blushing Chalcedony, the agate’s thick forearm propped up on the wall over the smaller quartz’s head. Chalcedony, leaning up against the wall and quite intent on the aggressive agate, reacted slowly. She turned her head to look upon Connie, eyes softly lidded and intense, lips parted invitingly. Despite the sudden appearance of the human, she did not seem to feel fit to change her demeanor in the least.

Moss Agate, however, exploded back from the wall, landing several feet back, her heels clicking together loud enough to echo down the corridor. “D-do you mind, miss!!?” she squeaked, cheeks going white. “Why are you skulking about here?”

“E-excuse me?” Connie stammered, looking between the two gems. “It’s a hallway.”

Chalcedony seemed to finally be catching up to things; a state which was not to her liking. She glared at Connie and pushed off from the wall, reaching out for Moss Agate. “Hey, Mossy, calm down. It’s just a coincidence.” She smirked, tilting her head to indicate the recently-vacated guest room. “And, heh...if the shower is free, then—”

“Then you can go cool off!” Moss Agate barked, turning on her heels and marching down the halls, swiftly turning out of sight.

“Aw, shards,” Chalcedony swore, taking off after her fellow quartz. “Mossy! Mossy, hold on! Mossy!”

Connie looked after the retreating gems. The only upside to this encounter, she decided, was that her skin probably now matched the dress.

Fleeing from the scene of the crime, Connie went the opposite direction of the two quartzes, and soon found herself before a door which did not seem to match the ship’s generally plain aesthetics at all. It was embossed, or perhaps sculpted, with swirls and geometric shapes and, in the middle of it all, a single, glowing pink diamond.

“Well, if this isn’t Steven’s chambers, then someone else on this ship really needs to tone it down,” Connie muttered. With only a moment’s hesitation, she reached out, pressing her hand to the panels. A crack appeared along the middle of the door, skirting the diamond itself, and the two halves split apart, allowing the woman entry. She stepped through.

It was jarring. It was unexpected. It was...familiar. But for the pink color scheme and a few missing bits of clutter, this room was an exact match for...

“The beach house,” Connie said, walking forward and craning her head to look about. Even the rafters were in the right places! There was even a warp pad to her right, though, instead of a Temple Gate just beyond, there was a window and a million stars slowly streaking towards her.
“Pretty close, yeah,” a voice responded, and Connie looked up to the replica of a bedroom loft and found Steven just finishing pulling a shirt over his head. She caught a glimpse of dark chest hair trailing down towards a pink gem, and then all was hidden and she could tell that her body’s efforts to match the dress had been renewed.

Steven kept speaking, oblivious to his brief moment of exposure. “The couch isn’t as comfy as home, but it does all...” Steven trailed off for a moment as he stared down on his guest.

“Those aren’t your clothes,” he said, flatly.

“I’d noticed,” Connie sighed, crossing her arms. “It seems Coral had some ideas about my not being fit for an audience with her diamond?”

Steven groaned, rubbing at his forehead. “Aw, shards. I’m sorry, Connie.” He turned, looking to his closet. “I’ve got some old pajamas, I think, or a robe or—”

Holding up her hand, Connie halted the man’s attempts at succor. “No, no, I’m fine. It’s not like this is particularly bad. Just...not my color.”

“I think you look fine,” Steven opined, jogging down the stairs to come stand before her.

Connie sighed. “Then Coral is right and you have no business making these decisions.”

Laughing, Steven rubbed at the back of his neck. “Yeah, probably. If you’d rather not be seen in Beach City looking like a Valentine, I bet I could get Lion to jump you home from the ship, after we land.”

“That would be much appreciated, thanks.”

“Then it’s settled! Now,” jerking his head towards the replication of his old kitchen, Steven urged Connie to follow him to the stove, “I wasn’t sure if you’d gone vegetarian or anything, and, well, there’s not much meat left in the stores, anyways, after the last 4 years, but our hydroponics work pretty well. We just harvested some great peppers and carrots, and there are always,” he paused and sighed, putting on a pair of oven mitts, “always soybeans growing for tofu.”

“Tofu? Really?” Connie leaned against the replica of the washing machine, watching as the diamond removed a rather fragrant, if not exactly pretty, casserole from the oven. “I didn’t see you becoming a vegetarian.”

“I’m not, really. It’s just you all always sent frozen meat, so there wasn’t really a chance to raise chickens or anything. I mean,” he lifted the lid off the dish, wafting away the steam with his free hand, “the Zoo had some cloning facilities, from back when it was founded and the environment kept crashing, but, eh, the idea of bringing a hamburger back to life just so I could slaughter it again...kind of unsettling.”

“Agreed,” Connie said, shuddering at the notion of such a tight cycle of life and death.

“Mind grabbing some plates?” Steven asked, taking a spatula from the large crock to the right of the stove.

“Yeah, sure.” Pushing off from the dishwasher, Connie went to one of the cabinets opposite, pulling it open to find the accustomed flatware...and paused.

She looked over her shoulder at Steven. “Okay, this could not have been good for your emotional growth,” she said, waving at the plates, and Steven’s chambers in general. Everything right where
it had always been. “Gonna clone your house, but not some cows?”

Steven laughed, accepting a pair of plates from the woman. “I didn’t set this place up until I got my ship, about nine years ago. I’d hope that I was doing well enough by twenty-three that I didn’t ruin myself.”

“Hmmm, debatable,” Connie breezed, earning a snort in response.

Turning about again, Steven held out the plates, each with a steaming serving of vegetables and tiny cubes of tofu. “Get what you want to drink. I intend to hear all about what happened with you the last eighteen years, and I don’t want you to get dehydrated.”

“Mister Universe,” Connie crooned, finding the glasses, yet again, in the traditional spot, filling one up with water from the refrigerator tap, “do you really expect me to talk?”

“No, Mayor Maheswaran,” Steven chuckled sinisterly, pausing before the table which had been set up on the warp pad. “I expect you...to dine.” With a flourish, he set the plates down and came about to one of the chairs, pulling it back and waiting.

“Nerd,” Connie snickered, mounting the warp pad—and perhaps this one was all for show, then, if he so willingly stood upon it, when it might otherwise be needed for transport—and accepting the offered seat. A little shuffling, and Steven pushed the woman’s chair in and came about to claim his own seat.

Connie looked down on the meal...and on the pink tablecloth. She meet the gaze of her old friend as he settled a cloth napkin—pink, though a bit darker than the other linens—on his lap. “Does everything on this ship have to be pink?”

“Ah ah!” Steven held a finger up. “I said I wanted to hear about you; this is not the time to be discussing color schemes.”

“That’s just because you have no justification for how gaudy this ship looks.”

Steven lifted his nose in the air. “That is beside the point. You’ve heard and seen plenty about what I’ve been doing. Now I want to hear about you!”

Connie smiled, picking up her fork and poking at the food. She’d never been much of a tofu person, but it looked okay. “You want the rundown Pearl-style?”

Steven laughed. “What? Are you a lesbian, now, too?”

Connor slipped a bite of tofu between her lips...and smiled.

Steven’s cheeks went a bright red. “I-I was just...are you?”

Chuckling, Connie shook her head, swallowing down the morsel. “No, that was never really...under consideration,” she said. Giving a shrug, she clarified, “I mean. I considered it. But it just didn’t do it for me, you know?”

“Oh...yeah,” Steven agreed, more out of form than understanding. “But I guess I was more wanting to hear about, like...well, how did you get into politics? What was college like? Oh, prom!” He slapped a hand down on the table, sending the plates and cutlery jingling. “I spent so much time thinking about what you’d be doing at prom and graduation and at Beach-A-Palooza and stuff!”

“Ah, well,” Connie shrugged. “I missed my senior prom.” At Steven’s immediate pout, she snorted,
and added on, “But I went my junior year, and I made it to Homecoming every year. You know, they hosted my senior Homecoming dance in Ocean Town.”

“Shards,” Steven gasped. “What was the theme? Stop, drop, and roll?”


“Aw! That sounds nice!”

“Eh, it was okay, until the third student fainted because their corset was too tight.”

“Well...at least they were keeping up with tradition?”

Connie sighed. “And then...the fusion experiment attacked....”

Steven asked questions. So many questions. What was the high school Model UN like? Was she a class officer? When did Connie start learning to drive? What was her favorite meal while at Oxford? How were her parents, how were her friends, how was she, after all these years. He kept her talking so long that she only managed to eat half of her meal before it had gone cold, and then he jumped up with rapid apologies, reheating it in a device which worked far faster—and more evenly—than any microwave back on Earth. And then it was questions again, and Connie’s mouth really was getting dry. It was a good thing one of the skill’s she’d worked on during her mayoral campaign was how to keep talking even as her lips began to tire, or else she might have had to ask for a break.

In fact, she was almost ready to seek a reprieve when the streaking stars before them turned back into seemingly-stationary pinpricks, and on the right side of the long window, a vibrant blue planet appeared which, while not being her own home, was no less familiar to Connie after her undergraduate studies.

“T—that’s Neptune,” she choked, rushing away from the table and pressing herself against the window. Despite being so close to the barrier, it seemed whatever material it was made from could not be fogged by her heavy, excited breathing. “I think I can see the rings!”

“See any Lion-shaped holes in them? I swear, I think he blasted through something like that on the way in.” Steven left the meal—its last remnants once more cooled and, at this point, rather unappetizing—and came to stand with Connie at the window. “Of course, it might have been Saturn or Jupiter. Or maybe he’s just shedding.”

“You’ve...actually been out there,” Connie whispered, dragging herself away from the blue planet which had already begun to recede from view. “I mean, I know you’ve been in space, you just took me to space, but....” She sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t see why you’re bothering with asking me about what I was doing down on Earth. It’s pretty much what any other human does, nowadays.”

“Not every human becomes mayor,” Steven protested. “And I liked hearing what you’ve done since I was gone.” Steven looked down into Connie’s eyes, and his gaze was so soft, so peaceful. “I never even considered you doing most of what you just told me about. And I thought about you...a lot.”

Connie felt the back of her neck go hot, the little hairs on the nape sticking up. She swallowed, finding that all her vocal exercises were perhaps not enough for talking to this man. “O-oh? Wh...what did you...think about me?”

“Like I said, I imagined you at your prom a lot. A frankly embarrassing amount, actually, now that
I think of it.” He chuckled, shaking his head at the preoccupation. “And I thought for sure you’d go to Empire City for college. Maybe study abroad for a bit, but then you’d come back? Become a surgeon, like your mom, or maybe you’d help the gems study all their artifacts. Maybe we’d…” he blushed, and stumbled over his words. “M-maybe we’d work at the Big Donut together.”

“Ooo, high aspirations, Steven,” Connie drawled, but it was gentle. Friendly.

“I know, I know,” he grinned, rolling his eyes at the fantasies of youth. “But you went and did all these things I didn’t even consider! You skipped prom, you monster!”

Connie barked a laugh, reaching over to shove Steven’s shoulder. “It’s not a big deal!”

“It is! You skipped prom, and then you go all the way to Silicon City! And you don’t come home, you go to Oxford! You get into politics, you become mayor, you—”

“I got married.”

The room went silent. As silent as the void of space just on the other side of the window.

Steven stared at Connie, his mouth hanging open in shock.

She knew it would be like this, but somehow...somehow....

Connie wrapped her arms about her chest, leaning against the window, needing some sort of support. “About a year and a half ago,” she said, quiet, almost too low for the man before her to hear. “Not long after I was sworn in. It was...kind of an impulse thing. We’d only been dating about a month, but...I mean, we were in our thirties! Seemed about time for that kind of thing.”

“Time for....” Steven’s words fell off in creaks. He struggled to swallow, and his Adam’s apple jolted painfully, once he managed. “C...congratulations.”

She shook her head. “No, no, it...” Connie sighed, hugging herself tighter. “It didn’t last. Our parents were right—much as I hate to say that—we jumped into things. It all started going south almost immediately, we had one big blow-up five months in, and...” She shrugged. “It turns out that two people being equally lonely does not make a very strong foundation for a relationship.”

“Oh. I’m...sorry, Connie.”

She shrugged again. “It’s not like that was my first breakup. Honestly, it wasn’t even my longest relationship.” She snorted in dismissal of even those partnerships. High school and college romances, founded upon the assumption that a deadline loomed ahead which would force an end to things with minimal fuss. “It honestly didn’t feel any worse than any of my other breakups. Maybe a bit more public, but...” She looked to Steven, holding out a hand, as if presenting evidence. “You know how it is. You get over those kinds of things about as fast as when you got into them.”

“I, uh...I don’t, actually,” Steven said, shifting uncomfortably. “Know how it is.”

Connie studied the gem, her brows drawn. “Wait....” She tilted her head.

Steven looked away from Connie and to the stars.

“Wait a second,” Connie said, stepping closer, looking up into Steven’s face, which was schooled to impassivity. “Steven. Have you...did you not date while you were gone?”

“Well, who was I going to pair off with!” Steven barked, throwing his hands in the air, his cheeks
burning a bright red. “Should I have courted one of the diamonds, or one of my gems, or a...a pearl?”

“I mean,” Connie grinned, glad to get the attention off her own past, even for a bit, “that Jasper is a pretty striking woman.”

“Oh, gag.” Steven stuck out his tongue. “That would be like dating Garnet.”

“A thought I have considered,” Connie mused, tapping a finger on her chin.

He scowled upon her. “I thought you said you weren’t a lesbian?”

“Steven,” Connie said, grinning ear to ear, “it’s Garnet.”

“LA LA LA, I CAN’T HEAR YOU!” Steven shouted, pressing his hands to his ears.

“Oh, come on!” Connie laughed, jumping up and grabbing Steven’s wrist’s, trying to pull his hands away, but only succeeding in making the man bend down and continue his obnoxious, undiamondly singing in her face. “All this time, and you seriously have never...” She shook Steven, trying to jostle the all-important answer free. “You know,” she sang back, suggestively raising a brow.

“I have never,” Steven insisted. “I’ve never gone out and...and...dated one of my gems!”

“I wasn’t asking about dating,” Connie sneered, letting him go.

Steven quieted, looking upon the woman with suspicion.

“You knooooow,” Connie sang again. When he didn’t nod his understanding, she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Steven Universe. Really. You are thirty-two. In all this time have you really never—”

“I don’t go around kissing my gems, either,” Steven answered, his glower dark.

“Kissing?” Connie raised a brow. “I was talking about sex.”

Hmm...could gems faint? Oh, wait, Connie had met Pearl. Of course they could. Perhaps she should go get a chair, or some smelling salts.

“N-no, okay,” Steven managed, and he sounded weak, tremulous, and suddenly quite young again.

“W-why would you ever think—”

“I didn’t, I didn’t,” she reassured, placing a hand on he man’s shoulder, offering what strength she could while simultaneously ribbing him mercilessly. “I mean, I just figured if you were back on Earth, you would have hooked up with someone! At least as far as kissing. But it’s fine, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Steven whined.

“Plenty of people choose to not be intimate with anyone! Even kissing.”

“It’s not like it’s something I aspired to,” Steven groaned. “I’m not a monk.”

“Oh, well,” Connie shrugged. “If it’s a matter of opportunity and not choice, then it’s not a hard thing to fix.”

“Fix?” He sounded so...indignant. “What do you mean, fix?”
Connie looked up, into his eyes, and she smiled. “You know,” she said, reaching out and placing a hand on the back of Steven’s neck, pulling him down, gently. “Fix. Like...this.”

He realized, suddenly. She could tell Steven realized what she was doing, and he gasped.

But he did not resist, and, oh, this was a terrible idea, and there was no alien dragons flying about and breathing in her face to blame for her poor decisions.

But there wouldn’t have been dragons eighteen years ago, either, if she had just worked up the courage on that night-time walk on the beach, before he left her behind and she had to try and live on without him. And maybe, eighteen years ago, she could have really used some dragons. Because Steven was putting his hands on her hips and pulling her in closer and she couldn’t believe they’d had to wait so long for just...this.

And then, with a crash that sent her heart racing...

A red gem slammed into the window.

Connie shrieked, jumping away from the window, landing in a crouch, arms raised to defend. At her side, Steven did the same, his left arm coming up, a round, pink shield flashing into existence before the both of them.

But the gem on the window did not come through. She just looked at the two beings inside the ship, her single eye darting between them in confusion, and then her eyes widened in alarm as she began to slide up the glass and out of view.

Connie and Steven’s heads tilted as they followed the gem’s path, right up until her boots disappeared overhead, leaving behind no answers whatsoever.

“What the hell?” Connie gasped, her heartbeat still nowhere near normal. “What was that?”

“I told her,” Steven growled.

Connie found herself moving away from him, even without consciously thinking that she should flee. There was something in that rumble. A deepness, a danger that even she could feel.

“I...told...her,” Steven repeated. And then he let out a sound. An unintelligible bellow of rage, which had Connie switching her stance, arms up and ready to guard not against attacks from the depths of space, but from Pink Diamond himself, in all his power.

He turned from her, storming back into the kitchen nook, where he picked up a small crystal resting on one of the counters. Holding it to his mouth, he barked out, “Pyrope, stop the ship. Heliodor, I need you out on a shuttle. There’s four rubies floating around out here, and I want them inside this ship. Now.”

“Yes, My Diamond!” and “Yes, Steven!” came the chorused response, and Steven flung the crystal back down on the counter, where it clattered and bounced about before falling over the edge and onto the floor.

“I told her! She said she’d....rah!” His fist came slamming down on the pink-tinted stove-top, leaving a dent two inches deep as the diamond turned away from the destruction and stormed towards the door.

“W-what’s going on,” Connie stammered, unsure if she wanted to draw Steven’s attention, with his anger letting vent.
Regardless, she got it. Steven paused at the doorway and looked over his shoulder. His eyes were dark and intense, and he growled out, “Yellow Diamond. She never sent anyone back to get her rubies.”

What energy and anger Steven had possessed dissipated quickly on his march to the bridge. He was glad. He didn’t want this anger to come loose around his gems, nor around the four Yellow-allied rubies whom Heliodor had confirmed were floating about not too far from where they had stopped. He’d felt most of his anger release after she had announced the fourth rescue. They’d be there, on the bridge, at any moment, and then he could...he could...stars, what was he going to do?

“We don’t have a spare ship to send them back,” Jasper ventured, watching as her diamond paced before his chair.

“I know that, Jasper,” Steven snapped. Then he took a deep breath, and tried again. “And we don’t have the time to deliver them ourselves.”

“Do you even want to send them back?” Jasper frowned. “I say finders keepers. That’s one of your Earth traditions, right?”

“It really does not apply to living, thinking beings.”

“Huh.” Jasper shrugged. “Well, we could always just keep them in one of the storage rooms until we’re ready to pay Yellow Diamond a visit. Hey!” She grinned. “If we leave them unbubbled, we could even give the quartzes some practice at guard duty!”

“We’re not bubbling them,” Steven said, staring at his Champion. “And we’re not turning them into prisoners!”

Jasper snorted, leaning back in her chair, crossing one thick thigh over the other. “What? You’re going to let them run around on your ship unsupervised? Or on Earth? They’re not your gems.”

“And they’re not our enemies!”

“Technically...” Jasper hedged, “true. In practice....”

“They’re not our enemies,” Steven insisted.

“Yes, My Diamond,” Jasper said, breezily.

Steven groaned. “When did you learn to make that sound like an insult?”

“Week two, My Diamond.”

“Look, we just....” Steven looked about the bridge. At his arrayed gems, almost all of whom—excepting Chalcedony, Heliodor, and Spinel—were at their stations, waiting for updates on this new, strange crisis. “Let’s take this one step at a time. Step one...say ‘hello?’”

“Uh...hello?” a voice called from the doorway to the bridge. Heliodor popped her bald head in around the corner, taking in the sight of nearly all her crew, as well as their human guest, the latter of whom stood back with the peridot and amethyst of Earth. She focused on her diamond, and asked, “Shall I bring them in, or...?”

“Yes, yes,” Steven said, waving for Heliodor to enter. He tried for a smile. It was not entirely unsettling. “How are they?”
“Well, I have certainly seen better,” Heliodor sighed, and she turned to look back down the hall. “Come on in, and I’ll see to those chips, shall I?”

“Chips?” Steven said, stepping forward several feet, before he was stalled by Jasper’s hand coming out and grabbing his wrist, pulling her diamond back. “Jasper...”

“Wait,” Jasper said, and it was no order, but a plea.

Steven scowled and looked back to the door.

When the rubies entered, he nearly broke away again.

They were shifting. Glowing and reshaping. Glitching as the cracks and chips in their gems compromised their projected forms. All about the bridge, his own gems gasped, looking to one another.

Moss Agate spun on her quartzes, snapping out, “Who here has the spray?”

“I’ve got some, Mossy,” Carnelian said, passing a hand over the gem on her shoulder, bringing out a small, translucent green spray bottle, about the size of a more economical perfume container. It was tossed from gem to gem until it could reach Heliodor, who nodded in thanks and began to spritz the rubies in rapid turns, as if worried that focusing on one would leave the other three to shatter in the few seconds they would have to wait.

Steven half expected they would. He’d seen Amethyst on the verge of shattering. He’d studied the condition while under Yellow and White Diamond, in the hopes that he would never need to call upon his own unique power to save another, for a diamond could heal a gem of her weariness, but he held within him this strange gift which none of his peers seemed to possess.

But he was not needed, this time. The spray—a bit of collected drool, the origins of which the gems attempted to ignore by only ever referring to it as “the spray,” because even gems found slobber a bit unsettling—did its work swiftly. Four red, square-cut gems glowed as the healing properties of Steven’s spit soaked in, tiny nicks and chips and several long cracks melting away, leaving behind smooth, perfect jewels and four tired, terrified rubies.

“What’s going on?” the one with the visor—which remained cracked, as it was apparently unaffected by the spray—and a gem on her chest croaked. She looked about the bridge. The bright pink bridge. And at the avidly watching gems of the crew. “W...whose ship is this?”

Jasper sighed in relief, letting Steven go. She stood, striding forward to address the ruby leader. “You are aboard the flagship Blade, personal vessel of Pink Diamond.”

“P-pink—” stuttered the ruby with a gem on her leg, taking several steps back, hiding behind her companions.

“Lies,” the one-eyed ruby growled, and she stared Steven down with such focus, such rage that he could feel the burn of her powers from where he stood twenty feet back.

And then fifteen feet back, as she stalked towards him. “I recognize you, you—let me down!”

Jasper looked at the ruby dangling from her hand. She blinked, slowly, and smirked. “Oh, no. Not while you’re planning on attacking my diamond.”

“That’s no diamond!” Eyeball shrieked, teeth flashing as she railed against the indignity of her capture. “That is Rose Quartz! She shattered Pink Diamond! And you can stop pretending to be
“Jasper, you...you...pebble!”

All about the bridge, gems gasped. Except for Laz, who giggled, a hand flying up to cover her mouth, though she could not fully mask the very edges of her smile.

“Pretending...to be Jasper,” Jasper said, slow and even. She turned, looking over her shoulder at the peridot console, and at one of their particular guests for the day. “How would you get a strange idea like that?”

Amethyst whistled, holding her hands behind her back, rocking on her heels.

“I’ve seen this trick before, and I’m not falling for it again! Every other gem thinks us rubies are stupid.” Eyeball took a swing at Jasper, coming nowhere close to hitting, thanks to the quartz’s obscenely long arms. “But I fought alongside Jasper! She and I led the charge at the Battle of Agate’s Call, and you are just a...a cheap synthetic, compared to her!”

Jasper bared her teeth at the insult, but then the red gem’s words filtered through. Her brows rose, and she lifted her arm higher, inspecting the ruby more carefully. “Agate’s Call?”

“Jasper is bigger than a mountain!” Eyeball declared, holding her hands high above her head, too caught up in her ranting to respond to her captor. “She has teeth as sharp as knives and hair as wild as a thunderstorm! Her gem is strong and bright, and she is far more beautiful than a knock-off clod like you!”

Jasper laughed. Deep and booming, her head thrown back, the muscles over her stomach rippling in an almost unsettling manner. “Agate’s Call? Why, you’re that crazy little ruby that broke ranks and tried to take out their bismuth, aren’t you!” She didn’t mean to shake the gem in her hand, but Jasper moved so violently with her laughter that it seemed she might accidentally crack the soldier once more. “You fell down in the mud and spent the rest of the battle trying to find that blasted chisel of yours! The only reason you survived was that no one thought to look so far down for an enemy!”

“Yes they did!” Eyeball shrieked.

And then she froze.

“Oh, shatter me now,” Army whimpered, accepting Leggy’s offer of a hug.

Eyeball stared at the gem which held her so easily off the ground. So...far...off the ground. The...orange...intense gem whose hair seemed to float about her like a mane. “Y...you really are...Jasper?”

“Yes. I am,” Jasper purred. “And you....” She brought the ruby in close to her smiling face, her teeth-like-knives flashing in the lights from above, “are aboard the flagship Blade, personal vessel of Pink Diamond.”

“But...but that’s impossible,” the ruby with her gem upon her chest—Doc—said, following the gaze of so many of the other gems on the ship, over to Steven. “Pink Diamond was shattered.”

“And Yellow is going to be, too, if she can’t explain herself,” Steven growled, plucking a crystal from the armrest of his chair, twisting the top and letting it rise up to form a screen.

“Maybe don’t threaten to shatter another diamond in front of her gems,” Coral said, shrugging, as if already dismissing the wild suggestion.
“Noted,” Steven sighed, and, a moment later, he was looking up at what was, to him, a familiar, sharp-nosed, sneering pearl.

“This is the Yellow Diamond control—oh!” The pearl jolted to greater attention. “Ste...Pink Diamond!”

“Good evening, Pearl,” Steven sighed, settling back into his chair, attempting to comport himself in a dignified manner. A challenge, after the stress of the day. “Would Yellow be available for a chat?”

“I do believe so,” the pearl said, darting her eyes just a bit to the side, her lips curving up as Coral gave her a small wave. Tearing her gaze away from her fellow pearl, the little yellow gem looked up and a bit to the side. “My Diamond?”

“Of course, of course,” a smooth, deep voice replied, and a massive hand came down, adjusting the camera angle until all in the bridge could look upon a single, massive gem.

“My Diamond,” the four rubies whispered, suddenly standing straighter. Or most of them did. Eyeball, still dangling in Jasper’s grip, just made the attempt, and it sent her rocking for a few seconds before she pinwheeled her arms to regain her balance.

“Ugh,” Peridot muttered, rolling her eyes. “Grow some stones.”

Amethyst chuckled, wrapping her arms about the green gem’s shoulders.

All this was beneath the notice of Yellow Diamond, who only deigned to look upon her younger fellow-leader. “Pink Diamond,” she said, and she smiled, so serene and genuine that the rubies and Peridot, as one, blinked in shock.

“Yellow Diamond,” Steven returned, his face far more neutral.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?” Yellow asked, pushing aside screens of data, giving her student her full attention. “Have you finally found a suitable second colony?”

“Nothing permanent; just ancillaries,” Steven replied. “Though we had a good run today. Eleven new gems incubating, very interesting conditions for development.”

“Oh, eleven,” Yellow said, pressing a hand to her cheek. “How indulgent.”

“Well, not all of us can have so many gems we just...forget where we left them!” Steven shouted, throwing his arms in the air.

“You’ll get there, someday,” Yellow soothed.

“Stars, I hope not,” Steven muttered. Then, gathering himself, he sat forward in his chair. “That’s why I called you, Yellow. I ran into something you left behind, today. Several somethings. And I literally ran into them.” With a flick of his hand, his own camera angle changed, focusing down on four little rubies, who instantly put on perfect diamond salutes.

Their leader looked down upon them, lips pursed as she searched her memory. It took some time for her to smack her lips, nodding as it came back. “Ah, yes. The crew I sent out looking for Jasper.” Yellow Diamond narrowed her eyes at the quartz, whom scowled up at the diamond, free fist clenched at her side. “I see they finally found her.”

“About what I’d expect from your gems, Yellow Diamond,” Jasper rumbled.
The massive gem’s upper lip curled, and she seemed about to snap something back, when Steven flicked his hand again, bringing the camera back to him.

“I believe,” Steven sighed, rubbing at his temples, “that I told you they needed picking up?”

“You did,” Yellow agreed. “But I really had no reason to be in that section of the galaxy, after all, so it was such a waste to send a crew out to hunt them down. Speaking of...” She tilted her head, considering the male gem. “If you ran into them, then—”

“Yes,” Steven interrupted. “I’m back in the Sol system.”

“And at your main colony, I presume!” Throwing her head back, Yellow Diamond crowed in delight. “Oh, this is exciting! What are your plans, Pink? I imagine there has been some significant improvement back at the Prime Kindergarten. You could probably recapture some of that original energy, make more of those lovely first runs of gems from the old days. At least a few thousand, before you had to fall back to the Beta location again.”

“The Feldspars have noted improvements,” Steven said, evenly.

“Oh, good! Those first quartzes were just perfection, Pink.”

“Well, a pity you all shattered them in the war,” Steven snapped. “Because I’m not making any gems on Earth.”

Yellow Diamond blinked, pressing a hand to her bosom. “What? Whyever not?”

“I believe,” Steven crooned, smiling up at his mentor, “that is my business. As for your business, Yellow....” He glanced at the rubies, who still held their salutes, though their arms had begun to shake. “How will you be picking up your gems?”

“My gems?” Yellow frowned. And then recalled them, once more. “Oh, those.” She flicked a hand to the side. “Keep them.”

Eyeball gasped, hands leaving their salute, coming to cover her mouth. Her three companions seemed no less shocked, crowding in together, looking up on the face of their diamond.

Their former diamond.

“Keep them?” Steven repeated. He sighed, shaking his head. “Yellow, I am not offering any of my gems in return; you know that.”

“Of course not,” Yellow Diamond replied, lips curling up. “Why would you? They’re just rubies! And not particularly skilled ones, at that. I already got back the best of them.”

“Hmmm.” Steven pursed his lips. “Well, in that case...thank you, Yellow Diamond.” He inclined his head, not so much in a servile bow, as a respectful acknowledgment. “I’m sure they will find places on the crew with ease.”

“Well, do call again if you’d like some advice on how to handle them.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Steven said, reaching out to shut off the feed. “I can handle things fine on my own.”

Which was, of course, the exact moment that Spinel burst onto the bridge, screaming and flailing before falling onto her face, a roaring, fire-spouting vine-dragon clinging to her back, striking out at
any who came close.

Steven looked at his gem and smacked his lips. With a sigh, he turned back to his mentor and gave another acknowledging nod. “Pink Diamond, out.”

“This is...not how I wanted today to end,” Steven said as he escorted Connie down the ship’s ramp and onto the sand before the Temple.

“Well, I didn’t come in with any expectations, so....” She shrugged, bestowing a smile upon her old friend. “I think things went okay.”

“I yelled at Jasper, I just found out that there have been four gems floating in space with no rescue for nineteen years, and Spinel abducted another alien,” Steven grouched.

“And you made me dinner,” Connie chirruped. “And it was pretty good!”

“Thanks. Really.” Steven sighed. “Did you ever have to deal with so much...stuff as mayor?”

“Oh, well.” Connie tilted her head, thinking. “I did once have to sit through a six-hour town hall meeting while the city council debated over whether to convert the stop sign at Sussex and Crawford into a stoplight.” She paused. “They did not.”

“Fun times.”

“Yep,” Connie laughed, and was relieved to find Steven joining her.

“You, uh...still want me to get Lion to jump you home?” Steven asked, looking out across the sands, searching out his feline companion. “So your constituents don’t catch you in all that pink?”

“It’s not that bad,” Connie allowed, looking down at the dress. “Not my color, but Coral actually does a pretty nice job. Especially since she never...measured me.”

“Yeah,” Steven said, nodding. “She’s pretty skilled.”

“They’re all pretty skilled,” Connie corrected, looking up the ship’s ramp, as if she could still see the many gems in Steven’s crew. “You’re doing a great job.”

“I am,” Steven agreed, accepting the compliment gratefully. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...I have a dragon to get back home.”

“Good idea,” Connie laughed.

And she paused. Considering. Considering trying again. He’d be just as willing as before, she knew, and it would be so...so easy....

But when she rose up on her tiptoes, Connie merely wrapped her arms about Steven’s shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. “Thanks for the day off.”

“Anytime,” the man sighed, wrapping Connie up in his embrace and holding her tight for as long as she allowed.
Steven looked down upon the gem, arms crossed, eyes dark, his voice stern and diamond-ly. “And what have we learned, Spinel?”

Spinel traced a pattern on the floor of the ship’s bridge with her toes, head hanging low. “Bringing alien creatures onto the ship without proper authorization is a bad idea.”

“And why is that?”

Spinel’s voice got a little quieter. “Because we’ll have to take it back and reintroduce it to its family circle....”

Steven circled a hand, reeling out the gem’s words.

Spinel hunched her shoulders. “And its family might be really angry I kidnapped one of their babies.”

Steven waited. Patient.

“...and burning hair smells really bad,” Spinel finished, hanging her newly-bald head even lower.

“Right,” Steven agreed, still breathing through his mouth in the presence of the foolhardy and unpleasantly pungent officer. “Now go check in with Heliodor. She should be able to get all that,” pausing, he gestured at the gem’s scorched head, “back in order.”

“Yes, My Diamond,” Spinel muttered and trudged off, little charred bits of hair forming a trail behind her.

Steven sighed and tried not to laugh. Spinel was not in the mood, after losing her latest attempt at a pet, and it really would diminish the effectiveness of the lecture. But she was just so pouty. It was hard to remind himself that he had to be stern, sometimes.

Although, to be fair, he suspected that the attacking vine-dragons had screeched plenty of hurtful things at Spinel, given how she had looked on relinquishing her stolen friend. His lecture probably wasn’t even necessary, after all that.

But, despite the generally casual atmosphere on his ship, a certain level of discipline was still needed. It was still a tiny vessel zipping through the vacuum of space, after all. Plenty could go wrong if gems were remiss in their duties.

More than ready to interrupt her diamond’s musings, Laz flittered from her station on the wall and landed before Steven, her hand held out. Expectant.

Steven sighed. Or if his gems had to be bribed....
“You up to handle the trip back and landing, Pyrope?” Steven asked, glancing past Laz and to his navigator, who looked up at him and smirked.

“Really, Steven, when am I not?” And, as if to prove her complete control of the situation, she leaned back in her chair, propping her legs up on the corner of her console, and produced the dagger from her gem, proceeding to flip it between her fingers in a quick pattern which would, no doubt, leave her bereft of a few fingers if she made a mistake. Something which hadn’t been an issue since several reformations back, to be fair.

Steven glanced back towards the doorway to the bridge, where four huddling gems watched the interchanges between diamond and crew. This was...really not the first impression he would have preferred. The kidnapped aliens, the bribery, the overly casual attitude towards essential duties. Though, to be fair, it was probably the most accurate impression of how things operated.

“Okay, then. Coral, Jasper, Laz, if you’ll come with me? And you four.” Steven turned to address the rubies directly.

They hunched. Smaller, tighter together, looking upon him with wide eyes.

He smiled, as best he could manage after the long day. “Would you please join us?”

There was a little jolt at the words. Most particularly, that “please.” Two of the rubies—the ones with gems on their shoulder and upper thigh—looked to the fellows for guidance. It was their leader, the ruby with the chest gem, who nodded and answered, an audible quaver in her voice, “Y-yes.” And, after a pause, rushing to added, “Y-Your Radience.”

There was the temptation to flinch, but Steven pushed it down. They hadn’t had a chance to choose how to address him. It was not the most pertinent thing, right now. Right now was welcomes and tours and gently easing aside a few of the rigid rules that plagued the Diamond Authority.

He hadn’t had to do this since Coral, and she had been such an essentially blank slate. Yet, even then, it had been months before Jasper, Coral, and himself had been on anything like a “first-name basis.” The thought of doing that all over...well, it had to be done, in the end. Leadership blew.

Laz left the bridge at the head of the group, though she did not keep with their gathering for more than a second. Just long enough to open the door to the hallways and shoot out, lost around corners in just a moment.

Steven’s lips twitched at her impatience as he followed after, not ambling, but trying to appear casual. He wanted to give the rubies at his back the time to look about, and to see the gems which passed them as they made their way through the ship. In particular, to see how the gems looked up from their tablets or conversations and merely gave their diamond a nod or smile in passing, only one or two offering a quick cross-armed salute, and none stopping entirely for obeisance. Let them see, let them see how his gems lived.

And it seemed they might actually be taking note. The first time the little party went by a gem who greeted their diamond with the most perfunctory of nods, barely looking up from her tablet, there was a gasp. Brief, quiet, but tense. No words were said, but Steven could feel the flare of heat at his back, and wondered at its source. Alarm? Outrage? Fear?

And then the other gem was gone and their group was still walking, and nothing had happened. Except, of course, the utter blowing of four minds. And Steven got the impression that the rubies were no less discombobulated for each subsequent occurrence.
The corridors of the ship had never felt so long before. It was a relief to take the final turn and see, just thirty feet down, the impatiently waiting figure of Laz, who was still hovering in the air, her wings fluttering and sending small sprays of water onto the walls.

“Really, My Diamond,” she said, tapping her foot on the air, “this would have all been a lot easier if you just kept the Cookie Cats in the common room.”

“If I kept them in the common room, you’ have eaten them all years ago,” Steven said.

Laz huffed, lifting her nose high in the air. She did not attempt a denial.

Steven reached out and placed his hand on the diamond adorning his door.

There was another gasp behind him, loud and...yes, fearful.

Steven glanced behind him, to find the four rubies staring at Coral, who remained standing beside Jasper. There was a long pause, during which the door slid open, and during which the rubies took small, unobtrusive steps back from the servant gem, their eyes wide, their bodies tense, ready to flee from the coming wrath of the ill-served diamond.

Coral failed to notice her peril.

“Come on in,” Steven said, and his words, though easy, were enough to make the four rubies flinch. They didn’t move immediately, despite their earlier outrage at his gem’s lack of obedience, so Steven took the initiative to walk through into his quarters, his three companion gems following after.

Out in the hallway, the rubies hesitated, looking at one another. And then to Coral, who had already gone through to the kitchen section of the beach house echo, settling down on one of the stools, idly waiting. Steven had to wonder what they saw: a pearl being remiss in her duties, or what was really there; a gem waiting unobtrusively for a chance to step in. He’d always done his best to not call upon Coral too often, but she certainly followed the Homeworld pearl model of a waiting servant. If a more opinionated one than Blue or Yellow Pearl had ever been.

“Please,” Steven said, looking to the hallway and gesturing at the living room area and the couch, “take a seat. Get comfortable.”

No doubt, the only thing that would make the rubies comfortable would be to jump straight out of the airlock again, but they had been given an order—or what they would see as an order—and heard it reinforced. Steven tried to assuage his guilt over this as the four gems swiftly shuffled in, assuring himself that he would not have shown any displeasure if the rubies had instead sprinted down the halls, but he only felt a single degree better about the situation. He knew well enough how strong the impulse to obedience could be for gems.

But he had many concerns to focus on this evening. The most pressing of which being the blue gem fluttering beside the fridge, growing steadily more irritated at each nicety and delay.

“You know, we’re going to be restocking soon, Laz,” Steven said, walking into the kitchen, pausing before the fridge. “We can pick up one of everything in the freezer aisle; surely something there is going to be just as good as Cookie Cats.”

Laz crossed her arms. “Do you think anything is going to be just as good?”

“I....” Steven trailed off and sighed. Opening the freezer, he tossed a single ice cream treat over his shoulder.
Laz swooped down, catching her Cookie Cat in mid air with all the grace of a raptor, never once settling to the floor as she shredded the wrapper and began to eat in tiny, rapturous bites.

Steven chuckled, and looked at what remained of his special stash.

Four.

He felt his heart sink. With great reluctance, Steven peeked over his shoulder at the red gems waiting on his couch.

They were pressed together, still, thigh-to-thigh. He half expected them to fuse, they were packed in so tight. None of the rubies was looking at him directly, instead keeping their eyes on the ground, but he could tell, from little flickers in their gaze, they each kept some small part of him in view. His feet, a hand, his shadow. They waited.

Reluctantly, Steven took the four Cookie Cats from the freezer and closed the door. He paused before walking into the living room, considering.

Rubies...he knew about rubies. Their training tried to make them calm and focused on their duties, since any strong emotion generally brought out their heat-based powers (fire on a spaceship never being a Good Idea). Unfortunately, that training only went so far, and right now...well, Steven expected there were going to be some strong emotions. And possibly a new couch.

He gathered four bowls, opening up the wrappers and placing a sandwich in each.

Laz perked up, looking at the delicious collection. She lowered the quarter-eaten treat from her mouth and raised an almost lascivious brow. “You want some help with those, My Diamond?” she crooned.

Steven cut his eyes at the gem. “Not your kind of help, no.”

With a dignified “hmph,” Laz twitched a wing and shot up to the bedroom loft, settling down on Steven’s mattress.

Down below, Jasper chuckled, but otherwise kept her peace. Wisely. There were plenty of water taps in her diamond’s quarters, as she well knew.

Balancing the bowls carefully, his heart leaping into his throat at just one near-disaster, Steven crossed the room, coming to the couch and laying out his offering to the four newest gems.

They stared at the bowls and the food within, eyes only occasionally flickering up to their new diamond. Just enough to keep track of him, without seeming to focus impertinently.

Steven tried to smile. He knew he was nowhere near as nervous, as scared as these rubies, but he was still plenty apprehensive. The only times he had interacted with these gems before, it had been as enemies; and now, it was as something near a god. Stars, meeting the gems he created was hard enough; they didn’t have the decades, sometimes millennium of conditioning of Homeworld gems, and there was still an inherent tension in dealings with their diamond.

So...slow. Easy. Flexible. Always, always flexible.

“Feel free to try those,” Steven said, gesturing at the bowls and the slowly melting ice cream sandwiches. “Most of the gems on this ship aren’t into eating, but some of them really enjoy it.”

“Yeah,” Laz said, rolling onto her stomach, licking a melting edge of her treat. “And if you don’t
“Oh, will you?” Steven put his hands to his hips, looking up at Laz, who grinned and took a tooth-achingly large bite out of the Cookie Cat.

The rubies looked to one-another, as if unsure of the protocol of food. It was their leader, the one with a gem upon her chest, who looked up above, to where the lazuli was eating. That seemed education enough, and Doc reached out, picking up her bowl and lifting the Cookie Cat to her mouth. She took a small, tentative bite.

Her platoon looked on, waiting for...something. Perhaps an explosion.

What came, however, was a little “hmmm!” of surprise. Doc looked at her treat, considering, and then looked to her platoon. She gave a tiny nod.

Permission from their leader thus obtained, Army and Leggy also took up their bowls and nibbled. Leggy frowned almost instantly, but it was Army whose reaction shocked Steven. Her eyes went wide and she stared down at the food in her hand.

And then she all but slammed her face into the bowl, devouring the Cookie Cat in moments.

From her place waiting by the door, always on guard as she was, Jasper laughed. “Let’s hope that one is more open to other foods, or else you’re probably never going to enjoy dessert in peace again.”

Steven chuckled, glad for the small lessening of tension, but it turned to a full roar of laughter as he looked up to the loft and found Laz glaring down at the little ruby, her wings raised and ready, set for fight or flight, and, if Steven had to put any sort of money down, she was 100% going for “fight” to protect her snacks.

It wasn’t long before Leggy was handing her nearly-full Cookie Cat over to her comrade, earning an outraged huff from Laz. Doc kept hers, however; a bit more proprietary, a bit more contemplative of the new sensation of “eating,” as if each bite was giving her more data to analyze.

Only one ruby refused Steven’s offer. The old soldier, Jasper’s fellow veteran of the Earth wars, was not even looking at her bowl. For the first time since her rescue, she was looking at just one gem: Steven himself.

It was...disconcerting. Not the least because the last time he’d been under the gem’s scrutiny, Steven had almost been murdered. But Steven could also feel the gem’s heat, radiating out directly at him. Intentionally at him. Even the bowl before her was currently untouched, ice cream melting only as fast as in any of the other bowls.

“It’s fine,” Steven said, and he tried to make it apparent that he didn’t speak just of the ruby’s food choices. “You want some water or a blanket or—”

“A boon,” Eyeball said, and her companions went rigid. Doc in particular stared at her subordinate, gaze sharp and warning.

“I...I’d ask a boon,” Eyeball went on, ignoring the unspoken commands of her leader.

Steven shrugged. Casual. He had to be casual. “Okay, what is it? I can’t make any guarantees, but go on.”

Eyeball clenched her fists, pressing them down on her thighs. Gems didn’t need to breath, strictly
speaking, but she was taking in air in thick gulps, working up her courage.

Steven waited, schooling himself to patience. He had to reassure these gems, and making them rush was just going to reinforce the idea of the stern, uncompromising diamond. Perhaps he shouldn’t have lectured Spinel when they were around, but he’d thought he was being so easy, so kind to her. Had it been too much? Too little? What was this little ruby thinking?

“S...shatter me,” Eyeball whispered, and closed her eyes tight. Waiting.

Up above, Laz gasped, wings flapping up so swiftly she lost control for just a moment, the ceiling becoming splattered with drops of water. She gathered them up before any fell back down on the guests, but she did not have the self-control to stop staring.

To be fair, Coral and Jasper couldn’t break off their gazes, either. And neither could Steven. Steven’s eyes, in fact, remained locked on the red gem as he shook his head, shifting in their sockets as if she was the new center of his universe.

“I...no,” Steven rasped, and Eyeball cringed.

“P-please, My Diamond,” she croaked, summoning all her courage and looking up into Steven’s face. “You have to.” She was so still, so rigid, her muscles straining as she fought to keep herself in place. And she must be fighting to remain still, because her one eye was wide, the pupil blown unnaturally large. About her, there was the faintest smell of burning upholstery.

“What? Why?” Steven’s heart was pounding. Harder even than those sessions when he joined Jasper in the training room. Harder than the moment he had first seen, first understood Coral. Harder than when Connie had pulled his face down to almost meet her own. He was suddenly glad there had not been enough Cookie Cats for them all, because he was just a few seconds from throwing up. “Is it...is it because Yellow Diamond abandoned you?” He’d seen gems be gifted; none had ever reacted like this! Many had seemed pleased, in fact.

“My Di—...Yellow Diamond could do with me as she willed,” Eyeball said. “But, please, My Diamond. Please...don’t punish my platoon for what I did. Shatter me.” She closed her eye once again. “Shatter me and spare them.”

Steven’s heart stopped. For a half-second. And then it was thudding hard, but slow, in his chest. He felt his pulse in his ears, his eyes, and it seemed that the entire world juddered with each beat.

“No,” he whispered.

She cringed. The little ruby with the gem in her eye, the veteran who had been part of a first charge alongside Jasper in battle, the warrior who had tried to serve Homeworld by eradicating its most hated enemy, cringed at Steven’s refusal to murder her. She opened her mouth, managing a weak “puh” sound before failing. She could not repeat her words after such a firm denial. It must have been hard enough to voice the request.

And it was hard for Steven to respond, but he forced himself. Forced his dry lips to part as he addressed the rubies, “Look at me, please.”

They were looking up before he even added in the social niceties. If anything, the word, “please,” just caused a flicker in their eyes, a puzzlement as they complied with orders.

“I promise you all,” Steven said, looking into each of the rubys’ eyes, “I will not hurt you. Any of you. I promise.”

They stared at him.
And Eyeball whispered, “Liar.”

Her platoon gasped, jolting away from the veteran, arms coming up as they awaited the final blow.

Steven sighed. “Look, I know it’s hard to believe, but—”

“Hard to believe?” Eyeball snapped, jumping to her feet, fists clenching at her sides. “It’s not ‘hard to believe!’ It’s impossible! It’s...it’s stupid. Picking us up, calling our diamond, asking her to come get us, and then just...just...making us part of your court?” She slammed a hand to her chest. “Making me a part of your court?”

“I prefer calling it a ‘crew,’” Steven said, and immediately berated himself.

“My Diamond,” Eyeball barked, a little haze of heated air forming about her, “we attacked you and your gems! We took you prisoner! I tried to shatter you! You are not going to just...forgive me!”

Steven narrowed his eyes. “Are you telling me what I’ll do?”

The ruby froze.

Steven almost did, as well. There had been an edge to his voice, so familiar so...wrong. He looked up to Laz, his eyes going wide in question.

The lazuli caught on and examined her diamond’s face, his eyes, and shook her head, giving him a reassuring smile.

Instantly, Steven’s nerves eased. But only a degree. For he was still facing down a panicking ruby, who had, by now, heated up so much that the floor below her was letting off a soft glow. If this had been the actual beach house, there would be a fire, but, as it was, there was just a growing, scorching heat, which had finally gone beyond the close confines of the gem’s control, flash-boiling the contents of the bowl still waiting before her.

Laz pouted down at the assassinated Cookie Cat and shoved the last bit of her own payment into her protective maw.

“I-I didn’t mean it like that,” Eyeball said. “Your Radiance, I didn’t presume—”

“Please, not that—” Steven began, then cursed himself. He should not have interrupted her, even for that hated title; she needed to vent her worries, and his speaking would just ruin her progress.

“I-I just...please, I just want my platoon to survive,” Eyeball quavered. “What I did to you, it wasn’t their fault.”

“It wasn’t yours, either,” Doc interjected. She looked to Steven. “My Diamond, if this ruby crossed you in any way, then I take the blame; I’m the captain, here. I’m the one that should face the consequences.”

Steven groaned. “Are you all going to say you’re Spartacus, too, or will you actually try to believe me?”

The rubies looked to one-another.

Leggy, tentative, queried, “What’s a ‘Spartacus?’”

The diamond slapped his face. “It’s not...stars, look.” Lowering his hands again, he lifted up his shirt, exposing his stomach and the gem which took the place of a belly button. He rested both
hands on his gem and looked each ruby in the eye in turn.

The stared at him, mouths hanging open.

“I swear,” Steven said, calm, even, and firm, “I will not hurt you. Any of you. I am not angry that you came to Earth. I’m not angry that you took the Crystal Gems and me prisoner. I’m not angry that you attacked me.” The last was said directly to Eyeball, who was growing more visibly confused by the moment. “You were doing what your Diamond commanded, and I get that. I swear to you, I am not going to punish you or treat you poorly or make you any...any less than the rest of the gems on my ship, just because you came from Yellow Diamond. You’re safe.”

“You should believe him,” Jasper finally spoke up, catching the attention of each of the rubies. Pushing off from the doorway, she crossed the room, coming to stand beside Steven, tilting her head just enough to look sideways at her diamond. Her expression was as stern as always, but, given how avidly the ruby platoon looked at the veteran gem, that was perhaps more comforting than the attempt at friendliness from their new ruler.

“Yellow Diamond kept me, as well; remember? And I attacked My Diamond and his Earth companions, just like you all. Probably a lot more effectively, in fact.” She smirked, as if proud of her treachery.

“Yeah,” Steven agreed. “Jasper beat the hell out of me more than once!”

The rubies’ eyes went wide, looking between the two massive gems.

“And that was even before I took over your training,” Jasper rumbled, a little laugh in her words. But she let it fade, and focused once more on the new gems. “I spent over five thousand years serving Yellow Diamond, and let me assure you of one thing.”

The rubies waited. Waited for the wisdom of one of Homeworld’s most famous gems.

Jasper smirked, displaying all of her bright, sharp teeth. “Yellow is a bitch and you are way better off with Steven.”

And she reached out and elbowed Steven in the side.

The rubies flinched at the assault on their new diamond. But, when Steven just laughed and elbowed back, they stared. First at Jasper, then Steven, and then even at the strange pearl who was still sitting aside, watching everything, making no move to intercede, either in the physical contact or the extended conversation or...or anything!

It took some time for one of the rubies to respond. It was the one young one, the jumpy little thing with her gem upon her leg. She looked to her diamond and, tentative, asked, “You’re...really not going to...hurt us?”

“Never,” Steven insisted, pressing a hand to his gem to, once more, to swear upon it. “I don’t hurt gems.”

“Unless you count making them clean out the filters for a month,” Laz said, flitting down from the loft and landing beside Jasper. “Which, I will say: gross. But it passes quick enough.”

“Quick enough for you to get in trouble again and get another month,” Jasper interjected, earning a stuck-out tongue from her comrade.

“If you will not believe My Diamond or his gems,” Coral interjected, rising from her seat and
walking over to stand beside Steven, her hands clasped demurely before her, “then allow me to add my reassurance. I have never seen him treat a gem unfairly or with disrespect.” She gave a small bow, smiling. “Even a pearl.”

Steven beamed down upon his seneschal. “Thank you, Coral.”

There was the tiniest gasp from the rubies at those words—giving thanks to a *pearl!*—and Steven looked to them once more.

“I know, it’s going to be an adjustment,” he said, holding his hands out, palms up and open. “And I don’t expect you to completely trust me, right away. But, please, just try to remember that you’re safe here. I’m not going to hurt you or throw you into a war or abandon you.”

Doc frowned, looking down upon her hands, blinking slowly as she thought. There was still some obvious tension in her shoulders, but it seemed there was more turmoil in her mind. After some time, she seemed to place everything, and put forward her most pressing concern. “Then what are we going to do?”

“Huh...yeah.” Steven tapped at his chin, considering. What was next for these rubies? Mossy would work them into the chore and training rotations without much difficulty, but right now, when there weren’t even any colony evaluations lined up? What role would these four take on?

Slowly, Leggy raised a hand and ventured out, “Baseball?”

Steven laughed, shaking his head. Then shrugged. “Well, maybe! But you’re on the right track! I think the first thing you all need is some time to relax and get comfortable. So, congrats!” He held his hands out and grinned. “You’re getting some days off!”

The rubies looked to one-another. It was Army that spoke up, frowning, her brows drawn down low. “Off from what?”

Steven groaned, but Coral giggled, a hand rising to cover her mouth. She looked to her diamond and smiled, eyes sparkling. “This could take a while.”

“Yeah,” Steven sighed. “Yeah, it could.”

There wasn’t really a “long way back,” but the *Blade* didn’t rush to return to Earth. There were always minor duties to be done in space: sending out probes, mapping new regions, scouting for potential colonies, and, of course, there was always little bits of maintenance and repair. The rubies seemed ready to help with the last item, but the brusqueness of the feldspars and their diamond’s reminder that they didn’t *have* to do anything, at the moment, allowed them to hold back.

Instead, they followed Steven and his little welcoming party about the ship as he conducted a tour. They had already been on the bridge, but now Steven had time to introduce them to other gems, as well as pointing out the technological developments they had missed in the last eighteen years. Doc and Pyrope had chattered on about piloting, which Steven noted carefully. Having another pilot on hand would be a definite asset.

He showed them the hydroponics, where Army eagerly accepted each of Steven’s offered samples, her three platoon members watching in perplexity as she repeatedly gave her approval. They were even *more* confused when the ruby bit into a slice of pepper, exclaimed “that’s disgusting!” and proceeded to swallow with no less enthusiasm than with the broccoli she had greeted with rapture just moments before.
Steven smiled upon the gem. “That’s fine! It’s good you gave it a shot. My dad always made me try new food once, before I said I didn’t like it.” He looked to Laz, not even bothering to be circumspect in his attention.

The blue gem just twitched her wings, refusing to respond to the oft-repeated lecture.

He showed them the engine room and the filtration systems (the dreaded, dreaded filtration systems), the common room and the observation deck. The hallways leading to the many smaller rooms in which his crew could relax in relative privacy (and a peek inside the room of his kunzite pair, after one of the pale lavender gems invited the party in). Not quite “bedrooms,” as only a few had beds, most of the gems more interested in socialization and entertainment, not unconsciousness, but certainly not the little cubby-holes the rubies were accustomed to.

And when Steven mentioned that they would be getting rooms...well, there was a little flash-fire about the four gems. Their delight was almost enough to overcome Steven’s misgivings about having to reorganize the rooms and tell Carnelian she was about to lose her private suite. Almost enough. Luckily, that little duty would mostly be left to Chalcedony, and Steven made a mental note to move her up on shore leave rotations.

They went to Heliodor, who had just finished up tending to Spinel, who was enthusiastically preening her restored mohawk. There was definite confusion about the process of healing gems, but Eyeball confirmed that she had let the younger version of their diamond fix her those many years ago.

“Honestly, I don’t know why I can do it,” Steven said. “I mean, my mom, Rose Quartz, she could heal gems, so I guess it makes sense that I can, too; but that and all the diamond stuff?”

Eyeball nodded. “Even in the war, the fact that the traito...” She trailed off, cheeks turning a dark red before she tried again. “Even in the war, it was odd that Rose Quartz could heal gems. Rose quartzes could always heal organic life—it’s what they’re made for—but not gems. It was...kind of terrifying, actually.”

Jasper nodded at her old war companion. “I was fighting this sanidine, once. Got her right in the gem, big crack almost all the way through. Couldn’t finish her off before retreat was called, but I figured she was done for.” The quartz shook her head, frowning. “Next battle, almost dissipated my form when I saw her. Thought she was some kind of...I don’t know. Echo?”

“Ghost,” Steven supplied.

“Yeah, a ghost,” Jasper agreed. “Learned better than to leave things half-done, after that.”

Steven looked to his champion, a little chill running down his back. It was so easy to forget that she was a soldier, a killer a hundred times over. And then she said things like that....

“Would have been nice if Rose Quartz told us she could do that when Cymophane got shattered,” Eyeball muttered, Jasper agreeing with a deep “hmph” and nod.

Leggy frowned, looking to her elder gem. “I’ve never heard of a cymophane before.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Jasper said. “Don’t think there’s ever been more than one. She was Pink Diamond’s champion.” The quartz gestured to Steven. “Old Pink Diamond. Older even than me. I only ever heard stories of her from the amethysts; she was already shattered before I was even injected.”

“And she might not have been, if Rose Quartz had just healed her when she got cracked,” Eyeball
growled. A moment later, though, she looked to Steven and rushed to add, “T-though I’m sure she had her reasons.”

Steven sighed and held out an open palm. “Don’t worry, Eyeball. I, more than probably anyone, know that my mom did a lot of things wrong. Including not explaining why she did those things wrong.”

Leggy tilted her head, looking up to her diamond. She was getting better about that. Looking directly at him, and she was managing it far better than her companions. Perhaps it was because she was the youngest of the rubies. From what Steven understood, she had emerged just a few weeks before her mission to Earth began. Despite having floated about in the vacuum of space for 95% of her life thus far, she seemed to be adjusting rather well. “So she didn’t’ explain why you’re so....” She gestured at Steven. “Small?”

Doc punched Leggy in her shoulder, earning a yelp of surprise, more than hurt.

Steven reached out. “Uh, don’t hit other gems. Unless it’s during training.”

Doc blinked, clearly taking some time to process this utterly foreign order.

“And, no, I don’t know why I’m so...small.” Steven grinned at the description. He was pushing seven feet tall. Small was the last description any human would use, but, among a crew where over a third of the gems were quartzes, and given that he was a diamond, he was a small gem. “Or the healing or the dream stuff or being a diamond. I’m working this all out as I go.”

“A very quartz way of doing things,” Coral opined, her sudden speech, once more, causing the rubies to flinch and look to Steven. They were always nervous when the pearl drew attention to herself, and Steven was fairly sure the little gem had caught on and was doing it deliberately, now. Especially with that statement, which might have been a deadly insult among the other diamonds, and possibly even the more pretentious quartzes.

“Very true,” Steven agreed, his casual acceptance of criticism once more blowing the minds of his four new crew members. “And, speaking of the quartz way of doing things....” He looked to the rubies. “I figure you all might have a bit of pent-up energy? The training room is just a few halls down, and there’s always someone in there. And if the quartzes hear you’re headed over, I’m sure all of them will show up to see a new fighter.” Quickly, he held up his hands. “If you want. Remember, not an order; you’re on vacation.”

“I thought were ‘off?’” Leggy said, brows drawing in tight.

Steven was about to explain his words when he noted Army’s smile. Her wide, wild smile. Her hands, rubbing together. Her little legs, dancing. “Yes,” she yapped, “yesyesyes!”

Jasper smirked, nodding. “Alright. My kind of gem.”

Which was, apparently, a mistake, because that sent the rest of the rubies clamoring for battle and edging closer to Jasper, subtly elbowing one-another in an attempt to keep their rivals at bay.

Laz looked upon the little fanatics and smiled. “Same,” she said, turning her gaze upon Jasper, who jolted at the attention, looking down on the swarming rubies.

Steven chuckled at his trapped champion. “Come on,” he addressed the rubies, gesturing towards the hall. “Let’s see if the amethysts can tire you all out. Heliodor, I think we’re gonna need someone on stand-by to fix up the bruises.”
“Just let me check up on the injectors, Steven,” Heliodor said, gathering up a little satchel and following the group out into the hallway. Rather than continuing in the same direction, she turned her back on them, drifting a few doors down to the storage room.

The rubies watched the gems unnerving, gliding retreat, looking to one-another. Then, Doc shrugged, and her platoon followed suit. Giving one last glance at where Heliodor had disappeared on her errand, the rubies turned and followed along to face glorious battle.

There were takers. Oh, were there takers. The rubies had barely been in the training room—no equipment-filled gym, just a wide, open square, with plenty of space to move around—for five minutes before it had gone from just a pair of amethyst occupants to damn near the ship’s entire contingent of quartzes.

If the rubies were intimidated by the number of veterans about them, they didn’t show it. Nor were they reluctant in taking on challenges from the unruly gems. It was the ever-brash Sharky who took the initiative, flashing her sharp teeth at the new gems. “Four on one?” she asked, tilting her head. “Or one on one?”

The rubies looked to one-another and smiled.

They rose up and together, glowing bright, solidifying into a single gem, as tall and half again as Sharky.

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Sharky purred, right leg going back as she took on a ready stance, prepared for battle.

The rubies, too, seemed eager for the clash, but there was just a moment’s pause there. Something that most of the assembled gems wouldn’t have even noticed. But Steven saw the momentary drawing-together of brows of this large creature, and the brief hover of fingers over the fused gem’s unadorned stomach.

But then the ruby shrugged it off and smirked at her opponent, slamming a fist into her palm. “Come get me,” she growled.

And Sharky did.

The ruby fusion was certainly a more defensive fighter than the rest of Steven’s gems. She wasn’t terribly fast, but she knew how to direct hits to her limbs, rather than her more delicate torso and head. She always attacked from her right side, keeping the three vulnerable gems on her left further back from her opponents. Of course, this was noted quickly, and Sharky began circling the ruby until she spun about, trying to keep her gems safe. But it was soon too much, too quick, the ruby unable to keep her vulnerable left side hidden. Sharky sprinted in, striking thrice at the fusion, each hit several inches off from the hard gems themselves, and the fusion popped apart in a cloud of smoke, Doc looking only a little better-off than her stunned companions.

From her spot standing by the wall, Moss Agate called out. “Good analysis, Sharky,” she said, earning a deep blush and a sharp grin from the amethyst. “And you four,” the agate went on, addressing the little platoon, “you’re too concerned with yourselves individually. That doesn’t help, in a fusion.”

“Believe her, on that one,” Skinny spoke up, a little laugh in her words. “She knows her fusions.”

The ruby platoon looked to one-another, frowning, and then swept their gazes across the many gems in the room. What they saw only made their lips curve down further.
Moss Agate opted against distracting herself with the thin jasper, keeping her attention on these new and tiny trainees. “Try to even out your fighting, and don’t worry too much about taking a hit. No one is out to cause real harm, and we’ve got plenty of spray on hand, if you get too bruised. And, once you start moving better, you won’t get hit as much, anyway.”

Doc lowered her head in an acknowledgement. “Yes, Lustrous Agate.”

Mossy jolted at the words, blinking several times, rapidly. Eventually, though, a little smile crossed her lips and she nodded to the ruby leader. “Would you like to try again?”

The rubies didn’t even bother responding. They just went to light once again, their amalgamated self taking form before the cheering quartzes.

“Alright, then,” Mossy said. “Girls. Go get her.”

Steven was fairly certain he was going to have to refill the stores of “spray,” after tonight. He’d been right; the rubies had energy, pent up and desperate to unleash itself after nearly two decades in space. No one got a chip, but there were certainly plenty of marks and tender spots and near-poolings, prevented by the ship’s medicine. As much of a beating as the rubies took at first, they didn’t slow down. And, little by little, Mossy’s commentary grew sparse and the ministrations of Heliodor were needed less and less. In fact, Heliodor soon found herself tending to the quartzes more than the rubies, as the four new gems remembered what it was like to move as one.

In fact...it almost looked like the quartzes were getting...tired. An almost alien state, for them. Challengers were taking longer to step up, and the rubies didn’t even seem half-done.

And then Jasper came forward to stand before the enormous ruby, and didn’t even bother issuing her challenge. She just looked up—only a little up—and raised a brow. And waited.

The ruby hesitated, for a mere moment. There seemed to be a rapid internal debate, little bits of the gem twitching as different aspects of herself made their feelings known. Soon, though, a consensus was reached, and the ruby smiled wide, springing forward, screaming at full volume. Clasping her fists together, she brought them down like a great hammer, aimed straight for Jasper’s face.

A split-second later, there was a puff of smoke and four little red rubies fell to the ground, their mouths open in groans of pain, eyes unable to focus for some moments. “Ow,” they chorused, earning hoots of laughter from the assembled gems.

“Fusion gives you power, sure,” Jasper said, clenching a fist and grinning down on her vanquished foe, “but it’s no match for real skill.”

“Oh, combining gems is fine,” Carnelian spoke up. “But even this brute has her hands full dealing with a real good fusion.” She cut her eyes just a bit sideways, looking towards Jasper’s smaller, thinner counterpart. She raised her brows in inquiry.

Skinny caught on in an instant, canting her hips sideways and smirking at her large sister gem. “What’cha say, Champ? Want to show these rubies a real battle?”

“Oh, shut it,” Carnelian said, holding out a hand to her old Zoo companion.

“And come get us,” Skinny added, taking Carnelian’s hand.
The room was suffused with light and power, and, suddenly, a new gem stood before them all. Bright amber skin and deep orange hair arranged in a voluminous, swept-forward style, covering one eye. Legs and arms with the length of Skinny, but the musculature of Carnelian. A solidly-built torso, and a body twice the height of Jasper. And, on her shoulder and her stomach, a pair of glittering citrine gems.

There was a gasp. A quartet of gasps, in fact. And not of surprise. Of deep, suffusing horror.

The rubies scrambled away from the fusion, running towards, of all, gems, Jasper herself. They stopped in front of the champion, pressed in close together, and stared down Citrine. Their gems flashed, and weapons appeared. A chisel, a staff, knuckledusters, a scythe. Raised to guard, ready to destroy.

Jasper stared at her tiny protectors, brows drawn inward, two deep lines appearing on her forehead. Then she looked to Citrine, who was also watching the rubies in confusion. And, finally, Jasper turned about to to her diamond, lips parted in a question she couldn’t quite articulate.

Steven sighed. “I see we’ve got a lot more to explain....”

“Okay. There is one...inviolable rule of a beach vacation,” Steven said, frowning sternly, his voice deep. The rubies needed to know how serious he was. This information could save their lives.

They seemed suitably attentive. In fact, their captain and war veteran members both had gone to something quite close to military attention. They looked just shy of flashing a salute. Even Leggy, who had been staring at the constantly moving waves with the sort of avid attention Steven more expected from a lazuli, brought her gaze back to the diamond.

Steven looked into each ruby’s eyes (or eye) and issued his decree. “Don’t...feed...the seagulls.”


Leggy tilted her head. “What’s a ’seagull?’”

Steven shuddered. “Demons.”

The rubies studied the birds—Steven imagined that every bird would probably be a seagull to them, until he bothered to explain Earth taxonomy—and seemed unimpressed. Fatally unimpressed.

“So...we can feed them?” Army inquired.

“NO.” Jasper shook her head violently. “No, no, no. Do not.”

The rubies seemed to finally take the advice to heart. As one, they shuffled back from the tideline, Leggy going so far as to rest her hand right by her gem, ready for action.
Steven smiled and gave a little, indulgent shake of the head. “Let’s just walk a bit. Everything is safe here, and if you have any questions about Earth, I can answer them for you!”

A bit more hesitation—stars, it was going to take ages for these gems to do anything without having to think through a dozen possible consequences—but then it seemed that the fear of the unknown could not overcome the encouragement of their diamond. The rubies began to wander—not too far, at first—while Steven and Jasper followed along at a casual pace, keeping an even more casual eye on their four new crew members. Not much could harm them, no, but Steven had long-since found that curious gems could invent all sorts of trouble for themselves. Despite coming out of their holes fully-formed and able to perform all duties required, there were moments when new gems could be remarkably like...well, toddlers. Messy, hyperactive, over-dramatic toddlers.

And even older gems had their own set of complications....

“I always forget that you come from Earth,” Steven said, looking to Jasper, who paced carefully at her diamond’s side. Their strides were almost an equal match—he supposed he had grown dramatically during his time away from home—but the quartz still had to take somewhat shorter steps than was natural.

“It’s something I try to forget,” Jasper returned. “It’s never been exactly a benefit to tell anyone you’re from the rebel colony.” She held her left arm out before her, turning it over as she examined the sharp line where orange skin gave way to red markings. “Not that it was something that I could hide.”

“Well, I can’t hide it, either. And besides,” he shrugged, “I’m triply from Earth!” He held up his own hand, counting out. “I was raised here, my parents are from here, and even Pink Diamond emerged here. I mean, if a diamond can come from Earth, then all those other gems really need to stop being so...snooty!”

Jasper tried for a little chuckle, but it fooled no one. Looking to her diamond, she sighed. “Don’t underestimate what gems will use to put you in your place.”

“I know.” Steven scowled, recalling far too many separate memories from his education among the diamonds. “And that is why we don’t visit Homeworld more often.”

Jasper’s lips twitched. “I thought it was because of Mossy’s...inclinations.”

“Well, yes. That, too.” Steven nodded.

Before their conversation could continue, both gems were distracted by the rapid approach of one of the rubies, who came directly from the tideline, her hands clasped loosely together in a manner that any parent—and, by that extension, anyone in charge of a few dozen new gems—would recognize with immediate trepidation.

“My Diamond!” Leggy hissed, stopping just before Steven and holding her hands out, opening them up to reveal what she carried. “Is the Earth life trying to attack us? You said it was safe!”

Dangling from Leggy’s hand, hanging on with one very firm claw, was a blue crab. It swung about, its free claw clacking at the air, challenging the gems to just try it. Try it, punk.

Steven laughed, crouching down and holding a hand out under the crab, slowly raising his palm so the creature would have something to stand upon, though this didn’t mean that the crab was in any way willing to let go of its attacker. “You probably just scared it by picking it up. Things picking crabs up are generally planning to eat them.”
The ruby stared at the crab. “Eat it? Like...like one of those Cookie things? Or the plants?”

“Mmmhmmm.” He gave the ruby a sly, teasing look. “Seagulls especially like eating crabs.”

Leggy glanced over her shoulder, as if the dreaded seagulls were even now approaching to steal away her find.

In fact, one of the birds was looking at them speculatively, though Steven rather thought it would be expecting something more like chips or french fries, not its natural diet of ocean life. It would, undoubtedly, be disappointed if it ever learned the truth.

Leggy scowled and shifted herself to stand directly between seagull and crab. “But, if it got eaten...wouldn’t it be...shattered?”

“Well, it’s not called ‘shattered’ when it’s Earth life,” Steven said. “It’s ‘dead.’ But, yeah. It would be gone.”

“Then...is everything on Earth at war with everything else?” She looked up to her diamond. “Is that why the gems made here rebelled?”

“We didn’t rebel,” Jasper growled, the sound making the little ruby hunker down, her gaze lowering from the quartz’s dark glare.

Steven didn’t even have to send a stern look Jasper’s way before she sighed and added on, “Not all of us. Not even most of us. And plenty of Homeworld gems were in the rebellion, too. It was mostly Homeworld gems, in fact.”

“I...I suppose,” Leggy muttered. “But...then why...?” She looked to the crab, who seemed to have finally decided its enemy had learned its lesson, letting the ruby’s finger go as it settled to exploring Steven’s palm.

“That’s just how living things are, sometimes,” Steven said. “When you make a gem, they take all the energy they’ll ever need from the planet, but living things are different.” Steven held his other hand up, letting the crab scuttle between each palm, careful to give it room to explore without toppling down to the sand, which was, in crab measurements, rather far below. “They get their energy a little at a time. Lots of them get it from light—from the sun.”

Leggy tilted her head. “Like the plants in the greenhouse?”

“Yep,” Steven agreed. “But others get their energy by eating other living things. Plants, for most of them, but sometimes things like crabs. Or fish. Or even seagulls.”

“That’s...terrifying.” Leggy looked over her shoulder at the seagulls—still ever-alert and always-waiting—and shuddered. “Would anything try to eat us?”

Steven was about to reassure the Ruby that she was in no danger of being eaten, but any words he might have managed were drowned out by booming laughter from Jasper. Laughter which went on for a good twenty seconds, with diamond and ruby both turning to stare at the warrior gem. Steven was a bit more shocked at the reaction than Leggy, but only just.

When Jasper finally calmed herself to look down upon the ruby, she gave the gem a smile. No...it was more a leer. And the ominous words of, “Well, nothing can shatter you, but I’ve seen more than a few gems reform after some big animal finished...digesting them.”

Steven greatly doubted that Leggy knew what “digesting” was, but the statement was unnerving.
enough for the little ruby to take a sharp step back from Steven and the crab.

Steven shot a little glare at his top quartz—which seemed to shame Jasper to absolutely no degree—before addressing the ruby once more. “Nothing will eat you. I promise. Nothing in Beach City is anywhere near that big or strong. And if we go anywhere that has anything big, I’ll put Jasper out front, so she’ll get eaten, first.”

“Hey!” Jasper cried out in protest, but it seemed Steven’s words were just reassurance enough for Leggy. Certainly, she looked wary—and that was not really a bad emotion to cultivate in an unknown environment—but she stood up straighter and gave her diamond a firm nod.

“Now,” Steven said, holding out his hands, presenting the crab to Leggy, “this guy probably wants to get back to the water. Just put him down at the tideline. And, uh...away from the seagulls.”

Leggy hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she put her hands out, flinching just slightly as the crab was tilted into her palms. After a few moments, she seemed to realize that she was not, as of yet, under attack, and she stared at the creature, bringing her hands up close to her face for a better view. Steven worried, for a brief moment, that the gem was about to get a pinch to the nose, but, before the crab could take offense, Leggy was dashing off to the tideline, ready to return the creature to its home.

Steven stood and smiled at the retreating ruby. “That went well...” Cutting his eyes sideways at Jasper, he added, “No thanks to you.”

“What?” Jasper grinned. “Gems should stay on their toes.”

“On their toes is one thing,” Steven said. “Scaring them halfway to hiding in the ship?”

“Ah, even a ruby is better than that,” Jasper said. “And beside, it looks like they’re all doing fine.”

Turning back to the beach, Steven found that perhaps this was true. The other three rubies had noticed Leggy’s conversation with their diamond, and had gathered around her. Each seemed duly impressed with the crab, and watched both it and the nearby seagulls carefully until it had scuttled off into the safety of a pile of half-submerged rocks. They conferred with one-another for some moments before sprinting off on their own, each seeming bound on some mission.

These missions became clear quite quickly, as first Leggy and then Doc jogged up to Steven, presenting small lizards caught in the seagrass. And then Army brought forth a sand-dollar. And even Eyeball got in on the hunting, though at first she only managed a particularly pungent clump of beached seaweed.

The six of them made their way slowly north and west along the beach, with Steven serving more as naturalist and local guide than as any sort of leader. Which he was perfectly fine with. He spent enough time on-ship going over reports and discussing exploratory ventures and dealing with the myriad little dramas that sparked between the gems. Just taking a stroll and checking out some animal life he hadn’t seen in decades was...restful.

That is, until he heard a call of “WHAT’S THIS, MY DIAMOND?” and turned to find Army chin-deep in the waves, holding an enormous, writhing stingray over her head, completely oblivious to both the animal’s struggles and its rapidly lashing tail spine.

“THAT GOES IN THE OCEAN, IT NEEDS THE OCEAN, PUT IT BACK IN THE OCEAN!”

Army complied immediately, whether from the inborn obedience of a gem or the pure shock of seeing Steven yelling after his extended calm. The ray slapped down on the gem’s head, balancing
there for a few moments and slapping at Army’s face before slipping back into the waves, seemingly content to just get away from the gem, rather than seeking any serious retribution.

Steven rubbed at his face and ushered the rubies back in with a wave of his arm. “I think maybe that’s enough beach fun. How about some more food? I think the donut shop is open.”

Leggy tilted her head. “What are ‘donuts?’”

Steven smiled. “The next-best-thing to a Cookie Cat, Legs. Come on. You’re gonna love this.”

It was very odd, going into the Big Donut and not seeing Lars or Sadie. Intellectually, Steven knew they couldn’t be both working with the sheriff’s department and the mayor’s office and also occupied watching the shop, but it was...just weird. And the two new clerks had no chemistry whatsoever. Steven could not ship that.

Still, they were polite enough to Steven and the rubies. Though perhaps the clerks thought the rubies were Steven’s identical quintuplets. Which was confirmed as the last donut was handed over with a “Now you all thank your daddy, you hear?”

The rubies gave one-another confused looked before turning to Steven and chorusing “thank you.”

Steven ushered them out before the clerk could have the bright idea to ask if the large woman standing outside was their mother and, goodness, four at once must not have been a problem for her and those hips, now, were they?

It was somewhat of a relief that there seemed to see so few other humans about. It gave the rubies time to, once again, explore a bit and come back for answers, though now with far fewer animals. A few insects were caught, but mostly Steven found himself occupied explaining what a T-shirt store was, then explaining human fashion, then explaining that, no, humans could not simply concentrate and alter their projected form and did not, in fact, have a projected form (“Weird,” Leggy said, with all the rubies nodding in agreement). And then food and amusement parks, money and jobs.

It all distracted him so much that, when they got to the center of the boardwalk and the stage set up there, he completely failed to notice that there were humans about. Though at least one of the Beach City residents had enough awareness to notice his group.

“Steven!” Sadie smiled and waved the man over to where she waited under the awning to Funland Arcade, already intent upon protecting her pale skin, even from the early morning sun. A concern which did not seem even present in the mind of her companion, the good Mayor Maheswaran, who barely looked up from her phone as Steven approached with his small battalion of gems. The brief smile—wiped away in just a second—would almost have been insulting if Connie didn’t seem so utterly focused on whatever was written on her work tablet and phone screen, which she glanced between rapidly.

Sadie was far more interested in Steven and his guests, her brows rising quite high at the sight of Jasper, but then falling down low as she took in the rubies. “Are these more of those gems that live up at the ruins? I feel like I’ve seen them before....”

“That was probably Garnet,” Steven said. “Or, well, the ruby that makes up Garnet.”

Sadie blinked. “Riiiiight...so these are like...Garnet’s...cousins?”

“Eh,” Steven shrugged. “Close enough?
“Well,” Sadie looked down on the rubies—though, granted, she didn’t have to look down nearly so far as the two quartzes did—and gave them her best, widest smile. “Well, kids, welcome to Beach City! You know, I knew Steven here back when he wasn’t any bigger than you all!”

The rubies, as one, whipped their heads around and stared at Steven.

At least, Steven mused, she didn’t call him ‘dad.’

“How could you be smaller, My Diamond?” Doc asked, at just about the same time that Leggy said “What’s a ‘kid’?”

Steven sighed. “It’s...it’s complicated. I’ll explain later? How about you all just...keep exploring?” He looked to Jasper. “Can you handle things?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jasper said, waving off her diamond’s myriad concerns and ushering the rubies down the boardwalk. “I’ll watch the kids, Dad.”

Steven growled. “You’re falling further and further down the time-off rotation, Jasper!”

“Explain that to Laz for me, then,” Jasper called over her shoulder, casually waving off the irritation of her diamond as she walked away.

“Why did I let her get so cheeky?” Steven muttered to himself. Then, with a sigh, he pushed the gem out of his mind and turned to Connie and Sadie, trying for a friendly smile.

He was greeted with a wide, almost...frog-like grin from Sadie. It was enough to make the man take a half-step back.

“Soaaaaa,” Sadie crooned, closing the distance between herself and her victim, going well past the comfortable range of personal space, “how was yesterday? Connie here isn’t spilling.” She jerked her head sideways, indicating the mayor, who had barely glanced up on the arrival of the diamond, before returning to her tablet. “Come on. Let an old friend in on the details.”

Steven chuckled. “I think that’s what you call a ‘state secret.’”


“I...don’t even know what that means,” Steven said, rubbing where the little woman had prodded him. “We just did some sightseeing. Showed her what my gems do for work. Had dinner.”

“Dinner?” Sadie cut eyes at her boss. “Iiiiiiiinteresting....”


“I...don’t even know what that means,” Steven said, rubbing where the little woman had prodded him. “We just did some sightseeing. Showed her what my gems do for work. Had dinner.”

“Dinner?” Sadie cut eyes at her boss. “Iiiiiiiinteresting....”

“Oh, stop it,” Connie replied, trying to keep down a smile, but failing to keep all of the curl from her lips. “It wasn’t any different from meeting with Ocean Town’s mayor, really.”

Steven raised a brow at the politician. “Oh. Really?” If that were true, politics were quite a more...intimate sort of game on Earth than he imagined.

The man’s tone seemed to convey that thought quite well. A little dark red came to Connie’s cheeks, and Sadie barked out a laugh.

“No, I know something interesting happened! You can’t hide it from me forever, Connie!”

“Sadie, I will loan you out to the DMV for a month, I swear,” Connie hissed, her threat having no effect on her employee. “Now, can we please focus? There’s a lot to do today, and I am already
losing it, without you trying to be the world’s worst spy.” She looked down the boardwalk’s gathering square, scowling at the empty street beyond. “Are you sure you called everyone yesterday? The setup crew is ten minutes late.”

“Madame Mayor,” Sadie said, crossing her arms before her chest, “I know that you looked over the checklist and went through the call logs. I got everything done; and a fair bit faster than you’d have managed, with all your fretting, I might add!”

“Well, then where are they?” Connie swept an arm towards the street.

“Probably just running on Government Standard Time!”

“They’re a private vendor,” Connie insisted, nails tapping rapidly on the back of her tablet, one of her heels joining in the rhythm, jack-hammering the concrete, sending her entire body vibrating. “They’re late. I should call. I’m going to call.” Reaching into her gray blazer, she produced a phone, which was immediately snatched away by her assistant.

“I will call,” Sadie said, taking several steps back before the warrior mayor could react. “In your state, you’ll just start screaming the second they pick up. I swear,” she grumbled, flipping through the contacts, “you were less worried on election night.”

“I didn’t have anything to worry about on election night!” Connie returned, staring at the phone screen as the correct number was found and it began to dial. “Just let me sort—”

“Talk to her,” Sadie commanded, pushing at Steven’s back, moving him so he stood just inches from the mayor, well within his own personal space bubble, and, given that he had the personal space expectations of a quartz, probably far within the woman’s, as well. Her mayor thus handled, Sadie turned away, and soon was speaking in that half-octave higher phone-voice of all people who have once worked in food service. “Hiiiiii, Rehoboth Events? This is Sadie, calling from the Beach City mayor’s office, just checking in!”

“You, uh...really more nervous than election night?” Steven ventured, trying to give Connie a calming smile, though he was having a little bit of a hard time, what with how his own heart raced at her proximity.

“Yes,” Connie said, forcing her eyes away from her chattering secretary and up to her old friend’s face. “That was...that was politics. I get politics. This is tradition. And after last year...” She shook her head.

“What happened last year?”

Connie opened her mouth, but paused. A small “um...” was all she managed, for some moments, before she finally added on a high-pitched “things.”

“‘Things?’” Steven repeated. “Are we talking ‘corrupted gem attack’ type things or ‘naked singing child’ type things.”

“Um...” Connie looked away, to her secretary, seeking any kind of distraction.

She got it, as Sadie suddenly screamed into the phone “What do you mean, reschedule to tomorrow! Beach-a-palooza is tomorrow!”

Connie was at Sadie’s side, wrenching the phone away and screaming into it within moments.

“Our contract says you were supposed to be here almost fifteen minutes ago, and I expect you to be here fifteen minutes ago, I don’t care if you need to go find a time machine to do it!” A pause as she
listened to the response from the other line, and then Connie was shouting again. “I assure you, young man, they do exist, and you will get your team here on time if I have to shove you into a temple to find the damn thing myself.”

“Iiiiii advise against that,” Steven said, raising his hand. “It just leads to a six-month existential crisis.”

Connie scowled at the man, but she didn’t have long to send her disapproval his way before it was all siphoned back down the cell towers. “No, no, you listen to me! You confirmed that your team would be here not twenty-four hours ago, and now you’re leaving us in the lurch! If we don’t have everything ready on time, the businesses in town will lose thousands of dollars, each. You could ruin some of them!” A pause, and Connie’s face went entirely red. “Tighten their belts? No, young man, you will be tightening your belts! You’re canceling our contract, right now, and I expect a full refund within the week. And you can just go ahead and close out Beach City’s entire portfolio! We will be taking our business elsewhere.” Another pause, and Connie barked out a laugh. “Oh, don’t you worry about us. Beach-A-Palooza is going to be great!” And, with an entirely unsatisfactory flourish, Connie hit the “call end” button.

For a moment, Steven was certain she’d spike the phone into the concrete, for the added finality. Instead, with a whimper, Connie crouched down, balancing precariously on her heels, her skirt stretching tight over and riding up her thighs as she descended closer to Hell. She dug fingers into her hair and declared, to the universe at large, “We’re fucked.”

“D-don’t jump to conclusions,” Sadie said, laying a hand on her boss’s back, rubbing gently. “I mean, they were just supposed to do the setup, right? We’ve got the sound system and the bleachers and everything, already. I’m sure we could call in some of the townspeople, handle things on our own, right?”

“Sadie, no,” Connie said, trying to shrug off her assistant’s attempts at comfort and rationality. “All the businesses are already rushing to get their own places ready; we can’t take them away from their livelihoods to fix this. And, even if we could get a few people, this stuff is heavy! The setup crew was bringing in lifts! One misstep, and someone could get hurt. I can’t let that happen.” Taking a steadying breath, the mayor rose again, looking back upon the trio of trailers. “We’ll just...we’ll get chairs. We can find some chairs. And just...try to keep the crowd quiet, so we don’t need to move out speakers.” As if already complying with her orders, Connie’s voice went soft, shoulders slumping. “And... maybe tiki torches for lights...we...we’re fucked.”

“We’ll manage,” Sadie insisted. “Beach-A-Palooza is going to go off fine.”

“It won’t,” Connie groaned. “We’d need...we’d need a damn army to get everything done in time!”

There was a long, heavy silence, backed only by the nearby hiss of waves on sand. And then a little red head popped back up from under the boardwalk. A ruby looked upon Connie and raised a hand, the gem on her shoulder glinting in the sun. “Oh, that’s me!” Grunting, she jumped onto the boardwalk and trotted up, her fellows emerging not far behind. “That’s what my diamond calls me! What do you need?” She looked between her rather un-gem-like leader and this rather gem-strong human.

“No, no,” Connie said, waving her hands at the ruby. “I didn’t mean y....” She paused.

At Connie’s side, Sadie began to smile.
And, very slowly, Connie began to do so, as well.

“Oh, Steven....” Connie ventured, and there was something gentle, something *lilting* in her voice, which Steven had never heard before. She looked to the diamond and quite overtly fluttered her eyelids, her lips parted just a tiny, *maddening* fraction.

“I don’t know what the question is,” Steven said, “but yes.”
Caught up in the middle of a headache and a heartbreak

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10 theme song: "Working Man" by Imagine Dragons

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Now, I know lots of you are off-duty, and I’m not asking you to give your time for nothing,” Steven said, looking at his arrayed gems. Particularly at the four rubies, who clustered together, close by Jasper, but not precisely at her side; as if they might fool anyone about the coincidence of their positioning. He smiled at the newcomers, and dragged his focus back to the crowd in general. “You’re all free to give it a pass, but for anyone who helps out, well....”

Connie Maheswaran, with the flourish of a performer—and what was politics, but the most public of performances?—took hold of the sheet which had been arranged over the end of stage and whipped it off, revealing five piles of cardboard-encased glory.

Several of the amethysts gasped, and it was Sharky that spoke for them all. “Pizza! I’m in!”

There was a mixed clamour, half from gems asking for chores and the other half for the first slice. Connie and Sadie found themselves swamped by enthusiastic helpers, but they most certainly did not seem to mind. The smile that Connie bestowed upon Steven as she watched the first group of gems set about moving the heavy sub-structure for the bleachers into place was bright, almost manic, and well, well worth the price of a few dozen pies.

Though, to be fair, the price for him was one very shiny rock. Not even a gem; just one of the many naturally-occurring minerals he ran across during his travels. “Thanks for helping out, Kiki,” Steven said, handing over the promised payment: a nugget of gold, barely bigger than his thumb. “Wish we didn’t have to wake you up so early, though.”

“An hour less of sleep for this?” Kiki tossed the gold between her hands, marveling at the weight of the little bit of wealth. “Steven, you can wake me up anytime you want to throw this much cash my way. Or, well,” she held the gold up high above her head, closing one eye as she examined it against the light of the sun, “not cash, but you know what I mean.”

“If I didn’t think it would ruin the economy, I’d gladly keep you on retainer to feed these gluttons.”

“You do that, and there’s gonna be more than one kind of rapid inflation to deal with,” Kiki laughed, already gathering up a dozen empty cardboard boxes. “And, well, unless you can account for some hellacious delivery fees, I don’t think it’d be an option. I’m not moving off this boardwalk. You want a live-in chef, you’d have to ask Jenny.”

Steven hesitated, unsure how serious the woman’s suggestion was. “I...don’t think I’m ready for that kind of struggle on my ship.”

Kiki smirked. “I assure you, Steven, that you are not. I am barely ready for that drama, and I lived with her for over thirty years, plus gestation.” Still, while Kiki was shaking her head, she was smiling at the memories. “I can not imagine how I’m gonna get through a weekend with her
stirring up trouble again.”

“Oh, yeah!” Steven grinned at the pizza maven. “She’s coming down from Empire City, right?”

“Her and her boys,” Kiki confirmed, beaming at the reminder of her prodigal sibling’s return.

Steven gasped, eyes alight. “Boys? She has kids?”

Kiki paused. Then smacked her lips. “Uh...no, Steven. Buck and Sour Cream. Her boys.”

“Oh, her friends.” It figured as much. The trip had almost never been apart back in the day. Finding that they’d all moved to Empire City had just seemed natural.

Kiki lay a hand on the Steven’s shoulder. “No. Steven. ‘Her boys’ as in, there’s only one guest room at my place. And that’s fine?”

A soft breeze wafted over the sand.

Steven tilted his head. “I thought you got rid of the bunk beds in high school?”

Kiki took in a sharp breath, nostrils pinching together. “I...need to go get the next set of pizzas out of the oven.” Giving Steven a little parting pat on the cheek, Kiki left for the safety and sanity of her parlor.

Steven starred after her for some moments, before hopping back on the stage to look his gems’ activities over.

Not everyone had opted to help. As he’d expected, Laz didn’t raise so much as a wingtip, instead opting to lay on the edge of Funland’s roof, an arm and a leg dangling down, wings spread wide as she sunned herself and took in the view of a few dozen working gems. Chalcedony had thrown herself into the fray, despite a general disinterest in food, being more concerned with assisting the quartzes under her care than in partaking of a reward. Moss Agate, conversely, was holding back, not really able to give out the orders—that being Connie and Sadie’s job—but offering further reward in the form of little compliments that very nearly did more harm than good. A pat on the back at just the wrong time had Carnelian tripping over her own feet, nearly throwing a steel bench into traffic.

Other gems stuck to their regular duties, merely in the company of their crew. Elder and her team were seated on the stage in a little circle, projecting from their gems, going through one of their injection-problem training games.

Nearby, Coral also worked furiously on her current project, pinning together bits of fabric and making tiny, precise stitchwork. Steven tried to peek over her shoulder at the design projected from her gem, but Coral seemed to feel his presence and blinked the design back into her gem before he could make anything out. Glancing over her shoulder, she gave her diamond a narrow-eyed look.

Steven tried to appease the pearl with a smile.

Her only response was to produce her bright silver scissors—which actually did make a terrifying weapon, given how smoothly they moved through even the thickest of fabrics—and make several snicks at the air, which had Steven holding up his hands and backing away to a safe distance.

There were plenty of gems to help, but there was also plenty to do. Steven could suddenly understand why Connie had been so panicked. He couldn’t imagine the residents of Beach City getting everything done, even if they had been gifted with the strength of quartzes. Though, he did
suppose there were a few others in Beach City who could have lended that sort of strength....

And, as if to finish his thought, walking down the boardwalk came four familiar and welcome gems.

Amethyst noticed the most important aspect of the proceedings as a good fifty paces, and she gasped, hands coming up to cover her mouth. She took it all in and let out a reverent cry, a sacred word, a blessing to the stars above. “Pizza,” Amethyst moaned, and, catching on with admirable swiftness, she jumped into the crew, toting about bleacher parts and stuffing her face in turn. Hopefully the rental agency didn’t care about messes on the benches, because there was going to be a good deal of marinara and slobber when all was said and done.

With admirable timing, Kiki emerged from the pizza parlor, staggering under the weight of a half-dozen boxes. She was divested of her burden by a pair of helpful and famished amethysts before she was five feet out the front door, and she gave a great sigh of relief, shaking her arms to disperse the lingering heat.

And then she noticed Amethyst.

Steven noticed her noticing Amethyst.

Reaching into his messenger bag, Steven produced another nugget of gold and tossed it to Kiki, who caught the rock with ease.

“No, I didn’t mean helping you,” Pearl said, “I meant helping us. Or, I mean—” Sighing, Pearl rubbed her temples, collecting herself. “Helping with that.” She pointed.

Steven followed Pearl’s gesture, brows furrowing. All he saw was a few dozen scurrying gems. “Huh? But she is helping with the—”

“ *That* ,” Pearl repeated, and finally, her target became obvious.

Doc and Eyeball crouched on the boardwalk behind the stage, Eyeball straightening out a trio of electrical cables while Doc came up behind, covering them with bright yellow tape. Just behind that pair, Leggy and Army fought an endless battle against the beach, sweeping sand out of the way of the oncoming tape.

“Oh,” Steven said, turning back to the Crystal Gems. “That.”

“Peridot told us everything,” Garnet said, crossing her arms, doing her best to look down upon Steven, despite now being just a few inches shy of the diamond’s height. It was actually quite
impressive how well she pulled it off. Was it her position of leadership that made her seem so much larger than reality, or was it a childhood spent looking up to her?

“What were you thinking, Steven?” Pearl said. Her eyes darted between the man and the busy rubies. “Bringing Homeworld gems to Earth? Have the Diamonds completely addle your brain?”

Steven scowled, and looked to Peridot. “I thought Garnet said you told them everything?”

“I did,” Peridot said, rolling her eyes, letting them land upon the still-seething pearl. “It’s not my fault they’re prone to hysterics.”

Pearl spluttered and did her best to communicate something to Peridot via gestures, but it was all quite jumbled, and, it seemed, a bit abusive. Peridot snorted and made little “blah blah” motions with a hand—both hands, crab-like, as it seemed she’d picked up the idea of the human gesture, but not the full execution—which only served to send Pearl’s yammering up an octave.

Garnet sighed, reaching up under her visor to rub at her eyes. “Steven,” she said, “you can’t keep those rubies on Earth. They’re dangerous.”

“No, they’re not.” Steven glanced over his shoulder, hoping that the screeching between Peridot and Pearl hadn’t attracted the attention of any of his gems.

Most hadn’t noticed—or were pretending not to—but, given the tilt to Coral’s head, he was sure she was getting everything. At least she wasn’t prone to gossip; if Heliodor had been there, instead of doing injector maintenance, the details of this confrontation would be out through the entire crew before the confrontation was even done.

“Look, they’re not doing anything aggressive or subversive or, shards, even ornery. They’re just helping and eating pizza.”

“Oh, that’s what they want you to think!” Pearl said, breaking off her sniping with Peridot. “We know their M.O. They’ll make nice and pathetic and then, bam, they steal your ship and fly off to Homeworld and the Diamonds are invading again!”

“The Diamonds won’t invade,” Steven protested. “I told you, that’s interfer—”

“You know what I mean, Steven,” Pearl interrupted. “Maybe you taught the others enough about Earth to trust them, but those rubies haven’t even been here for a day. They’re not respecting life, they’re just following orders!”

Peridot snorted. “And what’s wrong with that?”

“Orders can be disobeyed,” Pearl snapped.

“Yeah, but these are good orders,” Peridot pointed out.

“They don’t know that,” Garnet interrupted, her normally impassive face seeming just a tad strained. “Pearl is right, Steven,” she said, causing her oldest companion to preen. “The Crystal Gems, more than anyone, should know that even a Diamond can be ignored.”

“Is that what you see?” Steven asked, crossing his arms. “Do you see the rubies— see, Garnet—see any gem doing something to hurt Earth?”

Garnet opened her mouth to respond, but took several seconds of pause. Finally, she sighed, shaking her head. “I can’t see everything, Steven. But...no.”
“Then I think you should give them a chance!”

Peridot looked up to Garnet. “You gave me one,” she said, with a smug little grin.

“More than one,” Pearl grumbled.

“And was that a mistake?” Peridot asked, grin going wider. And wider. To an almost disturbing degree. Winning arguments always made her insufferable.

Pearl sighed. “I do so often wonder....”

“Steven,” Garnet said, trying her utmost to ignore the re-amping bickering, so she might remain, to some small degree, dignified. “I know I can’t change your mind on this. It’s just still such a risk, and I.... Steven. Listen.” Reaching up, she tapped down on her visor, fixing the man with an intense three-eyed gaze.

Steven swallowed. He couldn’t imagine any being in the galaxy could fall under those eyes and not feel utterly see-through. “Y-yeah?”

Garnet sighed...then allowed Steven the smallest of smiles. “I’m not buying them balloons, this time.”

It took some moments before Steven felt his stomach unknot, and he returned the smile. “Yeah. That’s fair.”

Happy about things? Steven didn’t really imagine was possible for Garnet and Pearl, but they had eventually covered enough of the bases to calm their nerves. Of course, Pearl’s nerves were always a little more exposed than the others, and it was a relief to both Steven and Pearl when Connie came over and pleaded for help with the electronics setup. A distraction was the best way to calm the gem down.

Connie must have known she was interfering in the best possible way, as she looked over her shoulder and gave Steven a little wink and thumbs-up as she ushered Pearl to the sound system. Steven hoped he could see the thankfulness in his eyes. And the affection. And longing. And—

“Sapphires aren’t the only gems that can see things, Steven,” Garnet said, breaking the diamond’s reverie. “But humans definitely don’t have special vision. It’s best to just tell them things.”

Steven’s face turned a brilliant red. “I—”

Chuckling, Garnet reached up—just slightly—and ruffled Steven’s hair, a shocking amount of it escaping to fuzz up in the process. “You two are better entertainment than Peridot and Amethyst,” she said, and, before Steven had a chance to finish his stammering—or ask for clarification—Garnet walked off to join in on the work.

Peridot frowned at her leader’s back. “Why are we so entertaining?” she asked, but, getting no answer from Steven, Garnet, or the universe at large, she gave a little snort to banish the thought and hopped onto the stage to join the circle of quizzing kindergarteners. “Hey! Are you doing injection problems? Oh man, I came up with some whoppers since I was last on Homeworld!” She paused before them, pulling a display up from her wristband enhancers and flicking it towards each of the pink-allied gems, where it shone forth from their own screens. “Here, check this one out!”

There was a second’s pause for analysis. Then, as one, the other peridots hissed in between their teeth and leaned into the maps and conditions, even Elder intent on puzzling her way through, all
under the watchful and quite smug eyes of 5XG.

Realizing he was finally, blessedly free from the interrogation, Steven let out a long breath, shoulders slumping. Stars, his back was a line of knots. He was really pushing things. He should get some sleep, but there was so much to do, there was always so much to do....

Like crisis management, Steven realized, as he saw Doc leave behind her crew and approach Garnet to proclaim “I’ll take the sapphire.”

Pearl dropped a microphone, a discordant groan blasting from the speakers. The crust-ends of a dozen pizzas fell from Amethyst’s mouth. Even Connie had the good sense to step back to the edge of the boardwalk, grabbing Sadie’s shoulder and pulling her along.

Jasper grinned like a madwoman. Seeing a fight was almost as good as getting into a fight.

Which meant, as it turned out, that she was to be disappointed, for Garnet just took a long breath...and melted in two.

Ruby and Sapphire stood holding hands, as they always did on breaking their fusion, but this time, that grip seemed a lot tighter, and Steven couldn’t tell which side the extra strength was coming from. Both gems looked...rather calm, actually. Which was a new kind of terrifying Steven wished he hadn’t discovered.

Reaching over with her free hand, Sapphire cupped Ruby’s cheek, giving her partner a little smile and nod.

And then Sapphire let her girl go, taking a little step back. Watching. Serene. Smiling.

“You wanna say that again, punk?” Ruby bellowed, blasting up to Doc, in a quite literal manner, steps steaming in a way that had Connie squeaking and reaching out to the precious wooden boardwalk.

Doc seemed unimpressed with the heat of both Ruby’s words and body. She made to side-step Ruby, intending to walk up to Sapphire, but was stopped by Ruby’s hand on her shoulder wrenching her back around to face the Crystal Gem.

“I said, you wanna say that again?” Ruby seethed.

Doc waited a second. Then put a hand out, she offered the missing “Punk.”

Flames burst up around Ruby’s feet.

Connie wailed.

Roused from her sunbathing by the cry, Laz let out a put-upon sigh and flicked a wing. A little blob of water arced over the crowd of watching gems—no work was going to get done until this drama was over—and splashed onto the planks, spreading across the boardwalk about the two rubies and putting out the fire with a great bout of steam.

Steven quite wished Laz had soaked-down the two rubies, in the process. Perhaps that had a chance in Hell of stopping the rapidly approaching fight.

He should break up the fight. He was the diamond, here. Right. Responsibility. Chain of command. He had this. Steven took a step forward.
Sapphire reached up to brush the hair out of her eye. She looked upon Steven.

Steven almost collapsed to his knees. Now he understood. Now he knew which one Garnet got that from.

“My rank is far higher than yours,” Doc said, “and I’m clearly stronger—”

Ruby broke in with a growl, “Hah! Wanna test that?”

Ignoring her, Doc continued, “So it only makes sense that I serve the sapphire. The resulting...fusion,” she hesitated on the word, brows furrowing a moment, “will be a greater asset with me than with just you.”

“Just—” Ruby’s teeth ground audibly even from where Steven stood wobbly-kneed. Several of the quartz soldiers took a step back, clearing space for a fight.

“You need to learn a few... small things,” Ruby said, and the comment seemed quite carefully chosen, as steam began to rise up from around Doc’s feet. Steven suddenly noticed that the gem was a fraction shorter—perhaps just a quarter-inch—than Ruby, and that, apparently, was quite enough.

“First, fusion isn’t about adding up two strong gems and getting someone stronger,” Ruby said, taking a step in, getting eye-to-eye with Doc. That tiny jerk of her head as she corrected to look ever so slightly down would have been hilarious if Steven wasn’t wondering about the procedures for evacuating Beach City. “It’s about two gems who want to be something more, becoming something more. If all you want is power, all you’re gonna get is a monster.”

Standing at the edge of the cleared gems, Jasper took in a deep breath, jaw tensing.

“Second,” Ruby said, reaching out and poking Doc’s little yellow insignia. “If you want to think you’re the stronger gem, that’s fine; I’ll gladly take you to the Sky Arena and drop you right off the edge.”

Doc bared her teeth, opening her mouth to respond, but all too slow.

“Third,” Ruby chirruped, bringing up three fingers into Doc’s face, getting her hand so close that she flicked the captain’s nose in the process, earning an outraged yelp. “You don’t ask me to fuse with Sapphire.”

There was a pause, during which Doc frowned, little ruby brain working on overtime.

Ruby took a step back and to the side, sweeping her arm out to grandly display her partner, standing serene as she watched the lecture. “No one takes Sapphy,” Ruby explained. “Sapphy goes where Sapphy wants.”

From her place on the stage, Pearl smiled, then raised a hand up to cover her grin. Her tactician’s mind had seen the next turns in the game, and she, surely, didn’t want to give away Ruby’s best move.

Doc remained, as intended, ignorant. She saw Ruby’s step back—her supposed acquiescence in the face of a superior cut—and stepped forward. Though she did take the opportunity to bump Ruby with a shoulder, sending her further back from the court gem.

Sapphire watched the approach, impassive.
Stopping before the blue gem, Doc inclined her head, eyes averted from the sapphire. “Your Radience,” she said, and held out a hand, palm-up, offering herself. “It would be an honor.”

Sapphire looked at the proffered palm. She reached out with her own delicate, thin-fingered hand.

“It would be,” Sapphire murmured, her hand touching Doc’s.

But rather than resting palm to palm, Sapphire pressed the back of her hand to Doc’s, guiding, *ushering* it away, gentle as wisp of wind.

“For you,” Sapphire finished, passing Doc by to return to Ruby. Steven hadn’t ever thought that Sapphire might, or *could*, sasshay, but that is what she did. And, apparently, it was an arresting site to all the rubies—even her own—as a set of dark blushes appeared all around.

Ruby’s in particular grew darker and darker, cheeks burning—among other things, Connie noted with a further cry of anguish, the water on the boardwalk steaming away and the planks beginning to glow a distressing red—as Sapphire took her hand, leaned in, and brushed their lips together.

And then Garnet was back, looking just as shocked as Ruby had, the blush having survived fusion. It took some moments to recover, and, even as she stood straighter and crossed her arms, her attempt to look stern was marred by a giddy smile. “I—” Garnet paused on noticing her voice, which had gone rather high. She coughed, and tried again. “I trust you’ve understood.”

“And I trust,” Connie snapped, marching up to stand between Garnet and Doc, but looking especially at Garnet, “that you will take this opportunity to teach this ruby about *wood* and *flammability* and how to do *repairs*.”

Abruptly, Garnet’s lovesick high dissipated. She followed Connie’s pointing finger, which directed her to a series of dark marks across the wooden boardwalk. “I—”

“Unless you think it’s *okay* to let her think you can damage civic property without repercussions?” Connie dug in.

“I didn’t mean—” Garnet took a little step back, and cast her gaze about until it landed on Steven. The look said so clearly what she was unable to ask: *Do I have to?*

Steven grinned, and joined Connie in the jabs, glad for a little payback after his own recent tongue-lashing. “You *did* say it was important for them to know that we take care of Earth. *All* of Earth.”

“But—” Garnet tried again, but gave up before more could be said. She slouched, arms dangling at her side.

“Good,” Connie chirruped. “If you do the inspection quickly, Greg can pick whatever you need up from Lumber Depot on his way over.” She clapped briskly. “Chop chop! That goes for everyone! If anyone else wants to experiment with fusion, just make sure we stay on schedule.”

The rubies—sans Doc, who was looking shamefaced down at the blackened divots under her feet—turned to one-another, eyes widening. It did not take them long to notice the leers from a few of the other gems, including, to no one’s surprise, the perennial agate troublemaker. A dangerous heat haze began to hover above each ruby’s head.

“Back to work, all of you,” Chalcedony spoke over the mounting laughter from the cadre of gems. “You have jobs, get back to them. Mossy, shoo. Shoo!”

“Aw,” Moss Agate pouted, sidling up to Chalcedony and resting her head on the quartermaster’s
shoulder, “you’re no fun, Chalcy.”

“I’m plenty fun,” Chalcedony rumbled in reply, poking the agate’s temple until her head lifted back up. “Now go, I know you can help with the heavy lifting.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” the agate snipped, sauntering off to join in the labor. Of her own volition, of course.

Latest crisis averted, and work back underway, Connie put some distance between herself and the tetchy gems. “I don’t see how you don’t bubble half of them,” she said, joining Steven at the edge of the crowd.

“Eh, they’d just let each-other go.”

“Your life sounds more and more like politics, then.” Connie shook her head. “I’d tell you the shenanigans since you’ve been gone, but then you actually might think it’s best that you do take over Earth.”

Steven flinched. “Aw, Connie, you’re not still—”

“No, no,” she interrupted, resting a hand on her old friend’s forearm. “Just joking. Poor taste, I know.” She paused. “Not that the idea wasn’t appealing to me when said shenanigans were occurring....”

“Oh, really?” Steven grinned. “Teenage Connie daydreamed about me taking over Earth?”

“I-I wouldn’t say daydreamed,” Connie protested.

He leaned in, looming over her. “Fantasized, then?”

“Steven,” Connie shrieked, taking the hand from his arm so she could smack at him, without much force, but with a definite enthusiasm.

“Oh, how dare you, human!” Steven laughed, holding his forearm before his chest, to take the brunt of the ineffective beating. “Rebelling against your king!”

“King!” Connie hit a little harder.

“Ah! Emperor? Sultan?” He ducked back, escaping a few of strikes, but Connie advanced to continue the onslaught. “Supreme leader?”

“My Diamond?” a voice called from back on the stage.

“It’s fine, Coral,” Steven reassured, dancing around the blows. “We’re just joking.”


Coral jolted. “Flirting?” Her eyes darted between diamond and mayor. “Really?”

“No, we are not,” Connie seethed.

This just earned a chorus of snickers from Peridot and her fellow kindergarteners. Connie’s dark complexion was well on its way to doing a remarkable impression of a ruby’s tones.

“Maybe you two should get back to work,” Amethyst suddenly joined in, hopping up so her stomach rested on the edge of the stage, like a performing dolphin. “You know. Get busy.”
And now the laughter was joined by full geode of quartzes. Across the sands, seagulls took flight.

“Oh my God,” Connie whispered. “I'm getting it from all sides.”

“Kinky,” Jasper threw out as she toted a twenty-foot steel bench past.

Spinning on Steven, Connie hissed, “Why does she even know that word?”

“Hey,” he held up his hands, “there are things a Diamond does not ask.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 12 preview song: "Christmas Island" by Lake
“Oh my goodness, Steven!” Beep beep! “Hey, Steven!” Beep beeeeep! “Over here, Steven!” Beeeeeeeeeeep!

“Hey, I’m trying to park, could you lay o—”

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

Steven looked over his shoulder, brows furrowed over who in the entire galaxy could be making that degree of racket.

Leaning out of the window of Greg’s white Dondai, arms thrashing in the air, was Barb Miller, lately of the Beach City Postal Service, and currently employed in screaming at the top of her lungs at Beach City’s lost scion. “Steven! Steven Universe, you get over here right now, I can’t believe you didn’t call me up right away, what am I, chopped liver?”

“Chopped, no!” Steven laughed, jogging up to the idling car, arms outstretched, quickly engulfing the postal woman and pulling her out of the passenger window, greatly relieving the driver, Greg, who could finally stop pushing Barb’s feet off the steering wheel. “Barb, you are a whole liver, at least!”

“Oooooh, Greg was right, you did grow up into a little charmer! Or, well,” Barb laughed, squeezing Steven’s biceps and leering, “a big charmer, I see. Goodness, boy, if I was a few years younger—”

“You’d still be dating that Kishino boy,” Greg said, climbing out of the car, grunting at his stiff joints.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call that dating,” Barb said. “That implies we bothered going out, instead of just—”

“LALALALA!” Sadie screamed from the side of the boardwalk courtyard, pressing her hands to her ears.

Barb threw her head back and brayed laughter. She finally let Steven go, stepping aside and holding her arms open, gesturing for her daughter to come forward.

There might have been a moment’s hesitation, but Connie was not allowing much more before she threw her assistant to the loud, muscular wolves. Sadie stumbled away from her boss’s not-so-gentle shove, getting in a half-second of glare over her shoulder before she was enveloped in arms which were still thick enough to squeeze the life out of her.

“Oh, honey, you look so good! That boy taking care of you? Of course he is, he knows what I’d do otherwise! Hah! Let me look at you, let me look!”
“Run, Steven,” Sadie whispered as she was held out at arm’s length and inspected. “Run, while you still can.”

“I’ll let you two catch up,” Steven said, patting Barb on the back as he edged away.

“I do this for you,” Sadie hissed. “Remember me.”

Oh, he would. When he needed a good laugh.

“Did you have any trouble getting the wood, Greg?” Connie asked, joining Mr. Universe at the back of the car. Her two community-service workers, Garnet and Doc, followed along behind, still sullen.

(“Hah! He’s been having trouble with getting the wood for fifteen years!” “OH MY GOD, MOM.”)

“Nope, they had everything ready when we pulled up!” Greg said, handing over a small bucket of nails, a hammer, and a crowbar to Doc before stepping back and letting Garnet haul out the half-dozen planks of wood, which extended from the folded-down trunk all the way to the windshield. “And a good thing your two delinquents over there didn’t do too much damage, or we might have had to leave this guy behind!”

Connie followed Greg’s introductory wave to the rear drivers-side door, which began to open. “Oh, and who is this gu-aaaahd damn—” Connie’s mouth snapped shut.

He was instantly recognizable. The rest of his hair was gone, except for the old bit of cowlick, which had gone a thin, brittle white, and his body starting to bend low, on its way to developing an actual hunch, but the man had worn a suit since the day Steven had met him, and it looked like Bill Dewey planned to go out of this world in his best duds.

“Connie, child, look at you!” Bill cried, supporting himself with a hand to the side of the Dondai as he came around to the rear of the car. “I never looked the part as good as you back when I was in office.”

“Oh, you know that’s not true, Mr. Dewey,” Connie laughed, tones a little high. She came forward, bending over to give her old boss a brief hug before stepping back, their hands still held together in marked affection.

“Dear, I told you,” Dewey chuckled, patting Connie’s hand, “don’t get all formal with me again! I’m still fine with just Da—”

“Daaaaaa Mayor!” Connie shrilled. “Mayor Bill!” She winked and snapped a finger-gun at Dewey. “Good to see you, Bill.”

There was snickering at Steven’s back. He turned to find it was actually two remarkably similar snickers; Barb and Sadie leaned into each-other, enjoying the awkward political reunion.

“Now, Connie, when is that son of mine getting in?” Bill asked, making his slow way onto the boardwalk, taking some support from the woman’s arm.

“Well, I can have Sadie check the itinerary,” Connie said, looking over to her assistant and her assistant’s mother, both of whom had joined in on the little walk to the mainstage, Steven and Greg following up behind. “What did he say when you confirmed yesterday?”

Sadie opened her mouth for a response, but before she could answer, Bill was talking again.
“I thought he’d have called you up himself,” Bill said, with a slight frown. “I need to have a talk with that boy....”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Connie said quickly, “he’s all confirmed to get in tonight, and we really only need him for soundcheck in the afternoon.”

“But surely you want to catch up,” Bill reasoned. “I know he made a scene at Beach-a-Palooza last year, but you did always...always....” Bill blinked. A shadow came over his face. Quite literally. The boardwalk shook and creaked under the slow steps of a behemoth.

“Oh my,” Bill whispered.

A bit off to the side, Garnet clasped her hands together and wiggled her hips.

“Oh, my my my,” Bill whispered and craned his head far, far back.

The giant leaned over, slotting a metal bench into place at the top of the bleachers. Holding it still with one dark-purple hand, she reached up to pull a waterfall of orange hair to one side of her face. “Hi,” the gem said, her voice absurdly high-pitched for someone so large. “I’m Gahnite.”

“H-hello, Ghanite,” Bill Dewey said, automatically extending his right hand, well-trained after so many terms in office. “I’m Bill.”

Gahnite smiled and jerked her head, flipping her hair over one shoulder so she could reach out with an arm as long as a light pole. With thumb and forefinger, she delicately pinched Dewey’s hand, giving it a gentle shake.

There was a little rustle, almost a breath of wind at Steven’s side, and he looked down to see Coral, hands clasped before her, smiling up at him.

“It’s one of the rubies, My Diamond,” she proclaimed, all smiles. New fusions always excited her diamond, and, thus, she was always pleased to bring the good news. “The leg one.”

“Wow, so soon!” Steven grinned, looking over the titanic fusion. “And who else?”

Coral snickered, putting hands to hips. “Moss Agate,” she answered. “But I thought that went without saying, at this point.”

Steven joined her in laughter. “You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.” Steven wrapped his arm around Coral’s shoulder, bringing her in for a little sideways hug, which sent a darker shade of pink to her cheeks. “Come on. Let’s go welcome her to the crew.”.

“So, Barb,” Greg needled, jabbing the woman in her side. “How do you like my grand-gems?”

“Well, Greg,” Barb replied, returning the elbow with enough force that Greg let out a little yelp, “Steven’s gems are nice, but I don’t think you can call them grand-gems.”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” Greg swept his arms out, encompassing the entire crew of bustling aliens. “I made Steven. And Steven made them. Ergo, grand-gems.”

Barb snorted. “Sadie bred guppies for a few years, but I didn’t call them my grand-fish.”

“That’s because you’re heartless, Barb.”
Barb shoved Greg’s shoulder, nearly toppling him off the concrete bench. He was only saved by the slightness of Bill Dewey on his right side, who was wheezing in amusement at the bickering townies.

“You’ve been on this for years, Barb,” Bill said, “but are you really going to join her, Greg? Your boy hasn’t even been home for a week!”

“Oh, sure,” Greg said, hands flying to the air, “criticize me, like you weren’t blowing half your retirement income on rattles and custom nappies!”

“At least I kept that to myself,” Bill sniffed. Before Steven could ask how anyone would, thus, know about these purchases, Bill slid a glare in Barb’s direction. “Nor did I commit felonies, Googling return addresses on other’s packages.”

Barb waved off the accusation. “If you didn’t want me finding out, you wouldn’t live on my delivery route.”

“That is not how the mail works!”

“Oh, which of us knows how the mail works, Bill? The politician of the postal worker?”

Greg chuckled. “And that is why I have an Ocean Town P.O. Box.”

Barb gasped. “Greg. After everything I’ve done for you? You ship with that hussy at office two-five-seven?”

Bill leaned in towards Greg, throwing an arm about the man’s shoulders. “My, my, Mister Universe. Do tell me about this two-five-seven.”

Greg returned the favor, the weight of his arm causing Bill to sag. “Bill. It’s a county hub. It accepts the biggest packages.”

Barb shrieked and went off on a rapid defense of her beloved small-town office’s capabilities, all while Greg and Bill smiled, enjoying the lesson on their city’s wide array of postal services.

Steven looked on with a peaceful smile, eased by the presence of Beach City’s vibrant elders. “It’s good to see them so friendly,” he said, casting a glance to his side, where Connie and Sadie were going over the dwindling to-do list.

“Oh, sure,” Connie snapped, narrowing her eyes at the chatterers. “You say that. Until you get the fifth call about the city’s parental-leave benefits.”

Steven’s brows shot up, attention now exclusively on Sadie. His smile widened. “Parental leave? Sadie, are you—”

Sadie interrupted. “If I could fit two IUDs up my vagina, I would cram them in myself.”

Steven flinched. “Oh, uh, I—”

“I have way too much to get done, thank you very much,” she continued. “Barb can keep the grandchild requests to herself, unless she’s the one who is going to give birth.”

Connie tapped her lips with a stylus. “She probably would, if you asked.”

Sadie groaned. “I know. Don’t tell Lars. He’s agreed to wait until we get some of this shit settled,” she gestured to the city at large, “before we wade wrist-deep into different shit. Literal shit.”
Steven stuck out his tongue. “I have never been so thankful that gems are mature when they emerge. And that they don’t poop.”

Sadie let her tablet sag, looking upon Steven with longing. “Can I adopt one?”

He snorted. “After you wrench them out of my dad’s grandfatherly clutches.”

“So….never?”

“Yep.” He shrugged. “Though, to be fair, it’s not all ‘plug and play’ with gems, either. They’ve got a lot of innate skills, but there’s still plenty for them to learn, once they emerge. Don’t fuse in small spaces, close the freezer door, you can’t open an airlock to get rid of a mess, your Diamond needs oxygen to live—”

“Don’t feed the seagulls!” Sadie shouted.

“Exactly!” Steven agreed. “Don’t feed the—”

His heart seized. Ancient terrors awakened in his soul.

“Don’t feed the seagulls,” Steven whispered.

The world went into cinematic slow-motion. Steven turned, arm outstretched, a deep “noooooo” bellowing forth from his gut.

Leggy sat in gentle innocence at the edge of the boardwalk, far from the raucous quartzes, who had thus far scared off any strangers. Except for one brave creature, which perched upon a bollard, head tilted, looking down upon the little green gem.

Leggy was stretching up, arm held out to the seagull, offering half a pizza crust.

Connie screamed, “HIT THE DECK!”

The townies knew. The quibbling parents left off their banter, going to their knees, pulling shirts up on their backs to cover their hair. A few of the gems also complied, most notably the Crystal Gems, whose eyes widened in ancient, well-learned fear. And even Jasper, so brave, so strong, looked to the darkening skies and cursed. Then she, too, fell to the ground, pulling the nearest two gems to her down beside her, bringing them in close to her bulk.

The seagull on the lamp-post cocked its head and, in the sky, a hundred of its brethren descended.

Steven acted out of purest instinct. He placed a hand to his belly, where his gem went alight. He held the opposite hand to the air. In a literal flash, a small domed shield appeared above his upraised palm. It began to expand rapidly, stirring up the boardwalk sand and the wild hair of the quartzes. Wider and wider grew Rose’s shield, as the seagulls descended in a ravenous fury.

And, at the last possible moment, the flock pulled back as one, buffeted by the shield-pushed air. The flock transitioned into a tight, descending spiral. One by one, they alighted upon the dome, shuffling clawed feet across the barrier between them and the anticipated feeding frenzy. Wings ruffled, caws rang out, and a dreadful heaviness came over the boardwalk.

“Oh my God,” Sadie gasped, teetering sideways, catching herself on Steven’s free arm. “I owe you my life.”

“Yeah,” Steven gasped, upheld arm shaking, not with weakness, but instead from the jitters of
adrenaline. “You do.”

He turned to Leggy, who had fallen upon her backside as the shield slid into place before her. On the other side, her seagull friend rasped, thumping its open beak against the shield, trying to get at the crust, which had fallen inches from the shield’s edge.

“And that,” Steven panted, voice grabbing Leggy’s attention, “is why we don’t feed the seagulls.”

“I-I’m sorry, My Diamond,” Leggy blathered. She turned about to a crouch, head to the boardwalk as she prostrated herself. “I disobeyed you, and I have no excuse, please don’t—”

But she couldn't continue. Not over the booming of her Diamond’s laughter echoing off the shield’s interior, along with the chatter of a hundred disgruntled seagulls above.

“D-dad, you remember when I was five and—”

“And the seagulls stole your jacket because you kept leaving used napkins in your pockets?” Greg joined his son in crippling laughter. “And it was your new coat, with the Lonely Sword guy on the back?”

“Blade,” Steven insisted. “And I was so worried you’d be mad; that thing cost so much!”

“I remember,” Pearl muttered. “You wouldn’t stop crying, so I had to climb up the cliffs and fight a one-legged seagull to get it back. It took two bottles of shampoo before my hair felt clean, again. I half-considered just having Amethyst hit me until I lost my form, so I could come back unsullied.”

“More than half,” Amethyst put in. “You asked me. Garnet said ‘no.’”

“Yes,” Pearl grumbled, glaring at her fused leader, still busy with Doc on the boardwalk repair.

“And I’d rather not spend the rest of my day in the shower, so if someone can find a way to handle that, I’d be much obliged.”

Pearl gestured at the gather of seagulls above, drawing Steven’s attention to the newest crisis.

The sky was growing darker. Not because more gulls had arrived. In fact, well over half had flown off, back to assaulting beachgoers. But, in retreating, they had left behind a thin, white coating of goop on the shield, little flecks of black and yellow interspersed occasionally. Each bird that left contributed their own portion, until the dome was bird-free, but painted in fresh, oozing droppings.

“That’s...not good,” Sadie pointed out. “Can you, like...I dunno, throw the shield away from us?”

“Not without some of that slipping off on us,” Steven replied.

Sadie made an elegant gagging sound at the thought.

“Yeah, exactly.” Steven considered the predicament a moment longer, but the answer was obvious. It was how Beach City had always dealt with the ever-present bird mess: power washing.

“Hey, Laz?”

From her place just outside the dome, the blue gem rolled over onto the roof edge, indolently resting on her back, her braid hanging over the side of the building. “Hmmm?” She hummed, inspecting the nails of one hand, refusing to notice the nearby drama. “Yes, Steven?”

“If you would?” Steven queried, gesturing at the prison of poop.
Laz glanced over and let out a great sigh. “Oh, My Diamond, there’s just a small problem.”

“Problem?” he repeated, mystified. It couldn’t be a water problem; the ocean was right over there!

“You see,” Laz said, sitting up on the edge of the building, kicking her heels against the bricks, “it’s my day off.”

Steven gaped. “I... what?”

“You keep telling everyone, take days off,” Laz said. “Do what you want, relax, no one can give you any orders!”

“I’m not ordering you,” he sputtered. “I just...this is an emergency, Laz! Please!”

“Well,” she shrugged, “I might be persuaded if there was some ‘overtime pay,’” she ventured. “But, well....”

“Oh no,” Steven muttered, slapping his forehead.

“Yes, ‘oh no,’ indeed.” Laz leered. “I know you just finished off the Cookie Cats. Therefore....”

The water gem shrugged. “You have nothing left that I want.”

“Oh no,” Peridot muttered, quite excited. “Steven! It’s your first Rebellion!”

“I always told you it would be Laz,” Jasper said, standing and brushing herself off, taking special attention of the pink Champion’s band about her neck.

“No Cookie Cats,” Laz sang, flicking a finger at the dome, “no splishy-splash.” To emphasize her point, the lapis lazuli shot out a tiny stream of water from her finger, making sure it fell just short of the befouled dome.

“Laz, come on,” Steven said, trying his best to keep a whine from his voice. He failed spectacularly. “We’re trapped in here.”

“No, you’re not trapped,” Laz snorted. She slipped off the roof, gliding down to the boardwalk, alighting next to the shield, as close as she could get to her glaring jasper companion. “You’ll just need a little bath. A simple shower is the price of your freedom.” Reaching out, Laz tapped her fingernails in sequence across a clean section of the pink barrier, setting off little pings. “A shower, or...my fee.”

“You’re being unreasonable,” Jasper growled, stalking up close to the blue gem. “You know they’re all gone.”

“No, you’re not trapped,” Laz sighed, shooting another tiny water jet, aimed towards Jasper’s nose, which was deflected by the shield, “so is my attention.”

“I can’t believe —”

“Is this seriously just because she wants an ice cream sandwich?” Barb snorted. “Just ask Greg; he keeps bringing the things to potlucks. Must have half-a-ton left.”
Laz’s wings flashed to full extension and, in a heartbeat, she was on the other side of the dome, blasting a section clean so she could press her hands to the shield and lean in to stare at Mr. Universe. “That’s right,” she whispered. “You are the creator of the Cookie Cats.”

Helped to his feet by Barb, Greg groaned, rubbing his knees. “I mean, kind of? I just bought the recipe and some time at a factory. I could call up for another order, if you really want.”

Laz shrieked in utter joy, hands raised to the air in praise. Her savior had delivered, and she needed no further prompting. The water of her wings disappeared in a glorious sparkle, ten-thousand colors radiating in the sunlight as droplets swirled over the dome shield.

The scene, at first one of beauty, triumph, and wonder at the almost magical power of gems, went a bit flat as the cyclone went opaque white with bird poop. But when the sun shone through a clean pink shield, the befouled water streaming through the air and into the ocean, none could deny the lapis lazuli her praise.

Well, except Jasper, who rolled her eyes at the blue gem. “Good show; you did your job.”

Laz ignored the quartz, preening before the Most Sacred Provider of the Cats.

Safe, at last, Steven let his shield drop, rubbing at his arms to relieve the small burn from holding them so long.

“Stooping again to bribery,” Connie said, crossing her arms. “Tsk tsk.”

“Wages,” Steven replied. “It’s her wages, not bribery. And you wish you could get loyalty so cheap.”

Sadie snorted. “Who said it was you she was loyal to?” Sadie waved towards Greg.

Steven’s father had been swept into a wet-winged hug (luckily with fresh sea-water, though this was still not entirely clean, as a few tufts of seaweed floated throughout), and was now awkwardly patting at Laz’s shoulder.

“I don’t care if she does her work for her diamond or her grand-diamond or for Cookie Cat himself,” Steven said. “Just so long as she’s back on the team.”

“Good,” Sadie said. “Because it’s definitely not for you.”

Steven stuck his tongue out at Sadie, who stuck hers back in turn, leaving Connie standing between them, sighing.

“You two,” Connie snapped, raising fingers to poke their tongues, sending them blepping back into their mouths. “Could we just try to get back on track? Before another crisis arrives?”

As if in reply—or in poorly-veiled literary irony—the door to Fish Stew Pizza was kicked open and Kiki pranced out, holding her cell phone at arm’s length to show them all the screen. “They’re here! They’re here! Jenny texted me; they just exited the highway, eeee!”

Connie’s lips sucked into her mouth until all their color was hidden. She breathed out sharply. Like a riled dragon.

“Like that?” Sadie inquired.

“Woah,” Steven said, looking the tense mayor over. “What did Jenny do to get on your bad side?”
“Uhhhh,” Sadie began, but her scramble to come up with an answer which wouldn’t get her fired was interrupted by an odd, almost sickly honk from Boardwalk Street.

An avocado-green van grumbled up to the streetside bollards, stopping in a manner which was halfway to parking and halfway to giving up.

“Finally!” Kiki screeched, sprinting for the van. She nearly slammed into its side, though it was doubtful she could do any more damage to the poor thing than it had seen it its long life.

“Out,” Kiki demanded, slapping a side panel, “out, come here, noooooow!” Grabbing the passenger door, she yanked it open, arms outstretched.

“Aw, thanks, Kiki,” a pale and still so-gangly man said as he leaned out, still buckled in, arms open to accept Kiki’s hug.

“Out of the way, Sour Cream,” Kiki snapped, pulling the man aside and diving behind his back to flail at her sister. “Jenny, Jenny, get out here!”

“Okay, okay!” Laughter came from the driver’s seat. “Don’t blow a gasket, Kiki! Back up a bit, Sour Cream is strangling.”

Kiki listened to her sister just enough wiggle back out of the passenger side of the van and sprint about to the driver’s side door.

Sour Cream, who had been saved from falling all the way to the ground by his locked seatbelt, but also thusly choked by the press against his neck, gasped in relief, leaning back and fumbling to unbuckle himself before he was somehow assaulted again. Once free, his body seemed to unfold from under the glove box. He almost flopped face-down on the curb, but grabbed onto the van’s open door and steadied his legs just in time.

On the other side of the car, the screeching continued. Jenny also did not have time to unbuckle before receiving Kiki’s greeting, but, this time at least, Kiki didn’t almost murder the new arrival. There was a long hug with the driver still in her seat before she managed to get free of seatbelt and car, and Steven finally got a good look at the missing Pizza twin as she was pulled out of the street for a safer greeting.

The twins were still so similar, after all these years, but for Jenny having a somewhat softer frame —no doubt Kiki benefited a lot from her jogging—and far less conservative style. Jenny’s shirt rode up high, her jeans down low, and both exposed an array of little tattoos on midriff, arms, and back. While Kiki’s hair was held down tight in dozens of cornrows, Jenny had buzzed up the sides of hers, revealing a further swirl of flower tattoos into her hairline, while also letting the hair on top of her head grow into a swept-forward afro pompadour.

These decorations were, it seemed, not new to Kiki, who made no comment on the inking, but instead hugged her sister in close once more, yanking her back and forth and she squealed in joy.

Sour Cream yelped at Jenny’s iffy balance, reaching out to steady her, but backed off as Jenny freed a hand to wave him away.

“Kiki, honey, you are going to crush me!” Jenny laughed, twisting in the hug so she could touch her sister’s biceps. “What, you jogging in a handstand, now? Did the family start investing in steel?”

Jenny grinned and flexed a forearm that even a quartz could appreciate. “Swim training, remember? The Rehoboth triathlon is no joke.”
“Not when the swimming portion is in Ocean Town, it isn’t,” Jenny agreed. “Swimming away, thank goodness, or else I’d be having you sign a little life insurance policy for me.”

“Oh, come on,” Kiki snorted, “I’m gonna be safer in the water than you are in that city. But look at you!” Kiki looked her sister over. “You look so good! This is not a city-living look, what are you doing to get all glowed-up like this?”

“I started my own exercise routine when we moved, remember?” Jenny smirked at Sour Cream.

The process of watching the pale man blush was fascinating. When he hung his head down to hide from Kiki’s leer, it just served to reveal that the red had gone all the way to the tips of his ears and the little just-balding spot at the top of his head.

“Hey, Buck,” Jenny called, slapping the hood of the van, “get out here. Looks like your daddy’s waiting.”

“What?” The rear double-doors of the van popped open, and a pair of hands slapped onto the roof, pulling a body up alongside. For a moment, the eyes were covered in a pair of so-familiar sunglasses, but as Buck Dewey looked around, he reached up to shift them up on his forehead. There was a bit of bagginess and redness about the blue eyes, but the arrival back home seemed to have swept away whatever sleepiness had kept the man down in the back of the van. And those eyes grew brighter as they fixed on a slightly-stooped, but still ever-dapper man.

“Dad!” Buck cheered with more enthusiasm than he had ever shown in youth. “I thought we weren’t getting together until lunch!” Swinging on the van’s back door, making the entire vehicle list and groan for a moment, Buck jumped to the sidewalk and jogged up to his father, enveloping him in a back-slapping hug. “You said your schedule was packed!”

“Ah, Quentin rolled his ankle and had to cancel our tennis match, and my only other option was a shuffleboard tournament.” Bill snorted. “Shuffleboard, can you believe it? I tell you, Buck, once I get on that homeowner’s board, there are going to be changes!”

Steven laughed, ambling towards the pair. “I thought you were done with politics, Mr. Dewey?”

Attention caught by the words, Buck looked to Steven and, again, lit up in a way he never would have allowed himself in his teen years. “And I thought you would be half-bald by now!” Easing out of his father’s embrace, Buck was welcomed into Steven’s, though he tried first for a dignified hand-clasp and back-pound before being nearly suffocated. “Oof!”

“Oh, you’re talking. What’s all this?” He ruffled Buck’s hair, which was still quite full, though now arched back in a gentle sweep. “And shouldn’t you be in a suit?” He let the man go, allowing him to step back and have his outfit roundly criticized.

“Hey, man,” Buck grinned, pulling at the collar of his paint-splattered denim jacket (which, Steven was sure, had never been near any actual painting projects in its life), “just because it’s not three-piece doesn’t mean it’s not stylish.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you left the governing to Connie, then,” Steven said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the mayor, “because I don’t think your ‘style’ fits into the council meeting dress code.”

Buck’s smile vanished. “Oh.” He started to follow Steven’s gesture, but quickly looked down at the sidewalk.

Bill waited a moment, then glared at his son. Another moment, and he elbowed the guitarist in the
Buck jolted, then coughed, trying to regain his cool. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his worn black jeans. He coughed again. “Hello, Connie.”

“Hello, Buck,” Connie said, neutrally.

Buck’s shoulders rose up almost to a level with his ears.

Out of nowhere, Sadie stepped forward, flipping through her tablet to a half-checked to-do list. “Buck, you and I have so much to do!” She chattered. “We should go over the stage setup and make sure it meets your band’s specs. They’ll be here in another hour, yes? We can’t do a sound check without them, but making sure everything’s in place will get things rolling!”

“Uh. Right.” Buck nodded. “Yeah. Hey, Sour Cream, are you—”

“I got her,” Sour Cream said, wrapping an arm about Jenny’s waist. “Get to work, rockstar.”

Obediently, Buck followed Sadie onto the stage, making just the slightest detour around the woman’s boss, his father leaving them to their work, going back to join the rest of the townies taking in Jenny and Sour Cream’s updates.

Steven let out a low whistle, sidling up to Connie and whispering to her. “I thought you said Mr. Dewey wanted you to be Mayor after him? You must have really upset Buck off by running!”

“I didn’t—” Connie snapped, but stopped as two strong hands clamped down, one to Connie’s shoulder, the other on Steven’s.

“Buck still upset?” Barb guffawed, leaning in between the old friends. “It’s Connie over here that he needs to watch out for!” She let out that alarming bray of hers, the one that made Steven lean away to protect tender eardrums. “Last time I got that mad at a man, I kept the house!” The postal maven continued braying, throwing an arm about Steven’s shoulder, trying to bring him into her mirth.

Connie’s lips peeled back in a ludicrous attempt at a smile. “Heh,” she forced between her teeth. “Ah, but don’t worry, Steven,” Barb said. “Your dad can have his lawyer write up an airtight prenup! That way, you don’t lose half the galaxy!” And her laughter rose in such intensity that Barb began to rock back and forth, doubling down on herself, slapping her knees. There may have even been a few tears at the corner of her eyes.

Steven knit his brows. “What?”

“Please,” Connie said, looking to the sky. “Help. Anything.”

Connie’s prayer, so generalized, and to an unspecified higher being, was thus answered by whichever god above thought it would be fun to interfere in the lives of mortals. Which is, generally, a bad thing.

Kiki screeched. “No way!”

Steven, Connie, and all the many well-trained quartz warriors jolted, turning towards the sound.

Jenny and Sour Cream preened, taking in the shock and rising joyous energy of Bill, Greg, and especially Kiki, all of them looking at Jenny’s...chest?
They stared at Jenny’s, belly, covered with intertwining tattoos, which were just beginning to stretch off-design under a slight roundness.

“Surprise!” Sour Cream cheered, reaching into his jacket pockets and tossing out a handful of pre-cracked glow sticks.

“I...” Bill’s voice was creaking. He paused, moistening his lips. “Is it...am I?”

From up on the stage, Buck answered his father. “Diaper duty begins February, Gramps.”

Bill wheezed, clutching his chest. “In...in... in....”

“Woah, is he okay?” Sour Cream asked, slapping his pockets in search of a phone for an emergency call.

So quick he was almost a blur, Bill turned to Greg Universe, thrusting a finger into the man’s chest, making the old musician yelp and stumble backward.

“In your face, Universe!” Bill let out a bark of a laugh, “Your son brought back aliens, but I’m the real grandpa, here!” And, in the excess of his emotion, Bill turned and swept Jenny into a hug, tight enough that Sour Cream seemed momentarily concerned the newly-announced baby would be squeezed right out.

But Bill let go before any of the Cool Kid trio could properly react, rushing to the stage, arms wide, ushering Buck back down and into another embrace. This one stuck, with Bill bursting into tears, his son awkwardly patting his father’s back and smiling over the man’s shoulder at the expectant mother and Sour Cream. Buck was doing his best to remain chill, but already his father’s emotions had his eyes shining and his jaw quivering.

Steven was not staying out of this one, no chance. “Jenny!” He cheered, leaving Connie’s side to go to the Pizza twin. “That is so exciting! How long have you known? When are you due? Is the baby kicking already?” Steven’s hand reached out towards Jenny’s belly.

Jenny watched the approached with rapidly narrowing eyes, but even quicker than the mother was Sour Cream, whose arm shot out, knocking Steven’s hand off its trajectory. Just as fast, Sour Cream brought his other hand around, sliding up under Steven’s shirt and resting his hand directly on Steven’s gem.

“Oooh, does yours?” Sour Cream bit out, teeth tight together.

At Steven’s back, nearly two-score of gems went tense, gems lighting up. Jasper bared her teeth and took a crashing stride towards her diamond.

Laughter shrill, Steven lifted his hand up beside his head, making a fist.

Behind him, his gems went still--even Jasper--but there was a low rumbling from each as they informed their Diamond of their discontent.

“Hah, sorry, Jenny! That was super rude of me.” Stepping back to get his gem away from Sour Cream’s touch, Steven looked over his shoulder at his gems. He forced a smile at his crew.

The subtle growling dissipated. One-by-one, gem glows settled and quartz hair unpuffed. Jasper held on for several seconds more after the last member of her geode, but, after a stern look from her
diamond, she huffed and turned away, grumbling as she returned to work.

Sour Cream, who had failed to notice his great peril, wrapped his arm back about Jenny’s waist, pulling her in beside him. “She didn’t tell us until last month.”

“I wanted to make sure all the tests came back okay,” she explained. “I’m four months, and everything looks great!”

“Oh,” Kiki said, voice betraying a sharpish lilt. “I can’t believe you waited so long to tell...the father.” And there was just a little uptick in tone at the last of her words. A nervous query.

“With all the drama Mom and Dad went through, and then getting us both with the IV, I didn’t want Buck and Sour Cream getting their hopes up too early. And they already knew I was planning to wait on telling them.”

“Good for... them,” Greg said, with that same inflection as Kiki. Greg rubbed the back of his neck. “So Buck and Sour cream are... both pretty excited?”

“Yep!” Jenny glowed with the happiness of an expectant mother and a supremely stubborn bitch.

Greg smiled. Or his lips did something like a smile. “Is one of them... more excited than the other?”

“What Greg wants to ask,” Barb broke in, her appearance so loud that Steven, once more, jolted, “is which of those boys did the deed?”

“Oh,” Jenny laughed, waving at the woman’s preposterous question. “Both.”

Barb rolled her eyes. “I mean who is the baby’s father?”

“Both of us,” Sour Cream said, and the cool playfulness was gone from his voice. His grip on Jenny tightened, and he gave a nod towards Buck.

Buck, still occupied with his sobbing father, but quite focused on the conversation, gave a thumbs-up behind the former mayor’s back.

“Alright!” Kiki said, holding up her hands. “Cool. Modern. Just so long as you’re the ones telling Daddy. And be glad Nana’s not around for you to deal with, anymore.”

“I know,” Jenny smirked. “She’d be asking if she could borrow a spare for the weekend.”

It was astonishing how much time could be devoted to grilling someone about the state of their uterus. And to threatening Barb with a painful death if she leaked the news to Vidalia or Kofi before their arrivals on Saturday. And what a pity it was that they had wasted such beautiful threats so early, with Barb declaring that she could flawlessly determine the baby’s sex if they told her the position during conception. (“What? Buck’s position, or Sour Cream’s?” Which had Sour Cream’s skin back to a very 80’s hot pink.)

The conversation—sans Sadie and Connie—moved from boardwalk to pizzeria as Steven’s gems wiped out the food supplies, with a pair of the amethysts following along. The pair were ecstatic, as Kiki had agreed to give them a brief pizza-making apprenticeship, in exchange for their much-needed muscle. Steven was beginning to worry about how much ship storage was going to have to be devoted to just the cheese alone. Would it be more efficient to just keep cows?
When the next dozen pies were up, Steven volunteered for the brief delivery. He only got a few steps out the door before he was divested of his burden. He shook his hands to disperse the heat from the boxes and was about to head back inside, having thought of another million questions about nursery decorations, when he noticed something that had him spinning on his heel, crouching down to silently approach the stage.

Two elegant gems sat on the seaward edge of the stage. With the afternoon gone and the sun just beginning to touch the treetops to the west, the sea on the horizon had begun to turn a deep blue, boat lights peaking out above the rising tide.

A particularly strong wind came up to ruffle Pearl’s hair, but it did very little to Coral's vibrant pink braid. The younger gem’s dress, however, shuddered in the breeze, little threads of silver embroidery twinkling as the hem shifted.

Another little flash of light came whenever Coral drew her hand back from her lap. She worked a tiny needle, its silken thread so thin that Steven couldn’t make out the color at this distance. Though, knowing Coral, it was probably pink.

Pearl shifted, looking to the gem at her side, and down a few degrees. The first time Steven had seen Coral, he’d thought she looked small, but had chalked it up to childhood memories of towering gems. But seeing her next to Pearl, and next to the pearls of the diamonds, had confirmed that full head-height difference between the young gem and all others of her type.

“I love that design,” Pearl stammered, obviously trying to break some long silence.

Coral paused in her stitching and tilted her head to give Pearl a brief look before taking her next stitch. “Thanks,” she murmured, ignoring the conversational opening.

Pearl took a steadying breath. Bravely, she tried again. “I tried to make Steven some nicer clothes when he was little, but that boy could tear through lacework like it was nothing. And once he found that old box of his father’s tour shirts, it was almost impossible to convince him to wear anything else.”

“Oh, I know,” Coral laughed, placing the back of her hand before her lips. “I tried elaborating on the design, but he never took to anything but a star. And, really, with his running around with all those quartzes, half his clothes ought to be armor!” She sighed, venting her years of suffering. “It really is nice when he needs something more impressive. It would be half worth going back to Homeworld, just to work through all the designs I have planned.”

“Yes, but...” Pearl hedged. “But Homeworld.”

Coral’s hands fell back to her lap. She began to stitch again.

Across the sands, seagulls hovered on salt-spray winds, searching for their next victims. The boardwalk pizza party was safe, now that Laz had taken up guard duty, threatening the occasional avian scout with tiny water jets to their tailfeathers.

Pearl fidgeted with her hands. “I...I wanted to thank you for taking care of Steven. He was too young to be on his own. I...wish I had been allowed to go with.”

Steven frowned. Leaving the Crystal Gems behind had been a central tenet of his agreement with the Diamonds, but he had never considered Pearl specifically for the journey. Of all the Crystal Gems, she was the one he’d known should never go back to Homeworld. And now, eighteen years later, he knew intimately why she should never return.
Coral paused her stitching, looking out to the water. “When I was presented to him, it didn’t seem like he was...I suppose I would have thought of it as ‘inexperienced,’ not ‘young.’” Her words were slow, as if she were exploring the idea for the first time. “I mean, his attire and living quarters were a disaster, but I thought that was just because he had no pearl to manage things.

“But the first time I saw those shipments of yours come in.” Coral shook her head. “He lived in those boxes. He spent weeks going through every little thing, telling me stories about you all and guessing who made the decision to send what. I finally realized there was so much...missing. Not just around him, but in him. So many things he was supposed to have.”

“He wasn’t supposed to have things,” Pearl said. “He was supposed to have us.”

“I know,” Coral said. “But he had us, instead. And now he has....” Coral gestured at the sea, but meaning something much wider. “This.”

Pearl drummed her fingers on the edge of the stage. “It sounds like you don’t quite...approve.”

Coral turned from the sea, looking up at Pearl. “This planet. It’s....” The little gem shuddered. “Brutal.”

Pearl looked Coral up and down. “You...have been to Homeworld, correct?”

“Of course,” the seneschal snapped, eyes rolling. “And I know it can be cruel. But nothing there has to die so other things can live.”

“But things do have to die for gems to exist,” Pearl reasoned. “A million times more than any organic life needs.”

“But it only happens once,” Coral insisted. “Here, on Earth, it is happening constantly. Animals eat other animals, or plants, and even the plants here grow in dead things. And everyone just seems...okay with it!”

“That’s just how organic life is,” Pearl said. “That’s how things are everywhere in the universe. Except where the Diamonds go.”

Coral scowled. “I’m not saying the Homeworld way is right, but...just...I mean, what about that girl in there?” Coral gestured back towards Fish Stew Pizza. “She’s going to die, and she’s okay with that?”

“Well, humans do tend to ignore their mortality for the vast majority of their lifespan, until they’re very old or ill. And even then, most of them seem taken by surprise.”

“But what about the men with her? Aren’t they sad that she’s going to die?”

Pearl shrugged. “Humans tend to ignore a partner’s mortality, as well.”

“But when it’s going to happen so soon?”

Pearl chuckled. “Oh, she has several decades of life left, Coral. I know it’s hard to stop thinking in Homeworld’s terms of time, but—”

Pearl suddenly paused. Then, focusing down on Coral, she asked, “Wait...do you think organic lifeforms die when they have offspring?”

“Of course they do,” Coral said. “That’s what happened to, What’s-her-name? Rose Quartz?” (Pearl
pursed her lips at *Rose Quartz* being called *Whats-her-name.* ) “And it’s in all those books of Steven’s, *Charlotte’s Web*, *Snow White*, *Unfamiliar Familiar*.”

Pearl looked about to respond, but paused. Considering.

Steven considered, as well. Yes, Lisa’s mother, and then Archimicarus...Filia Carter *did* like to get parents out of the picture....

“But what about Barb?” Pearl pointed out. “The loud woman? Sadie is her daughter, and she’s still alive.”

“Her father must have been the one that gave up his life. Duh.”

“Oh, I’ve met Sadie’s father,” Pearl muttered. “Trust me, that man never gave up *anything for anyone*.” She sniffed sharply. “Least of all his daughter. So, let me assure you, organic lifeforms don’t *have* to die in order to produce offspring, except in a few *very* specific species. Species which do *not* include humans. Jenny will be *fine.*”

Coral gaped. “B-but that means that My Diamond could—”

“MY DIAMOND!” came a shriek right in Steven’s ear.

“Gyah!” Arms flailing, legs kicking, Steven flopped back from his hiding place at the front edge of the stage, landing so hard on the boardwalk that the wood below him creaked in protest.

“Steven?” Pearl yelped, looking back towards him.

“My Diamond?” Coral shrilled, an almost maroon blush flashing across her cheeks and nose, which she tried to hide by burying her face in her hands.

“I just got here!” Steven yelled, then winced.

“My Diamond,” said the interrupting gem at his side, and Steven finally focused enough to note his youngest peridot, Hush. She was grabbing at his arm, trying to make him stand, unable to overcome his bulk. “The Blade needs to take off immediately. Get everyone on board, now!”

Up on stage, Swift snorted. “Just because you lost the last five games doesn’t mean we *all* have to run away in shame.”

Hush scowled at her chuckling fellows, the lines of her face bunching up around her gem nose. “It’s an educational game, I wasn’t losing, I—ugh!” She shook her head and reached up to poke her nose, a little screen projecting from it, forming a connection to the ship’s bridge, where the navigator gem lounged back in her chair. “Pyrope, chart a route, fastest possible, coordinates RA 8 hours, 10 min, 9 sec, Dec neg 10 degrees 38-30!”

Pyrope, who had been fiddling with a spatial puzzle—so scrambled there was no telling what its finished form must look like—didn’t even bother to look up from her solving. “Neeeeeh,” she buzzed like a gameshow error, “you do not have the authority to—”

Pyrope’s hands jerked mid-sentence, her puzzle bursting into two-score pieces, which rocketed across the bridge. Sitting up, she began typing rapidly, eyes flickering across her screen. “But we’re not supposed to head back there for another three months. Shards, shards, *shards*, routing!” A celestial map began to build before her, lines flashing and disappearing across the local galactic spiral-arm as she began routing. “Yes, yes, set! Three-minute takeoff window, I’m coming to you! Move your butts, people!”
Steven blanched. “What? Pyrope, I didn’t clear—”

“The Diamonds,” Pearl hissed, summoning her spear from her gem. “I knew it, there’s no way they’ll stay away forever!”

“No!” Hush interrupted. “My Diamond, it’s an emergence!”

Connie, who had been drawn away from Sadie and the working gems by the commotion, stopped at Steven’s side, offering him a hand so he could get to his feet. Her other hand rested on her left hip, where a missing sword might have hung. “What kind of emergency”

“So an emergence,” Hush insisted, her gem switching from its display of a fantastically cursing Pyrope, over to a little cartoon of a cliffside, and a gem bursting from the rocks, flexing. The gem bore a striking resemblance to a certain champion.

“You dolt,” Swift sniped, “there are no emergences expected for nine weeks.”

“I know,” Hush said, her words almost drowned out by a sudden blast of air and sand, brought by the arrival of the Blade, its gangplank already folded and touching down gently on the beach. Hush looked back to Steve and, shouting above the wind, finally explained herself. “My Diamond, we have a Variant!”

Steven stared at Hush. The sudden rush of lightness in his heart corresponded to the lightness of his very form, and Steven felt his feet almost clearing the boardwalk as he threatened to float away.

“Shards,” Elder hissed, pulling up a display from her own gem. The cursing continued as she examined the data, but soon her words were more constructive, if significantly louder. “EVERYONE, LOAD UP, EMERGENCE PROTOCOL!”

The gems on the boardwalk, which had already gone still at the arrival of the ship, hesitated, the energy almost wafting off of them as they looked to their diamond.

“Confirmed!” Steven shouted, forcing himself back to Earth. “Move!”

Several metallic clangs crashed out as the remaining bleacher rails and wrenches were dropped (thankfully, without damage). The wood boardwalk groaned as a stream of quartz bodies thundered up the gangplank. Among them came Amethyst 8XM and Carnelian, nearly hidden under a dozen teetering pizza boxes each. Then there were the peridots, 5XG among them, squealing. And, finally, the last stragglers...and Connie, sprinting towards the ship.

“Connie, wait!” Steven shouted, soaring across the boardwalk, landing just at the leading edge of the gangplank. He managed to get an arm about the woman’s waist as she went by, spinning them both about in a tornado of sand before he managed an awkward stop. “Connie, we could be gone for hours! What about the setup?”

Connie yanked herself free, scowling at Steven. “You’re not leaving me behind again, Steven! I’m going!”

Steven huffed. “What, again? Every time?”

“Yes!”

A beat. The old friends stared at one another. Their cheeks became suffused with dark red brushes.

“I—” Connie began.
But—" Steven tried, at the same time.

And, down on the boardwalk, another voice yelled back. "Damn right!"

Connie’s shoulders tensed, and she flashed slitted eyes back at the stage.

"Get going, you two!" Buck shouted.

"Yeah," Sadie agreed, waving her tablet in the air. "I got this! Just bring her home for opening ceremonies!"

"Are you—" Steven began, but another burst of wind and puff of sand slammed into his face, and he coughed.

Before him, the Blade began to rise.

Coral appeared in the ship’s entryway, shouting at the two humans on the sand. Her voice was drowned out by the ship’s warming engines, but her intention was clear enough. Time was up. The gangplank began to fold in.

Quickly, Steven wrapped his arm back about Connie’s waist. In a smooth movement, she was swept up, into his arms, and he rocketed into the ship’s entryway. And if the news of a new gem wasn’t enough to lighten his feet, he also had Connie’s declaration to make him fly.

A little shift in the ship’s positioning ruined Steven’s landing, and he and the woman tumbled end-over-end down the hallway, slamming side-by-side into the first curving wall. A second later, the gangplank snapped closed, sunlight extinguished before being replaced a split-second later with a yellow warning glow from the lighting strips on walls and floor.

And then human and hybrid were jerked several yards back towards the closed gangplank as the ship took off, the environment stabilizers kicking in just in time to slow their rolling before they suffered a second slamming stop.

Steven came to rest on his back, looking up at Coral, who was bracing herself against the wall. The world—or, well, universe—spun gently. "We made it," he wheezed, fighting for breath.

"Up, get up, get up!" Coral ordered. "Planetfall in five. Atmosphere is safe, but we need you in armor now."

Reaching out, she grabbed Steven’s hand, hauling him to his feet and pulling him back down the hallway.

Connie—still on her side—watched their retreat. "Armor? Wait, is this dangerous?" Kicking one leg, she brought her body about and up onto her feet in one smooth movement. She jogged after the gem pair, lurching a bit to the side for the first dozen or so steps.

"Uh, kinda?" Steven yelped, still lumbering after Coral, himself. "Coral, is Jasper—"

"She’s set, of course, now move," Coral barked, flitting behind the man so she could push Steven instead of attempting to drag him. "Hair, hair, hair," she fretted, pulling a tie from her gem and gracefully matching Steven’s recovering stride. She began grabbing handfuls of black curls, lashing them into horrific, but effective, braids.

Connie finally recovered her balance and caught up, making sure to keep out of Coral’s frantic reach. "What, do gems come out crazy or something?"

"No," Steven huffed, turning a corner. "Just fast. Hush!" But this last was not an order, only a
greeting, as the youngest peridot peeked her head out of a doorway, waving them in. “What are the
readings?”

“Rate of 80 per second, three-point-two psi, rising fast. Looks like an exploder.”

“Shards, I’ll need the full suit. Okay, okay, what were we anticipating here?”

“Magnetite, but readings indicate anything from the corundum line.”

“What we're getting,” Jasper snarled, coming forward, a dull metallic thump ringing with every
other step as she set down a wide diamond-shaped and (of course) pink shield, “is no notice. Can
someone tell me why?”

Hush shrunk under Jasper’s approaching bulk, mouth flapping as she tried to stammer something,
anything.

“Oh, back off,” another of the peridots, Swift, broke in. Stepping between Jasper and Hush, the
thin peridot held up a hand, her hundred tendril fingers spread to call up her display screen, which
swam with numbers. “She found it before any of us; even Elder. You want to point out where the
anomaly begins, Champion?”

“That’s not my job,” Jasper said. “I keep our diamond safe, which is pretty cracking hard to do if
you’re all too busy playing games to give us a warning!”

“Jasper,” Steven snapped, his voice instantly drawing the big quartz’s attention. “Stand down. I
need your mind on the mission, not on infantile rock tumbling!”

“Infantile” might not have been part gem vocabulary, but “rock tumbling” seemed to mean
something very particular. Swift yelped and her screen fizzled out, but Jasper merely gave a
derisive snort in the peridot’s direction before spinning away, going to stand at her diamond’s side.

“Pyrope,” Steven directed to the room at large. “ETA? How long do we have to get onto the
shuttle?”

“No time, no time,” Pyrope yammered from the hidden speakers. “Bringing the ship down direct,
Feldspars are on standby for hull eval.”

“Don’t strand us, Pyrope,” Steven ordered. “We’ve got a party tomorrow.”

“Confirmed, My Diamond. Landing in seventy-three seconds.” And the gem went quiet, focusing
on piloting them down in one very, very fast piece.

The ready-room was much more empty, this time, compared to the injection mission. A few gems
hovered in the hallway, and Heliodor stood by the doorway, but inside it was just the peridots
huddled in a corner, yammering rapidly as they went through their data; Connie standing near the
atmo suit storage, wondering if she should be prepping, as well; and Steven and his two assisting
gems, Jasper and Coral, who flitted about their diamond, fitting him with pink sheets of what didn’t
seem like metal, given that the man never reacted to their weight, but which could be nothing but
armor, by their design. Piece by piece, they built upon the already massive man, until he more
resembled a riot officer than any royal or ruler.

“Okay,” Connie said, gesturing at the getup, “are you sure there’s not a war on?”

“Definitely not,” Steven said, looking at Connie through a slit in his visor, “this is just for the
explosion.”
Connie blinked. “Pardon?”

“Landfall!” Pyrope called over the intercom. “In threetwo one —”

Half the room’s occupants—Connie included—were thrown off their feet as the entire ship, which seemed to have been moving so smoothly, was suddenly not. Curses went up to the speakers, and apologies duly came back, but none of this was noticed by Steven and Jasper. They were far too busy leaping through the opening slit in the wall—only just wide enough for Jasper struggling sideways—and sprinting across the rust-brown landscape beyond, towards a looming rock fifty meters off.

Connie rolled to her feet and rushed to join, but, before her, the gap in the ship’s wall became covered in what seemed like a transparent blue film. She’d heard of this from Steven—the barrier which secured gems, but had no effect on organics—and leaned forward, ready to barrel through. She was arrested by a thin, but steel-strong arm about her waist. “Nope, nooooope,” one of the other Jaspers—and when had they arrived, but, looking about, the doorway was suddenly inundated with gems—the aptly named “Skinny,” shouted. “That is a hard-hat area, lady!”

“Then get me a hard hat,” Connie demanded, squirming to break free.

Skinny snorted at her efforts. “Only thing that will make you halfway safe is a quartz, and those two,” she said, jerking her head out towards the alien planet’s surface, “are the only two on this ship stupid enough to try.”

Connie growled and tried to worm her way back and down through Skinny’s arms, but only managed to get down far enough to trap her arms up around her ears. Even if she had managed, there was now an entire team of gems in the room, crowded near the shielded door. One of them, surely, would catch her, even if they all seemed so focused on the action just outside.

On the planet’s surface, Steven and Jasper left a trail of dust, but it was thin enough to do little to obscure the view from the ship. They had only made it halfway to the rock outcropping when there was a tiny...shift. Some unreadable aura that set the diamond’s instincts blaring. Steven dug his feet in, soles of his shoes skidding across the fine sand that covered so many miles of this planet’s surface. Jasper did the same a half-second after, her bulk keeping her skidding for an extra few feet past her diamond, putting her in position.

In the two seconds it had taken them to come to a stop, Steven recognized what little detail had alerted his senses: a small reddish section appearing on the otherwise tan rock, about at knee-height. Almost like a laser target, but this dot appeared from within.

The red mark widened in an almost perfect circle. In the middle, the red brightened to a neon orange, then yellow, and finally, a bright white, like looking straight into a lightbulb.

“Guard up!” Jasper yelled, and Steven wasted no time in complying.

Both gems dropped to one knee, turning their bodies sideways to present the smallest target—and thinnest portions of their gems. Steven held up his right arm, and before him appeared first a small diamond-shaped shield. But with a little push within himself, he shifted it before them both and expanded the guard to cover the two quartzes in their entirety.

Jasper, likewise, brought her assigned shield about, digging the bottom into the ground and angling the tip back, presenting the outcropping with an angle that she could just barely crouch under. In a burst of orange light, her helmet materialized and the warrior tucked her head down low. Not only...
was her gemstone nose protected, but, through Jasper’s helmet and the bulk of her body, her diamond’s gem, as well.

It was all done with perfect smoothness. Practice. They had gone through this procedure a thousand times over; a Diamond and his Champion readying for battle.

There was less than a second’s stillness between their taking position and the explosion.

Within the Blade, Connie flinched back from the barrier doorway as a dozen pings rang across the ship’s hull. The barrier had done its job, however, and none of the bullet-fast shards made their way inside. The gems, which had all flinched back as their leaders had gone into their guards, now crowded forward once more, even closer to the door, a couple hissing and jerking back as they touched the charged surface. Still, they moved as close as possible, squinting through the dust of the explosion.

At first, nothing. Just a light-brown curtain of dust across the plane. Then, gradually, that thinned, until the still-crouching outline of diamond and quartz peeked through. And, finally, they clarified, the remains of the outcropping behind them easing back into visibility through the smoke.

Steven coughed, throat dry from the dust. He made a mental note to—and, yes, the thought disturbed him—spray out his mouth with a bottle of healing spit. The atmosphere here was livable, but the debris kicked up could have any number of dangerous elements. But, for now, he seemed fine, and he spat out a few dirty mouthfuls.

“My Diamond?” Jasper inquired, trying to look over her shoulder at Steven while still keeping his gem covered. It was an awkward contortion.

“Fine,” Steven answered. “You?” It was only after he asked Jasper that Steven actually took stock of himself, but he did not find himself a liar.

“Singed my hair,” Jasper grumbled, and Steven could suddenly smell the faint, malodorous burning. “Gotta keep it closer in, next time.”

“How?” Steven asked, and Jasper chuckled acknowledgment. There had been a lot of bonding over hair disasters over the years. “Could ask Coral—”

Jasper went silent. Rigid.

Through the settling dust, there was a shift. Something rose. No...sat up. Obviously humanoid in shape. “H...hello?”

Steven’s stomach flip-flopped. Every new gem did this. Fear, excitement, and an instant, deep tug on his heart. After all the joking about grand-gems from his father, Steven was beginning to think this was the sort of emotion that a new parent would feel.

Licking his lips—still dusty—Steven raised a hand and called back, “Hi! Are you alright?”

A pause, the silhouettes hands roving over its body. The hands paused on the head. “No, my gem is center-set.”

Jasper made an attempt at smacking her forehead, but just clanged a fist into her helmet.

Rather than correcting the gem, Steven tried a new tack. “Do you need any help?”

There was a very long pause.
“I think I do.”

“A sapphire,” Heliodor raved, scanning their new crew member’s gem, dancing about the sapphire and Steven’s seat, elbowing aside a few crowding crew members—and, really, there was so much space in the training room, why did they have to crowd?—as she circled.

Steven scowled, wishing he could remind everyone of the importance of personal space. He’d have preferred to do this evaluation in a slightly more private place on the ship, but welcoming new gems had always been a very public event. Sequestering now would just cause talk, and this new gem could certainly hear.

If she hadn’t responded to him back on-planet, Steven might now have some doubts about that. She was quite still. Muted in more ways than just vocals. Instead of the calming blue of the sapphire Steven had grown up with, this one was remarkably undersaturated, more a gray-green. She eschewed the puffy, formal attire of most sapphires, instead manifesting in a murky-white sun-dress. Her hair was even more neutral, a dark gray, and not much of it: buzzed sides, but a long, curly lock up front, which hid her face.

Steven resisted the urge to fidget. The sapphire still rested her hand on his forearm, from when he had helped her through the exploded rocks and onto the ship, and he didn’t want to risk her moving away for any reason. He wanted to know she was there. Had to keep reminding himself, in fact, because she seemed just...so...blank.

That hadn’t stopped anyone from being excited, though. Or overbearing. Elder was being especially trying. “Heliodor, what sort of reading are you getting from her?” she asked, leaning in, studying the new gem. “There’s not that much data on sapphires.”

“No, I suppose there wouldn’t be. And certainly not on star sapphires. There’s only, what...five others in the Diamonds’ courts?”

“Four,” the little sapphire whispered.

“Oh, right,” Heliodor said, flitting a hand to dismiss her error. “Four. And sapphire powers rarely match, even among the same colors, so it’s doubtful that asking about on Homeworld would enlighten us. If there even is another green star sapphire!”

“There isn’t,” green star sapphire said, still so muted.

“I suppose we could look through the common manifestations,” Elder said, tapping at her chin. “Run a few tests.”

“Yes, yes,” Heliodor agreed, nodding with enthusiasm. “However she manifests, there should be good clarity. I don’t see anything in the gem itself that would muddy things. Complete inclusions, a lovely asterism. Such vibrant coloration, as well. She should be able to see perfectly!”

Jasper snorted. “Except that she’s blind.”

Jasper failed to react to the dozen scowls that shot her way. Even her diamond’s glare didn’t make any sort of suitable impression, though he couldn’t maintain it long. Steven forced himself back to ease as he refocused on his newest gem.

She had lifted her head at the sound of Jasper’s voice, and that had caused her forelock to shift to the side of her face, exposing the gem where her eye should have been. Instead of the large, single eye of most sapphires, her face was surmounted by a smooth, round, and bright green sapphire.
Right now, the gem itself seemed rather featureless, but sometimes, when Green Star’s head was tilted just right, the stone would light up, three intersecting white lines flashing into view, forming a thin six-pointed star.

“I’m just saying,” Jasper went on, in the time-honored manner of people who are about to spout off something offensive, “if she can’t even see, I can’t imagine how she’d be useful.”

“She doesn’t have to be useful, Jasper,” Steven reminded his champion, keeping most of the growl from his voice. “We’re not going to force her to earn her keep or something, like Homeworld. And, besides, Green Star might not even be interested in using her powers! Stars, Pyrope would be a maid if we went with Homeworld roles!”

Jasper rolled her eyes. “And there’d be a lot fewer messes around, for more than one reason.”

“But we’d be out an amazing pilot! Green Star might be better at...at kindergartenering! Or she might like plants! Or...or—”

Coral, who had been giving her diamond and his new gem a little space, standing among the crowd of gems just outside the immediate evaluation zone, chimed in, “Or maybe she’ll want to take over your job and be Champion.”

Jasper did her very best to loom over Coral. The pearl was duly unimpressed.

Elder, who had spent far too many months in Steven’s court with just those two as her only companions, did her best to raise her voice over the coming crossfire. “We can put off the hypotheticals until after we determine what her powers actually are. It shouldn’t take long.”

Connie, standing near to Coral and Jasper, and just as unimpressed as Elder was with the maturity pearl and jasper—or perhaps it was with the maturity of all involved, because she was giving Steven a rather bland look, arms crossed, her foot just seconds from tapping in annoyance—decided to throw in her own thoughts. “It’d be especially quick if you just ask her.”

Steven didn’t even have time to blush. Not when the gem at his side was screaming halfway through Connie’s advice, her head snapping in the woman’s direction, her body jerking away, sliding on the bench and nearly toppling over backward. She was only saved by Heliodor jumping forward, catching the sapphire under her arms.

“What is that?” Green Star Sapphire yelped, pulling her legs up onto the bench, as if she was trying to evade a mouse. “Who’s there?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Steven soothed, scooting closer to Green Star, letting a little soothing hum into his words. “This is Connie. She’s fine, she’s friendly.”

“Friendly?” Green Star whimpered, looking vaguely in Connie’s direction. “Where did she come from?”

“She’s from Earth,” Steven said. “I’ve known her for years. It’s okay.”

“But when was she?”

“She came in with all the rest of us,” Steven said. “She just hasn’t been talking.”

“No,” Green Star said. “She didn’t come in with us. I know every gem that’s come in here, and she didn’t come in with us!”
“She did,” Steven said, adding just a little more hum. He didn’t like using his powers to affect his gems’ emotions, unless it was requested; it felt too much like mind control. But this was a moment of crisis.

And, either way, it didn’t seem to be helping too much. “My Diamond, I know who came in here, and I know she didn’t,” Green Star said. “I...I don’t even know she’s in here now!”

This was beginning to feel too much like some sort of...sci-fi horror scene. Steven’s brain briefly supplied an image of Connie morphing into a carapaced terror, covered in orange slime, but Connie, thankfully, did not do that herself. She just stared at the gem. And then gasped.

“You can’t see me!”

“Shards, I thought you said human intelligence had improved in the last six thousand years,” Jasper muttered.

Connie ignored Jasper, which was perhaps a more effective insult than anything she might have voiced. Instead, she addressed Green Star. “You can see—sense, I mean, everyone else in here?”

“Yes, that’s what I said,” Green Star whined. “I know they’re here.”

Connie nodded, tapping her lips with a finger. “You know where gems are, but I’m not a gem. I’m human.”

Green Star tilted her head sharply. It gave the distinct impression she would be blinking if she had an eyelid. “Human?”

“Right,” Connie muttered. “And you know there are four other sapphires, too....”

Scowling, Green Star corrected the mayor, “There are two-hundred and thirty-seven sapphires, four of which are star sapphires, two in blue, one in orange, and one lavender.”

Steven gaped. As did everyone else.

Except for Connie. Connie grinned. “How many peridots are there?”

“Twenty-eight thousand, two hundred and seven,” Green Star said. Then, after a pause, “two hundred and eight.”

Heliodor swallowed and ran a hand up her cheek. “H...heliodors? How many? No, wait...where is the nearest heliodor, besides me?”

Pointing at the floor of the ship, Green Star answered, “There’s a pair of them nine-thousand parsecs that way.”

Heliodor laughed. A single, sharp bark. “You...you see gems.” After a brief pause, she shook her head. “You know where they are. That’s why you didn’t run into anything or trip when you got on the ship! You were just following us!”

“But you don’t see humans,” Elder mused as she looked about the room. “Green Star Sapphire, the amethyst at your right shoulder. Do you see any gems in her direction and a little down? About fifty parsecs out?”

Tilting her head, Green Star considered. “Well...oh, yes! There’s a pearl, two amethysts.” (Moss Agate and Chalcedony jolted, looking to one another, and then about the room.) She twisted her
lips. “A...ruby and a sapphire, but they’re...overlapped? Kind of...blurry?” A further twist to the lips. “And two concentrations of...I can’t tell. They’re very dim and...they feel bad.”

“What else?” Elder prompted. “That’s a planet, and there’s loads of stuff to pick up.”

Frowning, Green Star considered. “I don’t think so. I just know about those gems.”

“Well, it looks like we’ll still have to do our life-scans before doing injections,” Elder said, tapping at her cheek, “but your power is very interesting. I’m sure there’s lots we can do with that.”

“And in the meantime,” Jasper broke in, “what do we do with her?” She gestured at the sapphire. “How is she going to manage without sight? She might limp along on-ship for the next couple of hours, but once we’re back on Earth, that fusion is going to knock out even the bit of sight she has.”

Steven bit at his lower lip, but before he had too much time to fret—stars, they’d need braille, textured flooring, tactile displays—a gem piped up from the back of the crowd. “Oooh! Me! Me!”

Barely visible through the press of quartz bodies, peeking up every few seconds above their shoulders, came a flash of red fingertips. “Me! I can do it! I’ve done this!”

A few of the quartzes looked down as they were pushed aside, shuffling just enough to accommodate the little gem who was muscling through. And, right at her heels came three other near-identical red gems.

Army popped out of the crowd, staggering forward, arms a-spinwheel. In a display of utmost grace and forethought, she managed to correct enough to fall down on one knee before Steven and Green Star, head bowed down low. “My Diamond,” she panted, ignoring her fellow rubies falling into place beside her, putting up diamond salutes, “I spent one hundred and six years in service to Yellow Diamond’s fifth purple sapphire.”

“And was demoted because you followed so close you tripped on her skirts,” Eyeball muttered, earning a growl from her comrade. “I’m the eldest, here, it should be me serving the sapphire.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Leggy said, sing-song, “who was it that spent the last millennium guarding the pearl farms?”

Army turned a deep, alarming maroon.

“It would be an honor for me to assist Green Star Sapphire,” Leggy went on.

“Yeah,” Doc snapped, “because you’re, twenty years old. Get back to the kindergarten; this is a job for an experienced ruby.”

And, suddenly, the ruby squad fell into indistinguishable squabbling. It was rapid and loud, full of gestures and damn-near devolved into an actual brawl.

Rolling his eyes, Steven looked to the clutch of quartzes on his left, seeking out the authority of Moss Agate (ignoring that, technically, he was just a little higher-ranking than her...) to get the newbies back under control.

Moss Agate was leaning into Chalcedony, whispering in her ear, causing the quartermaster to blush tight circles of white on her cheekbones. Chalcedony gave a playful “oh stop” push at the agate’s chest, but it was more like a brush than a shove, and it just made Moss Agate lean in closer for more intimate whispering.
Steven squeezed his eyes shut, taking a moment. This should have been expected. Emergences brought with them a definite uptick in energy on the ship. Really, it was a surprise the quartzes hadn’t started drawing up a fight bracket to show off to their new crew-member. He probably had just a minute to bring everyone down before he faced the Second Gem Rebellion....

“My Diamond,” Coral spoke up at Steven’s side, “we can finalize arrangements in a few hours. For now, I believe it would be most appropriate to give everyone a chance for a...peaceful gathering, to welcome her to the crew.”

Steven opened his eyes and looked to the pearl, already catching on. His lips twitched, and hers did the same, in return.

“My Diamond, shall I fetch your guitar?”

The crew went silent. The rubies continued squabbling for just a half-second longer, but were shut up as two amethysts reached out and covered a mouth with each of their hands, drawing the rubies back to the crowd. Even Jasper was at strictest attention, her cocky demeanor gone in a fervor of hope.

Steven acted as if he was considering the suggestion. For a good fifteen seconds, the crew watched their diamond. You could almost hear the hum of the ship’s engines.

“An excellent idea, Coral,” Steven said. “Pyrope,” he called out to the mics, “automate our route and bring your nav-tab down here. Spinel, ship-wide announcement. All gems, wrap up your duties and come to the training room for some music.”

A cheer from every gem nearly shattered the wall-spanning window. A little stampede of quartzes ran out into the halls, some actually spinning out the doors. Coral, wisely, waited a second for the chaos to disperse before she also skittered off to Steven’s room.

Connie watched them go. “Wow. Did your playing really get that good?”

Steven sighed indulgently. “If only. I mean,” he shrugged, trying not to appear too cocky, and failing rather badly, “I’m good, yes. There was a lot of free time for practice in the last few years. But it’s not the guitar. It’s the singing.”

“Singing?” Connie asked, head tilted. “Wait...this is that thing from the video Peridot sent, isn’t it?”

“Yes!” Steven chirruped, standing and offering a hand to Green Star, helping her rise. “Nothing better for a shipful of hyperactive gems. Green Star, would you like to sit with Jasper, my Champion? She’d be too...huffy to assist once we’re on Earth, but I’m sure she would be glad to be in your company for the flight there.” And, if she didn’t act like it, Steven wasn’t above giving the warrior a little talking-to.

“Oh!” Green Star pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to—poorly—hide a giggle, and she nodded. “Yes, My Diamond.” For the first time, she smiled, and her head tilted just so, revealing the star
pattern on her gem in a brief flash. Suddenly, she didn’t seem so blank.

“Good. And now, I believe the setup crew should be back—”

Steven was interrupted by a rapidly approaching rumble. Turning towards the doorway, the source was revealed: the returning quartzes rushed through the doors, though Steven could only tell it was the quartzes based on how large the shapes were. The gems themselves were almost completely obscured by skads of large, many-colored, and dangerously fluffy pillows.

Quilted, crochet, embroidered, tie-dye, puff-ball, and even those entrancing flip-sequin types. There must have been a storage room and several crafting trunks on-ship to account for them all, and the quartzes tossed them down haphazardly before dashing off again for a second load. And a third. With the fourth and final load—the floor of the training room completely lost in fabric and fluff—gems started trickling in and remaining.

It was... bizarre. They were whispering. Gems, in general, were a bombastic sort, being made of, for the most part, of light and emotions. Even Pearl, who liked to think herself refined and calm, was prone to her own rants and bursts of energy. To have such a large crowd and only hear murmurings—even from the clustering quartzes—reminded Steven of the one time he had attended the symphony with Connie’s family.

The gems rooted about in the pillows, creating little piles here and there, upon which cliques snuggled in. In the center of the room, the biggest and best pillows were piled. Up the center-most mountain, Steven climbed, the stuffing compacting down under his weight until he was just three extra feet above the floor. He wiggled and bounced until he was gently cradled in a ton of fluff.

Mirroring her diamond, Jasper ascended the nearest pillow, which seemed more an enormous beanbag. She circled, almost dog-like, shoving stuffing into place until she had formed the perfect divot. She flopped onto her side, knees drawn up to create a little cup of her abdomen. Jasper pulled stuffing under her chest until she could sit with her upper half slightly elevated, keeping an eye on proceedings, and particularly keeping an eye on the new sapphire, who took a place beside the mammoth quartz, reclining back into her soft stomach.

Connie watched, doing her best to hide a giggle, as the rubies noticed the prime real estate beside Green Star, just at the inviting plane of Jasper’s chest. Space enough for a single, lucky gem. The rubies looked to one-another, teeth bared, and began to edge towards this seat of honor.

Over their heads came a flash of refracted light; a billion stars through gossamer wings of water. Laz dropped a final armful of pillows upon the rubies with a snide “bombs away!” Then she dissipated her wings, letting the ship’s gravity-systems pull her down, plopping half onto a pillow, and half onto Jasper’s chest.

“Oof!” Jasper jolted and glowered at the blue gem sprawled across her, who looked upon the quartz with a little cat-mouthed grin.

“Rude,” Jasper growled.

“You’d know,” Laz said, reaching up to boop Jasper’s gem-nose.

Connie awaited carnage at the impertinence, but Jasper merely rolled her eyes, and Laz flipped about to lay back-to-chest with the Champion, devoting her attention to the coming performance.

Right about then, Coral returned, carrying Steven’s guitar with gentle reverence. She paused before Steven’s downy throne, inclining her head in the most casual of obsciences before handing the
precious instrument up to her diamond.

“Thank you, Coral,” Steven said. “Now, go enjoy yourself, will you?”

Coral preened, the airy layers of her dress fluffing up in her excitement. “Yes, My Diamond,” she sang, and twirled about, dancing back to the next-nearest pillow, taking a little jump and alighting, as if weightless, beside Jasper’s head. She pushed Jasper’s hair aside and, from her gem, summoned a long piece of light-pink fabric, upon which she began to embroider in tiny, swift stitches.

The settling-down went quickly, after that. The quartzes arrayed themselves about Jasper, and the rubies, realizing that they were being pushed further and further from their idol, jostled their way to a place...at Jasper’s butt. Connie wasn’t altogether sure if they were disappointed in their positions.

Finally, in little groups, the rest of the crew lay down. A pile of peridots next to the amethysts, with Earth’s 8XM and 5XG forming the bridge between. The feldspars went back-to-back near a wall, still typing on their workstations. Moss Agate—sitting up straight, so prim and proper—beside Chalcedony, their hands resting next to each other, nearly but not quite touching.

Connie moved back from the crowd, finding a place against the room-wide window, a pillow at her back and another on her lap. She waited to see this strange ritual, this... incantation, perhaps, commence.

A final straggler came in, skittering between piles of gems, muttering apologies for her delay. Pyrope made for her diamond, but halfway across the room, stumbled as a gem upon the floor stretched, their leg rising up right as Pyrope passed over, catching the navigator at the ankle. Pyrope yelped, flipping over an amethyst and landing with a soft oof in one of the quartz collectives. After a moment, she popped back up, glaring at her obstacle from over the defensive wall of quartz butt.

“Oh,” Spinel yawned, bringing her hand back to pat her lips. “Sorry,” she lied.

Pyrope hissed, preparing to fight, but startled as the tablet was plucked from her hand by Coral’s thin fingers, the pearl passing it along to her diamond, who looked down on the quarrelsome pair with a raised brow.

“Do you need some time, or can I begin playing?” Steven asked.

Pyrope shook her head and vaulted over the quartz cluster, plopping down next to Spinel. Folding her hands in her lap, she sat up straight. She was a good gem! Not like some other gems she wouldn’t be so gauche as to name!

Steven rolled his eyes, landing them on Connie, who was grinning at the drama. No help from her, but he really didn’t need much help, at this moment. All Steven needed to do...was sing.

He started with a simple, extended E-natural, his guitar’s first string vibrating out an almost perfectly matching note. A little adjustment on the fret and the instrument harmonized, and Steven swiftly moved through the other five strings. A, D, G, B, E, his voice giving the note first, the string matching after minor tweaking each time, until he gave a final strum, confirming all was perfect.

It took perhaps thirty seconds, but in that time, the room was settled over with...peace. Peace, with the mildest of anticipation.

Steven cleared his throat.
Connie leaned forward.

The gems held their breath.

Steven grinned. “Oooooooh he’s a frozen treat with all new taste!”

Laz almost screeched, leaning forward onto her hands and knees, wings flashing into being on her back, fluttering in her excitement. “Cause he came to this planet from outer space!”

Ignoring the groans from around the training room, Steven continued, more laughing than singing, “A refugee of an interstellar war!”

And Laz chimed back, “But now he's at your local grocery store!”

“Cookie Cat!” Steven yelled.

“He's a pet for your tummy!” Laz cheered.

“Cookie Cat!”

“He's super duper yummy!”

“Cookie Cat!”

“He left his family behind!”

And, together, Steven and Laz sang out, “Cookie Caaaaaat!”

Huffing, Jasper reached out, pulling at Laz’s shoulder so she fell back to her place against the Champion’s chest. “Cute,” she muttered. “Really. But maybe you can show the new sapphire some real singing, My Diamond? ” The last was said with an eye-roll and the snidest tone ever achieved by gem-kind.

Laughing, Steven got back to strumming his guitar. “Okay, okay, Jasper. Don’t lose your luster, it was just for fun. Now...let’s see...how about...” And Steven began to sing a series of wavering notes, up and down the scale, nothing Connie found particularly familiar, but the beauty of the man’s voice was undeniable.

As was its power. Where gems had once sat in rigid anticipation, it seemed like they...melted. Or like the air had been let out of them. They started to slouch, and then sag. Soon, even the prim Moss Agate gave into the serenade, laying down on her pillows, letting her eyelids fall.

Steven changed tunes, into something with actual words. It took Connie several lines to recognize the credits theme from the second Dogcopter movie. And, despite this song not being infused with the same power, the crew remained in their deep tranquility. And they went even further down with the next word-less, strange song of the Diamond. With this one, even Jasper let her eyes close entirely, and Connie was sure she heard purring from a few spots in the training room.

Steven went through several more songs, each pulling the gems down, down, until, but for his voice and a few snores, the room had gone quiet. Coral had made a nest in Jasper’s hair, pulling a section up over her legs, like a blanket. Jasper’s arm wrapped about Laz’s waist. Chalcedony rested her head on Moss Agate’s chest. Spindel and Pyrope drooled on each-other.

Steven stopped his playing, but he still produced a soft, strange hum. Setting his guitar aside, the diamond slid down from his pillow-perch, pausing as his feet tapped onto the floor, checking to see
Nothing. Turning a relieved sigh into another power-laden hum, Steven threaded his way through the unconscious tangles of gems, until he was halfway free. Then, with a little floating jump, he cleared the rest, alighting before Connie, who looked up at him with wide, astonished eyes.

Connie gestured Steven down to sit next to her, to which he obliged. Leaning in, she whispered almost directly in his ear, “It’s like they’re drugged.”

“I know,” Steven said, but a bit louder, having a better handle on how much disturbance his crew could accept. “I’ve got to be careful if I start humming around the crew. One time, I wasn’t paying attention, and Sharky passed out right in the middle of switching out the biome’s water filter. Fell right in the tank, and that didn’t even wake her up.”

“Good thing gems don’t need to breathe,” Connie giggled.

“Maybe,” Steven said, “but she certainly needed to bathe after that. She fell into the intake. I think she got algae under her gem.”

The pair shared a moment of stifled laughter, made worse as Sharky herself emitted a thunderous snore before being kicked in the side by one of her fellow quartzes, making her roll over and go quiet again.

Settling down from laughter to a contented sigh, Connie looked out on the helpless gems.

Steven also too in his crew, letting out a content sigh. It was always such a treat when they had the time to relax together. There was always so much to do on the Blade. Maintaining the biome, sending out navigation drones, evaluating planets, and the sort of continuous repairs that were necessary when you were hurtling through space at faster than the speed of light. He really should make a greater effort to carve out time for this, but it felt like his life nowadays was a series of little crises.

"I guess," Connie ventured, "you answered my big question."

Steven looked to the human woman, brow rising. "You didn't ask a question."

Connie sighed, reaching up to brush a short length of black hair behind an ear. "But I had one. I've had one ever since you left."

The man tilted his head in query. Stars knew he’d had a million questions for her since he'd gone to Homeworld. And the scenarios in which he'd asked some of them had grown more grandiose over the years. String quartets and trails of rose petals had begun to feature prominently....

"I wondered...was it worth it?" Connie turned to look at Steven. "Was leaving us behind, to go with the Diamonds, worth it? But..." Connie gestured at the dozing crew. "It looks like it was."

"Connie— " Steven began, but was cut off.

"I know, I know, it's not that simple. But look at what you've made." She smiled upon the crew. "They're wonderful."

Steven nodded. “They are. And I’m so proud to have them. And if I was given a chance to do it again, and I knew the only way to meet them all was if I did things exactly the same, that’s what I’d do.”
Connie barely flinched at Steven's words, but so much of the light went out of her eyes.

"But if there was any way they could still be here and I got to come home, even just once, no matter what sacrifices I had to make, I'd do it. In half a heartbeat. I spent the last eighteen years," he said, voice falling down to a whisper as he reached out to cup a large hand to Connie's cheek, "just imagining coming back."

Steven almost finished his declaration there. But it was too hard to keep things in. So he added, voice gone even softer, "To you."

There was the slightest sheen in Connie's eyes, but she maintained remarkable self-control. Her voice didn't even crack as she accused, "You should have come back sooner, Steven."

The accusation—well-founded as it was—made him flinch. "I...." He nodded, accepting the rebuke. "You're right. There are a lot of things I wish I'd done."

Connie huffed. "Oh? Like?"

"That last night, before I left, when we went to the beach?" Steven reminded her, brushing a thumb along Connie's cheekbone. "I wish I'd kissed you."

In an instant, Connie's face went bright red. "I-I-I," she tried, voice breaking. She coughed, as much to clear her throat as to give herself an excuse to lean back and escape Steven’s touch. She wasn’t meeting his eyes, anymore, and the flush showed no sign of slowing its expansion. She took in a short, sharp breath before giving words and composure another go. "I wanted you to. So why didn't you?"

It was Steven's turn to blush, now. He'd begun to let himself dwell inside this moment like it was one of his many fantasies over the last two decades. Having Connie respond reminded him that she was really here, and that he had no way of really knowing how this moment would end. "I... well...."

Connie waited. She raised a brow. "Well?" she teased, Steven’s discomforting giving back a little of her confidence.

"I...you know!" Steven squeaked, flailing his arms.

Connie drawled, "I really don't."

"It...I...." Steven lowered his head and mumbled. "I thought it would be schmaltzy."

It took Connie a few seconds to recognize the last as an actual word. "Schmaltzy?" she repeated, mystified.

"You know," Steven grumbled, "like when the last Unfamiliar Familiar book came out, and you were making fun of me for liking the wedding...."

The memory came rushing back. Connie laughed. "Steven! I wasn't making fun of you! If anything, I was making fun of Filia Carter."

"Yeah, but you still didn't like how she wrote it, and I just thought...." He sighed. "It was like something you’d read in a bad book. A boy leaves his family behind and gives his childhood best friend a kiss and promises to, I don't know, be true to her or something." Steven wrinkled his nose, as if at a bad smell. "Schmaltzy."
Connie pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, but had no luck in hiding her giggles. "Wow, Steven, when you put it that way, it does sound schmaltzy."

Steven groaned. "Exactly." Oh, how he’d second-guessed himself these last eighteen years, and oh, how disappointed he was to find his instincts had been correct.

"But, well," Connie ventured, tilting her head to the side as she considered things. "It’s been eighteen years. I have grown up a bit. My literary horizons have expanded."

Perplexed, Steven looked upon the woman, hoping she would explain why her reading material mattered.

There was still...a little of that color in Connie’s cheeks. The woman expanded on her thoughts, as casual as she could manage. "I mean, I think I can handle a little schmaltz."

Steven blinked, further perplexed by such an odd statement.

Connie sat beside Steven. Smiling. Waiting.

Understanding came as a punch to the chest, sending his entire midsection into disarray. Steven had to swallow down a new, enormous lump in his throat. A shiver flashed down his spine. The wriggling in his stomach was particularly alarming. The man tried to even out his breathing, but his lungs were having nothing of it. He would just have to feel like this, until he found some way to make the feelings change.

Steven shifted closer to Connie, until the sides of their thighs pressed together. For some moments, Steven was too scared to look her directly in her face, but, upon realizing this meant his gaze was centered precisely on Connie’s chest, he forced his eyes to snap up and meet hers.

She waited.

Connie waited.

And he couldn’t. Not any more.

Reaching out, Steven cupped his hand at the back of Connie’s head, pulling her to him as he leaned in, eyes closing.

He was clumsy, but Connie was not. She knew how to fit with another person; how to tilt her head, keeping their noses from bumping, allowing her lips to fall in place with Steven’s.

And... they were kissing. Coming together, so close that Steven could feel that Connie was shaking, just like him. But it must not have been from any kind of second thoughts, because Connie guided him. Showed him, with her own gentle movements, how to embrace and explore. Coaxed his mouth open and brought him down, deeper, tasting her, until his pulse pounded in his ears, his chest, lower.

It was only the small thought in the back of his mind, the reminder that they were surrounded by other gems, that made Steven stop...quite some time later, of course.

Steven reached out, taking Connie’s hand. He was ready, so ready, to whisper to her and ask her to come along with him, to his room, where a full galaxy of stars could shine upon her skin before he eclipsed it with his own.

Connie yawned. In his face.
Steven didn't even have time for his emotional high to crash into despair. Connie reached out, clasping one of Steven’s shoulders, her head falling heavy on the man’s collarbone.

"No, no," Connie whined, “I'm fine, I'm—" But she was yawning again, mouth wide, like a snake preparing to devour an entire coop's worth of hens.

"You're exhausted," Steven laughed, relieved at the realization. At least he wasn't so bad at kissing that he put her to sleep! "When was the last time you got a proper night's rest?"

"When was the last time you got a proper night's rest?" Connie sulked, nuzzling into Steven's chest. It seemed like she was trying to accomplish something with the movement, but was too clumsy to get whatever it was across.

"Irrelevant," Steven answered. "Come on." Stealing the pillow from Connie's lap, he lay it on his lap, leaning back against the window. "Settle down. We've got some time until planet-fall. You can rest up for the big night."

"You're not my mom," Connie grumbled, but she was tumbling down, snuggling into Steven's side, eyes already closed in defeat.

"Shh," Steven ordered, "no grumping. Only dreams, now."

Connie let out one last, weak grumble, but with her next breath, her body was unwinding. Another breath again, and she was gone.

Steven smiled down on the woman. As dead-asleep as any lullabied gem.

Or most of them. From near the center of the room, there came a weak voice. "My Diamond?"

Steven looked up.

Coral sat amidst her nest in Jasper's hair. Her eyes looked so heavy; she'd obviously fought out of sleep. She looked upon her diamond. Then, just a degree down, to the woman sleeping at Steven's side. “Don’t—”

"I've got this," Steven said, voice low, with a little sonorous hum on the underside. "Go back to sleep, Coral."

"But— " Coral began, but already she wobbled, the strength leaving her. She settled back, soft as a leaf on the wind, and let out a long sigh.

Steven sat, surrounded by his crew, with his best friend nestled against his side, all breathing softly in deep sleep. He smiled, brushing his thumb along Connie’s arm. Settling into his own peace, Steven let out a song, soft and low, free of a diamond’s gift, but filled with something he was sure was just as powerful.

“All of my affections...I give them all to you. Maybe by next summer...we won't have changed our tunes....”

Chapter End Notes

Let me tell you, I'm excited for you all to yell at me for ending a chapter like this.
Chapter 12 preview song: "Waving Through a Window" from Dear Evan Hansen
Before I lead with the worst of me

Chapter Notes

Chapter 11 theme songs:
"Waving Through a Window" from Dear Evan Hansen
"History Has Its Eyes on You" from Hamilton
"While My Guitar Gently Weeps" by Regina Spektor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Whatever she's paying you, it's not worth it."

Connie frowned, drifted on the last edges of sleep. She'd been fighting consciousness for some time now, tucked in one of those continuous dreams that incorporate any interruption from the waking world into its own strange storyline. Many hushed voices had become the whispering of wind, but there was something about this voice...a nearness, a tactile quality. And a tension that had the woman's well-trained battle instincts firing up.

Firing up too late. Behind closed eyelids, a bright flash of light became the reddened spark of a fire, and Connie awoke.

To a phone pointed at her face.

On instinct, Connie's right hand had gone to her left hip, but instead of meeting the hardness of a sword's grip, she punched soft flesh.

"Oof! Hey!" Steven protested, pushing Connie's offending hand aside to rub his distressed tummy. "Don't punish me! I tried to stop them."

"Stop them?" Connie repeated, squinting at the two green gems before her, who had already lost interest in the tableau of the human woman and their diamond. Having spent so many years with Pearl, a gem who had allowed herself to adopt such human habits as "cell phone ownership," it took Connie some moments to even realize how strange it was that the gems were using such an archaic human device.

And, when she did process the oddity, it was more due to the familiarity of the device itself. "Why do you have Sadie's ph—"

Connie stopped mid-sentence.

"No, " she hissed.

"Ye-eeeees!" rang out from the phone. Sadie's face beamed through a video call. "Beautiful, you two; I told you the left was her good side." She looked away from the camera for a moment, clicking at a keyboard, punching down on a final key with a sort of triumph. "And you are all set with tickets to TrekCon. A pleasure doing business with you."

The peridots Sol and Swift cheered and exchanged giddy high-fives. "To boldly go where no gem has gone before!"
"YOU!" Connie snarled, leaping to her feet and rushing at the kindergarteners.

Joy forgotten in the face of a force more powerful and destructive than their own diamond, the peridots screeched and flung their arms about one-another, braced for the sweet embrace of death.

Connie snatched the phone from Swift's hand and continued lashing out at the smug face of her secretary. "Blackmail? More blackmail?"

"Mhmmm!" Sadie chirped. She bounced in her office chair, entirely too perky for the early hour. For any hour, really. "You need to see this picture, Connie; you two are so cute." She sighed. "Really, it's tempting to send it out without even bothering about demands. It really deserves to be seen."

"Look," Connie hissed, dragging a hand through her short hair, which stuck out in every conceivable direction after a night of sleep, "Sadie, I know you enjoy your little games, but I think you have an overinflated notion of how much interest the local news has in me. Me sleeping with —"

"Next to someone isn't a big thing!"

"The news?" Sadie laughed. "Oh, yeah. You've given them way more shocking stories than this. No, I got this for your mother."

In the eighteen years since Steven had left the planet, cell phone hardware had advanced enough that shattered screens were a problem of the past. In Connie's spasmodically clenching hand, however, it nearly became a problem of Sadie's present.

"You wouldn't," Connie hissed. "You...you can't keep doing this!"

"I mean, probably not," Sadie agreed, shrugging. "You two keep cavorting like this and I'm sure she'll work it out on her own."

"We were not—"

"Tagliani's is delivering a proper meal to your office in an hour, Madame Mayor," Sadie breezed, clicking away at her keyboard once more. "Eat it all, will you? I'm not having you pass out halfway through Beach-a-Palooza because you were 'too busy' to eat." Sadie held her hands up to quote at the air, her eyes rolling magnificently. "And I'd advise you hurry back. Get a shower and some fresh clothes, before the delivery person arrives, so they don't see you looking like you had a wild time with the aliens last night."

Connie was ready to snap a threat back, but it was far too late. Sadie had flicked her hand at the camera, the gesture ending the call, the phone's screen flashing back to the most recent app: recent photos, where Beach City's mayor and Earth's diamond snuggled up under a lovely pastel sparkle filter.

"I hate you!" Connie screeched at the innocent cell phone. It did little to make her feel better.

Steven looked on and chuckled. There was something very satisfying about watching Connie be outmaneuvered. She had spent quite a lot of the time since he'd returned guiding events, or adapting instantaneously to his own machinations, forcing him to flounder through almost every interaction. Stars, even the kiss was more her idea than—

...the kiss.

Steven's hand drifted to his lips. It had been hours, but he swore there was a tingle there, still. A faint taste.
"Shit," Connie muttered, pocketing the phone. "Steven, can I call in that rain check on Lion jumping me home? Maybe the news doesn't care, but it really wouldn't look great if I had to do the UFO Walk of Shame."

Steven, addled, looked at Connie and murmured "What are we?"

Connie frowned. "Huh?"

"Nothing," Steven replied on pure instinct. It took him some moments to sync up with the actual conversation. "Oh, right. Yeah. Lion, jump, good idea. I'll ask Jasper to find him."

"Jasper?" Connie repeated, but her puzzlement suddenly faded. Wincing, the mayor leaned against the opaque wall—which had before been the transparent window looking out upon space, but which had filled in for privacy upon landing.

"Ah ah ah, dead leg, dead leg!" Connie whined, thumping the ball of a fist on her right leg. "Wake up!" Steven had done his best to keep the woman comfortable throughout the flight back—and he was a supremely comfortable companion to snuggle up against, with his liberal padding—but it seemed there was no escaping the consequences of sleeping sitting up.

"She's a lot better at finding him than I am," Steven explained, rising to stand beside Connie, holding out an arm to offer stability. "It won't take her long." And, if it didn't take long, and Connie had the time....

"Uh, hey," Steven ventured, the back of his neck burning. "W-would you like to...to, uh...um...." The back of his neck burned, all the way up to his ears. Come back to my room? He thought. The words weren't complicated, but stars, he couldn't force them out. Please come back to my room, he thought again, willing his lips and tongue to comply.

Then, in a burst of inspiration, Steven realized, even if he couldn't speak, he could still communicate with lips and tongue!

Leaning over, Steven closed in on Connie, heart pounding, every overwrought line from every romance novel he'd ever read flashing through his mind.

Connie took a large, crashing step forward onto her numb leg, staggering off just out of Steven's reach. "Yee!" she keened at the fading buzz in her bones. "Sssss...yeah, go ahead and have Jasper find him; I've got a thousand things to do if I'm going to feel ready for tonight. I really don't have time to mess around."

Steven paused in his thwarted approach, not quite understanding where his intended had gone. He'd only just managed to recover and stand up straight, like a semi-normal person, rather than a total goober, when Connie turned back to him, awaiting confirmation of her leonine rideshare.

"Uh...you got it!" Steven shot Connie a double thumbs-up, and instantly wanted to smack himself in the face. Why not just add some finger guns while he was at it?!

He had to get away. There was no recovery from being himself. So, without even a wave or a "see you later," Steven fled the room, in quest of either quartz or feline.

He left so fast, Steven didn't even notice Connie appreciatively watching him go. Nor the hand that rose to touch her lips. She couldn't suppress a little smile. And, once she was sure Steven was well away, down the halls, Connie Maheshwaran couldn't stop herself from bouncing in joy.
Steven was fairly confident he knew where to find Jasper; if her Diamond was so lately kept from ship duties by a snoozing politician, it was Jasper's duty as his second to take the helm. Thus, he was in no way surprised to find her on the bridge, in her outsized chair, conferring with Elder.

Steven was a bit more surprised, though pleased, to find Lion at Jasper's left, laying on his back in Steven's own chair, doing his best to appear like he was perfectly comfortable, despite the armrest digging into his spine.

"Oh, Lion!" Steven said, pausing in the doorway. "I thought you'd still be out terrorizing birds."

Jasper looked away from the tablet she had been studying with Elder, and grunted. "He took a break to bring his spoils home," she growled, holding up a still-wiggling lizard's tail.

"Aw!" Steven beamed. "He brought you a gift!"

"He shouldn't have," Jasper drawled. "Especially when it gives Spinel a panic attack."

Steven shifted his attention to the nav-and-coms station, when the dark-blue gem sat, head on her desk, face hidden in the cradle of her arms. Her shoulders trembled. Beside her, Pyrope watched, red eyes wide, a hand held half outstretched towards her crewmate.

"Oh," Steven said. "Oh, no, Spinel, it's fine. Lizards can detach their tails to get out of danger. It escaped!"

"Really?" Spinel mewled, lifting her head (Pyrope slapped her hand back down on her workstation, sending a random array of characters across the screen). A string of snot stretched from the gem's nose down to her desk. It glistened prettily.

Sprawled on the command chair, Lion groaned. And burped.

"Oh yeah," Steven lied.

He made a mental note to never tell Spinel what was on yesterday's pizza.

"Lion," he said, walking across the room, stooping beside the command chair so he could give Lion a good scratch behind the ears, "would you go gave Connie a jump home, please? I'll buy you a dozen deep-fried Lion Lickers tonight."

Looking down his muzzle at Steven, Lion blinked slowly. Stretching out, he brushed a whiskery kiss to Steven's nose.

"Haha!" Steven rubbed at his tingling face. "Thanks, bud," he said as the big cat flopped out of the chair and ambled out into the hall.

"I'd say you were going to run out of cash," Jasper said, rolling her eyes, "but I don't think even Laz could run through an entire asteroid of gold."

"Don't test me," Laz chimed from where she worked on one of the wall screens.

"No intentions," Steven shot back. "But, good reminder, Jasper. Chalcedony, we need some funds for tonight, and I don't think the ticket booths can convert from gold. Could you hit up some pawn shops and cash in?"
"Oh, sure," Chalcedony said. "Take the skipper?"

"Definitely. Be careful parking, though. I have no idea how we'd get a flying car out of impound."

Chalcedony shrugged. "I mean, fly it, probably?"

"Hah." Steven laughed hollowly. "Lets not have an intergalactic incident. How about you just don't park illegally?"

Saluting in agreement, Chalcedony left to go about her important pawn-store business.

"It sounds like this lot will be attending tonight's festivities, then?" Moss Agate asked. She stood with crossed arms, trying to appear stern, but her eyes glinted. Showing off her quartzes was one of an agate's greatest joys.

"Yes," Steven confirmed, inspiring cheers from all around the bridge. Holding his hands out, he waved the clamor down. "But we've got to follow some ground rules, so listen up!"

Dutifully, the bridge settled. Those who could easily dismiss their work did, over a dozen screens flickering out of view.

"First thing: I'm really sorry, but for the sake of our hosts, no fusing at Beach-a-Palooza."

The cry of outrage was immediate. An amethyst reached out to steady her wobbling agate.

"That's at the party," Steven called out above the din. "You can arrive already fused if your fusion is shorter than me and you can mostly pass as human. We are guests tonight, and guests don't scare off the customers! I know, I know, some of you will have a hard time fathoming going four whole hours without fusing—"

There was laughter from all about, and a few murmurs from the crew. Mossy responded to the accusation with an indignant sniff, which might have actually been an effort to hold back tears.

"But," Steven continued, "I'm sure you all can plan ahead or abstain, for the sake of the humans. Remember, they can be rather delicate."

Moaning, grumbling, but general calls of assent and "Yes, My Diamond."

"And, similarly, if anyone wants to fight or show off weapons or such, please do so by the Temple, not near the boardwalk."

"So just don't scare the humans?" Laz supplied.

"Exactly! And if anyone here hasn't watched the video I made on how money works, today is the day! There's plenty of food and games and cool stuff to buy, but the important word is 'buy.' I really don't want to have to hire a lawyer to get you off on shoplifting charges."

"What's shoplifting?" A jasper inquired of an amethyst, who shrugged in return.

"Watch. The. Video." Steven said in his most commanding, but unpowered voice.

"Yes, My Diamond," came back in chorus.

"And one last thing. Hush." Steven turned to the peridot workstation, addressing their youngest member.
Hush hunched down, trying to disappear amidst her fellow kindergarteners. She said nothing. Peridots, generally, could be said to be prone to dramatics, but Hush's energy had always fallen more inwards, becoming a silent anxiety.

"That was excellent work," Steven said, beaming upon the gem. "If you hadn't noticed the anomalies, we wouldn't have made it to Green Star Sapphire for another hour, at least, and she'd have been alone when she emerged."

"I—um—I—nothing...." Hush trailed off, looking down at her tangling tendril fingers.

Steven was about to reassure her that of course it was something, but was preempted by a voice which was nearly as gentle as Hush's, but which carried through the bridge far better. A voice that was still unfamiliar, but comforting to the diamond, just like all his other gems.

"Thank you," Green Star said. She sat with some of the quartz geode, and wasn't looking in quite the right direction for her address. She had a tight grip on one of the amethyst's wrists, anchoring her through lifelong darkness. It seemed the interference of Garnet's own sight had taken effect. "I'm glad I wasn't alone. That would have been...terrifying."

"Oh. Uh. Welcome," Hush managed, looking as if she wished to return to the boulder from whence she came.

"Could I possibly go to this 'Beach-a-Palooza' with you?" Green star went on, surprising quite a lot of the bridge. The rubies especially. But not, Steven noted, the quartzes that had taken the new gem in, who grinned as they looked between the two little gems. "It's only that, with another sapphire nearby, I only know if there are gems very close to me, and I understand that there will be many organic lifeforms there which I would not be able to sense, regardless. And I have been told by many on the crew that you are a very...calm companion."

That was a rather...generous description, Steven thought. He'd always considered Hush to be subdued, even reticent, not merely 'calm.' But, compared to the rubies, who were, to a one, glaring at Hush, the metal below their feet glowing red, 'calm' was surely a compliment.

Hush stuttered some more, before replying with a querulous "S-sure."

"I thank you again," Green Star said, dropping a brief curtsy to the peridot.

The rubies gasped at this servility from a sapphire. Steven made a mental note to talk to his adopted gems about...stars, about equality and courtesy and not being super overbearing and creepy. Again.

But later. He needed a break just as much as everyone else. "Alright, now that that is settled, I need everyone to wrap up your duties and automate everything you can. We're taking a weekend off."

The cheers from the crew drowned out Army's confused "What's a weekend?"

He'd get into that later. He'd do a lot later. For now, Steven was just ready to rest....

"Steven," Elder said, coming up to the man, flipping through her projected workscreen, "I'd really like to go over the results of the Prime and Beta survey before clocking out. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes, and I could get it out of my head before this party. Otherwise, it will be bouncing around in there nonstop."

The urge to whine was incredible. He resisted. "Yeah," Steven acquiesced. "Fine, let me just take a look—"
"Also," Jasper broke in, making Steven groan. She was grinning. She knew what she was doing. And it made her very, very happy. "Coral needs to fit your clothes for the night."

Steven took a deep breath. "Anyone else?"

Sheepishly, Spinel raised a hand.

"Oh no," Steven whimpered. "Which one?"

"Blue Diamond, My Diamond."

"Love it," Steven lied. "Elder, if you'll come with me, we can go over the survey while I'm being fitted. Spinel, message Blue's pearl, say I'll call when...when I'm emotionally prepared."

Spinel reeled. "M-My Diamond!?" She looked to her workstation, imagining having to relay that message.

"An hour," Steven corrected. "I'll call in about an hour. Elder, shall we?"

"Don't fidget, My Diamond," Coral ordered. "These needles are sharp."

Steven knew that all too well. More than a few of Coral's early designs had small, unplanned bits of embroidery to hide spots of blood. It had taken some hours to calm her down, the first time it happened. Jasper had been no help in the matter, well into a rage at the pearl that dared to harm her diamond. Hypocritical, given the bruises and cuts Jasper herself had caused during their sparring sessions.

By now, Steven had learned to keep statue-still while Coral did her work. Luckily, this fitting seemed just to be for slacks, so Steven looked over the tablet which Elder had handed over.

"It's a bit had to make accurate projections, as this is the first gem colony which has been left alone for any significant period of time, but I think these readings show great promise." Elder expanded her own projected screen, highlighting a few numbers. Those numbers flew to the side as a three-dimensional map of the Prime Kindergarten displayed.

"This is the area of effect around Prime at the end of the Rebellion. 7,325 square kilometers of neutralised space, with another 1,245 square kilometers of a desertified perimeter. Beta," and she brought up another map alongside Prime, "produced only half of what Prime did, but it was already located within a sizeable desert. Its neutralized Zone was 28,343 square kilometers, and we were unable to distinguish what area beyond that was natural desert and what may have been caused by the injectors."

Steven hissed at the numbers. He knew the damage caused by Pink Diamond's Colony had been extensive—enough for the human inhabitants of the region to attempt to drive gem kind out, sparking the fist salvos of the war for Earth—but hard numbers were always so...undeniable. And, yet, at the same time, unfathomable. "We really did a number on this planet...."

"Actually, all things considered, the effect is almost negligible," Elder corrected. "Pink Diamond's colonization efforts went quite slowly, as one might expect from someone undertaking such a large campaign as their first project. Even including all the smaller kindergartens and experimental injections across the planet, less than a thousandth of one percent of the planet's surface was affected." Elder considered the maps, thin fingers tapping at her hips in a sinuous wave.

"Compared to Yellow's colonies, Pink's work campaign absolutely glacial. Yellow would have been over a third done with the planet's colonization by the time the Rebellion began. The humans
probably would have been wiped out before a full generation had passed."

Steven shuddered. He'd seen Yellow's efficiency at work on new colonies. If he hadn't been the one to fight back against the Diamonds, the one to sing out and thus reclaim this planet, everything outside his ship would now be dead rock and gem machines. "Then let's be glad Pink was so slow. And even then, she did the damage. What do things look like, now?"

"Well, I didn't bother bringing up maps of the small test sites," Elder said, grinning, "because every sign of them is gone." Little green-toned images of jungles, fields, and even a city flashed through the display. "In fact, I only came across one injector, down in the antarctic ice. All the others seem to have been scavenged for parts by nearby human populations. And even the antarctic one has been repurposed!"

A video popped up of a vast, plain landscape. Though the video was tinged green, the brightness of the ground—and, of course, Elders' description—made it obvious that the majority of the view was bright white snow. In the middle of the screen was a half-buried, broken injector, bulbous top cracked open and nesting atop a jagged boulder, the other end disappearing into a snowdrift.

Little creatures waddled up to boulder in a disorderly mass, bumping into one-another, knocking more than a few back down to the had-packed snow below. There was a traffic-jam up top, which seemed less due to the carrying capacity of the path, and more from the nerves of those penguins who had reached the top.

Suddenly, one of the penguins overcame its fear and lunged belly-down into the top of the injector, disappearing within.

Seconds later, there was a puff of powder from the drifts and the penguin reappeared from within the hollow injector, flapping its stubby wings and shaking its head to dislodge a dusting of snow.

"Oh em gee," Steven cooed, "that's so cute!"

"So cute," Elder agreed.

From her spot pinning the hem of one pant leg, Coral tsked. "Tender-heart," she muttered.

"But Coral, look at them!" Steven whined, gesturing at the video.

Coral complied in time to see a gray, down-covered chick approach the injector and tumble over sideways into the tube, appearing on the other end with its entire body turned white with snow.

Coral rolled her eyes and got back to pinning. "Organics," she muttered, manifesting a dozen pins between her lips.

"Okay, back to the data," Elder said, waving to dismiss the video, ignoring her Diamond's disappointed cry. "As for the two main kindergartens, the damage has also been reduced there. At Prime, the desertified perimeter is only about a kilometer thick all around, which is a huge reclamation. Within the neutralized zone, though, there's only been about a five-hundred square kilometer reduction in damage.

"Beta is somewhat harder to judge. There's still a completely neutralised twenty-thousand square kilometer zone, but natural desert habitat has encroached significantly on the perimeters." Elder's display of Beta switched to a topographical map. "The recovery seems to have developed along the canyons, where the land is more protected from the sun. Beta was built upon a rise in the land, which must have once been a small mountain, in a region of at least moderate rainfall, before a climate change about two-point-five million years ago. You can actually trace the path of the old
mountain streams and compare them just about exactly to the recovery zone."

"That's fantastic!" Steven said, nodding at newly-projected images of reptiles, birds, and the occasional small mammal. "I mean, it sounds like there's still centuries to go, but I guess we are working on a more geologic scale."

"Really more like millennia." Elder said. "We could try to speed things up with cloud-seeding and strategic planting, but we're really only looking at a five-to-ten percent reduction in the area's recovery time. And who knows what biomes we might be preempting by interfering."

"Hmm, true." Steven said. "I'd want us to work alongside the local land management groups if we do anything, but that can wait at least a few years, while we develop a good plan."

"My thoughts exactly!" Elder's gem glowed with her pleasure. "But, speaking of plans and land development, there is one area I think we should address immediately."

A new, familiar location flashed into view.

Steven leaned back in surprise. This was, most definitely, not one of the old kindergartens.

"My Diamond!" Coral hissed, elbowing his upper thigh. The cold, razor-sharp tip of a needle grazed Steven's skin.

He froze, resisting the urge to step away. "Shards, Coral, are you sure you don't want to go to medical school down here? You're made for surgery."

Coral snorted. "Work on organics? That's beneath me."

Steven rolled his eyes and decided not to remind the pearl that her diamond was half-organic.

He returned his attention to the verdant display. Even without Elder's ever-green overlay, the view would have been largely the same, but for the red berries spread across the landscape. "The battlefield? What's going on there? Is the energy from the shattered gems causing some sort of problem?"

"Not that I can detect, no," Elder answered. "This is about an outside influence. I did a survey of legislative proposals, land sales, and what-have-you for anything within twenty miles of any major gem sites. Even if we're only studying things, gems running around would be bound to attract attention." She crossed her arms and studied the map. "The majority of the sites are on government-owned land, in restricted areas, so they're left well-enough alone. The battlefield was among those, up until three months ago, when it was re-zoned from 'restricted' to 'commercial.'"

"Oh no," Steven hissed. This would not be well-received by the veterans. The life-force of the thousands of shattered gems from Earth's last battle had seeped into the very soil, manifesting the ghosts of their sisters as thriving organic life. It wasn't just a battlefield; it was a monument. "Do we know what the plans are?" If it was something simple—say hiking trails or an archaeological museum devoted to all those gem weapons—the soldiers might be able to overcome their horror.

Elder pulled up more documents. "The winning bid seems to be for a hotel and a rope-course." She looked to her diamond, shrugging. "For 'corporate team-building retreats,' whatever those are."

Steven winced. "Nothing good." And not something he could let happen, even to the energy of old gems. This would take some consideration. There was no way he could build up the funds to buy that land just from Chalcedony hawking nuggets of gold. They would have to drop an entire boulder of precious metal in a bank somewhere, and what that would do to the world economy, he
The developer plans to break ground in spring," Elder went on, "so we don't have much time to take advantage of the overflow of life-force in the area. I've highlighted four locations," and she brought up a new topographical map, with the aforementioned targets marked out with yellow dots, "with quite intriguing properties for gem development. I'm particularly excited about this one," and Elder made one of the dots flash red. "If we're careful, and get to work before this 'corporate retreat' breaks ground, I think we can produce three beryls, and, if my latest theory is correct, this spot has a fifteen-percent chance of producing an emerald!" Overcome with the possibilities of her proposal, Elder clapped her hands together, preening.

In the wake of Elder's excitement, there was silence.

Coral looked up at the map, then to her quiet diamond. The pins between her lips flowed to liquid light, retreating into her gem. The pearl took several steps away from Steven, stopping behind the kitchen island, crouching almost out of view.

"You want," Steven hissed, turning to loom over Elder, "to inject gems on Earth?"

Elder froze. Her eyes went wide. "Just there! And it's only because of the energy overflow. If things remain as they are, the human's development would—"

"I will address that," Steven snapped. "But you." He ground his teeth. "I can understand your wanting to inject on early-development planets. Understand, but not approve. But this?" Steven pointed at the display map, just seconds before it fizzled out of sight as Elder hid her ideas from her diamond. "All of that is alive, Elder!"

"And the humans are going to tear it out!" Elder protested. "I mean, if anything, using the energy there to create gems will be a favor to the humans! If left unchecked, the plants will regrow over anything they build in six, eight months, at most! My proposal wouldn't neutralize the area, like the kindergartens; we'd just be bringing it in line with the available energy readings of nearby biomes!"

"We are not desecrating a GRAVEYARD!" Steven yelled, bringing his fist down on the island countertop. Bowls of fruit and a frying pan clattered at the impact.

A crack rang through the air.

The sound brought bile up Steven's throat. His stomach dropped out. He looked down at his fist.

A line snaked across the marble countertop, following the almost organic pattern of the stone. There was a brief silence. Then a grinding as the last bits of stone lost cohesion and the corner of the countertop fell to the floor, crumbling to pebbles.

On the other side of the island, Coral gasped, stepping away until her back pressed against the cabinetry. Her hands cupped over her smooth gem. The pearl stared at her diamond, trembling.

Steven didn't need a mirror. He could feel the power in his limbs, his gem, his diamond-shaped irises. Several deep breaths did nothing to bring the surge back down.

He turned to Elder, and spoke us calmly as he could manage. And still there was a deep growl in his words. "We do not get to make that decision, Elder. My mother fought a war so we wouldn't make those kinds of decisions for Earth."

Elder looked into Steven's bright eyes. She swallowed, ducking her head, gaze averting. "Yes, My Diamond."
"Coral?" Steven queried.
"Y-yes, My Diamond?" Coral quavered.

Steven winced. Stars and shards, he hated himself. "How much more fitting time do you need?"
"I...." A deep breath. "I was fairly done."

"Thank you," Steven said, acknowledging the little lie. He didn't blame Coral for wanting to rid herself of a raging diamond. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I've got to make a call."

The dark clouds that had hung over the Galaxy Warp had dispersed since Steven's arrival home, leaving just a normal layer of early-morning fog, which was already dispersing. He would rather it stayed. Not being able to see Blue Diamond, or be seen by her, felt preferable, at the moment.

How long could he put off the call? Technically, he'd told Blue it would be within an hour, but what sort of grasp on time did the diamond have, currently? Gems almost didn't bother keeping track of time, focusing more on events within their civilization, and not the placement of those happenings in the eons. He'd studied the history of the Diamond Authority under Blue, and there were entire centuries omitted. Not to hide anything—because who was there to question the flawless Diamond Authority?—but because the diamonds didn't think anything important had occurred.

So Blue probably wouldn't notice if two or three hours passed before her student called. Stars, he could probably extend it to a couple days without upsetting Blue unduly.

But Steven knew well enough from childhood, it was best to just rip the band-aid off.

Steven sat on the steps leading to the central warp pad, the still-shattered link to the rest of the galaxy. He drew a small octahedron from his pocket and, before he could let himself vacillate into a bracing countdown or other delays, he turned the activating facet to the blue side and let the communicator float out of his hands.

The expanding screen displayed the expected sight of a short blue pearl—particularly elegant and neutral in expression—but before she could answer the call, an excited voice rang out from just off-screen.

"Is it him?! Pearl, give that here."

The pearl had just a second to jolt in surprise at the suddenness of her diamond's command—as a keeper of history and culture, Blue Diamond had always moved rather slowly—before the view on the communicator shifted, rising, to focus on a large, long face and perennially heavy eyes.

"Pink," Blue Diamond beamed. "It's been months since you last called! And how dare you not tell me your good news directly," she chided, but with a lightness and affection. "Yellow told me you're back to work on your colony!"

"I'm home on Earth, yes," Steven confirmed, crossing his arms. "But we aren't doing much work. This is a vacation."

"Ah, yes, a 'vacation,'" Blue repeated the word slowly, rolling it around on her tongue. "You mentioned those. They did sound intriguing."

'Intriguing.' The idea of taking any sort of rest had been nearly foreign to the diamonds, when
Steven first joined them. It had taken a bit of explaining to make them understand why Steven would regularly lay on cushions and refuse to respond. Of course, the explanation had taken longer than it probably would have if Steven hadn't been more than half-asleep as Blue berated him for his laziness.

"Well, I do look forward to hearing your plans when this 'vacation' is over."

Steven shrugged. "Just more scouting. You all left this sector pretty much alone for Pink Diamond, so we've been having good luck finding suitable planets." His and the diamond's definition of "suitable" being, of course, quite different.

Blue Diamond frowned. "Well, scouting is important, but what of your primary colony?"

"It is doing well," Steven said, stiffening his spine. "We're exploring ways to help it recover the damage from the original development."

"But you must go back into production sometime," Blue objected.

"As I told Yellow, and as I'm sure she told you," Steven seethed, fighting so hard to keep his tension down to just sharp words, instead of devolving to bellowing out more of the day's abundant rage, "I will not be making any gems on Earth. And," Steven went on, holding up a hand as Blue opened her mouth to speak, "I also told Yellow, and I'm telling you that what I do with my colony is my business alone."

"Pink! You can't keep coming up with excuses to avoid developing your empire! You have a duty to your gems."

"Of course I do," Steven snapped. "And I'm sure I serve my gems—"

Steven stopped himself. Clacked his teeth shut so tight he worried a molar would crack. But he only clenched his jaw the tighter, holding in the accusation of 'far better than you.'

"You do tend to them admirably Pink," Blue soothed, having at last noticed the boy's tension. "But there is always room for improvement."

"Hmm." Steven nodded, battling the ball of vile words cloying to his tongue.

"Well, I'm afraid I must go," Blue said with a deep sigh. "I must activate another batch of injectors soon, or this colony will fall behind schedule. But I really would love to be kept updated, Pink. The data you're sending back from your experiments has been quite... curious."

"Well," Steven shrilled, "I'm glad you can patronize my work."

Blue blinked, but before she could respond, Steven reached out, tapping the bottom of the octahedron and ending the call.

He resisted the urge to throw the communicator into the ocean. For one thing, there were dozens more on-ship, so it wouldn't even bring him peace. And, for another, he couldn't in good conscience subject marine life to Blue. Not even crustaceans.

He rolled the octahedron between his hands. Should he just call White and get the lectures over with? No...given his luck, he'd be put on hold for a week. And then he'd still have the sit through a lecture. Better to wait until the great diamond got around to noticing him. Which, ideally, would take years.
"I see she hasn't changed," a voice opined from behind Steven.

"Laz," Steven yelped, turning to address the gem. "I didn't—"

But the gem before him was wrong. Or, different, to be more accurate. None of the freckling of gold across her nose and cheeks, no heart of blue stone, and no light in her eyes.

"Lapis," Steven corrected himself. He looked about the galaxy warp. "Is this where you got off too?"

The gem shrugged, a long, undulating motion. "I suppose I can go wherever," Lapis said, long legs taking meandering, almost random steps, threading her between the warp pads. "Now that I don't have to wait around, I mean." She sent a look Steven's way. Her eyes were half-lidded, emulating a calm the gem had yet to show since Steven's return. Her wings nested low on her back, tips dragging down and leaving thin, wet trails on the dark blue stones, which evaporated away swiftly in the sea breeze and the light of the rising sun. "But I suppose this place has become rather familiar."

Lapis's wide, light steps and the wet path behind her created a diagram for a dance Steven had never before seen. Intricate and arresting and closing him into an ever-narrowing circle.

"Lapis," Steven ventured, hairs starting to rise on his forearms, He could not blame their erectness on the chill. Not with the sun banishing the last of the day's fog. "Lapis, you didn't have to wait here for me. That wasn't healthy."

"I'm a gem, Steven," Lapis snapped, light flashing through her wings. "We don't have 'health.' You're either broken or you're not."

"You know that's not true. Look at how much you improved back at the barn, with Peridot!"

"And why did I need to stay with some kindergartner, Steven?" She shot back. "Because of what she," Lapis gestured vaguely in the air, where Blue Diamond's face floated, "did to me in the war. And because of what your monster did to me when I got free."

Steven was quite certain whom Lapis would consider a monster. He thought it best to let the insult go. "And Peridot helped," Steven reiterated. "She was there for you. From what I'm gathering, she wanted to be there for you when I left, too, but you wouldn't let her!"

Lapis swung about on Steven, screaming. "If she had helped me when I needed her, then you wouldn't have left in the first place!" At the ocean gem’s back, her wings fractured, becoming a million needle shards, which shot back, lancing into one of the broken warp pads, reducing it to a pile of dust.

Steven stepped back, arms rising to protect his eyes from flying debris. He almost raised a shield. He desperately wanted to, still. But once more arming himself against Lapis...it didn't feel right. She was almost...almost like one of his own gems. There was a pull at his core, from his gem, that desperately wanted some way to connect to hers. To comfort her.

And that pull became all the stronger, all the more painful, as he risked lowering his guard and saw that as Lapis was regaining her wings, their forms thin and brittle, some of the water she used was rising from the tears streaking her cheeks.

"We had a chance, Steven," Lapis croaked. "If she'd done it, if I'd...if I'd made her...."

"Lapis?" Steven ventured, daring a step forward, an arm outstretched.
His foot landed on a thin shard of stone, which cracked under his feet.

Lapis jerked back. Her wings, though still lace-thin, spread wide. "I—" she croaked.

And then she was gone, leaving Seven with nothing but confusion and the sort of bone-deep chill you could only feel on the sea.

Thankfully, the warp pad Lapis had damaged hadn't been the outlet to Beach City. Steven did not relish the thought of calling his crew for a pick-up. He needed a little more time alone. Please.

He hoped, with all his hybrid heart, that he could warp through the Temple without facing anyone.

He came through, light taking on solid form once more, and looked about his remodeled childhood home.

The Crystal Gems, to a one, looked back at Steven. So did Jasper. And Carnelian, Green Star and Hush. And a half-dozen other crew members, all of whom crowded about Greg Universe, who sat on the couch, leafing through one of Steven's many childhood photo albums.

Steven considered warping up to the Temple hand and flinging himself on the edge.

"Steven!" One of the amethysts cheered, pointing at the open album. "Ga-reg was just about to show us your Ceremony of..." she paused, looking to Greg, mouthing a foreign word. "Brisk?"


Steven blinked.

He turned to light and fled.

Not far. A few dozen feet up. And, despite earlier considerations, he did not take an immediate nose-dive off the pinky.

Mostly because he instinctively froze when he saw the flash of a long, wide blade in sunlight.

And a little bit because the holder of this particular blade was not Connie, as he first thought. It wasn't even any blade-wielder from his crew. Instead, Jasper's geodmate, the well-named Skinny, sat on the little mound of stone below the hand's pinky. Across her lap lay a sword, which Steven took several seconds to recognize: the claymore of Fire Agate, the one Pearl had returned to the Beta gem only...stars, was it just two days ago?

"Oh, sorry," Steven said, taking a step back and wracking his mind for warp destinations. Shards, if he'd gotten permission from the Crystal Gems to connect the Blade to the Earth's warp system, he could have escaped to his ship. (If he'd asked to connect Earth to the galactic warp system, he could have shot himself into the void between stars and never have to deal with any of this again....)

Before he settled on a destination, though, Skinny turned about to address him. "My Diamond," she said, "can I talk to you?"

Steven paused. The jasper sounded quite serious. He knew that this old soldier wasn't quite so...emotionally constipated as Jasper, but her moments of catharsis had never happened with him. She talked with Carnelian, or another Beta jasper, or occasionally one of the calmer amethysts. But, while she was friendly enough with Steven, being the sort to use "My Diamond" and "Steven"
"Of course," Steven said, striving for a tone between chipper and solemn. It was time to be The Listener. The wise one. The shoulder to lean on.

He took a few jogging steps off the warp pad and down to the little crease below Skinny's seat. What was it, the Life Line? No, no, Heart. He was pretty sure. Whatever it was, the dip was just deep enough to put Steven's head nearly on a level with the orange gem.

She looked to Steven, offering an awkward smile before returning focus to the sword on her lap. There was a little pile of supplies and what looked to be several short pieces of frayed cord by Skinny's thighs; the remnants of the sword's previous grip, it seemed. Skinny was carefully wrapping the naked grip in thread of a burnt orange even deeper than the gem's own stripes.

"Are you...switching to the claymore?" Steven ventured, watching the masterful wrapping. Skinny kept a constant tension on the string, leaving no gaps in the cover, even when her fingers gave a little flourish, leaving behind a decorative knot.

Skinny tilted her head. Considering. "You know. We loved Fire Agate," she said, trailing her knuckles along the blade for a moment, before going back to her work. "If she saw me touching her weapon like this, she'd have poofed me and put me on the front lines for the next dozen battles."

Steven blinked. "That's love?"

Skinny laughed, pulling the cord tight, her arm muscles popping into definition. With another little dance of fingers, the thread wove in on itself, and Skinny picked a small blade from the tools, flashing it across the trailing end of the cord. A small bit of the cut end peeked out from the weave, but a little brushing and rubbing along the grip worked it back under the wrap, giving the illusion that the grip was made of one unending orange strand.

Skinny held the sword out over the edge of the Temple hand, examining her work in the sunlight.

"We loved her," Skinny repeated. "And she did her best by us. But she let most of us get shattered." The veteran sighed. "And then she was shattered, herself."

"It...sounds like Mossy would have hated her," Steven said. He most definitely did. Another high-class gem, sending so many of Pink's gems to their deaths those millennia ago? And yet, at the same time, here was again that faint, hollow ache of connection is his gem as he looked on the agate's sword. She'd been his. Before he even existed, he was hers.

"Yes," Skinny agreed, laying the claymore across her lap. "I think, looking back, I hate her, now, too." Despite her words, Skinny's touch on the blade was tender, mindful of an edge sharp enough even a gem’s sturdy skin. "And I miss her so much."

Steven knew grief was strange. He'd certainly felt enough conflicting emotions about his mother's unremembered death. Add on thousands of years of mourning, and the interconnected death of hundreds of sisters, and things must grow even more unmanageably complex. Hatred and love and nostalgia in one really didn't seem so strange.

But Skinny's next words still shocked the breath out of him.

"I want you to do the injections on the battlefield."

It was so unexpected, so unrelated to what had come before, that Steven didn't even have time to feel a building anger, as he had done with Elder and Blue Diamond, before Skinny was speaking
"I know it's not my decision," she said, calm as the sea breeze on her face, "and it's against every rule you have. But that's what I want."

"But...why?" Steven somehow managed, staring at the Beta gem. "Wait. How do you even know about that?" He couldn't imagine Elder had told the entire crew of her dressing-down, and Skinny and Elder weren't close.

"Well, Elder was upset." Skinny had a little twitch in her lips. "And she talked to Swift about it, and Swift's quarters are...."

"Across the hall from Heliodor's," Steven finished, rubbing at his face. "So the entire ship knows, then?"

"About you blowing up and scaring the lustre off Coral?" Skinny said. "Of course."

Steven groaned. Just what he needed. "Skinny, you know I won't inject on Earth. I can't."

"But you don't know what to do with the battlefield, either," Skinny pointed out. "Even if you take the land from the humans—"

"Buy," Steven interjected. "We would buy the land."

"Right, right," Skinny dismissed. "Commerce. I was around this morning, I get it. So, even if you buy the land...what then? You just...keep it like it is?"

"Well, yeah," Steven said. "It would be a monument!"

"My Diamond, that is not a monument," Skinny said. "I mean, I don't know about the Crystal Gems, but when I saw the battlefield...." She shuddered. "It's horrific."

"Isn't that what battlefields are?"

"Of course they are. My Diamond, I went into that fight with a hundred of my geode at my side. And I left it with four. My agate was shattered. And all that's left of them is being sapped out by those organics. The life there? All over that battlefield? It's not a monument. It's a parasite, feeding off our dead. And it will keep feeding on the energy they left behind until...until I don't know."

Skinny ran a hand along the flat of her agate's blade. "And I hate it. I hate that it's happening, and I want it to stop. All of us from the battle want it to stop, but your damn ideals won't let us just inject enough to make everything normal there." Her hand tightened into a fist and came down on her thigh, hard enough that the gem winced. Though her face was a rictus of pain already.

Steven stared. Skinny had adapted to familiarity with him, but she'd always been a more...traditional gem. As in, he suddenly realized, a compliant one. Which was an unnerving thought, given how he had always tried to get his gems to share their feelings. But, well...it was so rare that they expressed an idea counter to his own wishes. And, despite the sudden opening-up from a gem who had done little but get along for the past decade, Steven found himself...well, wishing she hadn't. Wishing she had kept her opinion to herself. Wishing he didn't have to suddenly consider desires contrary to his own.

It would have taken ages to find a way to react to Skinny's proclamation, but jaspers are never fond of waiting. The claymore on Skinny's lap turned into a pool of light before being reabsorbed into her gem, and she stood, looking out to the sea and quite deliberately away from her diamond.
"Those plants thrive on the spirits of our dead," she said. "And I'd rather have one new crew member among us than watch as my sisters are devoured for another five-thousand years. And maybe those Crystal Gems disagree. But they are the reason things are like this, to begin with."

Steven leaned back, mouth dropping open as he tried to sputter a response, but he had only managed stray syllables before Skinny stepped over the edge of the Temple hand, dropping out of view. Soon, she reappeared down below, walking away across the beach, leaving Steven finally alone, as he had wanted so many times today, suddenly wishing that it wasn't always his wishes that had to be granted.

Everyone in the house below seemed unconcerned with the diamond brooding far overhead, as no one came up to impose upon Steven. Which meant he had plenty of time to go over the morning. And, unfortunately, his mind did not rehash the pleasant parts.

Just as being up in the sea breeze began to feel uncomfortable, a little party of gems appeared from the temple below. Steven was still loath to catch notice, so he trusted to his high perch for shelter. But, while most of the gems were occupied with chatter, not all were as oblivious as the diamond wished. The temple's hand cast a long shadow, and the new bump on the shadow betrayed a recalcitrant diamond.

It was odd to see Garnet startle. From what Steven understood, the fusion saw possibilities, not certainties, but she had always shown such calm self-possession that it seemed she must know all. But it wasn't until she stepped under the shadows on the sand that the fusion noted their observer.

But, unlike Steven's own gems, who would have, no doubt, cheered and waved and given him away, Garnet just glanced up at Steven and gave a little nod. Then, she went back to talking with Green Star, who was, really, far more important than some diamond.

The group continued around south of the cliffside and out of sight, leaving Steven to sigh with relief. An unopposed retreat. And he didn't even need to call Lion for a jump.

Or so he thought, for Steven realized, as he warped back into the Temple, that he had made that most ancient of gemkind mistakes: he'd forgotten the humans.

Luckily, this one human had a special spot in Steven's heart. Greg Universe smiled upon the reconstituting shape of his son and waved a hand in towards the couch. "Schtu-ball! Come here; I haven't had you all to myself in ages!"

Steven needed no further prompting. He was a starfish, a blanket, a baby monkey wrapping itself around its mommy. Greg, being at least 50% responsible for Steven's need for physical affection, gladly wrapped a hand about his son's back, barely reaching far enough to curl fingertips about Steven's side and pull the young man closer in.

Snuggled up, Steven sighed in contentment. "It has been...a morning."

"I heard," Greg acknowledged. "Got to say, Steven, scaring the crap out of Coral doesn't speak well of how I raised you."

Oh. It was going to be one of those bonding sessions. And, Stars, Greg did them so well. The casual comment, with just a tinge of acerbicness in the tone, and all of it somehow directed at Greg's "failings," instead of Steven's? Parenting at its finest.

"I know," Steven mumbled, looking down at the coffee table, where photo albums still sat open. "I should have kept my temper, but I—"
"People spend enough time talking about 'buts,'" Greg said, smirking as he nodded towards one photo album, which was open upon a particular childhood Beach-A-Palooza performance. Two full moons had shone that night.

"What did I teach you to say instead?" Greg cajoled. It was such a distant, yet still-familiar tone. The performance of fatherhood, it seemed, did not change when a child reached adulthood.

Steven sighed. "'Butts aren't the end that talks.'" the diamond let his head loll to the side, resting on his father's shoulder. "I know, you're right. I'll apologize to Coral when I get back on ship."

"And?" Greg prompted.

"And Elder," Steven groused, and, far more petulantly, added, "Even though we have rules about not—"

"'Even though' sure sounds like a 'but' by a different name," Greg mused.

Steven sighed and let his justifications drop. "I swear, is there anyone Heliodore hasn't told, yet?"

"Let this be a lesson to you; don't give gossips anything to share. You know. Like yelling at people, ice cream bribery, making out with politicians."

Steven spluttered. "We weren't 'making out!' It was a kiss! 'Making out' is...." Steven paused, considering. "When does it become 'making out'?"

Greg began to chuckle, the movement of his shoulders jostling his son. "Ya know, I sort of expected you to try and deny everything. Though I suppose my little romantic has been dreaming about that kiss for years. Was it everything you ever hoped?"

"Yeeeeeessssss!" Steven squealed, pressing his hands to his cheeks. "Dad, her lips were so soft! And I love her shampoo; it smells all eucalyptus-y! And she's still a really good fighter and she's all political and how do I get Connie to kiss me again?"

"Ask, probably," Greg said, as if it were so simple. "So long as she’s not bus or mad at you. Though, if I know that woman, she's probably not done being mad."

"Ugh." Steven deflated. "Probably...."

Greg patted Steven's back. "But-

"Butts aren't the end that talks," Steven interrupted.

Greg elbowed Steven's side. " However ," he replaced, "she was also waiting for that kiss for years."

There was a little jig playing in Steven's heart. But there was also a slower, more somber tune. One he'd done his best to ignore for the last few days, but which had, nonetheless, been growing louder and louder.

"Dad, I...if Connie has been waiting, then...I mean, why didn't she wait?" Steven looked down at his hands. "For me?"

Greg was silent. The congratulatory pats to his son's back changed into a slow stroke. "Steven...." Greg tried, but soon let out a little snort of frustration.

Leaning forward, grunting as his belly was compressed, Greg plucked a photo album from the
coffee table. With a soft, relieved groan, the elder Universe relaxed back into the sofa, resting the open book on his lap.

Steven was only passively interested at first—after all, he'd seen enough of himself—but, suddenly, his mind perked to attention.

This photo album matched none of Greg's style. No extra stickers or little drawings or glittery gel-pen exclamations. The photos were perfectly parallel with the page edges, and there were only brief notations below each image, done in a looping, meticulous script.

And, though, he was in a few of the photos that flipped by, it was a young Connie that starred in every one. Serious and confident, even as a pre-teen, but growing happier and cuter in each image.

Until, suddenly, the smile was gone. And so was he.

Greg didn't explicate on any of the pictures; he let the descriptions—Doug Maheshwaran's hand, no doubt, as Priyanka used a true doctor's script—guide Steven through Connie's life. School awards, orchestra performances, a few candid shots of her with the gems or practicing with Rose's sword in the backyard. Growing slowly older.

Greg flipped a page.

Steven frowned at Connie. With a boy. Both were probably seventeen years old. They sat on a pier at dusk, hands held between them, resting on the salt-weathered wood. It was not a good shot, Steven decided.

Greg paused on that page longer than Steven would like. He wanted the pages to turn, for Connie to move on, for whoever that was to be left behind.

"At the risk of sounding like a skeezy old man, Connie was quite the desirable young woman," Greg said. "Smart, confident, beautiful. She dated plenty. Once Priyanka realized she couldn't stop her." Greg chuckled. "Which was some months after Connie realized her mom couldn't stop her."

Steven’s scowl darkened. Unable to take the image anymore, he reached out and turned the page. Luckily, the boy was already gone, replaced by Connie in one of the more candid shots he'd seen. Priyanka stood before the girl, the smallest, unsuccessfully contained smile on the mother's lips. She was applying concealer to a truly monstrous zit above Connie's left eyebrow. Connie was crying, just a little, but also glaring at the cameraman for immortalizing her this way. It was as funny as it was heart-wrenching.

Greg eyed his son. "She was allowed, you know," he said. "Even if you'd been there, she had every right to make her own decisions. Heck, if you'd been around and were acting all pissy," Greg paused, letting the 'like this' remain unsaid, "there'd be plenty of people around more than willing to remind you of that. Excluding Pearl. She was pretty pissy about things, herself."

Steven liked Pearl. Pearl was the best.

The slow perusal of the photo album continued. Connie grew taller. More mature. He came across a photo which had caught Connie in the middle of a jump, screaming, holding a paper to her chest. On the opposite page was that crumpled paper: a college acceptance letter. The next several photos were of her in cap-and-gown, and then standing beside a packed car. A dorm room, sitting in a lecture hall, at a table in a pub, about to drop a shot into a dark beer (next to that picture, one of the few notes from Priyanka, a simple "how dare" and a frowny face). And, through them all, she sat with the occasional boy...no, man, at this point. Holding hands or their arms about Connie's
shoulders or the woman sitting in their laps. Some there for just a picture. Some for several pages. Eventually all leaving, but all there, for a time. With her.

Steven turned a page too hard, the top hole-punch ripping.

Greg lay his hand on Steven's, preventing further damage. "Steven," he chided, "you have to understand—"

"She's a her own person, I know!" Steven snapped. "I get it, I left her behind! I didn't expect her to...to join a nunnery or something! I just thought...I hoped..." Steven rubbed hard at his eyes, sending up shifting geometric patterns in his vision. "I know I shouldn't have counted on it, but I just thought she'd...you know, when I came back, that...." He sighed. "I thought she'd be ready when I came back."

"Steven." Greg shook his head. He took over the perusal of the photo album again. Flipping faster, through an undergrad career and graduation, waving goodbye at an airport, buried in books, another walk through a sea of graduates, this time arrayed in a bright scarlet gown. Then back in Beach city, in Mayor Dewey's office, arguing with the old politician. On the boardwalk, greeting old friends.

At a small party in Steven's childhood home, sitting on the porch with the gems, looking to the stars. Smiling, eyes bright, almost manic.

Then, in the next picture, a smaller smile. Bags under the eyes, knuckles white as she clutched a glass of wine.

Then, sitting on the beach before an approaching twilight. Lips still curved in a smile, but nothing alight in Connie's eyes. Except exhaustion. A deep tiredness that had nothing to do with whether she slept or not.

"Connie was so ready for you to come home," Greg said. "She came back to Beach City a couple months before you were due, and I don't know what she left behind, back in Oxford, but she left it. Completely. And she waited for you to come home.

"Connie waited. She waited for fourteen years for you to come home." He turned the pages once more, showing a woman in quiet mourning. "And she waited two more years," Greg said, as more pages turned and the exhaustion left Connie's eyes, replaced by a focus, a passion, a purpose as she stood with Mayor Dewey, with city council, with the people of Beach City in a crowd, holding up signs which proclaimed "Vote Maheshwaran!"

Greg turned a page. On the left side, Connie hugged her parents, both completely covered in "Vote Maheshwaran" shirts, hats, pins, lanyards. In the background, Lars was appreciatively watching Sadie, who was mid-jump and screaming. Bill Dewy beamed, confetti resting in his thinned hair. Buck applauded at his father's side, and the rest of the packed crowd at Fish Stew Pizza went nuts. On the right page, a more formal shot: Connie in a red suit, on a stage, one hand on a thick book, the other held up high.

"And then," Greg said, turning one final page, "she stopped waiting."

Steven had seen Connie in mehndi once before, after she'd returned from a cousin's wedding. But he'd never seen her in such thick saris and intricate jewelry, the henna fresh on her palms, her long hair woven up high on her head, just as adorned as her neck and wrists. She was...ethereal.

Steven stared. There were pages after this one. A few dozen. And he wanted to look, wanted to
wound himself, but he was afraid, ashamed, overwhelmed.

Greg seemed to understand. Greg always seemed to understand. He shifted the photo album to Steven's lap and lumbered to his feet. He patted his son's shoulder, twice. "See you tonight, kiddo," he murmured, and made his slow way across the living room and out the front door.

Steven waited, hoping that someone else might burst in to distract him and demand that Pink Diamond attend some new crisis. But no one was coming to save him.

Steven sniffled and wiped at the pool of tears already in his eyes. Sight clear for but a moment, he turned the page.

And watched Connie walk down the aisle.

Chapter End Notes

Pssst. It's my birthday. Give me lots of comments. <3

Chapter 13 preview song: "Belle of the Boulevard (Acoustic)" by All Time Low

End Notes

Check out this fic's TVTropes page!

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