Curtain in 5, 4. . .

by **KingRiles**

**Summary**

Peridot just wanted to get her degree and get out, but at Beach City University she meets Lapis, a girl like her stuck in a world moving too fast to keep up with alone. Peridot gets spun into Lapis' world on the way, introducing her to a very curious theatre troupe called the Crystal Gems.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Peridot's first day in Beach City lands her in contact with some unique drama kids.

Chapter Notes

This is a story I've been wanting to write for a long while, and I'm really, really excited to see it unravel and blossom into a genuinely relatable tale about two people healing through one another in a world moving too fast for them to keep up with alone. I hope you enjoy! Rated 'mature' only because of some possibly sensitive topics addressed and a mature scene in chapter 21 (not detailed or explicit, but to keep kids safe, right?). Follow my tumblr if you wanna see some art for this fic! (rileys-universe.tumblr.com)

Tacka-tacka.

Peridot's fingers clipped busily away at the nullified light of her smartphone screen, turned down for the convenience of the sleep-deprived bus passenger to her left. It wasn't exactly dark out, but she just thought it would be nice for the snoozing person to open their eyes to natural light instead of the bright artificial kind.

The red fingers of dawn were only just beginning to unfurl over the horizon, painting the distant hillsides and little cityscapes in a warm amber glow as night was chased away. She admired the illusion of colour, the birth of a new day, before it got incredibly boring and she went back to scrolling through her personal collection of articles that would help her over the next few days.

"5 Secrets to Make People Like You."

A truly remarkable article title.

Already, Peridot could feel her conscience slipping away into overthinking at least twenty-three different scenarios where she would fail at absolutely everything when it came down to making acquaintance at her new university. She let out something between a whimper and a groan just thinking of all that she'd be subjected to soon.

Her previous place of education, Empire State University, had lacked the extensive computer program courses that Peridot's desired field of pursuit demanded. Or, rather, the courses that her mother demanded she be trained in. Not that Peridot didn't enjoy tacking in numbers and generating programs and applications; if anything, the way that the codes would fit so crisply together and exploit themselves, it was a pacifier.

After some ridiculously extensive research, though to Peridot it seemed like nothing more than looking up the recipe for the tamest of souffles, she landed herself at Beach City University. Not nearly as expansive nor as notable as the profound Empire State bureau, but it fostered all of the classes that Peridot would need if she was required to take up role in her mother's company.
Key word, required. Not wanted.

Tacka-tacka.

The bus ride had been pleasant enough. No one had dared bother her in the five hours she had spent crammed between the smudged window and the dozing human beside her. Who would want to bother the small girl with the permanent frown crossing her lips?

Peridot supposed she should have been thankful for her cold semblance; then again, it didn't seem to help her case when it came down to social confidence in oneself.

Eventually the Greyhound did stop. With surprise slackening her taut features Peridot looked up from "Eleven Brilliant Ways to Turn Strangers into Friends" and saw a few people standing from their seats as an automatic feminine voice spoke, 'Beach City University'.

"Crap," Peridot spat, gathering together the scraps of paper she'd strewn across her small lap and stuffing the items into her worn leather satchel. Carefully, tediously, and most of all, awkwardly, she maneuvered herself around her snoring not-so bus companion and followed the rest of the students out of the bus and to its undercarriage to retrieve their things.

Naturally, Peridot's suitcase was easily discernible because of the small alien keychain she kept tied to its zipper. Oh, and the fact that it was a bright enough green to make people who named green as their favourite colour reconsider at least eighty percent of their life choices.

She blinked with surprise as a gangly girl with obviously black-dyed hair that would make any My Chemical Romance fan proud (with an edgy outfit to match, mind you,) nabbed a bright pink-and-white zebra case from the undercarriage. Talk about breaking character. The thought made her smirk half-heartedly.

Peridot listlessly trailed after the other group of students, keeping to the back of the small crowd that just seemed to keep growing.

The campus was nice enough. It lacked the elegance and prestige that Empire State so proudly boasted, but what it did have was things that were green and alive. A grassy courtyard stretched out, dappled with trees that were already beginning to mottle and molt with autumn yellow. The architecture itself was grandiose, she supposed, and the roses that seemed to crowd around every streetlamp and bench added a unique flush of colour.

Before she realized it, she had followed the group into a large hall, where she was victimized by a whirlwind of unfamiliar faces, packets of paper shoved into her fumbling arms, and worst of all. . . a whole room packed to the brim with people. Lots of them.

Thankfully, because she was generally familiar with university life and all the blights it had to throw at the miserable people otherwise known as its students, she felt obligated to skip out on the second half of the introductory seminar. She stuck around long enough to learn when campus tours were scheduled for the next week and what times they served breakfast and lunch in the mess hall. Last but not least, Peridot was able to snag her time table in addition to her dorm key.

Her back was aching, her left foot prosthetic's gel cap was rubbing the wrong way, and her temples were throbbing from the rumble of inane chatter that seemed to permeate every inch of the Beach City University campus. All she wanted to do was head back to her dorm and unpack, and take maybe a few days for herself to recuperate from getting caught in the thick, constricting net of socialization.
As she moved across the courtyard, following one of the cobblestone pathways that directed ambling students from building to building, she began to rifle through the papers that one of the staff had handed her.

"Peridot Diamond," she had said when she reached the long grey desk where a tall, middle-aged blonde woman in a mint-blue blouse beamed as she shuffled through the piles of paper before her. "Diamond, Diamond. . . Aha!" She pulled out the sheets with amazing precision, right out of the middle of a daunting stack of papers. "Here you are. And the name's Barbara, by the way. If anyone gives you a hard time, just call for Ol' Miller and I'll be on their case in a heartbeat. Got it, hun?"

All Peridot could do was dumbly nod and try her best not to grimace as she turned on her heel and exited the facility. If the staff here were already showing such fervid behavior, were the students she was going to be working alongside be just as. . . err, earnest?

She picked out her dorm key and followed the buildings until she came to the C wing, where she practically sprinted inside and searched for Room C:217. When the golden numbers finally appeared, thank God only on the second floor like the namesake suggested, she wasted no time in unlocking the door and rolling her things in.

The room was barren. Two simple beds sat parallel to one another, naked and grey in all their sheetless glory. An upside to them was that they were, literally, up. They sat on clean tawny drawers, and desks sat at the foot of each bed. Even though this was information Peridot had already known, courtesy of the magnificent internet, seeing it in person instead of in a student interview video alleviated some of the first-day-jitters anxiety.

Other than that, the dorm was quite plain. It wasn't cramped, per se, but it could have been a whole lot bigger.

Her first thing on the checklist: fix her damn prosthetic, because it was rubbing her stump of a limb in all the wrong ways.

Once she had re-centred the device and practiced the kneading exercises her physical therapist had instilled in her years ago, she got to work unpacking. By the time half of her suitcase had been dissected and thrown into the corresponding drawers below the bed on the right wall, the sound of a key card pinging made her jolt.

She snapped her eyes to the entrance as a short, stout girl with curly blonde hair stepped inside. She donned khakis, pink vans, and a faded green shirt with a rock emblem Peridot didn't recognize, topped off by a jean jacket. She had a large duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

When she met Peridot's eyes, she immediately became sheepish. "Oh, hi, um-" She stammered off, putting up a small hand to cup her cheek. "You must be my roommate! I'm Sadie."

"Uh- I'm surprised," were the first words to tumble out of Peridot's mouth. She was quick to palm her lips as heat filled her face. "Sorry! Peridot. My name is Peridot."

Sadie laughed, and Peridot would have shrunken in like a turtle into its shell if it hadn't been full of innocent knowing. "Well, heya Peridot. I guess I'll be taking the left bunk, huh?"

Peridot glanced over at the empty left bed, feeling a rush of culpability flood through her. "I didn't think about which bed you would want. Though, I suppose since I've already begun the unpacking process. . . "

"Oh, a bed's a bed. I don't care which one I end up crashing in," Sadie consoled as she closed the
door quietly behind her and dropped her duffel on the naked mattress. "Guess I'm gonna need to go buy a bedspread. Day one and we're already en route to IKEA."

Peridot watched Sadie curiously as she rustled through the folds of the duffel and brought out a pile of slightly disheveled, but nicely folded, clothing. "It would be best if I did too," she tried, mentally fist-pumping when she spoke without the shrewdness that usually plagued her voice.

It was hard when you were just an incredibly cynical person in a world with arms held open far too wide for your liking. You ended up sounding like an egotistical jerk most of the time, even when you were just stating the blatant facts.

"You wanna go together? Since we're gonna be rooming and all."

*Oh.* Peridot hadn't been expecting that. She set down the green flannel pajama pants she'd been fondling and frowned to herself.

Pros of going out to shop for dorm necessities with Sadie: find said necessities, see a bit more of the town with someone who might be familiar with the environment than she, and a new friendship.

Cons of going out to shop for dorm necessities with Sadie: a new friendship.

As much as she wanted to tell herself that she was here to get her degrees in engineering and software production and nothing else. But the idea was really tempting. Plus, those articles she'd read on the Greyhound were still running across her mind and giving her some pretty crazy ideas about how to dazzle Sadie with friendship things.

And step one of that magical routine would be learning to answer questions sooner, because Sadie was now peering at her with dark eyes and a nervous little smile. "It's okay if you don't."

Peridot shook her head. "No! I'd like to. Really."

Sadie's smile widened. "All right! How about we unpack first? That way we can just tackle dorm things when we get back later."

The two ended up lapsing into a comfortable idleness as they finished unpacking, with them sharing brief backstories as to where they came from, what their majors were, what they wanted out of life. Peridot learned that Sadie was only a junior, and her mother was the zealous Barbara woman from the new student seminar. Sadie learned that Peridot came from Empire City with all its big, flashy lights and glamour.

"Don't expect the same out of Beach City," Sadie had chuckled as she dug out a small bag of hygienic tools. "It's cozy but it's remote. I've lived here all my life, so it's home."

There was something calming about Sadie's presence. She was immensely grateful for whatever that was: she seemed mature, but also kind spirited. Maybe this whole roommate thing wouldn't be so bad.

When it was time to roll out, Sadie offered to drive.

"Are you positive?" Peridot was asking as they made their way down the steps, which she focused on with all her might as to not trip and fall from disrupted balance. "The Greyhound returns in only-" she checked her wristwatch when she reached solid ground, "-twelve minutes now."

"Yeah, it's fine. My mom's not using it because she's still handing out papers to freshmen."
"If you say so."

They made their way across the campus, since Sadie's car wasn't parked in the dorm parking lots. More people were outside now, gathering together in groups and already forming friendships that would last for the rest of their college lives. If they were lucky.

As she walked with Sadie, her eyes raked over the clusters, scanning from face to face like she would see someone she recognized. There was no such luck.

Sadie's vehicle was a white Toyota Venza, with a mailman icon plastered against the driver-side door. Peridot quirked a brow as she rounded the vehicle to reach the passenger side window. "Are we gonna be making some deliveries today, as well?" She sniffed as Sadie unlocked the car and laughed. "No, but my mom works as a mailwoman. She's a real people person, so she's always pitching in with opening days all over town."

Peridot grunted with a begrudging reverence for the older woman. "Understandable. Extroverts tend to flock to where the people are, after all." How extroverts did it, however, was a mystery to her.

Sadie sighed in agreement. "Preach." She started the car and began the drive off into town.

"I wasn't aware it was possible to be caught in the kitchen section for so long," Peridot huffed grumpily as the two girls entered a pizza parlor off of the boardwalk. "My sudden fascination in napkin dispensers was out of place. And out of this generation of millennials' time frame, apparently."

"You can't top the old lady who was complaining about how that blue chair didn't have a back. The poor employee didn't have the heart to tell her that was a table for toddlers."

Peridot scrunched her nose with a snicker as she shoved her round glasses back up onto the bridge to scrutinize the restaurant. "You're right. I would have told her myself if you hadn't suggested she take a look at the chair section across the walkway."

Sadie laughed, a noise that Peridot had come to appreciate in the past two hours of furniture hell. "You looked ready to. Oh, let's sit here!"

There weren't many tables, thanks to the parlor's diminutive size, so the table Sadie suggested was right next to a table over-packed with college kids. They were talking loudly and excitedly about something, with more than one of them making erratic hand gestures to prove something.

Peridot seated herself on the chair farthest from the group while Sadie went up to the counter where a pretty dark-skinned woman scribbled their order down.

"Hey! Fluff!"

Her head snapped at attention as she noticed a few members of the other table beaming at her. The cat-caller was a short with mildly dark skin, but had a mane of lavender hair and enough ear piercings to make any old conservative have a stroke. She thought that the taller woman, dark with a rich afro, was looking at her too, but with her aviators she couldn't be sure. The third was a fair-skinned willowy woman, with short-cropped peach hair and an unsure smile.

The fourth member of the table hadn't even spared Peridot a glance, though. Peridot thought that the feeling should be mutual, then, but the more she eyed the mystery girl with the shock of blue hair, the more her longing grew.
Why it was growing? Stars if she knew. She'd give a Nobel Peace Prize to anyone who could coin the reason for it.

"Yeah, we're talking to you, friend."

"Uhhf." Peridot sputtered, realizing she'd been staring. "Excuse me, friend? And, for that matter... Fluff?"

The girl with the wild dyed hair put her hands up in surrender. "Sorry. Is buddy better? Or compadre?"

"As far as I'm concerned, we are neither of those things," the blonde retorted.

This earned a snort of laughter from the blue-haired girl, who looked up to give this new sardonic stranger a proper look. Peridot blinked as she briefly met eyes with her. She had heavily freckled olive skin, bright yet indifferent brown eyes, and a messy bob cut with dark roots just becoming visible on top.

She almost missed the lavender-haired girl's next remark. "Ehh, can't diss ya there, sister. But you look new around here, is all I'm sayin'. What's your name?"

"Peridot," she supplied simply, subconsciously tucking her prosthetic foot behind her real one. She did wear men's jeans, so the extra folds in the legs would hide the truth from anyone who wasn't looking for it, but it was just a nervous habit she had picked up from her earlier school years.

"Ha! Told you she'd have a rock name! Pay up, P!"

Now it was the peach-haired woman's turn to groan. "You should know that I was never going to give you money over a silly bet on a name."

The large woman with the aviators chuckled as she leaned on the table as she fixed Peridot with an expressionless face. Or, at least, Peridot thought she was looking at her. Sunglasses always made it harder to read people, especially for her.

"You'll need to excuse them. My name is Garnet, and these two are Amethyst and Pearl." She gestured to each person respectively. "And this is Lapis Lazuli."

"Just Lapis," said blue girl corrected, looking at Peridot again. And again, Peridot could feel her body seize with that sensation she couldn't name.

"Yeah, I was just, like, really sure you were named after some kind of gemstone, too," Amethyst butted in. "It's super common, apparently. So, Peri, what bri-"

"Peridot."

"Okay, Peri, what brings you to Beach City? You going to University like the rest of us?"

Peridot didn't have to answer any of these questions. She wasn't obligated to, and where in the name of all that is good and holy was Sadie? Did she ditch her? When it looked like Amethyst wasn't going to let her get away with not answering, she sighed and humored her. "If you must know, yes. I'm getting my bachelor's degree in engineering technologies."

Pearl perked up. "Oh? What a coincidence! My major is in technical engineering, as well."

Peridot did have to admit that seeing another woman in the field was a comfort. Far too many times
was she shoved into a classroom full of incredibly nerdy men, but on the other hand, she was just a very nerdy girl when it came down to bare bones.

"So, does that mean you're good with technology and machines and stuff?" Asked Amethyst, who had a knowing smirk on her face. Peridot should answer with pride, she decided.

"I'm good with technology and machines and stuff because it's my major, yes. It'd be stupid if I wasn't." She combed her fingers through her short, thick blonde hair exasperatedly. She was really nailing this establishing relationships thing. That was sarcasm.

"Awesome! Garnet, she should totally join the Crystal Gems!" Amethyst pounded Garnet's shoulder enthusiastically. "The missing link!"

"Amethyst," Pearl twittered, shaking her head at the darker girl, "it must be her first day! She can't possibly take that role on- look, she's as pale as a ghost!"

Pearl wasn't wrong. Peridot had dropped at least twenty degrees and as many shades paler. She didn't know what this Crystal Gems society was, but she knew she wasn't interested from the moment it was suggested.

"Hmm. She should hear about it before you make that decision for her, Pearl," Garnet surmised. "The Crystal Gems are Beach City University's one act play group. We travel from city to city, competing against their respective campuses for title crowns. Our latest lights technician graduated last year, and we've been searching for his replacement since he walked the red carpet to receive his diploma. If we're to advance this year. . . "

"We're going to need a light person," Pearl finished with a sigh. "We can't go on without one. Backstage lighting can only provide so much."

Peridot sent Pearl a questioning glance. "Why don't you do the lights then?"

Pearl nervously tittered. "No, they need me backstage to direct the cast! The last time I tried to operate the booth, a curtain fell and Alexandrite missed two of her costume changes!"

Peridot's lips twisted into an uncertain scowl. She came to the college to get her degree and graduate. Meeting a few people along the way, perhaps, but nothing would deter her from getting her education sealed with a fancy red ribbon. Maybe a robotics club meet or two, but nothing more.

Besides, a theatre troupe? She would be more out of place there than she would in a junior wrestling competition for the ages.

Fortunately, she didn't need to deal with the rambunctious lot any further because Sadie slid back in, holding a small box of deep dish pizza. "They were all out of pepperoni, apparently, so I just got cheese. Hope that's fine."

Peridot sighed with relief. With a name like Fish Stew Pizza, her primary concern was that every dish served would be served with some sort of seafood. "No, that's a relief if anything," she relieved.

Sadie's intervention seemed to alleviate some of the attention from the other table. While she was munching hungrily on her slices, however, she did spot them giving her thoughtful glances every once in a while.

Everyone but Lapis Lazuli. Why did that disappoint her?

"We can take what's left back to the dorms," mused her roommate after a second slice.
"We'd better hide it then. I hear that college kids can smell pizza from a mile away," Peridot remarked.

Sadie bit her lip as she resealed the box after Peridot had plucked her third and last slice from it. "We'll hide it in the shopping bags, then! They'll be deterred by the scent of shampoo and toothpaste."

Peridot stuffed the cheesy morsel between her lips, folding up the flimsy paper plates into neat squares as Sadie bid farewell to the other people in the restaurant. They made way to the entrance, and Peridot shoved what she didn't finish of her slice into the trash can.

Before she could leave, she felt a warm hand clap her shoulder. Her head spun as she glowered at Garnet, who towered over her measly 5'2. "Give it some thought, Peridot. You can find us in the theatre department, in the art district of campus."

Peridot ducked out from the tall woman's grasp and turned to give her table a watchful glare. Pearl and Amethyst were bickering over something, but she noticed with a slight heart palpitation that Lapis Lazuli was watching her. As soon as they met eyes though, both quickly darted their gazes away.

"I'll- I'll think about it," Peridot grumbled as she weakly nodded to the woman and left the pizza parlor. She wasn't going to think about it. Her, joining some drama group? Ha! That was ridiculous.

The blonde sagged with reassurance when she saw Sadie waiting for her in the car at the end of the pier, flashing her lights on.

"I take it you made some friends while I talked with Kiki," the driver commented as Peridot clambered into shotgun. Kiki must have been the girl behind the counter.

"I wouldn't call it making friends," Peridot scoffed. "It was more like a one-sided battle against theatrical peer pressure."

"Yeah, the Crystal Gems can be like that." Sadie started the ignition and reversed out of the boardwalk parking lot. "Especially when they're desperate."

Peridot blinked. "You know them?"

"Well, yeah. They're pretty popular. And they're always looking for new recruits; I've considered joining them, but . . ." Colour flushed the short girl's cheeks. "I couldn't stand being on stage. Never have. Especially not after the incident at Beach-a-Palooza."

"Beach-a-what now?"

Sadie shook her head. "A story for another time. Let's get back before dorm refills when everyone gets back from scrounging for food."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Peridot's curiosity gets the better of her when she gets lost, and a familiar blue-haired girl shows up and scares the living daylights out of her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Take a class at nine, they said.

It would be easy, they said.

Peridot was ready to jab a hot butterknife into the next clod who tried to give her advice on what classes to take and when.

*Take On Me* carried over the instrumental buzzing of her cell phone beside her face, shining light into her eyes and earning a disgruntled hiss. 7:45, the screen read, as the song launched into the 1985 waggish melody that basically made a meme out of itself.

She struggled up from under the new covers, taking in the surroundings that seemed daunting and unfamiliar without the aid of her glasses. She could just make out her round lenses folded neatly on the desk at the foot of her bed next to her prosthetic.

Sadie had been very considerate when Peridot had rolled up her jeans to reveal the metal beneath. If Sadie was going to be living with her for an indeterminable amount of time, she might as well know that Peridot was an amputee. If she wanted to know how it happened, well, that was up to if Peridot was keen on telling the tale to a virtual stranger.

She usually wasn't. It wasn't exactly a fun memory.

The blonde scrambled out from under the dark blankets, curtly admiring her choice in selecting the bedspread that most resembled something outer-spacey at the furniture store, and crawled on her chest until she could grab her glasses.

She shoved them on before grabbing her prosthesis pin lock liner, rolling it swiftly on. After ensuring there were no air bubbles, she slid on the extra socks that would help fill out her shrunken limb's volume and slid on the leg itself. She dubiously slid out from the bed, waiting for the umbrella of the prosthetic to snap into its socket as she stood and let out a sigh of relief when it did.

She moved over to the mirror on the door, observing her sleep-riddled self with a flat expression.

She had on her Camp Pining Hearts Pierccy t-shirt, purchased off of RedBubble the moment her mother stopped monitoring her purchase history. She donned equally silly boxers, white with the same alien heads as on her suitcase.

Even with her biting and blunt demeanor, there was no doubting that there was still a dork slumbering away somewhere in the dark space society called a heart. Her alarm and sleep attire proved as much.
She gathered the clothes she'd shed aside the night before for her first class: multimedia software development. Technically not an engineering course, but developing software had always been like her secondhand option if she ended up hating machinery in the long-run.

Peridot trudged down the dorm hallway, stepping into the bathroom and rushing behind a curtain-covered stall. Unlike Empire, even the upperclassmen dorms had public restrooms. She would dearly miss the privacy of her own bathroom at her old college.

Nevertheless she didn't regret leaving it. Anything to get out from under the studious and ever-imperial eyes of her mother.

She threw off her pajamas and replaced them with a black crew-neck and her—she wouldn't call it signature, but she wore it more often than a few select politicians lied-green-checkered flannel. Worn blue jeans finished the look, with the extra rolls near her ankles disguising her leg with ease. When she approached the mirror waiting outside the stall, openly ignoring the giggling gossipers tucked into the corner of the bathroom, she gaped at her wild hair.

Now, by no means was her hair ever to be considered tame. The best she could do was streak it with spiking gel to make it seem more on purpose than natural. She fished said product out of her bag, wet her hands with the faucet, and styled into an almost respectable state.

If push came to shove, she could prick it with a few hairpins later on in the day. She always kept a few in her satchel anyway.

Sadie was already up and about by the time Peridot stepped back inside. She was sliding on boots and looked up to Peridot when she re-entered. "Morning, Peridot," she greeted as she laced up her feet. "Ready to begin another lovely semester of university?"

Peridot let out a nasally high-pitched groan as she threw her sleepwear onto her bed.

"Yeah, me too," Sadie smiled.

"Whatever clod thought it would be wise to schedule classes before noon should be put on a firing range," the amputee grumbled as she grabbed her satchel from the office chair at the desk before collapsing into it.

Sadie searched her drawers for something to throw over her grey tank top. She suddenly stopped as if remembering something, before peeking over her pale shoulder at the grumpy freckled student. "Take On Me, Peridot?"

Peridot crossed her arms stubbornly. "It was that or Rick Astley. Which would you rather have?"

"At least I'd know you'd never give me up or let me down."

Peridot cackled good-naturedly before thumbing through her jean pockets. "I was going to go down to the mess hall and see if the breakfast is truly as delectable and healthful as the seminar lady said it would be. When is your first class?"

"Eleven."

Peridot balked. "Then why are you up at-" she checked the time, "8:07 in the morning?"

Sadie stuffed her hands into her jean pockets thoughtfully. "Oh, you know... It's everyone's day back on campus, and I was gonna go see some friends. They wanted to meet at the pavilion in the art district around nine."
Peridot noted how Sadie kept glancing at the small bag of cosmetics that lay strewn across her desk. "Looking to impress someone, are we?" Peridot pried.

"No!" The other blonde stammered, vaulting away from the make-up and throwing her curly hair over her shoulder defiantly. Peridot cackled a second time, softer than before. "Fine, fine. But I'd better get going. I'm not eager to find out what happens if you're late on the first day."

"I mean, they won't care much. The professors."

"Still. It's a detrimental thing for one's reputation to get off on the wrong foot with them already." Peridot's features went slack with surprise. "Unintentional wordplay. Besides, food awaits."

Peridot threw her satchel on, tracing a finger over the alien pin buttons on its leather flap as she bid Sadie farewell and left the C dormitory. The food served at the mess hall was, at best, mediocre. But because she just was not going to march all the way back to her dorm to steal away the rest of their cold deep dish pizza, she mindfully downed the off-brand cornflakes and wheat toast that looked most appetizing to her.

8:30 came about and Peridot was struggling to locate her multimedia class. It was supposed to have been between the technology and art districts, but unfortunately for her, she couldn't seem to find the place where either place bordered each other.

The stars would fall and aliens invade to finally rescue her before Peridot Diamond asked for help. She may as well have been the stubborn husband in those road trip horror films.

Eventually she ended up slinking through artist territory, passing by graphic design and fine arts classrooms. It was closer to multimedia development than keyboarding, so she kept to her gut and dredged on.

"If I see one more student with an iced coffee and a beanie with a palette tucked into their armpit..." Peridot huffed as she approached the last door on this segment of hallway, glaring at the blank golden plaque where room numbers would usually be scribbled on.

"This definitely isn't going to be what I'm searching for," she mumbled to herself, "but sue me for trying." She twisted the door open and blinked when she entered a dark room filled with black-screened monitors and lowly blinking lights.

Puzzled, Peridot slid the door shut behind her and felt around for her a light switch. She did find a knob close to another open doorway on the other side of the thin stretch of room, and rolling it filled the room with gentle blue light.

A table ran parallel to the window of glass separating the room from the darkness beyond. A huge light board sat before two offline monitors. It was lined with so many faders, buttons, and knobs to manipulate that Peridot's fingers buzzed with premature fatigue just thinking of running them. Across the way, a similar board laid, next to a pile of crumbled papers. That one, however, only had twice as many knobs as it did faders.

"Oh." This was a light booth. Probably belonging to that Crystal Gem troupe.

Peridot moved seemingly against her will towards the lightboard, watching the tantalizing pinpricks of green and blue light blink on and off. It was like it was winking up at her. With ten eyes, give or take, but the thought all in itself was alluring.

She should get out. She wasn't part of their play group, and she doubted they wanted someone messing with their technologies like a child.
"Oops," Peridot said as her fingers ran over the faders, pulling up the masters until light grandly filled the auditorium behind the glass panel. A rough draft set laid out before her, complemented with simple black-and-white furniture pieces. The props were mundane and unimportant, left on the smooth black vinyl of the stage floor, forgotten by the ghosts of rehearsing actors and actresses.

Peridot's lips pursed. A moment passed where she just watched the lit auditorium, before she belted out a string of maniacal giggles as she began to mess with the other lights. She turned them on and off at random, watching with glee as the lights danced in a way not-so-different than they would in a club.

Not that she'd ever been to one, but, whatever.

She was so entranced by the mutable, off-beat light show that she missed the silhouette that swiftly ran through the auditorium and was now watching her through the shadowed doorway. "Why are you back here?"

"Jesus Christ!"

Peridot flew away from the device, arms flailing and grappling onto the seat of a stool for support. Sadly, the stool had wheels. It careened away under the sudden influx of applied weight and Peridot found herself facefirst on the cool vinyl floor of the room.

"Oops," the stranger in the doorway deadpanned before striding in.

Peridot fumbled around for her glasses which shot off on impact while glaring up at the blurry blue-shadowed intruder. "I have half a mind to-" Words failed her as she begrudgingly threw on her metal frames and the identity of the assailant was revealed.

Through the blue sheen cast by the overhead bulb, the girl with the blue hair from Fish Stew Pizza was standing not a yard away from her, tan arms crossed and expression indiscernible in the half-light. She wore a striped crop-top, torn-up jean shorts and a beanie.

Suddenly, she wanted to wear one too. Peridot swallowed. There goes her loathing for the knit hipster hat.

"Half a mind to...?" Lapis Lazuli's tone was unimpressed, but if Peridot's voice-reading abilities were accurate, she thought she could sense curiosity somewhere in there. But that was just wishful thinking.

Like a fish out of water Peridot's lips fluttered. "Nothing. I'll be going now. I've got a class to get to." She re-positioned her feet on the floor, using the table to aid her as she stumbled back upright. She stiffly pushed her satchel to her thigh. She could feel the taller girl's eyes burning into her.

"Were you considering joining them?"

Peridot looked up, properly viewing Lazuli from a place that wasn't the cold floor. The shadows obscuring her face were less bold here, and she could make out slight traces of her thought process as she glanced down at Peridot. She didn't know why, but the thought of being looked over by this person made her face bubble with heat.

"Joining who? The Crystal Gems?"

"Yeah. You talked to them yesterday."

"Aren't you one of them?" Peridot inquired, confused. She had been at their table, so she must have
been in their troupe. Then again, she had seemed indifferent to the happenings around her. Standoffish, if you would.

A sigh from the blue-haired girl. "I guess you could say that."

"Oh." Peridot nibbled her lip with anxious pension. "Me stumbling in on all this was an accident. There's my reason for being back here."

"Was you messing with the lights also an accident?" Lazuli pressed.

". . . Yes."

Laughter Peridot wouldn't call sweet filled the room, but it definitely lacked the insouciance she'd seen out of Lapis thus far. So that was a good sign. "Right," Lapis smiled when her fit was over with. "Garnet said she told you think it over. Have you?"

"Honestly, I haven't thought about it since leaving the parlor," Peridot told her. "I came to get my bachelor's and get out. Besides. . . theatre really isn't my forte."

"You wouldn't need to act or whatever. Just program looks, cues, and stuff."

Lapis's stance of nonchalance faltered slightly as she drummed her fingers along her freckled arms. Her lips twisted in a way that made her look distressed. "I'm not. I'm only suggesting. It's important that we find someone to work the lights up here."

Peridot sighed and kneaded her temple, brushing a strand of fluffy blonde hair away from her eyes. "What is this. . . Crystal Gems about, anyway? What's a one act play? And for that matter, why is it so hard for you lot to find someone privy with technology?"

Lapis' features lit up. Or Peridot thought they did, it was hard to tell in the bluish darkness. "We specialize in presenting one act plays. It's. . . it's basically one play condensed into a forty-minute production. We have certain time restrictions and a lot of dumb rules to follow but. . . it's an outlet for a lot of people." Lapis shrugged. "Myself included."

"And lights are so important because. . ."

"Have you ever seen a play without lights?"

"Well, no--"

"My point stands. It's important."

"I was going to say I've never seen a play, Lazuli." If she had feathers, Peridot's would probably be ruffled indignantly. That, or they would be swelling to try to coerce a partner. Wait, what?

"Then now's your chance to, and maybe be a part of one," the other retorted before Peridot could finish analyzing that metaphor, leaning against the table and cocking her hip. "And it's Lapis. Never Lazuli."

Peridot's lips twitched into a smirk. "Whatever you say, Lazuli."

"Cheeky," Lapis commented dryly. "Well, I'm not willing to leave until this proves to not be a total waste of my time. What do you say?"
"I say that you would be a horrible campaign advertiser. You didn't even offer me 20% off if I called within the first five minutes."

"I mean about the Crystal Gems, smartass." Lapis pushed her thumbs through the thin gaps of her belt loops. "It would mean the world to some of them."

Peridot lifted a brow. "Would it to you?"

Lapis hummed as she leaned back into the table, nimble hands tightening into fists at her sides. "Maybe."

Signing up for this light person business would be a distraction. A distraction from her studies, and God knew what wild, absurd accusations her mother would throw if she learned that Peridot was associated with something as trivial and pointless as theatre.

But it wasn't like she would be on-stage, right? She wouldn't have to deal with the thousands of eyes boring down on her, judging her, watching her body language and examining each little move she made. She would just need to light up the place for the audience to do the same thing to other people.

"We go to competitions based around our school sizes. We're 6A because this place is massive, so we go around and try to out-drama other 6A schools." Lapis clarified. "We haven't been to State yet, not since our old stage manager graduated my freshman year."

Peridot's brow quirked as she looked out into the glowing theatre. "Losing all your crucial people, huh?"

"Watch it." She pointed a threatening finger at Peridot. "We're still growing and finding all the right ones. We've had a few... unsavory people to deal with lately." Peridot almost missed how Lapis' nimble fingers pressed nervously into her biceps. Her chest began to ache thinking of possible strife that this kind of life could provide for her.

She guessed she could divert the topic if they were beginning to stray onto rocky terrain.

"Are you an actress?" Peridot asked suddenly, surprised by her growing curiosity. She usually was never the one to start things; she finished them, usually with caustic, curt replies that ended all desire to pursue relations.

"Yes. I play the ghost in the mirror," informed Lapis. "Hold on. I think there's an updated script back here from Sour Cream messing around."

"Sour Cream?" Peridot queried as the blue-haired girl moved towards the filing cabinets that lined the wall near the closed hallway door. "Our sound guy. Since he's good with creating music and things, we have him produce and play whatever tracks we use so we don't need to deal with buying licensed crap." Lapis pulled out a blue packet, squinting at the bold title and its respective subscript. "Yeah. Here."

Peridot dumbly took the script from her, holding it up to the light to read its title. Mirror Gem was printed in bold font at the top, and it was authored by some probably dead person called Paul Villeco. "You said you were the ghost?" She checked as she thumbed through the pages and admiring the typewriter font. She was answered by a noncommittal hum.

With lackluster interest she read a few lines. But since she had no idea what it was about, or why this character Abby was crying, or why everyone seemed to be in distress, she closed it and tucked it away into her satchel. "I'll read it later. I've really got to get to class."
Out of nowhere Lapis materialized a royal blue permanent marker and grabbed for Peridot's wrist. She tried to jump away but Lapis was astonishingly quick. Her grip was warmer than Peridot would have imagined, ghosting over her skin and leaving her arm tingling where their skin touched. She scribbled down a number on Peridot's wrist, much to the smaller one's chagrin.

"Here's my number. I guess you could text me if you end up thinking about it," Lapis said as she capped the sharpie and frisked it across Peridot's forehead.

"-Wh- hey!" Peridot tried to snatch the marker away but Lapis was still faster. She stuffed the marker into a pocket and bent down until she was at eye-level with Peridot. "Or you could just text me anyway. You're cute when you're flustered."

Her body temperature increased by at least eighteen degrees. She was glad it was so shadowed in here, or else she might have looked like a ripe tomato behind her lenses. "Excuse me?"

"See you around, Peridot. I've got a prop box to lazily organize." Lapis turned away with a shrug, swaying on her - was she not wearing any shoes? - bare feet as she padded towards the theatre entrance. "And your class," she stopped in the doorway, her bangs falling slightly over her sharp eyes as she sent Peridot one last glimpse. "What was it again?"

Peridot's fingers clenched her brown shoulder strap, rubbing her thumb along the tough fabric. "Fourth year multimedia software development," she muttered.

Lapis whistled thoughtfully. "Wow. It even sounds even nerdier than I thought it would. Next building, lab 14. Better go if it's a nine class, you're gonna be late." She shone her phone briefly to Peridot's face, presenting her with a time that read 8:54.

"Crap!" Peridot rocketed past Lapis, chest tightening with what she hoped was ire as she threw open the closed door. "But, uhm, wow, thanks!"

An amused "whatever" was the last she heard of Lapis as she rushed down the hallways as quickly as her leg let her. When she stopped at the main double glass doors that sat all the way on the other end, she spared one last look to the light booth entryway.

A shadow loomed just within the dim light of the room, and if she squinted she was sure that the fluff around the head was blue. Was Lapis watching her leave?

The weight of the script in her bag seemed to amplify. Peridot forced herself out the doors with a captivated shudder and darted over to the next building. She managed to clock into the room a minute before the doors would shut and class would start.

She scrambled into an available seat near the back of the computer lab, turning the machine on and staring at the screen as it bloomed to life.

Peridot stared at the numbers scrawled in bright blue marker on her wrist for the whole lesson.

Chapter End Notes

Peridot, that feeling? It's called gay. Say it with me now. "Gaaaaaaay."
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Peridot is coaxed into attending a bonfire with Sadie, and finds out it's hosted by none other than the Crystal Gems. She learns a little about them by the time the blazing night is over.

Chapter Notes

I've decided that I'll try to post chapters every two to three days! Key word, try!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The rest of Peridot's week was a blur of getting familiar with course syllabuses, getting assigned books, and even beginning an essay due by next Tuesday on the history of modern mechanics. Thank you, professor of the honors engineering class, for wanting his students to get a few extra grey hairs by the time they can walk the carpet.

When she wasn't pouring over something about the fundamentals of machinery or software in the campus library, she was either hiding away in her dorm and messing around on her laptop.

Her last Friday class had just ended, and an exhausted Peridot was watching a popular Twitch user stream Overwatch. She laid on her stomach, oversized jeans swallowing her feet while her sharp chin was propped up on her extended palm.

It was nearing seven o'clock. Grey light seeped lethargically in through the dual windows at the top of the wall across from the door, filling the room with dusty shadows and a duskiness that vaguely reminded Peridot of her moment with Lapis Lazuli in the light booth.

The revelation that she'd actually stayed and talked with her, managing witty conversation instead of her usual bitter deference, hit her when she'd returned to the room that night. She'd stared at the now slightly slurred sharpie on her arm for what felt like hours before Sadie came in.

Thinking of the blue-haired girl made her chest ache. She hadn't texted her yet. She had long since washed the marker from her wrist, but even when she did she had been hesitant to do so. At least her number was stored in her short contacts list, alongside her mother's number as well as Sadie's.

She really wasn't exaggerating when she thought about just how small and pitiful her number of successful relationships were. If you counted interacting with a cold, uninvolved mother with an equally hostile attitude a successful relationship.

Peridot's eyes drifted from the screen and onto the untouched Mirror Gem script that laid on the desk. She'd put it there when she had gotten back to the dorm on Monday, and unless she was staring directly at it, forgotten about it entirely. It goaded her, silently prompting her to snatch up the papers and scan over the screenplay to see what all the holler was about.
Still, she could never muster up the will to flip past the cover page.

The small girl groaned and rolled onto her side, facing her wall as the door clicked open and Sadie walked in. "Hey Peridot," she greeted cordially. "Done with classes for the week?"

"Thankfully," Peridot muttered into her comforter, balling the fabric up in her fists and pulling it up to her chin. She pivoted her gaze over to where Sadie was ditching her bag on her desk and throwing on a jean jacket. "Going somewhere?"

Sadie began to roll up the denim sleeves, sending Peridot a curious smile. "There's gonna be a bonfire on the beach tonight. Lars invited me to go with him and the rest of his friends."

"Sadie, I keep telling you-"

"He's a good guy. Even if he can be a jerk to some people," Sadie interrupted before Peridot could chastise any further. "I came back to grab a jacket and ask if you wanted to come with. It'll be good! Especially after a tough week."

Peridot exhaled through her nostrils contemptuously. "Bonfires sound barbaric," she mumbled into her arm. "Plus, I hate walking on sand."

Sadie's face softened with sympathy. "You can stay by the boardwalk then. You don't have to get in the sand." She didn't press any further, instead focusing on refastening the laces in her boots. "I'm gonna drive out there. You sure you don't wanna come?"

Peridot weighed her options. Her mechanics essay was only half-done, three out of the designated six pages typed up in impeccable MLA format. It was true that she hadn't done anything particularly riveting in her time at the university. She'd gone to her classes, did her best to remember to eat under the hours of work, and hid away in her dorm for the rest of the time. Sure, she had maybe spared a few glances at the students around her, but she definitely hadn't made any move to get social with any of them.

But thinking of Lapis made her think that she had a chance. Her mind was made.

"I'll come with," Peridot gave in. "But I'm not going to get in any sand. That stuff's hell to walk in."

"That's fair," reasoned her roommate. "Let's go before it gets too dark."

Peridot slid off of her comforters and changed her outfit. She ditched the dark tank top she had on and keenly replaced it with a black X-Files t-shirt, and hesitated before throwing on her flannel. She grabbed up her satchel for good measure, but not before sliding the Mirror Gem script under the flap, meeting Sadie out in the hall as the latter jangled her keys knowingly.

The ride to the beach front was uneventful. They talked mostly about what they'd done that day, what professors made their skin crawl and who had fallen asleep over their notebooks within the first three minutes of class. Peridot began snickering when she learned that Sadie's neighbor had brought a terrier puppy into class, hiding it behind a binder stood upright. "It kept crawling over to me the whole time!" Sadie divulged gleefully. "I think it smelled the sandwich I had in my bag."

When they pulled into the lot that sat beside the boardwalk, twilight had just ended and night had begun to unfold. The billowing orange flames of the bonfire and the crowd of college students congregated around it stuck out like a sore thumb in the middle of the night-shrouded beach.

Peridot exited the car with Sadie, walking the sand-crusted floorboards of the pier until she stood on the edge. "I can hang with you if you really don't wanna go over there," Sadie offered kindly upon
noticing the amputee's reluctance. "No, you go," Peridot replied. "If you come back to pity me, I'll make it so that you can't stand me."

The thickset girl shrugged. "Okay. I'll catch you later!"

For a while, things passed without incident. Peridot found a bench to lean back and mess with her phone on, indifferent to the chorus of probably drunk voices rising from the crackling bonfire not far from her. She wasn't sure when the resilient coating in her chest began to peel away, rewriting the unwillingness to participate into a sour longing instead.

But she needed a certain catalyst to lure her over.

"You look kinda lonely over here."

"Crap. She knew that voice."

Peridot dropped her phone between her legs, neck craning to watch Lapis Lazuli sway through the sand towards her. The taller girl hopped onto the boardwalk, dipping over the backside of the bench to gaze at Peridot. The distant light of the fire cast an amber glow over her the left side of her face. "Why aren't you over there with all the people?"

"Why do I never see you in the light?" Not the ideal response to that question, Peridot decided exactly two seconds after it came out. Not that it wasn't somewhat true; any genuine interaction with this girl had been in a dark light booth, and now, an equally dark night.

Lapis' eyes became half-lidded as she regarded Peridot, lips curling into a sly smile. "Do you want to? Then come over to the fire with me."

Peridot was glad her voice was caught somewhere in her throat, or else the squeak she let out might have been audible. "You mean the bonfire?" She asked, pointing over to the blaze shrouded with singing people. "I don't know..."

"Well, you aren't here just to admire the scenery."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I don't." Lapis came around and grabbed onto Peridot's small hand. She paused when the smaller girl stood. "'I want to believe'? Really?" Lapis smirked, pointing with her free hand at Peridot's t-shirt. Peridot shrugged.

Her feet carried her mindlessly after Lapis as they approached the edge of the boardwalk, hands fumbling to pocket her cellphone and mind fumbling as they got closer to the sand.

"Is there a way to participate without, uh, walking in the sand?" She tried.

"Who said anything about participating? We're just going over by the fire." Lapis dropped down into the sandbank, the impact sending up tiny particles that glinted in the firelight. Peridot steeled herself, puffing her chest as she took a stride into the sand. The uneven terrain made her lose balance temporarily, and for an instant she feared she would face-plant into the grainy stuff.

Fate was on her side for once, and she ended up wandering after Lapis, mind instead focusing on how they were still holding hands.

"All right, folks!" A loud, rough voice boomed over the roar of the stereo box and indistinct drivel. Peridot watched as Amethyst, the lavender-haired girl from the pizza place, climbed up onto a
boulder to address the party. "We've gotta liven this up! No more just mopin' around- show me you're havin' a good time! . . . Or, get thrown in the fire." Her demand was followed by a boisterous uproar from the people around the bonfire as beer bottles were clinked and cheered.

Peridot, however, didn't share their delight. "She's joking, right?" She asked, stumbling to a halt when Lapis halted a few feet away from the foot of the flames.

"She could be," Lapis answered dismissively, fixing Peridot with a lazy jester-like smile. "Wouldn't be the first time she's threatened to throw someone into a fire."

"Oh," was the only response Peridot could make. Admittedly, it was much brighter here than it was on the bench. And. . . Stars, she suddenly wished she had brought the lights to their full potential in the light booth.

Lapis' tan face glowed warmly in the firelight, each individual freckle sprayed across her nose, cheeks, and jawline looking like the embers springing up from the crackling logs. Her blue hair swayed lightly in the soft wind carried in from the sea, and if it was Lapis or the ocean filling her nose with the scent of sea foam, Peridot wasn't entirely sure.

"Better, huh?" She asked, letting go of Peridot's hand to cross her arms over her chest.

As soon as their fingers detached Peridot's hands flew to her sides, trying to indiscreetly swipe the sweat onto her jeans. Were her hands always this clammy? No wonder Lapis wanted to let them go!

Or maybe it was just because they were two students who had met a total of three times now and not had more than thirty minutes of interaction between them.

No, it was undeniably because her hands were clammy.

"I suppose it is," Peridot conceded as she turned her eyes from Lapis to the fire.

Lapis hummed. "You haven't texted me yet. I guess that's a sign you aren't interested."

A pink blush crept onto Peridot's cheeks. "No! I mean, I'm interested- I just haven't had the time to-"

"So you've read the script?"

"Huh- oh my God, you meant the play." Peridot's face deepened in colour. "Interested in the play. Yes. Definitely, I am interested in the play." Anxiety ballooned in her stomach, like the anticipation of waiting for the roller coaster to peak and begin the speedy descent, as she watched Lapis for a reaction. If she caught onto Peridot's fumble, she didn't let it show.

A quiet chuckle rose from somewhere behind them, and the two girls glanced behind to see Garnet coming to them from across the way. The fire bounced off of her sunglasses, which Peridot thought were highly inappropriate for the nightly setting. "Hello, Peridot. Long time no see."

"It's only been a few days," Peridot corrected.

" Doesn't mean that it can't feel like a long time," the large woman mused as she stopped before them, regarding the short one with a knowing smile.

"She says she's read Mirror Gem," Lapis chipped in, signaling to Peridot with an expectant, sweetly smile. "You're interested, aren't you?"

Peridot hadn't read a word of the script. But if she could play along and pretend that she knew what
they were talking about, maybe she could save herself the humiliation of her initial vocal screw-up. "Y-Yeah."

"That's great news. Though I do warn you, Peridot, that becoming part of the Crystal Gems is a huge responsibility." Garnet fixed her aviators. "Everyone will depend on you."

A bead of sweat trickled down Peridot's temple and it wasn't from the heat of the bonfire.

"But the experience of one act play is something that can never be replaced. It's special. You won't find anything like it ever again." Garnet motioned towards a tight cluster of partygoers, where they could see Amethyst zealously goading Pearl on as she timidly cracked open a beer. Close to them, a larger group meshed together, singing drunkenly, led by Sardonyx from Peridot's communications class. When she caught Peridot's eye, she winked, raised her drink, and let out a happy cheer of "ohoho!" that the friends around her jovially reciprocated.

"Are they all Crystal Gems?" Peridot squinted, watching as a small chubby boy with dark, curly hair emerge from behind Pearl, cheeks glowing. A taller little girl followed him, laughing as they tripped over one another and were engulfed by sand.

"Most are," Garnet nodded. "But a few are friends that were invited along. Like your friend Sadie. We host a monthly bonfire in remembrance of Rose Quartz, the founder of Beach City University's one act play foundation."

"Where is she, then?" Peridot asked, scanning the fire-flecked throng.

"She's no longer with us."

Culpability flooded Peridot, replacing the sensation in her face with a mind-numbing guilt. "I'm sorry. But it's- it's nice. That you guys do this."

"Mm. Don't be sorry, be glad instead. Rose left behind so much that it's better to celebrate it instead of mourn it," Garnet appeased, taking Peridot's shoulder under her firm palm. "I hope to see more of you soon, Peridot," she smiled down at her, before saying good-bye to Lapis and returning to the clamor of crooning college students.

"Wow," Peridot breathed when Garnet phased seamlessly into the crowd. "She should have her own book of motivational quotes."

Lapis snorted. "Tell me about it. But she wasn't lying, about any of that."

"About the experience?"

The blue-haired girl nodded softly, eyes shining as she stared into the fire. "It's a family. People you can turn to when it feels like there's nothing and no one left for you." Lapis' thumb stroked her arm, lips brooding. "It's really worth the shot if you're considering it."

Peridot's hand rested over her knapsack where the play script sat, feeling a thousand words and feelings compile in her chest, unable to format into a proper sentence to reply with. Would she admit that she hadn't even gotten past the cover page?

With the way Lapis was glancing at her through the corners of her eyes, it was hard to keep lying. "Erm. I actually haven't read the script. At all. It's kind of evaded me since you gave it to me."

Lapis twirled around to face her, hand drawing through her mop of hair. "I guessed as much," she admitted with a smirk. "Wh- What?" Peridot stammered. "Then why did you tell Garnet I read it?"
"Like I said, you're cute flustered."

A growl rumbled in Peridot's throat as she tucked her chin into her shirt, fists rising up to hide her bright cheeks. "You're insufferable."

"Thank you." Lapis wrapped her fingers around Peridot's wrist and led her over to the red Coleman chest, lunging for two cold ones before Peridot could get a word in edgewise. "Now here, this may help you make that decision about joining."

The chilled bottle stung against her palms. "I don't really drink," the shorter girl pointed out, glowering at the beer with evident skepticism. "And isn't it considered cheating if you get me drunk and have me agree to this while my judgment's all flawed?"

"No. That's how I joined OAP."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Come on, take a drink with me, you coward," Lapis crowed, crouching and falling onto her bottom as she stretched out her toes in the sand. "If not to OAP, then to us. Or whatever." A very dramatic sigh fell from Peridot's lips as she followed suit and sat back beside Lapis, facing away from the mass of people and instead looking directly ahead at the blazing bonfire.

She hesitantly popped the bottle open, taking a nervous swig. It wasn't her first experience with alcohol, but she still didn't fancy the way it rolled down her throat and left the awful tang in her mouth. She didn't hate the warm feeling that began to accumulate after her fourth sip, however.

"I never saw stars like this at Empire," Peridot commented after a few minutes of comfortable silence. That one of the few truths she'd said today.

Lapis followed Peridot's gaze up to the stars, where constellations and faraway galaxies sparkled valiantly on without the deluge of urban smog. It was like a canvas, where the painter had grown impatient with blotting each individual star and just decided to splatter the piece with white speckles of paint. "Really?"

"Really. The sky was always so full of smoke and all these other chemicals that can't possibly be good for the environment." Peridot snickered. "The air is cleaner here, too."

"I've never been. Sounds like I didn't miss out on much," Lapis murmured around the glass rim of her bottle. "What made you want to come to BCU?"

"The engineering courses, primarily," disclosed Peridot. "There was an alleged scam which plummeted Empire State's programs into the ground. I wasn't going to take a sub-par class taught by an English professor thrown into the job because the school couldn't find another mechanic. So, here I am."

"Here you are." They both took drank.

"What about you, Lazuli?" Peridot asked. "Do you come from here?"

"No, I lived in Hawaii for the longest time, before moving to California. Then I came here for school." Lapis leaned back into the sand, folding an arm behind her head while the other played with her bottle.

Peridot blinked with astonishment. "Hawaii? Was it nice there?"
"Nicer than it is in Delmarva. But I'm glad I left." Lapis eyed the remainder of the rich liquid inside before downing the rest and turning to Peridot with a leisurely simpler. "How about we play a game?"

"Err," the blonde started. "What kind of game?"

"How about... flip, sip, or strip?"

Lapis must have noticed all the colour drain from Peridot's face, because she began laughing. The only thing grounding the amputee and keeping her from fainting were the natural snorts that dappled the other girl's laugh.

"Okay, not that one. We'd need a couple more people for it anyway. Never have I ever?"

"That's more appropriate," Peridot sniffed, gazing into her bottle and watching the golden drink slosh around.

"Great. I'll go first." Lapis rolled off of her back and shook some of the sand from her black crop top, fixing an aloof bra strap. "Never have I ever believed in aliens."

There went Peridot's certainty that she wouldn't be getting drunk tonight. With an accusatory frown, she drunk from her bottle. "That was uncalled for," she remarked after burn of the alcohol buzzed away. But now it was her turn. "Never have I ever..." She looked at the bottle in her hand. "Been drunk."

Lapis put her bottle up to her lips before she remembered it was empty. "Oops. No beer left. My turn."

"That's not fair!" Objected Peridot, throwing her arms up into the air childishly. "Guh-fine, take some of mine, then." She offered Lapis her bottle.

Lapis waggled her finger in Peridot's displeased face. "Nope. I'm just gonna go grab a few more. We're gonna need 'em if we're gonna play this properly." Before Peridot could protest Lapis bounced onto her feet and returned to the Coleman. She returned with three iced beers, swinging them around like one would a trophy prize.

"Great, more risk of long-term alcoholism," Peridot sniffed as she took a beverage from Lapis and laid in the sand between them. Lapis let out a mocking scoff as she snapped one open and put away a good quarter of the bottle. "My turn again. Never have I ever read fanfiction."

An offended gasp escaped Peridot. "You have it out to get me," she hissed as she downed another swig of the stuff, grimacing. "Good thing I'm dumb enough to play your stupid game, Lazuli."

"It's Lapis. And I have no idea what you're talking about," the other purred, bringing her knees up to her chest and resting her chin over them with a wicked smile. "This is a game between two friends. Now come on, your turn."

"Err, uhhm, never have I ever... been part of a play group! Ha!"

"Now you're just playing dirty."

"Consider it returning the favor," countered the blonde.

Lapis chortled and took a drink. "Okay. Never have I ever screamed at a twelve year old over Call of Duty."
"These is getting very specific."

"Have you?"

"... Fine." Peridot took a discontent sip, making flippant eye contact with the tan girl the whole time. Already she was out of questions to ask Lapis, so she turned to her surroundings for help. Fire pit, people, sand, abandoned beer bottles... ocean?

"Never have I ever swam in the ocean."

The tipsy mirth on Lapis' face broke so quickly that Peridot questioned if it was even there to begin with. With a certain ambiguity, Lapis stared into her drink before slowly, hesitantly taking a sip and looking out towards the dark waters.

It was a new moon, so it was outrageously dark out aside from the pinpricks of the stars and the light of the fire. The closest waves that crashed onto the beach whispered with streaks of yellow light, while the others stretching out into the horizon loomed black with ominous promise.

"Let's play something else," Lapis whispered to her knees, setting her drink down beside her and focusing back on Peridot. Her brown eyes were glassy.

Peridot's eyes broadened as she inspected Lapis' face, trying to read any scrap of emotion, anything. But a wall had been put up that was so guarded that all she could make out was the underlying need for immediate distraction, a feeling she was familiar enough with to detect.

Something about the ocean had put her off her edge, so maybe they should divert to something like... .

"How about you tell me some more about the Crystal Gems? We'll see if my judgment's been shrouded by alcohol yet."

Lapis regarded Peridot, dark eyes swimming with unreadable thought. The quiet that blossomed between them had just reached a tense pique before Lapis scooted closer. "What do you want to know?"

Peridot whistled across the rim of her newly opened bottle, relishing in the sonorous chime that the exhale elicited. "Humor me."

"We're colourful, I guess. There's a lot of different people with equally different backstories, personalities. It's just some big..." Lapis cupped her chin. "What's a good word to describe a mess of things that kind of come together nicely?"

"An amalgamation?"

Lapis bumped Peridot's shoulder. "Impressive. You must've been reading a Webster's instead of the script. But, yeah. An amalgamation of people and things that just find themselves in each other. I only joined last year, but there are people here that have been together since grade school. Like Stevonnie and Smoky, they've always been there for each other."

"Which ones are they?" Peridot asked, pointing at the crowd.

"They're over by Amethyst. The one in the bomber jacket is Stevonnie, and the one with thick hair and red jacket beside them is Smoky." Indeed, the two were side-by-side, making fun conversation with a tall, slim woman with long bleach-blonde hair. "Who are they talking to?"
"Opal."

"Amethyst really wasn't kidding when she said the number of rock names was unconventional," mused Peridot as she took a listless sip. "This is uncanny."

"It is the Crystal Gems," shrugged Lapis.

"You got me there." The blonde frowned. "It's like a magnet, attracting all the people with gems for names."

"We have a few who aren't." Lapis splayed her legs out, sending a spray of the grainy stuff onto Peridot's jeans. The victim sputtered as the assailant blithely continued. "Actually, we even... I mean technically he isn't part of the troupe, but he's still a Crystal Gem. Steven."

She pointed out the small boy Peridot had been observing earlier. "He doesn't look like a college student," Peridot stated bluntly.

"That's because he isn't. But he's Rose Quartz's son. After she passed, his dad couldn't afford to take care of him... so Pearl took custody of him. The theatre is his second home now, and he loves it. And we all love him too. He's a really nice kid." A soft smile played across the Hawaiian's lips as she watched Steven throw beach kindle into the flames. Peridot's heart fluttered.

"Wow," she murmured. A silence stretched between them against, but this time it lacked the strain and flourished in fondness. But that could have been the alcohol working its magical strings of social euphoria.

"You know what." Peridot set down her drink and lifted her hand. "I think I'll start reading it tonight. The script, that is."

Lapis' eyes met hers, shining intensely in the firelight. "And you'll start texting me after forgetting to for four days?"

"... Sure. I can do that too," Peridot awkwardly smiled, before her eyes brightened with realization. "Oh! Hold on, I brought the script with me!"

Lapis watched with inclining interest as Peridot threw her leather satchel off and unclasped the flap, digging out the blue screenplay with a victorious cluck of her tongue.

"And here I thought you couldn't surprise me anymore. Let's get reading." Lapis crawled closer and flipped the cover page of Mirror Gem.

The two read until the fire had toned down. Students left in clusters, off to loiter further down the boardwalk or just gone home to sleep. Peridot hadn't realized how much time had passed until Sadie sleepily came over to retrieve Peridot. They were only pages from the ending, and knowing that Lapis was responsible for playing the phantom who haunted the Leroux family home, Peridot was hesitant to put the script down. She wanted to see how the young protagonist Blake freed her spirit!

"You can finish later, right? We're only heading back to the dorm before campus security gets snippy with us for returning too late," Sadie argued when Peridot voiced her concerns.

"She's right. I should be getting back, too," Lapis concurred, standing up and scraping sand from her shorts and legs. "My roommate said she'd lock me out if I wasn't back by midnight."

Peridot groaned and put the script back in her bag. "Will you be busy tomorrow?" She asked Lapis, grunting with effort as Sadie assisted her in climbing up onto her feet, sending the empty beer bottles
around them scattering.

"No, I don't have any classes Saturday. Besides, I'm expecting at least half of a hangover in the morning," Lapis mused. "Why?"

Peridot flushed. "No reason! Come on, Sadie, let's head back."

Peridot waved to Lapis as they started across the sand and onto the boardwalk. She couldn't explain the effervescent sensation in her chest, growing warmer and stronger with every step.

"You two got along well," Sadie trilled as they entered the vehicle. "What were you two talking about the whole time? You were practically glued to each other."

"Nothing big," Peridot sighed as she leaned back into the embrace of the peach-scented passenger seat. "But I might have just accidentally joined the Crystal Gems."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaa, I'm so glad this story is getting good reception! I've been super excited to write it for the longest time now. Happy reading!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Peridot spends the day with Lapis and makes to a defining choice by the end of her venture.

Chapter Notes

With my three-day weekend being over. . . updates won't be daily like they have been, oops. I'll try for every two/three days like I said!

Peridot learned two things that night.

One, she was really enjoying Lapis Lazuli's company.

And two, alcohol didn't sit exceptionally well with her. She didn't wake with a hangover like the legendary tales of college grandeur foretold, but her throat and stomach felt like she had ingested a box of nails in one regretful sitting.

She decided she would try to focus on the first thing.

When she was jolted out of the safe confines of slumber, it wasn't by Take On Me or even Sadie shuffling around. It was her phone buzzing with a text from none other than Lazuli herself.

Lazuli [10:24am]: guess who got your number from a now probably untrustworthy friend

Peridot squinted through the harsh morning light pouring in through the windows as she glared knives over at the only possible candidate's bed. Which was, luckily for Sadie, empty of its usual inhabitant. She remembered that Sadie had a part-time job at some place in town to help pay for her books.

With a bemused grumble Peridot thumbed out an impudent reply to Lapis, falling back to snuggle half of her face into the cushion of her green pillow.

Peridot [10:25am]: The aliens who are finally here to rescue me?

Lazuli [10:25am]: you wish. wanted to know if you wanted to have breakfast? im hungover and have the munchies

"Like I should have expected anything else," Peridot worried her lip as she thought of all that she had planned for the day. She had finished reading Mirror Gem when they got back to the room, Peridot hiding under her covers after ditching her leg on the desk and using her phone as a light source.

Truth be told, she was dying to pour her thoughts onto Lapis, revealing her rough analysis of the
production and projecting her own thoughts about how Blake was obviously the backbone of the household. Honestly, the only reason Abby and Robyn didn't tear each other limb from limb was their youngest sibling's team spirit!

**Peridot [10:26am]**: That tends to happen when you drink more than what's necessary.

**Lazuli [10:27am]**: do you wanna go get donuts or no

**Peridot [10:27am]**: You're gonna have to take me there. I don't know my way around town just yet.

**Lazuli [10:28am]**: gotcha. what's your room numb

**Peridot [10:28am]**: C17.

**Lazuli: [10:30am]**: be there at eleven. get dressed. or dont, idc it's donuts not caesars palace

**Peridot [10:30am]**: Ha-ha. See you soon.

Peridot snorted and rolled out from under the safety of her sheets, cringing when she felt sand crunch beneath her weight. "I really should have showered before deciding to lay down on this thing," she sourly cursed, balancing on her foot as she flapped her sheets in a disheartened manner. With a sigh she attached her prosthetic, swiping it clean of any grit that might have clung to it overnight, before grabbing some clothes and marching towards the bathrooms to shower and change.

Some primal part of her was telling her to look nice for her breakfast excursion with Lapis. Something about impressing her. But Lapis was coming over hungover probably, and definitely going to be showing up in pajamas if Peridot could assume anything about the mysterious girl with the blue hair.

Peridot didn't care about her physical appearance. That was her mother's job.

She thought this over as she scrubbed her dense head of blonde with Old Spice, frowning at her prosthetic that she had tucked in the corner, with its appropriate plastic cover to prevent it from getting damaged by the hot water. She dried herself, clicked her leg back on, before throwing on her lazy choice of clothing.

Black ripped men's jeans, just wide enough near the cuffs to give the illusion of two real legs rather than one, were hoisted up around her waist. She tossed on a graphic tee and threw her old grey hoodie over it. She hastily shoved on some black vans before walking out of the stall and back to her room.

When she arrived, a girl in dark pajama shorts, black tee, and a dark blue flannel tied around her waist was hovering at her door, a frown on her face as she knocked.

"I don't think anyone's home," Peridot helpfully commented as Lapis, surprised, twisted around to see the shorter girl walking down the hall. "I didn't take you as the type to come early."

"There's a lot that you don't know about me," Lapis remarked as Peridot slid past her and opened the room, stepping in to retrieve her wallet and phone. She had three missed texts and a call from Lapis. "Really?" Peridot asked, showing her notifications to Lapis. She shrugged.

"Your dorm is kinda empty," said Hawaiian added as Peridot tucked her laptop safely away into her satchel and hoisted the bag over her shoulder.

"It's only been a week since we moved in. Plus," Peridot swept past under Lapis' nose and clicked
the door shut behind her. "I consider myself a minimalist in terms of decoration."

"All right, a minimalist. More fun words I get to look up while we make idle talk over donuts." Lapis clapped her hands together and started down the hallway with an indignant Peridot trailing after her. "You really don't know what a minimalist is?"

"I was joking."

Peridot sighed with relief. "Naturally," she huffed with forced amusement. "So... where is it that we're going?"

"You'll see. It's a little ways into town so we can just take the bus. I don't feel like biking all the way there." Lapis regarded Peridot as she pushed through the dormitory entrance and strolled down the stone steps. "But I guess you could fit between the handlebars if you-"

"No, bus is fine. Bus is good. And, bus is not nearly going to be as humiliating as riding on a bike's handlebars," the blonde shushed Lapis with a snap of her thumb and ring finger. There was no way in hell that Peridot would subject herself to that kind of degradation. Not without some very solid and pertinent reasons to.

They boarded the university bus, catching it in the last twenty seconds and Peridot went to find seats near the back while Lapis told the driver their desired stop. Peridot was already tugging out the script of Mirror Gem when Lapis flopped down beside her, making a crude comment about how she would positively kill for anything chocolatey.

"I wouldn't advise that. It'll land you in prison," Peridot retorted good-naturedly as she quavered the blue script in Lapis' face. "But this! You didn't tell me that the ending was so... stellar! I feel personally offended! Blake's resilience to help the ghost despite their family's ignorance! The resolve! Even the parenthetical effects in the italicized text make it stand out!"

"Oh my God, Peridot, shut up. You're shouting." Lapis' hand flew over Peridot's excitedly moving jaw, and just to be petty Peridot considered licking it. She thought better of it, though, and instead ducked away from the light brown hand with a beaming grin. "I'm not going to apologize. This really is a great read, but I wonder if the Crystal Gem's performance of it will be just as spectacular."

Lapis' lips became downcast. "Are you doubting our acting skill?"

Peridot's face was pulled into an expression of apprehension. "Not exactly," she reworded herself. "I've always held doubt in the translation of print into live action. I mean, have you seen the Percy Jackson live adaptations?" She scoffed from the sheer embarrassment those directors must have been exposed to. "They're horrible!"

Lapis' blank look answered Peridot. "The point being, call me a skeptic about this kind of stuff."

"I think you'd be surprised. We're hoping to go to state competition this year, and we've all been working hard to get it." Lapis stretched over and plucked the script from Peridot's pale hands, ignoring her squeak of protest. "But, we still do need that lights person to be able to qualify for a clinic."

"Clinic?"

"A... practice-run of a competition, almost. A judge who'll judge the real thing watches us run through the play once and then critiques us on what we need to fix and what we should focus on." Lapis absentmindedly thumbed through the script and paused on the page where the ghost she played makes her first appearance. "We're pretty good about finding that out ourselves but it never
Peridot hummed her assent. "That's justifiable." She paused, before shifting so that her body faced Lapis. "So you really can't find another person to work lights for you? One would think that with such a large school someone ought to be interested."

Lapis chuckled. "Believe me, we've been looking for a while. We've had a few freshmen sniffing around but they got scared away by Garnet. She likes you. I think."

Peridot emitted a long, deep breath. "I thought about it a bit last night. I think I'd be willing to give it a shot if I got to see what it's like beforehand. The OAP program."

"Are you serious?" Lapis pivoted fully to lean down towards Peridot, making the smaller girl shrink back into the flesh of the bus seat with a nervous "yes?"

"That's great!" She threw the script back at Peridot, who made a grab for it before it could flutter onto the dirty bus floor. Her initial glee dampened as she noted Peridot's fluster, and pulled herself back with an embarrassed hum. "Sorry. I was really hoping you'd join in the end."

"Were you really?"

"Hmm. Yeah. It'll be nice to have a new face around." Now it was Lapis' turn to flush a deeper hue, waving a hand dismissively as the other coursed through her thick blue bangs. "I mean, we have two other rookies this year, but I don't know either of them very well."

"You don't know me very well."

"That's not really true. What about the heart-to-heart we had last night?"

"That was a drinking game, not an episode of Dr. Phil."

Lapis giggled and sunk back into the bus seat, letting the cushions envelop her as she raised her bare legs and planted them on the back of the seat before them. "Okay. Whatever."

Peridot conspicuously narrowed her eyes at Lapis' bare feet. "Do you ever wear shoes?" She asked, jabbing her index into Lapis' speckled shoulder. "You're gonna step on glass one day and I'm going to be standing in the hospital bay area with a sign saying 'I Told You So'."

"Unless it's absolutely necessary, no." Lapis moved her right leg closer to Peridot, sending the blonde reeling to the window to avoid being touched by the bare skin with an aggrieved hiss. "Shoes are a detriment to society."

"Do you get kicked out of libraries often?" Grieved Peridot as she pressed against the window to avoid the foot-touch.

"Only sometimes. The trick is to avoid the conservative old ladies."

The rest of the ride was calmer. Lapis did eventually let Peridot breathe a sigh of relief by tucking her feet under her legs. She shared little facts about certain landmarks they passed, such as Dead Man's Mouth and even began to explain the mysteries of the huge lighthouse on the hill.

"People used to tell me that aliens tried invading here once," Lapis was telling Peridot as they climbed off of the bus and onto the Beach City Pier. "That's why there's a huge crater in the cliff."

"Oh puh-lease," Peridot scoffed. "If aliens did come to invade, they would be more intelligent than
that! They'd use something called *stealth* to infiltrate our atmosphere. Smashing into a cliff would be ridiculous."

"But the idea of alien life isn't?"

"No."

Eventually the two honed in on the Big Donut, a small brick building adorned with window canopies that supported a huge sprinkled donut structure. Upon entry, Peridot's mouth began to water as the delectable scent of appetizing pastries and baked goodies swamped her senses.

"Welcome to the Big Donut, how can I he- oh! Peridot, Lapis!"

Sadie was behind the counter, sporting a periwinkle polo t-shirt with the store's logo printed on its front. Peridot inhaled with surprise. "Did you two *plan* this?" She accused, pointing a threatening finger at Sadie as she stormed up to the counter in her very intimidating 5'2 frame.

"First you give her my number, and now you work at the donut place!"

Sadie only laughed and took out a scrap of flimsy paper and clicked on a black pen. "What can I say? You two looked like you were getting along so well last night."

"I've been betrayed." Peridot grabbed at her chest before draping her free arm dramatically over her glasses. "I'll never trust again. How could you do this to me?"

"You didn't seem particularly unhappy about it when I texted you," Lapis cut in from behind, approaching and leaning on the cool marble counter as she mulled over her options. "I'll take a Boston creme, and a . . . blueberry. And another blueberry for luck because I'm kinda drunk and gonna really want it later."

Sadie jotted the order down before turning to Peridot. "How about you, roomie?"

Peridot glowered at the mouthwatering racks of pastries behind Sadie, eyes latching onto a peculiar row of greenish snacks. "Are those key lime donuts?"

Sadie followed Peridot's gesturing hand behind her. "Yeah. Limited time. No one's been real interested in them so far. You want one?" Peridot nodded dutifully. "Two please. I can't imagine why anyone fails to see the superiority that is *key lime,*" she scorned as she pulled out her wallet to trade a few bills for the bag of green delights. "Thank you."

"No problem," Sadie mused, tucking the paper into a jar halfway filled with crumpled sticky notes. "You two gonna eat here?"

"Actually, we're eating outside," Peridot decided for them. "I'm still distraught over your betrayal of my trust. And it's a nice day out."

"Have a nice day you two," the stout blonde waved good-bye as Lapis and Peridot drifted out the door, the bell chiming its own farewell as they stepped out into the open. Lapis was already hungrily tearing into the blueberry donut, while Peridot was eyeing her own choice with tasteful regard.

"Are you really upset with Sadie for sending me your number?" Lapis mouthed to her, swiping a smudge of carolina-blue frosting from the edge of her lips with her thumb.

"No, of course not," Peridot said as she nibbled the edge of her first pastry. "Haven't you ever heard of banter?"
"Never." Lapis stuffed the rest of the donut between her cheeks and chewed as she pulled out her phone. Her eyes widened and Peridot followed her visage behind them where a few members of the Crystal Gems were running up behind them.

"Yo, yo, what's up Lapis! And Peridactyl, too!" Amethyst slapped Peridot hard on the back, provoking a yelp of alarm as she clenched her paper bag closer to her body. She was slightly shorter than Peridot, the blonde realized with a blink of shock, but her minutely sense of pride was squashed when Pearl flew up with the little boy Steven in tow.

"I apologize for Amethyst," the tall peach-haired woman sighed, rubbing her temple with a nervous twitter of laughter. "She spotted you two ahead of us."

"Hi Lapis! Hi stranger!" Steven, Peridot remembered, came running up from behind Pearl and threw his arms around Lapis' waist. He looked up at Peridot, and again she felt the rush of pride that she was a few inches taller than someone. Granted, Steven was an adolescent, not an adult. It was the thought that counts.

"Hi Steven," Lapis laughed, patting the boy's thick head of dark brown curls. Steven giggled and pulled back, looking curiously up at Peridot. "What's your name?"

Peridot found it easier than normal to put a smile on her face in the boy's presence, regardless of how puny it may have been. "Peridot. And I take it your name's Steven."

"Yup! I thought I saw you at the bonfire last night - that was you, right? The girl who Lapis was with all night!"

Colour flushed both of the girls' cheeks, and Amethyst elbowed Pearl's side with a knowing chortle. "Yep. That's her, all right. So, Peri, what'dya think about the Crystal Gems? Garnet told us you gave it some thought so what's the holdup?"

"What Amethyst means is that if you were considering joining us, we'd be glad to show you the ropes as soon as possible," rectified Pearl, placing a slender hand over her friend's head. "We were just heading back to the theatre. There's extra space in my suburban if you'd like to join us?"

Peridot glanced up at Lapis, whose eyes were at half-mast. "It's up to you," the blue-haired girl said as she pulled out her Boston creme. "If we do, eat fast because Pearl will not let you eat in her car."

"For good reason!" Pearl defended with her hands poised on her thin hips. "All food and drink is banned from my suburban after Amethyst's energy drink incident."

"It's not my fault you stopped so quickly. I was in the middle of taking a sip," Amethyst protested without any real fervor. "It was either that or hitting that duck. I don't know about you but I would rather see it live another day than end its life prematurely," Pearl sniffed. "But my offer still stands. Would you two like a ride to rehearsal?"

Peridot finished her donut, worrying her lip in deliberation. She relented in the end. "I don't see why not," she said, folding up her pastry bag and tucking it safely into her satchel.

"Woohoo! We got ourselves a tech nerd!" Amethyst hollered, taking off down the boardwalk, but not before comically saluting to a perplexed Peridot. "Not yet you don't," the blonde huffed after the darker-skinned girl, trailing after Pearl, Lapis, and Steven to the parking lot at the end of the pier.

Peridot was surprised she hadn't seen the auditorium's main entrance sooner. She left that up to not entering the arts district of the university since her solitary encounter with Lapis. But still, missing the
majestic display was a pretty astounding feat on her part.

Instead of resorting to the plaintive look most buildings on the campus held, the entrance was bedecked with festoons and clumps of verdant foliage. Rose clusters bloomed on either side of the cobblestone path leading to the giant, smooth oaken doors with the telltale ‘auditorium’ plastered in elegant gold type across a brick beam above the entrance.

The most opulent exhibit, however, was the statue of a beautiful woman with her eyes closed as water trickled gently out from within the bronze statue and into the pond below. She had on an elegant dress that could have only been one of the purest whites, and huge ringlets of hair that spilled down her shoulders and back. She was depicted in a dignified but benign manner, hands stretched out before her like she was offering gifts.

"Hey mom," Steven said to the fountain as he padded up, brown eyes filled with sorrow. Peridot stared up at the statue, realizing with a pang that this must have been Rose Quartz, the deceased founder of the Crystal Gems. And, Steven's mother.

The boy threw a couple pennies into the pond before rushing back to the group, where Pearl comfortingly patted his head and Amethyst hooked her arm into his. "C'mon. Garnet's gonna have my tail if we're late again."

The group hustled themselves through the heavy wooden doors, and the cacophony of voices inside the auditorium were as jumbled as Peridot expected them to be. "This is like a secret passageway to the stage," Lapis said, guiding Peridot as the five all hurried down an elusive corridor tucked in beside the auditorium walls.

"This must be how you snuck up on me up in the booth," Peridot wondered aloud, looking over her shoulder and at the shiny glass box at the head of the theatre. You couldn't see through the glass it was so tinted, and that gave her a sense of solace if she really did end up working up there. No one would see her!

When they reached the stage, Steven ran off to talk with Smokey who was twirling a star-studded yo-yo on their finger and Pearl vanished off behind a curtain. "She probably went to find Garnet," Amethyst said as she stretched out her thick arms. "She'll wanna know you showed up."

"Will she now?" Peridot inquired bluntly, emerald eyes wide behind her yellow-tinted lenses as she took in the controlled chaos of the Crystal Gems' rehearsal.

Sardonyx was administering the movement of a large armoire that two women she recognized from the bonfire but didn't know the names of were carrying, shouting encouragement and clapping for an encore when they were able to set it. "That's great, Alexandrite, Sugalite, but I'm afraid you're about an inch away from the correct spiking tape! Let's give it one more go!"

Across the stage, two actresses were rehearsing lines, one being Opal and the other a shorter, tan girl with light blue hair that swept over her eyes. A muscular girl suddenly rushed up behind her, tackling her into a hug that made the girl with the cyan hair squeal indignantly. "Ruby, put me down!"

Peridot snapped back to attention when she heard heavy footfalls headed for her. Garnet was emerging from the shadows of backstage, still wearing her aviator glasses. "Welcome to the Temple, Peridot," she genially greeted. "Pearl tells me you've come to join."

"Not exactly my choice of words, but, yes." Peridot rubbed the shoulder strap of her bag self-consciously. "If I was to, in theory, join, I wanted to see a bit of how you all... worked before I made a decision."
"Then that you will." Garnet's dark hand rose up and lowered the microphone from her headset, twisting a knob before her voice boomed over the speaker system of the auditorium. "Cast and crew, please return to your designated areas. We've got an impromptu show to put on."

"You don't have to put on a whole show!" Peridot shrilled, lungs hitching as she watched members of the Crystal Gems flounder and dart behind the curtains all around her.

"Very well," Garnet ceded. Peridot sighed with relief. "But we'll still perform a scene and you can see the dynamic that's evolved between the cast and crew." With a look of pension about her, Garnet led Peridot to the far apron of the stage and called out. "Act two, scene one! As you would for competition."

"Let's see if I can live up to your expectations," Lapis challenged as she left Peridot's side, vanishing like the phantom she played backstage to prepare. Peridot's cheeks were bright as the first characters stepped on-stage.

As there was no one to work the technology in the booth, the lights didn't change at all during the scene. Peridot did recall reading this part. It was where Blake, in their desperation to prove that they were right about the home being haunted, first encounters the ghost in the mirror. Stevonnie played Blake, it seemed like, while Sardonyx and Opal played Abby and Robyn, respectively.

She guessed that Lapis' appearance in the mirror would be more ominous in a real contest. Still, when she recited her lines, the blue-haired girl's tone carried such realistic sadness and such hopeless despair that it made her wonder where Lapis learned to speak with such raw emotion.

When the scene was over with, Peridot was leaning on her good leg with a hand cupped thoughtfully over her jaw.

"Both the cast and crew are an essential part of the Crystal Gems. No extra is too small, nor any main character too large." Garnet crouched down, pulling off her glasses and revealing her heterochromatic eyes-blue and amber-to Peridot. "We're a family, if you will. And I think many of us would be keen to let you into it."

Peridot's teeth dug tautly into her lower lip. She would be lying to herself if she admitted that this offer didn't sound tempting. Exciting, even; it would certainly be a giant shift for her, mentally. Not to mention inference with her classes. But how mundane could she keep her life before it sent her down the same derogatory spiral it sent her aristocratic mother on?

Her decision-making skills were exceptionally crappy that day. It really didn't help that heads were poking out from behind the curtains on either side of her, waiting on bated breath for her choice.

Amethyst was giving her a beaming thumbs-up, with Pearl hovering over her with a small smile. Even Steven was bouncing on his heels waiting for her answer.

And lastly was Lapis Lazuli, emerging from behind her ghostly mirror prop and leaning against the sturdy frame, leg kicked up almost nonchalantly as she waited for Peridot's resolve.

"Since I have a very strong feeling I'll be chased out if I say no... Yes. I'll be your lights technician."

This was followed by a wild chorus of cheers from the Crystal Gems who all flooded the floor and circled Peridot faster than she could react. Sardonyx laughed and promised to make the year positively marvelous, Amethyst gave Peridot another hearty slap on the spine only to be upbraided by Pearl, and Steven ran up to give Peridot a hug. "Thank you, Peridot!" The chubby boy murmured into her hoodie, looking up at her with stars in his eyes. "The Crystal Gems are whole again!"
Through the din of ecstatic voices, one voice's gratifying laughter, littered with a snort or two, rose above the rest. Peridot looked up to see Lapis coming to her through the crowd, ducking beneath Smoky who was throwing their yoyo up into the air in celebration and skirting past Ruby and her probable girlfriend.

"I knew you'd come through," Lapis said once Steven had detached himself from Peridot's waist and dissolved back into the crowd. "Did we do the script any justice?"

Peridot dumbly nodded, too awestruck to properly formulate a response. It was like her voice box had failed her altogether, the damn coward.

Lapis hummed like the soundless answer satisfied her. "I can promise to make it worth your while if you stick around," she added with a jokey wink before turning away to head to the dressing rooms.

Peridot sputtered a laugh.

Oh stars, what was she getting into?
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Peridot gets used to the technology and then takes a break. Or, the one where Lapis is an extremely dangerous driver.

Chapter Notes

I was writing chapter seven during my actual OAP practice today. I was up in the light booth for three hours tacking away at the keys. Holla.

The first step towards Peridot coming to grips with her new role as a member of the Crystal Gems was dictating how exactly it conflicted with her current class schedule. By good fortune alone, she deemed it, the scheduled rehearsals on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday didn't fall under the same time slots as any of her prime courses. Tuesdays did clip into her mechanics class, but only for the last twenty minutes.

She brought this up with Garnet, who waved it off as inconsequential. "Keeping your grades in tact is far more important than working a light booth. Keep to the path."

Thank you, Garnet Laska of the Crystal Gems, the self-proclaimed philosopher of Beach City University.

The second step had been familiarizing herself with the technology she was responsible for controlling now. Pearl had handed her a binder filled with notes and an instruction's manual which she scoffed at, stuffing the binder without a second thought into her satchel and muttering "what do they take me for, a kindergartner? It's all in the feeling, not in some dumb manual!"

It only took eighteen minutes and forty-seven exactly (she timed herself) to acquaint herself with the technicalities of the light board. It was a dual Leprecon LP-1524 light console set with twelve channels to conduct on each panel.

Toying with the thing had been child's play when Lapis had found her. Now she manipulated the LED lights, casting the stage far in front of her in a multitude of different hues. She messed with the set times, shifting from automatic to manual and becoming immensely satisfied when the lights faded at the speed at which she dropped the faders.

It had been a few days since her extempore induction into the Crystal Gems, and already it was beginning to feel like a new way of life for her.

It certainly did bring a new dynamic into her humdrum style of life, but part of her still feared for the day where her mother would gain knowledge of this silly excursion from her studies. Peridot had never been very active on social media, so the only real way for the mother and daughter to interact were if they directly called, texted, or e-mailed one another. Even so, it was a rare occurrence.
Peridot was busy queuing saved light programs after a decent rehearsal. The troupe agreed on having an overcast of LED blue in every scene that featured the phantom in the mirrors, with an underlying hint of red that would provoke more of a baleful semblance out of the restless spirit of Mirror Gem.

Both cast and crew were gathering their bearings and preparing to leave, and Peridot nearly coughed up the energy drink she had been sipping when Lapis suddenly appeared in the dim doorway of the light booth.

"Oops," Lapis straight-faced, hoisting her lithe body off of the doorway to wander into the light room.

"You're lucky I didn't spit that all over the light board," Peridot stated with a raised brow, swiping the cottony fabric of her jacket over her the dribble of soda on her lip. "Pearl would have my ass handed to me for that."

The Hawaiian actress puffed her cheeks out. "Shame." Her shoulders drooped like she was disappointed. "That would have been kinda funny to see."

The two had grown closer since Peridot became part of the one act play troupe. They never did drop their act of repartee, but if Peridot was honest with herself, her interactions with Lapis were the highlight of most OAP rehearsal nights. Lapis would sneak up through to the light booth and made it a dastardly habit of hers to spook Peridot in the middle of her light cues, much to the amputee's chagrin.

Well, it wasn't entirely unwelcomed. It was almost like a game they played. A very one-sided one game... but a game nonetheless!

"You- you did good out there today. You really had that all the creepy ghost vibes, ambiance and everything," Peridot complimented as she kicked herself away from the table with her good foot, spinning twice in her seat before the metal wheels squealed to a stop.

"Thanks. I think," Lapis acknowledged with a tilt of her head. "You know, even though I'm cramped behind the curtain and can't see how it looks from the front, I think the blue and grey lights are working great for that... ambiance thing for my scenes."

"I'm glad someone else thinks so!" Peridot happily declared. Unfortunately, Lapis had just walked herself straight into the spark of another one of Peridot's lectures. "Frankly, a play that runs only on the upstage work lights lacks the all-inclusive quality!" Her hands went up for emphasis, only returning to earth once or twice to fix her glasses as they began to slip from the bridge of her nose. "It changes the whole atmosphere, the entire setting! I can say with certainty that my contribution to the Crystal Gems is-"

"Not another spiel I want or really need to hear again." Lapis stopped her, silencing her with a firm grip on the shoulder.

"When did you get over here?" Peridot blurted disbelievingly, head rotating to glance at the shadowy entrance where Lapis had just been loitering.

"When you were going on about how great your power as our lights person was," the taller girl said. "Thank God you're not backstage with that chatterbox mouth, the whole Temple would be able to hear you blathering." Peridot scoffed and kicked away from Lapis, pressing the sole against the lean girl's leg and vaulting to the other side of the light room to grab her satchel without standing up.

"I'll have you know that everyone loves my blathering," she disagreed as she threw the strap over her
"Shut up." Lapis scoffed incredulously and hopped into Sour Cream's abandoned chair, twisting herself on the squeaky metal wheels before pawing her way over to Peridot. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going back to my dorm to sleep," Peridot longingly lamented. "I was up until three this morning working on some cloddy project for multimedia. It's a software development class! Not graphic design! I had to buy Photoshop for it!"

"The professor didn't tell you the Creative Cloud stuff?"

"Th- Oh my God."

"You're an idiot."

"Noted, Lapis, thank you." Peridot ripped out her phone to check the time since she had already turned off the booth's monitors, grumbling when she read 9:43 across the top. When she looked up, she spotted Lapis with her legs perched on the edges of Sour Cream's chair like some sort of demented amphibian ready to pounce. Peridot didn't like her expression at all.

"Something tells me you want to do something."

"Yeah," Lapis said, throwing her arms up onto the back of the comfy office chair. ". . . Care to elucidate?"

"I know a neat place we can go to. I go there sometimes to clear my head - it's a bit out there, and a bit of a hike to get to, but it's nice enough." Lapis leaned back from the chair, sending the thing careening into the table when she leaped off. "It's up on the hill with the lighthouse."

Peridot groaned. Fifteen minutes from ten o'clock and Lapis was asking her to take a midnight train up to some vacant cliff point for fun. She had very important things to do. Like sleep. And forget to eat the lukewarm Ramen she had left on her desk earlier that afternoon.

She could already feel the migraine beginning to thump behind her right temple. But she still agreed because damn it, screw personal obligation and hail sleep deprivation! "How are we gonna get there? Doesn't the last bus leave at 9:50?"

An affectedly simpering smile fell onto Lapis' freckled face. "I know a way. C'mon, get your stuff together and shut this joint down. Meet me outside the Temple. I'll bring our ride up."

"Aaaaand you're gone." Lapis had sped out of the light booth, the gentle *pap-pap-pap* of her bare feet on the vinyl floors the only hint of her presence in the building. She threw on her headset and waited for the audio signal from Garnet to fade the masters and plunge the auditorium into darkness as the last costume racks were sealed in the dressing rooms and all prop boxes stored safely away until the next rehearsal.

An affectedly simpering smile fell onto Lapis' freckled face. "I know a way. C'mon, get your stuff together and shut this joint down. Meet me outside the Temple. I'll bring our ride up."

"Aaaaand you're gone." Lapis had sped out of the light booth, the gentle *pap-pap-pap* of her bare feet on the vinyl floors the only hint of her presence in the building. She threw on her headset and waited for the audio signal from Garnet to fade the masters and plunge the auditorium into darkness as the last costume racks were sealed in the dressing rooms and all prop boxes stored safely away until the next rehearsal.

When Garnet pulled in the curtains and beeped Peridot the all-clear, she turned down the lights and set the lamps lining the Temple auditorium to stay on for the next hour in case any actor forgot their phone or car keys or anything else college students needed to survive.

The short technician navigated through the weak light projected onto the walls by the theatre lanterns, pawing around at the main entryway doors until she heard a click and the heavy thing swung open.
To say she was surprised would be a mild understatement.

Lapis was standing-no, sitting?- on a golden Ducati Scrambler motorbike stretched across the cobblestone trail. Upon Peridot's arrival she revved the engine in a goading fashion, which made the shorter girl rush forward (almost losing her footing on the way in her heart-stopping terror) to shush the actress. "Do you want campus security to come!?!" She whisper-screamed to Lapis' face, voice piercing a new record in pitch. "There's no way you're allowed to ride that thing here!"

"As long as no one catches you," Lapis corrected, offering Peridot her hand. Peridot stared at the outstretched fingers uncertainly, instead moving both hands until they defiantly sat on her hips. "I'm not getting on that deathtrap."

The distant sound of a droning walkie-talkie and the sharp sounds of keys clinking against a thigh begged to differ.

"There's your security," Lapis said as she regarded the beam of a flashlight running along the brick work of the second arts building across the yard. "And if you wanna sleep in a dorm tonight, I suggest you get on."

"Do you even know how to ride that thing?!"

"For the love of-" Before the security guard could stomp any closer, Lapis seized Peridot's wrist in an iron grip and pulled her onto the Ducati. The small girl's hands instinctively tightened around the thin girl's stomach as her breath hitched. The blue-haired girl gunned the engine, taking off just as the flashlight landed on the spot where the two girls and the bike had been.

"I thought you said you biked places!" Peridot wheezed into Lapis' shoulder blades, too afraid to look up at the speed-blurred world around her.

"Motorbike! What, did you think I was gonna pedal you all the way to Beach City?" Lapis shouted over her shoulder as she pelted down alleyways between buildings before emerging on a stretch of paved road that would lead them onto the Delmarva 1A to take them into town.

"Yes!" Shrilled Peridot into Lapis' shirt. "I would have felt much safer and even dealt with the indignity of sitting on the handlebars of a normal bicycle!"

"Fortunately for you, a motorbike seat is a lot more comfortable. Now hold on- I'm speeding up!"

"Oh clod, I'm gonna be sick-"

"Please don't."

The hasty swerving and bumping of the road eventually evened out, leaving Lapis cruising at a fair fifty-five miles per hour across the freeway. There were no other cars out on a late Thursday night, leaving the two girls alone with the elements and the stars.

"You can look up now. We're just sailing now basically," Lapis gibed, carefully reaching back to elbow Peridot in the head to try to pry the clinging girl off of her back. "Plus I think you're slobbering on my back."

"I am not!" Peridot staggered back, realizing her mistake as she grabbed for two fistfuls of Lapis' shirt. When her fingers brushed against a warm, damp spot between Lapis' shoulder blades, her cheeks brightened with mortification. "I wasn't drooling."

Lapis groaned at the handles. "Let's hope the wind dries it off. I don't want Peridot-spit to stain my
"last good tank top."

"It won't stain!"

"So you do admit to drooling on me?"

"No, I just happen to know that saliva won't stain clothing. It's clear! And essentially just a denser form of water," Peridot vindicated, knotting her fingers together over Lapis' abdomen as they veered into a delicate swerve to deviate onto the exit that would lead them into town. "Besides, your shirt is black."

"Doesn't make it feel any less weird on the skin!" Lapis disclosed, which silenced Peridot's protests. Beach City had begun to unfold around them as they weaved through the small suburban outskirts and traveled through the tiny town. They came to the last road that ran perpendicular to the hill with the lighthouse on its summit.

A lump formed in Peridot's throat as she examined the inclining slope, wondering just how well her prosthetic would fare against such difficult terrain. "Is hiking really the only way up there?" She peeped anxiously. "I don't know if I can do that."

"It's not the only way," the driver drawled in an ambivalent tone of voice. "I'm not sure how much you'd like our second option."

"Anything would be better than hiking up that monstrous rock," shuddered Peridot.

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Peridot's heart pounded against her rib cage as the Ducati's engines revved and Lapis steered off of the road. "Lapis?" The technician called warily, holding onto Lapis impossibly tight. "What are you doi-"

She could feel her centre of gravity shift as the front wheels of the motorbike tore across the foot of the mountain. Her voice was caught somewhere in her throat, streaming out of her gritted teeth and flared nostrils as a high-pitched screaming noise. Before she could finish mentally reciting her will in her head, the sound of the yellow bike faded and she didn't feel quite as unbalanced.

"Hey, clingy," Lapis' voice came from somewhere in front of her. She didn't know or care where it came from, but she grounded herself to it. She clenched her fists tighter and only then registered the warmth of the body pressed strikingly close to hers.

"Gyah!" Peridot ripped herself off of Lapis' back, falling on her own as she collapsed onto the earth. "Are we dead?" She whimpered, staring up at the cloudless night sky, trying to count the number of glittery U.F.O. ships coming down to rescue her.

"No, but you might be on the inside right now. I don't know, or care, honestly."

"Your innate sense of compassion is touching," Peridot sarcastically shot back. "Just hold on while I try to keep my innards from concaving in on themselves." Peridot spent a few seconds on the ground, eyes closed to regain a perception of momentum. She pushed herself onto her behind, sticking her tongue out as she tucked her face into her bent leg. "Okay. I'm not dying anymore. Thank you for your concern, Lazuli."

But Lapis didn't answer. Peridot looked up from the ground, spotting Lapis approaching the edge of the cliff, arms wrapped around herself. With the anomalous curiosity that only seemed to affect Peridot when this enigmatic but preposterously enticing blue-haired girl was around, she wandered over to stand beside the tanned onlooker.
"Nice, right?" Lapis pondered after a solid minute of quietude. "The view."

"It's appreciable," Peridot concurred softly.

"You could just say yes."

The moon was a waxing crescent now, a thin claw-scratch of rheumy white against the deep darkness of the nebulae beyond. It provided just enough light for them to see one another in detail, but still shadows ate away the town far below their heels. The ocean stretched out for forever, dipping with the curve of the earth as far as the eye could see.

"Like I said I come up here to just... think about things. Doing it on campus or in town has too many distractions. Up here it's just me and... nothing else," Lapis mused, chuckling lowly to herself as she sat down on the sea of moonlit grass.

"But now it looks like it's you and me up here instead," observed the blonde as she leaned back to mirror Lapis. "I can see the therapeutic effects of being up here. There's no intrusion, no sound, virtually..."

"It's just us and the stars," Lapis finished for her. Peridot watched as the actress tucked her arms behind her mess of blue hair, slim chest rising in a deep, serene inhale. "Steven showed me this place."

Peridot swiveled her neck to peer over at the other. In the fragile light of the crescent moon, the curve of her nose was so much more pronounced, as well as the gentle bend of her jaw as it worked for words. "It was a little after his mom died. He was really broken up about it, and I was in a... pretty rough place as well. He took me up here on a night like this, and we just... sat. We talked. About Rose, about..." Her voice faded off, obviously catching herself sharing something that was too personal by the way her eyes dropped. "About life mostly."

"Is that what we're going to do now?"

Lapis shifted onto her side, shirt riding up to expose her stomach as it caught on the grass. "You tell me, Peridot."

The same emotion that stormed in Peridot's gut returned with a fiery vengeance, making her curl in on herself to avoid hissing from the strange fluttery warm feeling. "I wouldn't mind it," she managed to say. "We can just talk about ourselves. We don't seem to do too much of that in retrospect."

"You start then." Lapis perched her jaw in her hand, waiting for Peridot to begin.

Said blonde issued a grating grumble as she raked her brain for something opportune. Something basic yet engaging. "Hi. I'm Peridot Diamond, twenty, my birthday is January eighth. I like green, aliens, technology, and the old cheesy Canadian soap opera Camp Pining Hearts." Granted, it wasn't as impactful an introduction as she might have hoped, but it would do. For now.

Lapis gazed fixedly at the blonde, features indistinguishable. Then she let out a snort. "It's so much worse than I thought."

Peridot scoffed in faux annoyance. "Pardon?"

"That you're a bigger nerd that I thought you were," the actress clarified with knitted brows.

"I suppose I can decide to take that as a compliment. But now it's your turn. What's so great about Lapis Lazuli?"
Lapis lowered her head onto her arm, turning her attention to the indigo skies above. "Firstly, my name is Lapis Lazuli Kaile'a."

Balking, Peridot secured her glasses as they slid from her face as she bounced from the grass to ogle at Lapis. "Your last name isn't Lazuli?"

"No. It's Kaile'a. I just told you that." Peridot ran a hand through her bristly blonde hair, struggling to process this new information. She thought she was being clever with some tongue-in-cheek flair whenever she called Lapis by her surname! Turns out, it was Kaile'a. And Peridot didn't know how to pronounce that. "Is Lazuli your middle name?"

"No. My parents thought it would be funny if they named me after the gemstone," Lapis made clear. "We always had a few lapis lazulis around the house. It was like a family charm."

"Seems ridiculously common in this town," Peridot muttered. She didn't know what on earth inspired her mother to name her after the green gem. Perhaps her father had some say in it? She had never known her father, a Vietnamese businessman who left her life as soon as she had entered his. She learned after mouthfuls of notable yelling matches to not bring up the wayward man to her mother. "How about the rest of you? I don't even know how old you are."

Lapis' lips distorted until they curled along her cheeks in a coy style. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She impishly crooned.

"That's why I asked," Peridot piped, refusing to let the warmth in her cheeks from the other's coquettish question get to her.

Lapis began. "My birthday is September twenty-fifth."

"Your birthday is two days away!"

Lapis reached over and slapped her fingers over Peridot's lips to shut her up. "Yeah, because I obviously didn't know that. I'm turning twenty-one. I like motorbikes, art in a weird kind of indirect way, and..." Her eyes left Peridot's and turned towards the ocean crashing across the horizon. "... Water."

The smaller girl's nose scrunched at the reluctance in Lapis' description. "You say that last one like it's questionable."

Said actress only grunted for an answer. Peridot was about to chip into the silence that had built up when she spoke again. "I don't know. I'm not really good with this introspection stuff. I don't like thinking about myself," Lapis whispered to the sky. Peridot's throat constricted with sympathy.

"Then you don't have to," consoled the blonde as she eyeballed Lapis' hand which was gently twiddling with the stirring fronds of grass. "I don't like to think about myself much either."

"You don't understand." Lapis' fingers clenched, hands balling the grass underneath and quivering. "I've done some crappy things. A lot of them to people I still talk to."

Peridot's teeth ground together as she groped for something profound and encouraging to say. "The Crystal Gems don't seem to mind, even if you did. I think everyone's done bad things in their life. No one's perfect or good, never entirely. No matter what all the books and TV shows like to tell you."

"The Crystal Gems are like my family. But it's still sometimes hard to be around them. I like Steven, and I'm okay with a lot of the Gems. But there are some of them who did some things that I can't look past." Lapis' eyes lowered.
"That's why it's called the past. Because it's behind you, past you," consoled Peridot, gathering up the courage to rest her hand next to Lapis'. This made the older girl's fingers loosen, stretching and twisting until they had found their way between Peridot's smaller, paler digits.

"Who knew that you were such the counseling type," Lapis chuckled breathlessly as she shuffled closer to Peridot, bringing their clasped hands up between their chests.

"There's a lot you don't know about me," Peridot smirked willfully, remembering Lapis using a similar, if not the very same, phrase a few days prior.

A welcomed quiet spread over them. The cool early autumn breeze whistled past their ears, ruffling the smooth grass and rippling through their clothes. Their fingers never untwined as they stayed, watching the stars dance millions of miles from the earth.

Lapis was the one to move first, melding their bodies together in the silvery gloom, drawing Peridot closer until they were only centimeters apart from one another. Keen jade eyes met a deep, yearning brown. The hand that Lapis used to roll Peridot's head towards her burned and sizzled like the flames from the bonfire a week ago. She could just begin to feel the warmth of Lapis' lips on her own... 

Both of their phones suddenly erupted with the peal of an incoming text, causing them both to sway away from one another, hands shooting to their pockets to silence their devices. Damn technology, ruining their intimate moment! Peridot was ready to dial up her service company and disconnect her stupid cell from all phone lines when Lapis gasped.

"We've got one!"

Peridot frowned. "Got a what?"

"A clinic!" Lapis exclaimed, shining her phone screen into Peridot's face. The sudden light made her squint as she tried to discern the notification she had gotten from the Crystal Gem group chat. "The director of the Surf City One Act Play department approved Garnet's application, the one she sent in last Sunday!"

Peridot leaned over Lapis' shoulder when she stole back her device, an admirable feat considering their height difference. "What does that mean again?"

"Competition, Peri! We needed a clinic to be able to enter district competition in Bayburgh on the seventh," Lapis explained quickly, breathlessly. "The Crystal Gems are beginning their season!"

Peridot was too endeared by seeing the so commonly phlegmatic girl so filled with relieved exhilaration that she didn't even care for her employment of the pet name Peri, which Peridot loathed. Instead she leaned over to wrap an arm around Lapis' lean shoulders. "I suppose you could say that this is... my time to shine."

"I will kick you in the face with my bare foot," snorted Lapis as she shoved the cackling Peridot off with a heave.

The smaller girl snickered and rolled onto her back. "So it's really kicking off now?"

"Yeah," Lapis concluded with a self-indulgent stretch of her back. "You can expect rehearsals to get a little more rigorous and way more taxing," Lapis notified. "Especially with Pearl running things backstage now with Garnet."

"I do have one question that's mildly off-topic," Peridot put in nervously after a couple seconds of quiet.
"Fire away."

"How are we going to get down this hill? Please tell me we aren't down on your bike."

Silence.

"Laz, please tell me aren't."

Silence again. It's more awkward this time.

"Lazuli!"
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It's Lapis' birthday and Peridot frets over what to do for her.

Chapter Notes

Wasn't gonna post this until Friday but I am weak and impatient, oops. I'll upload seven Friday then!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Jimmy Novak from the Surf City OAP organization has scheduled the Crystal Gems to conduct their clinic on September twenty-eighth. Pearl and I will be providing the proper excuse notes for your professors if any of you miss classes on this date, from eleven a.m. to three p.m."

Garnet stood before an enlivened cluster of Crystal Gems, all pouring over the calendar dates and comparing them to their class time tables. For those who had been late to receive her notification last night, she was giving them the synopsis of what they were in for.

Amethyst had sent word out to the whole of the Crystal Gems that morning via their group message to meet during their lunch periods in the Temple. She, Garnet, Steven, and Pearl were busying themselves in ensuring that no cast or crew member would be unable to participate in the clinic that would take place in under a week.

"This is basically an all hands-on-deck kinda scenario, capiche?" Amethyst was saying as she handed Peridot the forms from Garnet's table. "You can just stick that stuff in your teach's box or folder or cubby, whatever kinda spiffy professor they are."

Peridot eyed the excuse note, skimming over the laconic explanation about how OAP was a school function and therefore valid for excuse. "I capiche," she said as she folded the papers and stuffed them into her bag. "Did Garnet type these up?"

"How'd ya know?" Amethyst snickered. "It was either her or P over there," she motioned towards Pearl. "would'a typed up a three-page essay about the importance of theatre if we let her, so."

A cackle slipped from Peridot as she watched the acclaimed pink-haired co-manager flutter about on canary feet to hand out forms to the waiting cast and crew members. She ran her gaze quickly over the now familiar faces, failing to spot a particular freckled one among them.

Lapis hadn't shown up yet, but Peridot didn't try to mind it too much. Lapis had said she had some little things to take care of today between classes anyway.

"Lookin' for your girlfriend?" Came the short, darker girl's gibe from behind her. Face bathed with pink Peridot spun around and flashed a finger at the purple-haired actress. "She's not my girlfriend," she sputtered, embarrassment making her feel light on her feet.
"So that little moment you two had last night was all friend stuff."

"How- How do you know about that?" Peridot hissed, trying to use her extra inch on Amethyst to leer over her. The stout girl's cheeks puffed out as a huge grin split from one ear to the other. "Oh my God, I was bluffing!" She crowed, bending down to put her hands on her torn jeans. "What did you two do? Give me the deets! I wanna know if Lapis finally got the pants off of som-"

"No pants were taken off," blushed the technician as she slapped her forehead. "Nor were any other articles of clothing."

"Aww. Lame." Amethyst sighed. "But yeah, yeah, totally friendly things going on between you two. Gotcha," she snorted, running away as Peridot raised a fist to possibly deck her in the throat.

"Oh my stars," she grumbled to herself as she shoved her hands under her glasses and rubbed at her eyelids.

Whatever had happened last night on the summit, Peridot was sure that it wasn't just two gals being pals. It had been so intimate, so private. Just the two of them and the stars above them. That is until their phones went off, of course. But she regarded the moments before her phone decided to expel the X-Files sound effect.

In addition to those undisclosed thoughts, her mind was racing for things to do for tomorrow. It was Lapis' birthday! She hadn't bothered to ask if the blue-haired girl had already planned for herself. A part of her doubted Lapis would do that, and she clung to that flimsy belief as she researched activities that would make Lapis' twenty-first birthday special.

Lapis didn't enjoy huge crowds, that much she knew. Nor did Peridot, which was fortunate. So tack of any event that involved more than at least five people. If she had to make any sort of educated guess about what Lapis would want, it would be an exclusive affair.

You're thinking too much about this, Peridot internally bemoaned to herself, pausing when a second thought occurred to her: what if she just wasn't thinking about it enough?

She hated when she contradicted herself. It gave her a splitting headache every time. Except the headache she expected to receive translated into heartache; a cold feeling in her chest that tightened with helplessness as she checked her phone for any texts as to Lapis' current whereabouts. Her screen was still dark.

Peridot ended up languishing in the black Maison love chair set in the living room area, squinting up at the light fixture which she had set to fifty percent as to provide the Crystal Gems enough light to do their business but not enough to blind anybody. It could have been funny, turning the apron lights on to maximum strength and seeing them all need to use their hands for visors, but she didn't feel like being a total nuisance today. She could save that for next rehearsal.

The hour was nearly over. Most of the Crystal Gems had filtered out to return to their classes or other scheduled happenings, and Lapis had yet to show up to retrieve her things. The last two to leave, Bismuth and Rainbow Quartz, waved good-bye as they left, leaving Peridot alone with the heads of the theatre troupe.

"Waiting for somebody, Peridot?" Pearl asked as she strolled over, grabbing the back of the love chair as she looked down at the small student. "You're usually so quick to leave as soon as you're finished."

"She's waitin' for Lapis," chortled Amethyst as she draped her arms knowingly over the armchair.
"Ain't that right?"

"I don't know what kinds of preconceived notions are raging on in your head," Peridot detested, "but they're all ridiculous, I'm going to give you that."

Amethyst cleared her throat and raised her finger, assuming a stately posture that would have reminded Peridot of Pearl had the smirk not been there. "Stage one of pretendin' to not be waiting like a lovesick puppy for someone," she began before intoning, "denial."

"No," Peridot stubbornly moaned as she wrenched her eyes shut, lifting them up to Pearl in a way that screamed, 'help me out!'

The slender woman only laughed. "Well, I'm not sure where Lapis is at the moment. I would have inquired among the others, but they've all gone and left already. I'm sorry."

Humming with discontent, Peridot ripped out her phone and scrolled through her feed. She had a few notifications from her installed RPG apps, but no new messages in her inbox. "Would you two happen to know if she's doing anything tomorrow?" She ventured.

"... Nah," Amethyst offered with a shrug. "Why d'ya ask?" She gasped comically and leaned in to Peridot's flushed face. "You wanna second chance to make a move on her? Sly dog!"

"No!" Peridot threw herself away from the cackling character and diverted her attention to Pearl. She looked thoughtful, light blue eyes thin with contemplation. "She hasn't said anything to me," she determined. "Why? Is there something you wanted to do?"

"It's her twenty-first birthday tomorrow."

"Ooooooh!" Amethyst snapped her fingers. "Right! Shoot, I forgot all about that. She's so reclusive about that personal stuff."

Pearl quieted the lavender-haired actress with a hand on her shoulder. "She's always been. She only really tells Steven those kinds of things, you know that," she uttered in a way that made Peridot feel like she wasn't meant to hear the lackluster reprove. When she looked back to Peridot, whose face was blank with incomprehension, she blushed. "You could ask Steven. He should be by the sandbags."

The technician doubted that the Universe boy would really know about Lapis' plans for tomorrow. She sighed. Beggars can't be choosers. "Okay," she yielded as she lifted herself up from the cushioned chair. "I'll talk to you later."

Peridot could hear Amethyst making obscene noises and proclaiming, "tell me everything y'all do tomorrow tonight, you hear me!" followed by a flustered shriek from Pearl. She didn't even want to turn around to see what Amethyst had done to evoke that terrified sound.

She left the brightness of the stage and moved backstage, squinting in the dusty gloom as she tried to remember where the sandbags were. "Wait," she grunted, pausing. "Sandbags. Curtains, duh." She deflected towards the traveler curtain and found the boy sitting beside a grounded work light, reading a book. When he looked up, his eyes brightened. "Hi Peridot!"

"Hey Steven," the college student waved as she stepped closer. "I wanted to ask you about Lapis."

Steven's lip protruded from the edge of his mouth as he licked his thumb and folded a dog-ear to mark his spot in the novel. "Sure! What'cha wanna know?" He piped, folding his legs criss-cross applesauce and clasping his pudgy hands like he was ready to conduct a business meeting.
"Not... much." Peridot didn't want to seem... stalker-y. "Just if she was planning on doing anything tomorrow."

The boy gasped. "Her birthday! Oh, geez, I don't know..." Steven pursed his lips and tapped his chin. "She hasn't told me much about what she wants to do for it this year. She likes things on the down-low."

"Down-low, huh...?"

"Yeah! I got her a card last year, she really liked it," he mused as he looked down at his hands. "Maybe we could make her another!"

Peridot fidgeted with her satchel strap. "We?"

"Well, sure!" Steven smiled up at her. "Don't you wanna give her something?"

"I don't see why not," she chuckled quietly, breaking under the child's elated stare.

"Okay! Hold on a sec- I think I have some stuff in here to do this!" From behind him Steven dragged out a hefty backpack shaped like a cheeseburger. Peridot would have laughed at the absurdity of the thing if the boy's expression wasn't so filled with determination. Out of the cheese pocket he pulled a card stock paper followed by a box of crayons and an assortment of colourful pens.

"Can I do the insides?" He asked gleefully, tearing open the box of used crayons.

"Definitely," agreed the blonde as she slowly lowered herself onto the floor, tucking her long jeans over her prosthetic as she accepted the paper from Steven. "Only if I can fold it, though. I'm very picky about symmetry."

"Be my guest! I was actually gonna ask you to, because I'm really bad at folding stuff to look nice," the boy laughed as he moseyed through the crayons. "How about... blue?"

"... Which shade?"

"Um... I don't know how to pronounce it," Steven squinted at the bluish crayon between his fingers and showed it to Peridot. "Cerulean," she enunciated for him, which he repeated with an amused hum. "All right! Cerulean it is!"

Peridot watched curiously as Steven decorated the inside of the card, snuffing humorously when she saw how very anime-like he drew eyes. "Ta-da!" He cried when he had finished his masterpiece, grabbing a pink pen from the stash and signing his name.

He paused before turning to Peridot, holding out a handful of pens. "Pick a pen, any pen!" Peridot selected a neon green one, uncapping it as he presented the card with a flourish of his hand. "Sign here please." She scribbled down her name and returned the pen, chuckling when the boy fell onto one knee and held it out the finished birthday card on two carefully outstretched hands to Peridot. "It is... finito."

"Wow, thanks," Peridot said, gratefully taking the card from his palms. "I was thinking of getting something for her from town. Do you think she'll mind something extra with this?"

Steven shook his head. "I think she'll be really happy! She likes you a lot-" He paled as he swatted a hand over his mouth. "Oh, crud, Pearl said I wasn't supposed to tell you that!"

Peridot halted as she stumbled up, eyeing the Crayola-embellished cover of the card as Steven's
confession echoed in her mind. "That's okay," she told him absently. "I really like her too. I think." She tried to ignore the 'aww' sound Steven made.

She bid the boy a kindly good-bye before digging out her cell. She punched in a certain roommate's number as she walked down the passageway towards the rear exit of the auditorium.

"Sadie?" Peridot inquired into her device when the recipient picked up as she left the Temple. "Yes, it's me. Do you suppose you could give me a ride into town?"

Through classified means was Peridot able to obtain Lapis' room number. It involved a little conniving bribing with a gift card with eleven dollars and thirty-three cents left on it and a week's worth of some bum's quantum physics homework. Peridot was always received approbation on her vast knowledge of the quantum theory, so she wasn't concerned in the slightest about that last part.

She had tried texting Lapis after finding her the gift of choice. She hadn't gotten any reply, or even any sign that the message had even been opened. She tried not to feel hurt by this, steeling herself and taking matters into her own now-sweating hands.

Peridot approached Lapis' door, holding the white box in her hand and fidgeting with the azure silk ribbon she had picked up and tied as neatly as she could around the little container. Her hand paused in front of it before tapping her fist on the smooth surface three times.

You should turn back, she told herself. You don't even know if she's home!

She was about to turn away after the second unsuccessful rap of her knuckles on the frame when she picked up on sniffing coming from the other side of the entryway. "Laz?" Peridot pressed her ear to the door and tensed when she could hear another round of bereaved hiccups emanating from inside. "Lazuli, I'm coming in."

If this was Lapis' roommate having a battle with sinuses in there, this was going to be a little more than awkward.

Peridot tried the doorknob, blinking when it fluidly dipped beneath the applied force and the door swung open. It wasn't even locked. Light from the hallway flooded the dorm, illuminating the reflective brown surfaces of the empty beer bottles and the sea of crumpled tissues that sat at the foot of the dual beds. A phone lay among the mess, screen webbed with cracks and little chips of metal littered the floor, suggesting it had been violently thrown. That explained why Lapis hadn't replied to her texts from earlier.

The bed on the right was empty, but the left bed housed a sniffling bundle of blankets. A familiar tan foot was sticking out from the bottom, disappearing into the folds of the comforter as soon as the light touched it.

"What're you doing here, Peridot," a shaky, wet voice muffled through the sheets.

"I . . ." Peridot stopped, shuffling her feet and dropping her eyes to the gift box caught in her now trembling fingers. "I got you something. You know, because it's your birthday."

The response was a cynical sniff. The figure in the blankets shuffled around until Peridot could see a few tufts of electric blue hair shrouding a shadowed set of swollen eyes. "What a birthday," Lapis sneered, never moving her visage from the ground.

A grimace overtook Peridot's mouth as she quietly closed the door behind her, plunging the room into darkness again. She made her way through the clutter on the ground until she was at Lapis'
bedside. She sighed and set the gift down on the nightstand before crouching on her good knee and
becoming eye-level with the despondent Lapis. "What happened, Laz?" She whispered to the tear-
streaked face inches away from her own.

Blue bangs were covering her eyes so Peridot couldn't tell if she was looking at her or not. The
technician impulsively huffed and dug her palms into the mattress, hoisting up her good leg first and
then her prosthetic. "Move over."

Lapis didn't object. Voicelessly she budged to let Peridot onto the bed with her, where they sat side-
by-side with their backs to the wall. Peridot was patient, curling her legs in as she waited for Lapis to
speak.

"She called me again."

Peridot's eyes narrowed, nonplussed. She needed a little more detail than that defunct tidbit. "Who is.
... she?"

The sheets rustled beside her as Lapis kicked an empty beer can from the foot of the bed, sending it
careening into the abyss below. "Jasper."

The way the name was said, it was obvious that it was a sore topic for Lapis. Peridot inhaled deeply.
"Do you want to talk about it?" Lapis nodded weakly.

"I did bad things, Peridot," the girl muttered as she shoved her face in between her legs, hugging
them close to her flat chest. "We both did."

"... You and Jasper?"

Lapis huffed like that amused her. "Yeah. Me and Jasper. What we had... it wasn't good or healthy
like things are supposed to be when you're like that, it was... it was so bad." Lapis' arms left her legs
and wrapped around herself like she was trying to squeeze it all out of her system. It only squeezed
out more tears instead. "We called it off a long time ago. We haven't talked since, I-" She broke off,
red-rimmed eyes staring off into nothingness. "I didn't realize."

She didn't want to ask what Jasper had called her about. It could have been innocent, like a "hey,
happy birthday," kind of call. But if it provoked this deplorable of a reaction out of Lapis... that
simply couldn't be the case.

Peridot leaned her head back with a slow breath. She would just need to keep on track with what
they had already. "Didn't realize what?"

"How much I could miss her."

Some mordant part of her compared the place she was enclosed in now to the fourth season of Camp
Pining Hearts where Paulette had locked herself in her cabin when she openly admitted to the whole
of the camp in the middle of the final stage of the canoe races, of all places, that she loved Percy.
Said hero in shining khaki armor had to come to make amends with her after sitting outside her cabin
for hours. Ugh, that episode sucked.

Peridot's lips clamped shut. This wasn't Camp Pining Hearts where she could say anything and have
it be resolved in the end by some magical 'it's all okay now because I'm here! Hurray!' and the two
main characters would grossly make out. Bippity-boppity-boo didn't do squat in this kind of
scenario.

Maybe if she just let Lapis keep talking and stream out all of the bad stuff, she could begin to feel a
little better. Peridot knew how bottling things up felt; in fact, she used to record podcasts on her computer at home before moving out whenever she was aggrieved by her mother. She would just ramble about all the weird things in her life until she felt better. "Why do you miss her?"

Lapis hadn't been expecting a question like that it seemed like. She sniffed, raising her head from her knees and glancing in Peridot's direction. "God, I don't know," she lamented. "Maybe she just- just made me feel bigger. Made me feel important. No one had ever made me feel like that before."

Peridot's frown deepened as she stared at her twiddling thumbs. "But she also made you feel bad, right?"

"Well... Yes." Lapis chewed her lip. "I made her feel bad, too..."

"Then she didn't make you any bigger. She just..." Peridot's hands twitched in front of her face as she tried to piece together the thoughts cramming into her head too quickly for her to make into words. "Made you... smaller."

Lapis laughed bitterly. "Smaller?"

"I don't mean it in a bad way, Lapis!" The younger girl blared, her trepidation making her staid composure crumble. "I meant it like... she didn't help you. She was hurting you, but... you thought she was helping."

"I never thought she was helping," Lapis objected. "I knew it was bad but I was always too afraid to let go. Afraid to learn what would happen."

Peridot glanced over, eyes dull with dejection as she regarded Lapis. She didn't know how to help if she didn't know specifics, but she wasn't about to make Lapis pour her a cup of chamomile tea and go over this evidently atrocious part of her life.

"Well," she croaked as she rubbed her prosthetic leg subconsciously. "I think you did pretty great without her."

Lapis didn't respond, only tucking her head further into her crossed arms as the uneasy silence fell over the two Crystal Gems. Peridot's heart was thudding so powerfully in her chest that she feared that everyone in the building would be able to hear it.

She didn't think she had any right to dictate Lapis and tell her how to feel about this whole... Jasper thing. Peridot didn't know Jasper or what she and Lapis had been in together. Frankly, she didn't want to know. But if she could help in any way, shape, or form, then by God, she would try to. She just... didn't know how to right now.

"You called me Lapis," Lapis' quiet voice said after a few minutes.

Peridot blinked her eyes, having grown used to the weighted silence. "Yeah," she murmured vacantly. "I guess I did."

Lapis reached over and ghosted her fingers across Peridot's tense fist, rubbing her thumb against her knuckles in a feebly apologetic way as she asked, "what's in that little box?"

Reaching over to the dresser and snatching the gift up with renewed vigor, eager to change the subject, Peridot explained. "I wanted to get you something."

"You didn't have to do that."
"I already did so congratulations. Look, the ribbon's even blue," she added as she presented the little box to Lapis. "Here, I'll unwrap it for you!" Peridot's hands pulled apart the glossy bow and set the ribbon down on the bed beside them.

Lapis let out a watery giggle as she took the unwrapped container from her, wiping away a stray tear with her wrist as she took off the top.

Even in the partial darkness around them, the item within glowed in full luster. Encompassed by muted sky-blue cushion sat a black chain necklace with a beautiful gold-flecked lapis lazuli stone expertly carved into a raindrop affixed to its end. A gold-accented ring bordered its fine edge, glinting coldly in the thin beams of grey sunlight sneaking in through Lapis' closed blinds.

"I wasn't going to go this big but I saw it in the window of Miroslaw's Jewelers and thought of you," Peridot explained as Lapis numbly reached out to trace her dainty finger along the tear-shaped gem. "Its gold flecks . . . made me think of your freckles. How they looked." She paused. "I now realize that's cheesy enough to land us a spot on some horrible Disney sitcom," she added with a mousy, self-conscious chuckle.

"Plus! You said your family used to keep them around the house as good luck charms. I didn't know if you missed that or not.

Oh, and that's not all! Steven wanted to get you something, too." She removed the jewelry cushion and pulled out the slip of paper that had been neatly folded and tucked into the box.

She positively glowed as she handed the card to Lapis, which Steven had taken all of the creative liberties on. On the inside, Steven had drawn Lapis in blue crayon, covered with little flowers, swirls, and hearts. His and Peridot's names were signed on the bottom of the drawing.

"I talked to him yesterday at the Temple and he wanted to make it for you. He wanted me to si-hrk!" Peridot was unable to finish her commentary because lithe arms were thrown around her shoulders and she was pulled into a quivering embrace by the teary-eyed girl.

"Thank you, Peridot," Lapis murmured into Peridot's shoulder, head tucking into her pale neck and her grip so longingly tight that it felt like the blonde had become Lapis' sole lifeline.

Peridot's arms froze at her sides, body seized with a temporary confusion. But that befuddlement was swift to disintegrate as she wrapped her arms around Lapis, exhaling slowly as she tried to calm her speeding heart. "You're welcome," she whispered into Lapis' hair, stroking her back comfortingly. They sat together like that for an indeterminable amount of time. It wasn't tense or uncomfortable. Their breathing eventually fell in sync, and as did their heartbeats, which they could feel through each other's chests as they stayed locked in one another's arms. When Lapis finally did pull away to wipe at her eyes one last time, Peridot couldn't help the icy rush of dismay that flooded her heart.

"Sorry," Lapis sniffed as she brushed her bangs away from her face.

Peridot shook her head, only remembering that they were enveloped in darkness at the last moment. "There's nothing to be sorry for," she scolded mellowly.

"Actually there's one thing I have to apologize to you for now."

Peridot frowned. "What's that?"

"Being drunk and really, really wanting to do this."

With superhuman speed, Peridot was convinced, Lapis leaned forward and caught Peridot's lips with
her own. The blonde was too stunned to react, motionless until she could faintly taste the salt of Lapis' dried tears and fresh alcohol on her lips. It was the catalyst that melted Peridot's stiffness and stimulated her ease into Lapis' grappling hold, reaching up to pry Lapis' hands from her hair to pull them close to her chest.

They did need to separate after a few long seconds because oxygen was regrettable an element they both need, Peridot especially because she had been so unprepared.

They sat and stared at one another, unable to find words to properly acknowledge the kiss they had just shared. Their hands had yet to detach from each other, so Lapis ended up crawling back over to press her shoulder against Peridot's. She slouched until her cheek rested on the smaller girl's shoulder, eyes never leaving their interwoven fingers.

Peridot pressed her cheek against the crown of Lapis' head as she felt the Hawaiian's body relax into hers, breathing gradually growing slow and cadenced to the familiar rhythm of sleep.

Sadie could wait a few hours for Peridot to return, she decided.

With a tired puff through her nose, Peridot closed her eyes.

"Happy birthday, Lapis."

Chapter End Notes

My real life friend punched me because I apologized in advance for this chapter yesterday. Friend, if you're reading this, please don't kill me tomorrow in class. I wanna live to finish this story. Thank.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

It's the first clinic for the Crystal Gems, and a couple familiar (but unfamiliar all the same) faces are revealed.

Chapter Notes

It's five in the morning because I wanted to post this before class because I'm gonna be busy as all hell today. Holla.

It was the morning of the clinic in Surf City.

Those who were able to assist the final load-up of all materials and taking final inventory entered the Temple before ten o'clock came around and their bus arrived.

Peridot didn't have many classes that day. In fact, one of her professors had called in ill the night previous in an e-mail sent out to the whole honors mechanics class. She had slipped in her excuse forms to her other two remaining teachers' inboxes before returning to the Temple yesterday.

Garnet approached Peridot as she was gathering a bundle of outlet cords for Amethyst's fog machine. In her arms was a lime-coloured binder that the lights technician accepted with an equivocal "thanks."

"In this binder are the light plots for every theatre the Crystal Gems have performed at in the past," Garnet explained as she opened the binder for her, pointing out the front page which was a cleanly illustrated diagram depicting the Temple's stage and its lighting areas. "You can use this to your advantage when we visit other auditoriums with different settings."

Peridot's eyes widened behind her frames as she poked through the hard folder, taking in the different drafts of lighting areas for different theatres. "And they're all schools?" She asked, pointing to a picture titled 'Bayburgh College of the Arts and Humanities Auditorium.'

Garnet nodded. "One Act Play is only found in university programs. It's part of a grander universal scholastic league regime, but we aren't directly involved with the likes of those officials." Peridot nodded in understanding with a remote scowl. "So we're really only competing against other students."

The stage manager hummed accordingly. "There's no such thing as only competing. For the past few years the Crystal Gems have been trounced by other neighboring OAP groups. We haven't been to State competition for. . ."

"Three years," Peridot finished for her, remembering a similar discussion she had shared with Pearl when they had been organizing light program sheets together last night. The uptight manager really had a respectable knack for alphabetical and numerical composition.
In retrospect, the Crystal Gems' lack of triumph sounded outrageous. "That's so contemptible, though! How big is Delmarva, really? Advancing should be a piece of cake."

Garnet's expression was stoic as she viewed the amputee. Peridot's lips tightened together as she mulled over her choice of words, anxiously registering just how mean-spirited and contemptuous she had come off as.

"That is to say," she flustered to correct, "this year should be great!" She swung up a fist for emphasis, balancing the coiled cords in her free arm whilst mentally crumpling to the floor with cold relief when Garnet tilted her head to acknowledge the indirect apology.

"It definitely will be," the head of the troupe said as she turned to help Sugilite and Stevonnie begin moving the armoire across the stage to their truck. "Be good, Peridot."

"Be good," Peridot echoed back, biting her lip. "Sure. I can do that."

She finished coiling Amethyst's wires and found her talking with Smoky and Opal, making a crude joke as Peridot walked in on that Smoky guffawed at. Opal looked away with a hidden smile.

"I got your cords," Peridot said, handing them to Amethyst with a proud smirk. "I even colour-coded them. They were a mess! How did you even manage connecting them to the right adapters?"

"Just followed the gut instinct," the other girl mused, patting her stomach gladly. "It usually works out just fine. Pearl's always there to double-check if it screws up anyway so I'm in the all-clear, dude."

Peridot sniffed in tepid amusement (or it could have been pity, she couldn't tell,) before moving back across the stage to the apron.

Since her prosthetic stopped her from helping with most of the muscle-work, she resorted to paging through the ring binder, admiring the contrasting set-ups.

She had forgotten to ask Garnet which of these auditoriums they would be re-visiting again. Honestly though, Delmarva wasn't a big state. Just the first twelve drawn-out plots could be the whole state OAP system for all she knew!

When she checked the time, it was fifteen until eleven when their bus was scheduled to arrive. Most of the Crystal Gems had shown up. She saw a familiar head of blue hair weaving through the mass of people and immediately perked up, scrambling to her knees and up onto her feet in record time.

"Lapis!" Peridot called, eyes brightening when the actress twisted around, confused at first, before seeing Peridot marching across the vinyl of the stagefloor.

"Hey," Lapis greeted casually in return, closing the distance and wrapping Peridot in a brief hug around the waist.

"You're still wearing the necklace," observed the shorter girl between her tan arms with narrowed eyes and a small, haughty smile.

"What can I say? It's pretty." Lapis let go of Peridot after a few curious pairs of airs sifted over to the pair. "Sorry about being late. Without an alarm it's kinda hard waking up on time."

When Peridot had found Lapis crying in her room, she had seen the shattered phone on the floor among the alcohol and tear-stained wipes. The broken device had slipped her mind after waking up, curled up on the bed with Lapis at six in the afternoon when Sapphire came home and saw them
sleeping together.

"It's not what you think!" Peridot had shrilled in her defense, untangling herself from the sleeping Lapis as she fumbled for her glasses that had fallen off somewhere in her slumber.

Sapphire only giggled and began to remove her beanie with a wink. "Don't worry. Lapis has walked in on her fair share of happenings with Ruby and I."

Yeah. That was a fun conversation to try and get out of.

"Did you try to fix it?" Peridot asked as she walked Lapis over to the edge of the theatre where they had raised the gridded back opening to load the Penske truck.

Lapis scoffed. "No. I'm really bad with technology honestly. And I don't know if I can afford to have someone in town repair it."

The small girl rubbed her chin thoughtfully, mentally piecing together the components of Lapis' phone and which had most likely been damaged in the fall. Or, throw, rather. "Do you think I could take a look at it?" She inquired as Lapis led her towards the stage apron to get out of the way of the set-movers. "I could try to fix it for you."

She couldn't tell if Lapis looked impressed or incredulous at her generous proposition.

"I guess," Lapis ceded in the end, shuffling through her pockets and pulling out the busted cell phone. "Here."

"You were carrying it on you even though it's broken?"

"Call it a force of habit. I always freak out if I pat my pocket and find it's not there."

Peridot sighed. "I can relate." She took the phone from Lapis with cautious fingers, studying the screen and its cracked fragments with swift precision. If she was able to restore the integral parts lost in the crunch. . . "I can probably fix it. Give me a few days to find all the cloddy parts and you'll have yourself a new device."

"Thank the stars," Lapis exhaled, "you're a life saver."

"I know," Peridot preened as Lapis visibly relaxed. "But it'll be hard talking to each other until I restore it."

The actress found her resolve with a silly solution. "Until then I'll just communicate with you with a carrier pigeon."

"Lapis, those went extinct in 1914."

"So?"

"Extinct means that they're all dead. There are none left."

"But there are normal pigeons."

"Carrier pigeons were specifically bred for the pigeon post! Then the telegraph was created and they weren't needed anymore, so they stopped breeding them!"

"Hey bird-brains!" Their witless ribbing of each other was interrupted by Amethyst who was leaning with one arm over the side of the Penske. "Stop pecking one another and get on the bus!"
Peridot frowned past Amethyst into the parking lot beyond. "The bus is here?"

"While you two were fighting over the last worms it pulled on in. Now hurry up, Pearl's takin' roll call!"

Lapis and Peridot blinked, looking at Amethyst then at each other with steadily growing embarrassment. "Fine," Peridot whined as she brushed past the taller girl."But we weren't fighting. We were talking about the unreliability of an extinct species of bird."

"Wow," Amethyst yawned. "Sounds boring. Now get goin!'" She swung around the storage truck's backside and clapped Peridot on the back, sending her stumbling forward slightly with a surprised hiss. "That was unnecessary," the blonde wheezed while brushing her hands on the rough fabric of her jeans.

The last of the crew members were gathering their final technology pieces and loading them before Bismuth slammed the door shut. She yelled the all-clear before swinging around to the driver's seat, Alexandrite riding shotgun beside her.

Lapis followed Peridot onto the flat-nose university bus the Gems had been assigned for the clinic. As soon as they stepped on it was mayhem and Peridot had to duck with a concerned yip as a costume was flung over her head and stuck on the ignition rod.

"Sugilite!" Pearl's irritated voice carried over the bus seats as the willowy woman stormed on the brawny perpetrator. "Do not throw the costumes!"

"C'mon, little P, I'm bored!"

"Do not argue with me before the bus is even in motion!"

Peridot ducked as another clothing article, a polished shoe this time, was chucked in her general direction. She was really beginning to doubt climbing onto this hell-bus before Lapis' dainty fingers wrapped around her wrist and she heard her quiet voice utter, "follow me. No one usually sits far in the back."

The struggle to the back of the vehicle involved lots of annoyed watch it's, indignant hey's, and no, Smoky, I don't want to see Walk the Dog again because we need to sit down's. When they did reach the seat Peridot collapsed with a strained huff. "Well that royally sucked."

"It's hectic every time we head out," Lapis mused, scooching down beside Peridot and kicking her still very bare feet onto the back of the bus seat where Rainbow Quartz was sitting. "It calms down a little the farther we get in the season. Everyone's just excited."

"Excited seems a little tame of a word," perplexed Peridot as she stretched her neck to stare over the grey seats to where Sugilite was now dealing with Pearl and Sardonyx together. "Come on, Suggie, give us the hangers before someone gets hurt!"

Peridot turned to look out the window and saw Garnet crossing the lot from the side entrance of the auditorium with a balding middle-aged man with a prominent sunburn tailing her.

She squinted curiously when Steven emerged from behind the man, eyes huge with excitement as he pawed at the man's cargo shorts.

"That's Steven's dad, Greg," Lapis supplied next to her, poking her head over Peridot's shoulder and pushing the thick hair aside to get a look. "He drives us places. He has a car wash in Beach City but he always closes down to help take us places."
"The same dad who can't take care of Steven?"

"It isn't his fault," Lapis defended with a sniff, leaning away from the little amputee. "Greg's a good guy. He helped me even when I wasn't so nice to him."

Peridot's eyes left the window to trace along Lapis' dark-speckled face. She wondered just how often Lapis would admit to doing wrong things in the past; she certainly didn't seem like she hated anyone now, aside from Jasper.

Was that even hatred? Verily it looked like it had been helpless grief, and Peridot had done what she could to help her.

The trio's entry into the bus helped dissipate the deluded thoughts clogged into her mind.

"Hey y'all," Greg greeted as he stepped up and pressed his hand to the steering wheel. "Long time no see, huh?"

A chorus of different greetings, happy and neutral alike, followed the man's hello. Garnet silenced the crowd with a raise of her hand as she conferred with Pearl about attendance.

"Everyone's here," Pearl confirmed with an avid nod. "We're good to go!"

"Then everyone please return to their seats and we'll be on our way to Surf City." Garnet took the seat behind the driver. Everyone else settled into their seats, talking animatedly among one another as the bus turned on.

"Here we go," Lapis announced as the bus pulled out of the university and onto the Delmarva 1A.

The ride was smooth enough after the corybantic behavior up front faded into hushed murmurs and idle gossip. Surf City was only an approximate forty-eight minutes away from the outskirts of Beach City where its university was situated.

Peridot spent the most of it on her phone and talking with Lapis, shrieking for fear of her life when Lapis leaned in to crush her against the window with a wicked grin. "Lapis, get off! You have five inches on me!"

"All the more reason to use them."

"Lazuli," she let out an elongated whimper as she self-consciously tucked her fake limb under the bus seat.

Lapis finally relented. "Ugh, fine." The actress pulled back. She reached over to grab the green binder from Peridot's lap, prying it open to view its contents. "Are these papers all for lights?"

"Mhm. Garnet handed it to me a bit before you found me. Or, I found you, more like." Peridot snatched the folder back. "I'm certainly appreciative I don't need to re-learn everything like I had feared; but it's not like it would have been difficult."

"Because you're a tech-wizard, I almost forgot with how much you brag about it in the booth."

"Technically I'm a tech-witch, but yes, wizard flows better on the tongue."

Lapis laughed and folded her arms for balance as the bus took a sharp curve down a narrow street that would take them to the Surf City college campus. "Okay. You think you're gonna know what to do in a whole new place?"
A hand moved over Peridot's chest in mock offense. "Are you doubting my abilities, Lapis? I'm hurt."

"Good." Lapis' lazy eyes drifted over Peridot's head, broadening when they latched onto something behind Peridot. "We're here."

The younger girl swung her head around to gaze out the glass at Surf City University. A fitting surf board, painted blue with white swirling stripes along its fin, sat between two pillars with the engraved words _Surf On!_.

"Wow," Peridot snorted as Greg pulled the bus behind the auditorium. "It's even more dudebro than I thought it would be."

"The students here are nice enough," Lapis surmised as she pointed out towards three students, all wearing the same black drama polos as they waved the bus in. Peridot did a double-take when she noted how alike the two looked as the troupe vehicle pulled closer.

Amethyst's exultant cry from the front of the bus caught their attention. Peridot watched as the girl tore away from her seat and jumped out of the opening bus doors, pouncing into the left girl's arms with a holler. "Wassup!"

"She's practically half their size!" Peridot remarked in astonishment as Amethyst broke to give the other girl a hug. "Why's she _hugging_ them?! Aren't they the _enemy_? Our _competition_?"

"They're her cousins."

Peridot sent Lapis a questioning look before focusing on the hugging trio. She noted the similar body builds, the same skin tones- hell, even the same faces virtually. "Cousins?"

"They're part of Surf City's OAP group. They call themselves the Zookeepers, God knows why, but we call them the Famethyst," Lapis explained as she got up to grab her prop box from the back of the bus. "Just because a good chunk of them look so much like Amethyst."

"I can see that." Peridot watched as the front of the bus retreated to retrieve their bearings from the back before flooding out for instructions. She gathered her binder and satchel, scrambling out after Rainbow and Lapis.

Two more of the Famethyst emerged after pulling open the garage door that Bismuth was carefully backing the truck up to. Only one had the same surreal resemblance to their Amethyst, who the newcomer high-fived with a grin. Peridot watched their interactions closely, fixing her rounded frames to make sure that they weren't simply playing tricks on her. No, the resemblance the four women shared was undoubtedly uncanny and very much there.

"All right, all right," the provisional leader of the Famethyst barked after the Crystal Gems had left their bus and the Penske was docked at the entrance. "Welcome to Surf City, Crystal Gems! For any rookies you guys may have, we're the Zookeepers." She motioned to herself and the other look-a-likes, as well as the additional string bean of a human beside them. "Since Holly likes _confidentiality_ with other OAP groups, we've got some dumb code names. Kinda. I'm 8XL, this is 8XG and 8XH."

Peridot leaned over to Lapis and whispered in her ear, "who is Holly and why does she sound like a villain off of a rejected CW show?"

The blue-haired actress chuckled and rubbed her shoulder. "Their head stage director. Rumor has it she's a real hard ass, but I think that's because these guys are all totally off the railing," Lapis mused as the Crystal Gems were led inside the backside of the auditorium. "I think that's her."
Peridot glowered to where Lapis was gesturing. Coming up fast on the leading Famethyst and ultimately, the arrived One Act troupe, was a matronly woman in a powder-blue blouse, sporting of all things a navy-blue shawl with white rims.

Her steel blue eyes were trained on Amethyst's cousins as she trooped over.

"Really! What ragtag business do you think this is, running amok at a time like this!" The woman hollered. "What have I told you three about allowi-" She stopped short, eyes shot with terrified amazement, when she saw the multitude of Crystal Gems piled behind Amethyst's cousins. Peridot couldn't help but snicker softly at her ignorance.

"My word, you've already arrived! I do hope that these three have treated you all well!" The blue-clad woman cajoled with an eager clap of her strong hands. "For those unaware, I am Holly Blue Agate, sole director and manager of the Surf City One Act Zookeeper troupe. Let's get to work preparing your clinic, shall we?" With an intolerant flick to 8XG's shoulder, she sent the look-a-likes scrambling to bring the cast and crew to their appropriate places.

From the shadows of backstage a short, dark-skinned girl emerged, wild hair bouncing as she shot up to Peridot. "I take it you're the techie!" She exclaimed, wasting no time when Peridot diffidently nodded in taking her across the theatre. "Great! I'm Carnelian - I do most'a the tech stuff here, 'cuz everyone else is busy on-stage and crap."

"Peridot. Charmed," muttered Peridot as she was shoved in front of a light board, gripping the table for support from Carnelian's rush. "And this board," she began, switching the contraption on with a flick of her wrist, "is a. . .?"

"Leviton N. . . some numbers I can't remember. But there's a whole bunch of 'em! Think you got it from here, techie?" She was gone before Peridot could even answer. Not that she cared.

"All right, Peridot," the amputee told herself, cracking her knuckles and drawing the rolling stool closer to her to begin plotting looks. According to the rules of the clinic, she had thirty minutes to prepare and set her cues before the juror would judge their rough draft of a performance. This would be easy!

After setting the faders and assigning them all to a program connected to a card chip she had brought along (for good measure, you never knew when you'd need one!), Peridot focused on watching the cast set the props.

In real competition, you only had seven minutes to strike your set. The same rule never applied to clinics, but she still worried at her lip when they finished setting up at nine minutes and forty-eight seconds. Once the set was finished everyone scurried back to the dressing rooms to change into their costumes.

The juror entered at one-thirty, briefly meeting with Garnet, Pearl, and Holly Blue before the performance began. The Famethyst, Holly Blue, and the juror - who had introduced himself as Wy-Six unbeknownst to Peridot - all left the stage and took their seats as the travelers closed.

"Peridot," Garnet's voice fuzzed over the headset she had found scouring the table. "Are you ready?"

"Affirmative!" She squeaked, dimming the house lights and restoring all settings to the beginning. "Is everything clear backstage?"

"Crystal."

". . . Ha-ha."
There was some shuffling on the other end before the leader began to count down. "Curtain in five, four, three, two, one."

The front curtains drawled open, and Peridot began the show.

Even if the clinic hadn't been a real contest, her anxiety still expounded bullets of moisture that ran down Peridot's sharp jawline. Her entire form would tense when she was seconds away from a cued transition scene, and more than once she had to bring up an extra area light when one of the actors walked too far out of their blocked zones.

"Ugh, Opal, you clod! You're not supposed to be there! That's the gardenhouse! Go back to the living area!"

She hoped her microphone had been muted for that part. As well as for a few other parts where the actors messed up their blocking.

She ended up focusing more on their lines than on the characters' dynamics and body language, determined to never miss a beat when a cue rolled around. Now that Sour Cream had moved to backstage sound, there was no way to coordinate their respective elements of light and sound other than going by the actor's cue lines.

And it stressed Peridot the hell out.

Despite how tormenting it felt, by the time the final blue LED faded as the smoke machines sent up their last wave to bid the mirror phantom farewell, Wy-Six was already on his feet, clapping for encore.

"Please no," Peridot grumbled to herself as she rubbed her eyes which had begun to sting from the sweat. She heard Garnet chuckle on the other end. "Don't worry, Peridot. Our time window is too narrow now to have another performance."

Peridot was quick to power down the manuals and restarted the house lights, bringing the theatre into the light and asking Pearl over the headset to turn on the worklights since there wasn't an option to up there in the booth. She gathered her things quickly and bolted from the booth, heart thundering as she stomped down the rows of seats and clambered onto the apron of the stage as the cast and backstage crew aggregated in front of Wy-Six.

"Congratulations! To all of you!" The judge grinned, white dress shirt practically glowing under the work light directly above him. Peridot noticed for the first time that his light voice was accented. "There is potential for this play! Come, sit down, we've some to discuss before the next school arrives at three."

Wy-Six gave a run-down of the ups and downs of their first showcase of Mirror Gem. He claimed that he positively adored the portrayal of Blake's character, thoroughly making Stevonnie blush as Smoky nodded proudly behind them.

"However, with an up, there's always a down!" Wy-Six admitted with a childish shrug. "Who was the lovely girl to play the mother?"

"Me, sir," Rainbow Quartz said.

"Ah, yes! I would like to give you some tip on your way of showing in the first few scenes you show up! Now, your character. . . "
Peridot droned the juror out for the most part. Lapis sat beside her, legs crossed impossibly tight on the small auditorium cushion as she dully awaited her turn for critique.

"Do they usually just ramble on like this?" Peridot whispered to her at one point when Wy-Six was talking to Stevonnie and Pearl about their characters' parallels and how they needed to show them a little more. "Because I should have brought some earbuds if this will be the case at every event."

Lapis' nose crinkled with wry mirth, but the sentiment was quick to wash away when Wy-Six called her into question. "And the ghost! The blue girl - what is your name?"

Lapis straightened up beside Peridot. "Lapis Lazuli."

"Like the rock! I should not be surprised, it suits you!" Wy-Six chimed happily. "After all, you are all the Crystal Gems, yes?" A few members of said party nodded, while others chuckled to themselves.

"I would like to ask you one thing," the juror clarified. "Who is the ghost? Why is she like she is, do you know? What is she?"

Peridot's brows furrowed as she pondered the question. Lapis was fidgeting beside her as she made a crack at a favorable answer. "She's . . . a poltergeist."

"And?"

"She's . . . sad, she's angry."

"And what else?"

Lapis began to grow more confident in her answers. "She's a prisoner. She's bitter about being trapped and no one's helped her."

"Very good!" Wy-Six was essentially luminescent at this point, what with how bright his eyes and widespread grin looked. "But what do you think is the most important thing about her, about the ghost?"

"Um . . ." Her certainty briefly faltered, and Peridot quickly moved her hand down to tap Lapis' slim knee encouragingly. She thought she could see a small smile creeping onto Lapis' face from the peripherals of her vision. "She's very passionate. And willful, and strong. We can see that when she sacrifices herself to save Blake. And when she attacks everyone."

"Yes, yes, very good!" Wy-Six nodded and scratched at the attempt of stubble on his brown jaw. "I would like for all of you cast to ask yourselves these questions. Who is your character? What are their desires. Just keep asking what are you? Develop all characters with this exercise."

The judge checked his watch, face visibly dropping. "It appears my time with you is almost up! Do any of you have questions for me before I leave?"

Silence other than the sound of Pearl scribbling away notes on her notepad. Peridot didn't doubt she was writing down every single word the man was saying.

"Okay! My last words this afternoon is that this play is one of the hardest plays to do. It's . . . what is the term? Supernatural! But, domestic and home-like all the same. In my years of judging, only one team has been to state with Mirror Gem! There is lots of talent in Delmarva OAP this year, but I think with some more work you Crystal Gems can make it."

An appreciate murmur rippled through the team as they began to stand to begin striking their set.
Wy-Six exited through the front, calling out good fortune to the Crystal Gems as Holly Blue escorted him out.

"Well, that was certainly a clinic," Peridot remarked as she rested her hands on her hips as Lapis dismantled her mirrors.

"What, did you think it was going to be something else?" Lapis said as she carefully placed the reflective objects into her disheveled prop box. Peridot squinted down into it. "You really need to organize that thing, Lapis. It's almost as bad as Amethyst's cord catastrophe from this morning!"

"I will take that as a compliment, Peridot."

"It wasn't intended as one."

"I know," Lapis mused, clipping the container shut with a smug simper. "Now come on, help me load this crap onto the bus. I wanna take these dumb ghost shoes off. Then you can lecture me about my character because I know you're dying to after what the judge guy said."

"Hrrf-" Peridot grunted as she dipped down to pick up the prop box, astounded by its heftiness. She shifted her weight onto her good leg as she shot back over with a playful, mischievous grin. "You aren't wrong. I'm going to make you repeat all of that stuff he said on the bus ride home!"

"Oh God."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems decide to have an after party, but ends up with more trouble than it was worth.

Chapter Notes

I have my second OAP clinic Monday and Tuesday so I'll be busy until Wednesday, so expect the next chapter then! Wish us luck, we have district in five days, AAAA-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the Famethyst emerged from the woodworks after the clinic had completed. In total, five of them shared a remarkable resemblance to Amethyst. How one's family tree could be so expansive and yet so comparably similar, physique-wise, was utterly beyond Peridot. She didn't want to think about it too long.

One of the tallest members of the Famethyst, a spindly actress with mottled light tan skin and wild, short, and bleached hair that stuck wildly out from her squarish features came sauntering up to the light technician when she was helping slide a featherweight of a prop box into the undercarriage of their bus. "Lights person, huh?"

Peridot finished gliding the plastic container into the storage compartment, wiping her sweating hands on her jeans as she frowned up at the long-limbed perpetrator with a small huff. "A lights person with a name. Peridot."

"Whoa, didn't mean to fire you up. But, names. I'm Skinny." The wild-haired student whistled, throwing her hands up in resignation. "But I'm here because Carnelian wanted me to tell you you did good with the tech."

"Why didn't she just come over and tell me herself?" Peridot inquired. She knew that her techwork had been sensational - even with the reduced channels and the annoying lack of LEDs for the apron, she had made it work.

"She's celebrating." Skinny gestured over to the group of Famethyst breaking free of their auditorium. A few of them stopped to wave at the departing Beach City cast while others, a hollering Carnelian included, raced one another to the other side of the parking lot. "She just got released for lunch and she's been stuck in the Temple since dawn."

Peridot could relate. The Crystal Gems had yet to eat since leaving the Temple, and everyone was impatient to learn where they could stop to have a bite. For all she knew, she'd have to scavenge for her own dinner after getting home to her dorm, an idea that grew more and more appealing the longer she spent on a sore foot.

"Well, it was a nice chat," Skinny clapped before Peridot could worm her way out of the effectually
nonexistent conversation. "But I've got to go - I've, regrettably, got a ride to hitch with the others. They're all so cliquey I've got to grab a seat in the van before it fills up."

"You do that," Peridot mumbled as she snapped the undercarriage shut and Skinny left. Lapis came up to her shortly after her departure. Her brown eyes never seemed to leave the Zookeeper, trailing after the actress until she merged into the throng of Surf City's OAP troupe.

Peridot laced her fingers around the Hawaiian's arm uncertainly upon catching, albeit slowly, onto the blue-haired girl's discomfiture. "You okay, Lazuli?"

"What? Yeah, I'm fine," Lapis murmured, lifting a hand to tap the pale fingers off of her slim arm. Peridot didn't believe Lapis entirely despite this. Regardless, Lapis was keen to press on into the bus. "Let's get back on before everyone else does."

The Crystal Gems left the Surf City campus after an extreme inspection of the facilities used to make sure no set piece, prop, or sock had been left behind. Apparently, someone had a habit of forgetting their linen footwear at contest.

Pearl's intensity on the investigative matters only climaxed when she found a single black ankle-sock by the open gridded door. God knew how it got there or who it belonged to.

"Aliens," Peridot had insisted when Lapis told her the story when the blue-haired actress raced across the bus to join her in their seat. "Aliens can be the only ones responsible for that!"

"I highly doubt that if aliens came down to steal stuff from earth, it wouldn't be socks. They'd at least take the women and children first. Or the cows."

Lapis slid into the seat, picking her legs up and positively relishing the air between her toes. "In my honest opinion."

"Your opinion's wrong." The blonde stuck her tongue out. "I can name at least three consecutive reasons aliens would go after clothing first. Socks especially."

The bus started into motion after the last of the straggling cast members piled on. Steven, who had been in the back throughout the performance, per One Act Play cast and crew regulations instructed, was excitedly talking up the stage-walkers. They replied with as much spirited zeal; it was hard to be impassive in the presence of Steven, even Peridot had to admit.

She and Lapis did share their perspective on how the clinic flowed. Aside from the nauseating jitters the lights technician had battled in the booth, Peridot had escaped the thing unscathed.

The actress, on the other hand, shared the deranged story of how Amethyst's smoke machines had refused to work when the second scene of the first act came about, and how half of the off-stage Gems had all been crowded around the stout girl as she tried to make sense of the disorderly wiring.

All Peridot could do was sigh. "I told her to keep it as I handed it to her! Colour-coded, Lapis!"

"You should know better than to expect Amethyst to listen to that. You sounded as useless as Pearl would be for stuff like that," goaded Lapis, preening when this earned a vexed groan from the younger one. "Besides, she's gotta system for all her stuff. Amethyst."

"A system? Of what, mass disharmony among items?"

"Dunno. But she's good with putting stuff in their places and keeping them there. You should see her dorm, it's like a tornado tore through it."

Peridot was sorely tempted to quote a song that would coincidentally cater to that particular choice of
words, but she refrained by some feat of magical willpower.

Twenty minutes into the drive home, Sardonyx's voice rose up from the front of the bus.

"Well! I believe that that clinic was so grandeur, we Crystal Gems might host an after-party!" The flamboyant actress hollered over the din of interested voices. "Now, now, quiet down, but not for too long! Smoky and I, mostly I-" Smoky's giggle interrupted her. "It's true! I just wanted to get the idea in your head!"

"Yes, Smoky, we are all well aware," Sardonyx chimed. "But I concurred in the event of a successful clinic, we would take the Crystal Gems out for a surprise party!"

"Doesn't her telling us about it ruin the whole surprise element?" Peridot muttered, bewildered, to Lapis who huffed with amusement. "It's never stopped her before."

"We give you an option!" The theatrical woman surmised, throwing her white-gloved hands graciously up into the air. "Either you disembark from your clinical journey when the lovely Mr. Greg parks, or you can join us in an escapade to the party destination!"

It was silence apart from a few murmurs.

"There'll be free food!"

All at once, a clamor broke out among the seats. Stevonnie had thrown their fists up with enchantment, with Smoky Quartz and Sugilite following suit as they pounded the metal bus racks above their hands in agreement.

The rest of the Gems were considerably more tame, but most seemed to fall in hungry compliance with Sardonyx's invitation.

It was an ad lib of mixed emotions. Especially for Peridot, who clung a little tighter to her leather satchel as Lapis indifferently shrugged beside her. "It doesn't matter to me," the actress said when Peridot pegged for an answer with her wide, nervous eyes. "But I don't really wanna go if you don't."

"I..." Peridot pressed the back of her head to the seat to reflect on it.

Since joining the Crystal Gems, she had yet to experience something as heartfelt and affectionate, in terms of team bonding, since first seeing the whole lot of them at the bonfire. In more than a few ways, she was still an outsider. She enjoyed thinking that it was because she was not on-stage and rehearsing directly with the other members of the troupe.

She had yet to experience the 'familial' aspect of the troupe. Only those who made an effort - namely, Lapis, - to run back to the booth to talk to her when rehearsals got tediously dull were people she really considered herself close to.

Joining their rambunctious little escapade to clod-knows-where could prove to be fun, right?

Fun, or something that Peridot would dearly regret when she woke up the next morning in her underwear with someone draped over her.

She would just have to hope for the former.

And, also hope for the food that Sardonyx had promised.
"I suppose I should," Peridot surrendered with a passive flick of her wrist. "I haven't exactly done much to bond with the Crystal Gems, thinking back. It would be better than nothing to have something."

The other looked like she might have felt inclined to disagree with that notion, but seemed to submit in the end. "Then it's settled." Lapis stretched her arms far over her messy head, binding her fingers. "Wake me up when we get to the surprise place. I've been waiting for this nap since I woke up."

Peridot acknowledged the yawning girl's request with a small noise of her own, bringing her arms up to her chest as she watched the outskirts of Surf City zip past. The scenery was picturesque, with buildings tied together with strips of greenery and the occasional ad for a surf shop. There had to be at least twelve that Peridot had seen in the ten minutes it took to cross town.

Watching the human establishment thin out into rolling hills blotched with trees eventually grew banal. The blonde shuffled in her seat restlessly, considering retrieving her earbuds from her bag.

Her bag which was now being used by the sleeping Lapis as an improvisatory pillow.

Peridot's eyes traced over Lapis' serene features. The afternoon sun filtering in through their window highlighted the smattering of freckles stippling her cheek, over her curved nose and rolling down her neck and shoulders beneath her black tank top. Her blue hair spilled messily down around her cheeks, sweeping in a broken fringe over her eyebrows. Peridot only broke out of her staring stupor when a paltry sigh parted Lapis' lips when the bus went over a rough stretch of road.

She forced herself to look away, already feeling warmth stealing itself into her face. In only the last seven days, her relationship with Lapis had augmented significantly. From their time together on the hill watching the stars, to the kiss shared in the solitude of Lapis' dorm, and every little interaction in between, Peridot had really begun to think back on it all.

Reflecting on the memories always left the same bubbling feeling in her chest. It possessed the same constricting sensation each time, but only seemed to escalate with every second she kept reverting her eyes back onto Lapis.

Whatever this feeling was, Peridot wasn't sure if she enjoyed it. It made her feel too raw, too vulnerable. But one look at Lapis added another word to the list of ways Lapis made her feel. Needed seemed too strong a word. But never in all her years did Peridot feel as though she really was wanted. Aside from the spurring the Crystal Gems went through to recruit her, but that had been more in the pursuit of completion. It wasn't personal.

This, whatever it was, was personal. And it made Peridot feel like she was worth the time.

She'd never known her father. So she couldn't have possibly known how he would have treated her, had he stayed. Her mother was a hawkish businesswoman, the cold-blooded head of an equally cold-blooded corporation. Actual interaction between them was arbitrary enough. Even more so were the days where Peridot felt that she actually mattered to her.

The brutal truth of the matter was that after the accident that took her leg, Peridot became a leaden weight tied around her mother's ankles that had been kicked off for fear of dragging her down. Only financially did she ever try to help Peridot, if help was even the right word. Obligatory compensation coined the sentiment much more fittingly.

Bitterness welled up inside of her. She and Yellow Diamond's relationship had been stringent. For so
long, she had tried to pride herself through her exemplary academic prowess to her mother. If she
couldn't amount to anything in the physical world, she could always amount to something in the
scholastic one.

Her teeth ground her lip. An acrid tang burst on her taste buds, and with a grumble she pressed her
index to her lips, feeling the split she had worn into the chapped things. "Great."

She decided music would do her well then. She needed to get her mind off of these heinous
thoughts. She had always been above rotting away and buckling beneath the dumb thing that were
her personal ties.

Peridot leaned over to imperceptibly flip open the front pocket of the satchel, capturing her yellow-
and-black earbuds with a triumphal puff. She inserted the cord into her cell, apathetically opening her
Spotify to drown in some playlist that would desensitize her enough to let her relax for the rest of the
ride.

Then someone decided to tap her shoulder to get her attention and the illusion was shattered.

With a snarl, Peridot whirled, ready to prattle off at her aggressor with the tongue of a mercurial
sailor. But the only person she saw was Lapis, who had slumped, limp head dipping and landing
itself on the edge of Peridot's tiny shoulder.

The belligerence Peridot felt blanched, washed away by the sun bouncing off of the tussled blue
locks splayed over her arm. She could just see the tip of a speckled nose peeking out through the
long strands and the dampness of warm breath blooming into the fabric just below it.

Peridot reclined, posture wilting to better accommodate the sleepyhead. "Yeah," she murmured as
she skipped the sad song that had just begun, finding it ill-matched to the way her life was unfolding
at that very moment. "This is okay."

She had someone now. And that someone had her.

It would forever remain a mystery how Lapis was able to sleep through the initial stop at their
campus where a hasty pandemonium erupted as the Crystal Gems unloaded their set, costumes, and
prop boxes into the Temple. Pearl looked ready to self-combust from the derangement of it all,
unable to corral the eager partygoers fast enough before the bus took off again, leaving the co-
manager sputtering behind in the dust cloud and shouting (clean) absurdities after the vehicle.

Greg was laughing up front, accompanied by Sardonyx, Bismuth, and Amethyst. "All right, kids,
who's ready for a surprise trip outta town?"

*Out of town? Peridot did a double-take. Didn't we just- arrive from out of town?*

Whoever's wallet was paying for the mileage the Crystal Gems were plowing through would be
dried out completely by the middle of the theatre season.

"It's not a surprise that it's out of town anymore!" Amethyst broke in, playfully punching the middle-
aged man in the shoulder. "Way to go, Greg!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Greg laughed as the bus left the auditorium lot behind, freeing a hand from the
steering wheel to ruffle his boy's head as Steven bounced to the front of the bus, cheerfully returning
Amethyst's fake shoulder-punches to avenge his father. Steven escaped from Amethyst's badgering
and latched like a bloodsucker into Greg's leg. "Dad, can you tell us where we're going, please?"

"Sorry, Stu-ball, driver's honor!" Greg stole back his thigh, patting the boy on the head comfortably.
"I'm forbidden to say. But I think you'll like it - you have before!"

Steven beamed. "So it's someplace I've been? That can be at least. . . a lot of places!"

Peridot tuned the discourse out, nudging her earbuds deeper into her ears to better block out the exterior voices. Some progressive rock anthem sung into her mind, deadening her to the outside world as the campus spiraled out of view behind them.

Lapis had re-positioned herself a handful of times, now resting with her cheek pressed higher up on the blonde's side. A nose poked against the crook of Peridot's neck with every inhale of the sleeping actress' body. Peridot thought she had minded it at first, feeling half-tempted to prod Lapis awake or at the very least alter her posture so every breath didn't tingle against her neck.

She found that after a few minutes of toughing it out, she was reveling in the close proximity. Each inch of her body touched by Lapis was bathed with flame, fueled by the excitement and satisfaction being close to the older girl ignited.

Lapis' hand brushed inertly against Peridot's thigh, and in a flash of tenacity Peridot brought her own hand down to wrap her fingers around the darker ones. It didn't elicit any kind of reaction which was nice. Peridot worried that the minute she had grabbed onto Lapis she would jolt awake and rip her hand back.

She wasn't sure what was fueling that thought. Lapis made it crystal clear that she thought fondly of Peridot. That kiss had meant something, hadn't it? It wasn't just a heat-of-the-moment, alcohol-induced action, was it?

Oh God, what if it was?

Peridot didn't want to find that out. She still knew that she would need to bring it up sometime, but prolonging the inevitable was a great thing to do when you were 5'1, anxious, and liked Camp Pining Hearts. In other words, you were Peridot Diamond.

What Peridot did know about that afternoon in Lapis' room was that she had loved every thudding heartbeat of that kiss, and every blurred moment after it.

She wanted to do whatever she could for Lapis. Already she could see how Lapis had changed her - just a month ago, she would have bitten anyone's head off who dared rest their head on her shoulder, let alone touch her at all. Yet here she was - here they were, Lapis and Peridot.

The drive to the surprise location didn't take long at all. The whole mental harangue she had just had with herself over her past and over Lapis totaled to fill only eleven minutes. She hadn't even blown through four songs on her playlist!

When the bus began to slow, Peridot noticed it was because the vehicle had taken a detour off of the side road. Pebbles skidded out from under the wheels, spraying out around the bus as small cliff walls began to rise up around the broad valley the Gems were headed into. Her breath hitched when the bus narrowly drove between two huge boulders spruced with stringy mosses. She swore that if she could reach an arm out, she could have ripped the old mulch right off of the stones.

Everyone else seemed to know where they were. Before the bus even stopped people were climbing up from their seats and hustling to the front of the vehicle, chanting for Greg to open the doors and let them run loose in. . . whatever this place was. As far as Peridot knew, this was some dead-end stone hollow with some free leaves to admire.

Sardonyx's laughter filled the bus, replacing the symphonic rock blasting in her ear canals with a
boisterous 'ohoho, here we go, everybody!' Peridot sighed and removed her earbuds, thumbing them into her pocket as Lapis shifted restlessly beside her. "We're here," Peridot told her. "... Wherever this is. I don't know."

"Nnm."

Lapis' eloquent response was revolutionary.

"Lapis, please. I've got pins and needles from you sleeping on me," Peridot commented, bumping her shoulder and gritting her teeth at the painful tingling that flooded her socket when she realized, my clodding shoulder actually is asleep.

"Nnmm-m."

"Lapis."

"Fine, I'm awake." Lapis' body shook against hers. Through the thick fall of bangs across her forehead her eyes fluttered open, bemused. "Are we here?"

"Yes, like I told you only twenty seconds ago. But I don't really know where... here, is."

Peridot grabbed her satchel back from Lapis' nefarious sleep-riddled clutches, thinking it over twice before hiding it under the seat. She didn't know what sort of rugged capers she would end up getting into today. She didn't want her personal belongings to suffer because of it either way.

"Here?" Lapis squinted, arching her back in a deft stretch that made her shirt ride up her abdomen. "Here..." Her eyes widened after a couple of fatigued blinks as she sharpened up, registering the bodies crowding off of the bus and filing outside into the sunshine. "Oh. Here."

Peridot lifted her brow and smirked. "Did you forget we were going with everyone to this thing?"

"Maybe," Lapis drawled. "Let's see what the thing is. Because I have no idea with the sun in my eyes from that window."

"A sun I had to deal with the whole ride while you slept. On me."

"You could have just slept with me again."

"Hrkk-" Peridot choked on the retort she had been saving to end the banter. "Again? W-We never slept together!"

Lapis turned around, hands wrung in the rims of her tank top as stared innocently back at the madly blushing Peridot. "My birthday?"

"Th-" She wasn't wrong. "At least phrase it differently! Someone could have thought we did... something!"

"I don't care. They can think what they want," Lapis remarked as she got up. Peridot scoffed and followed Lapis out of the seat as she flowed into the aisle and padded to the front of the bus. It was much easier to navigate the bus without the commotion of others clogging up its seats. Peridot was stepping out of the ajar bus doors and allowed to admire the outdoors in clearer judgment.

Sunshine cascaded thickly from a cloudless sky, enlivening the dust-coloured cliff walls with sparks that rebounded off of the etches and grooves in the stone faces. The other Crystal Gems had left the bus, packed together in front of a small lake garnished by dense copses of stale pink lily pads.
Peridot's eyes flickered over the Crystal Gems and their noisy dissonance, stopping her eyes as soon as a few of them beginning to remove their shirts to reveal the underwear below.

"Oh my God, Lapis, they're taking their clothes off!" She pulled her eyes away hastily, smacking a rigid hand to the side of her face to shield her eyes.

"We sure are!" Amethyst's voice heckled them from behind, crashing past with a huge grin as her fingers tangled with the bottom of her t-shirt. "C'mon, P, join us!"

Peridot watched, explicitly disturbed, as Amethyst threw off the sark to expose the tight blank tank. "No thank you," she grumbled, tightening her grip on her hoodie as Amethyst brushed them off with a huff, ditching her shirt on the dirt. "Whatever. See y'all in the water!"

Lapis and Peridot walked stiffly over towards the edge of the lake. "I don't even see any free food," Peridot groused to Lapis as she stared dubiously at the greenish water that everyone was climbing into. "We've been tricked."

"Y-Yeah," stuttered Lapis, reaching up to rest a vacillating hand over Peridot's, which still clawed into her arm like a lifeline.

It might have been a funny setting, Peridot clinging onto Lapis' side for dear life as she tried to suppress everything that was currently happening around her, if Lapis wasn't so distraught.

"Lapis?" Asked Peridot after recognizing the malaise, leaning into the taller girl with a concerned grimace. "What's up?"

The tan-skinned student's lips parted, like she wanted to say something, but clamped shut so fast Peridot wasn't sure if she'd imagined it or not. "Lapis?"

"Yeah!" Lapis burst back into reality with a visible jolt. "N- Yeah, I'm okay. Let's just, go sit over there on the bank."

Peridot was more than happy to oblige. They moved over to the sandy shoreline flounced with shivering ferns, settling down in the circle of greenery as they watched the others crash around in the water.

Peridot's prosthetic limb felt heavier than usual, cumbersome with the burden of water lingering so close by. If she were to get water on it, she couldn't think of anything good that could happen. She worried the edge of her jeans as she tugged them further over her vans like it would protect them from the liquid sloshing not five feet from her.

Amethyst had vanished somewhere under the surface, coming up to startle Rainbow Quartz with a delighted bellow. Sugilite came up behind Amethyst, wrapped her dark, strong arms around the smaller Crystal Gem and hoisted her up into the air. "Ya like that, huh? C'mon, Ame, there's boulders to chuck from up the cliff! S'called Dead Man's Mouth for a reason!"

Stevonnie and Smoky were still donning their clothes, splashing one another. Bismuth was talking with Opal close to them before a lily pad smacked into her rainbow hair. "Ohoh," Bismuth growled with a scandalous smirk, pushing her arms under the water as she targeted the now very nervous Stevonnie and Smoky. "Now we're talkin' Bismuth!" Tattooed arms send up a huge wave that swallowed the fleeing provokers.

"Gack!" Peridot scrambled back from the edge of the lake as water splashed not three inches from her prosthetic. "Hey! Watch it!"
"Yeah, Bismuth," giggled Amethyst, who was balanced on Sugilite's shoulders as they swam over. "Leave the landlubbers be. Or," Amethyst pointed at Peridot, eyes narrowed wickedly, "we could convince 'em to join us in here!"

"I agree," Sugilite cackled. "Let's get 'em on in here! Hey, ladies, get off ya high horse and get on in here!"

"I don't-" Lapis tucked her knees closer to her, fists so tight her knuckles had paled a couple of shades. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Wassup, Lil' Lappy?" Sugilite taunted from the shore, swimming over and planting her fists on the sand. "You scared or somethin'?" Amethyst snickered above her, jabbing her chubby feet into the muscular woman's shoulders as she vaulted off. "Yeah, guys! You both look like you've just seen a ghost, and we're ain't even on set!"

"I don't know how to swim," Peridot admitted. It wasn't a lie; ever since getting her prosthesis she'd never been in the water aside from when she was behind the privacy of a bath curtain. "And..." She looked to Lapis for her excuse for not getting in the water. Her throat tightened.

Lapis' visage was the very definition of distress. Fingers curled defiantly at her sides, her shoulders were taut with unresolved tension. She was petrified.

When Sugilite climbed ashore beside Amethyst, she derisively crackled her knuckles. "If these little girls won't get in, I guess we'll have to make 'em."

Amethyst's hands found Peridot's shoulders, and before she knew it, she was hoisted up off her feet. "Amethyst!" Spat Peridot, arms wheeling as she tried to slug the cackling girl off. "Let me go!" She tried to kick her prosthetic into Amethyst's gut but her leg didn't reach far enough, and for a fearful moment Peridot feared the pin would unlock and send the leg soaring off into the water.

Sugilite loomed over Lapis, undeterred by the smaller actress' very evident horror as she hoisted her up by the middle. "Up and into the good ol' water we go!"

"Sugilite!" Shouted Lapis, digging her nails into the behemoth student's wrists, scratching with all her might to try to loosen the grip.

Peridot struggled with Amethyst, blowing caustic and blaspheme insults with every punch and kick she tried to get away. "Don't let her put me in the water!" She shrieked to the spectators, growing more and more concerned but refusing to act, as she was dragged closer to the lake. Her legs tucked as close to her body as possible like it would help her keep out of the water. "I'm serious!" She shouted, her heart hammering madly in her chest as she made out her thrashing reflection at the edge of the pool. "I-I can't swim! I can't!"

Steven, who had swum over from his place on the other side of the lake with his dad, was scrambling onto the shoreline, eyes wide with alarm. "Um, guys? If they don't want to get in the water, don't make them!"

"C'mon, Stevie, she'll love it," Sugilite mused as she stomped closer to the water, holding Lapis out over the edge, ignoring the tan girl's shouts of shaky protest as she eyed the water two feet below her. "In ya go!"

Splash.

With a shriek Lapis was dumped into the water. It was only a few feet deep, but being dropped into the water unprepared never had good results. Lapis emerged, sputtering and coughing, arms
swinging as she crawled her way onto the banks. Steven rushed over to her, dark eyes brimming with worried tears as he held her shoulders. He stepped back with dismay as Lapis stormed to her feet, body dangerously poised as she swirled and turned on the confused onlookers.

"What is wrong with you people!"

All playfulness seeped out of the atmosphere within a heartbeat. Splashes stopped, voices lowered, and all eyes were attracted to the scene, focusing on the shaking, sopping girl with the blue hair. Even Amethyst dropped Peridot, who collapsed onto her back and pressed a fist to her heart to quell its rapid thudding.

Lapis wasn't done. "You can't just do that! Not- not to me! You don't know what I've been through! You-" Lapis' face was morphed into a horrified wrath so animal Peridot's heart twisted with foreboding in her chest. The soaked girl's head spun, eyes dark with monstrous shock as she took in the suspenseful faces around her.

"I-I mean, I-" Words failed her as she took a few shaky steps away from Steven, whose hands were pressed to his flabby chest with apprehension. "Lapis?"

Lapis stumbled back numbly. Her hands combed frantically through her wet hair before she turned heel and sprinted away from the lake, disappearing behind the bus with quick, aggressive footfalls.

Peridot's jaw dropped as she vanished from sight. With a grunt of effort, struggling to find footing, she jumped to her feet.

"Wait!" she called, breaking into an unsteady run after the fleeing actress.

"Lapis, wait!"

Chapter End Notes

Oops. Also, Peridot was probably listening to Mariana's Trench. They're reeeally good, I love 'em.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Peridot rushes to find Lapis.

Chapter Notes

The clinic went well! I only got home an hour(ish) ago, and I'm sorry to leave ya at that cliffhanger! Here's the outcome!

The world around her was but a blur of brown, blue, and green, hues all mushed together to make an indistinguishable tunnel that warped around Peridot as she lumbered across the wilderness after the elusive Lapis Lazuli.

Dead Man's Mouth was far behind her, and if she couldn't paw her way back later, she didn't care. As far as she was concerned, the Crystal Gems had just majorly alienated themselves. The impressions of where Amethyst's hands had rested on her body still thrilled with skittish energy. She hoped they wouldn't bruise; she was durable when it came to roughing herself up, but man-handling had never been kind on her body.

Her heartbeat thundered like a jackhammer in her chest as she skirted around a crop of brown boulders, pulse raging behind her ribs and making her feel faint. She hadn't had such substantial exercise in so long, her trampling up a rocky slope with a virtual fake leg was cruelly debilitating.

She didn't have time to focus on herself, though. Lapis was out there somewhere! God knew where she went, if she was okay, if she was hurt from falling off the cliff or- gyakhh!

Peridot lost her balance, toppling forward and slamming chin-first into the soil. Pain hissed through her jawline, pooling in her brain as hands clutched alarmingly at the wild tufts of blonde blocking her vision. "Damn it!" She seethed, digging her palms into the earth and throwing herself up again, gait attenuated and lopsided after the rough fall.

A small grove of trees began to rise up around her, throwing brindled birch trees in Peridot's path and shoving undergrowth below her plodding feet. Sunlight fell through the leaf-infested canopies in streams, and if Peridot's blood wasn't frosty with panic, she might have enjoyed the natural aesthetic.

"Lapis!" She panted as she stumbled to lean on the side of a gnarled ash tree, lungs begging for oxygen that she sucked in through ground teeth. "Lapis! Where are you? I'm- nyeehh." Peridot doubled over, clutching at the ache diffusing through her abdominal muscles.

"I'll just- rest here. For a minute. Or two. Huff. Or maybe until the year is over," she wheezed as she pressed herself against the bark of the ash.

Her laborious breathing was the only sound to fill her ears until she was able to subdue it while she
massaged the sore flesh above her prosthetic leg. "Okay, Peridot," she whispered to herself, rubbing her thumbs in steady circles over the throbbing muscles imploringly. "You're in a forest you aren't familiar with in pursuit of a very upset Lapis. This isn't ideal." She looked up to glare at the unfamiliar surroundings. "Because you don't know where you clodding are!"

Her high-strung voice lapsed the forest into a temporary silence. The birdsong pervading overhead dimmed. The squirrels chittering above quieted, scared off by the sudden shriek. "That's right, you clods," Peridot grunted, tucking her feet together with a glower. "Shut up."

In the stillness of the quiet interim, a sorrowful series of sobs broke through the silence.

Peridot's head shot up. The heartrending sounds rocked in her mind, prompting her into action. She struggled up to her legs, pushing herself off the trunk with renewed vigor. "Lapis!" She shouted, following the keening until she stumbled through a dense clump of bracken, stumbling and crashing onto her chest when her prosthesis tangled in the detritus. With a groan she raised her head, temples throbbing with agitation, and took in her new environment.

A pool of sun-dappled grass rolled out in front of her. Hoary wooden trunks hemmed the clearing, edged by massive swathes of moss and wood sorrel that that spilled out into the glade. The greenery built together near a fallen oak tree, crawling over its ancient surface. What really didn't match the scene fresh out of a novel on an enchanted forest was the doleful crying that rose up from behind it.

"Lapis?" Peridot inquired, gently picking her way across the glade and peering over the mossy log. She could see a head of blue, beaded with drying moisture, hiding behind the hollow trunk. "Lapis, I know you can hear me."

When there was no audible answer Peridot paused, considering launching herself over the log, but resorted to skirting around it to get a better view.

Lapis had her back pressed to the log, head tucked between her legs, arms wrapped so tightly around herself it, if you pricked her with a needle she could have exploded she appeared so strained. Her speckled shoulders shook with each breath. She had still shown no indication she had even heard Peridot come over.

Peridot's bit her lip, unsure, while she crept over to the quivering actress. She messily slid down, back pressed harshly to the bark of the log as she stared helplessly at Lapis hiding beside her. "You okay?"

No response again.

Her brows furrowed with determination as she lifted an arm and ghosted her fingers delicately over Lapis' shoulder. "Hey- whoa!" Peridot jumped back when Lapis startled, brown eyes blown wide with misgiving as she glared at Peridot. "Don't-" Lapis tried to say, the words unable to leave her constricted throat. "Don't touch me."

"Okay! Okay, no touching." Peridot retracted all appendages quickly, wrapping them around herself. Lapis had never had much of a problem with being touched. In fact, they... they did it often. Touched each other often. Whether it was Lapis tugging Peridot along on some impromptu journey to the Big Donut or Peridot supporting her head on a boring bus ride... it had always been there. The physical aspect for their relationship. To be ripped out of it made her fingertips feel cold and fluky.

Lapis still had tears building in the corners of her eyes, different from the last time Peridot had stumbled upon her in a bad emotional place. Her lips still trembled, and her cheeks were still shining
with the tears that must have glided down her face since running off. Her eyes drooped down to her knees. "Why did you come after me?"

"Because- because I care about you, Lapis!" Peridot squeaked, incredulous. "I wouldn't just coming running out here for my health!"

Lapis' shoulders bobbed with what Peridot thought might have been a despondent chuckle. Her heart leaped with hope as she inched a bit closer, but kept her hands close to her body. "I wanted to make sure that you were okay. You seemed. . . really upset when you just ran off like that!"

"And no one else came after me?" Not the ideal response on Lapis' behalf, but it was good to finally be receiving some.

". . . No," Peridot verified, wringing her hands. "Steven was very worried though. And everyone else. . . I think Amethyst might have felt bad about it, but Sugilite. . . I don't know, she's so intimidating, I-"

"It's fine," Lapis interrupted, hands curling around her knees, face poking out above her forearm to lazily frown at Peridot. The blonde's jaw worked as she struggled to combine the thoughts in her head together into something that made sense. Nothing was fine! Nothing was okay! "No, it's not fine! Lapis, you're not fine! I don't think running off into some random forest and crying is being fine! So just, tell me what's wrong? Please?" Peridot reached her hand out, palms up, to Lapis.

Lapis' eyes studied Peridot's hand, tracing each line, each contour. The same eyes raised up to lock with Peridot's, which were glistening with forlorn. Something in Lapis must have clicked, because she lowered her arms, revealing her face in full. "I'm- I'm not okay," she admitted in a tear-filled voice. "Being in the water. . . it wasn't okay."

Peridot would have groaned at the vagueness of it. But Lapis needed this. Peridot needed this - she needed to know what was wrong. "Why isn't water okay?"

"It just!" Lapis grabbed at the hair framing her cheeks, fingers kneading the azure strands as she tried to vent the thoughts too jumbled to explain. "It just isn't. I've had some bad experiences with it, I-" Her thin frame shook as she released a ragged breath. "I can't go back in it. Not after what we did. Me and Jasper."

Peridot's chest swelled unhappily at the weight of the oncoming ordeal. Jasper all in herself was a whole thing Peridot knew faintly of, and when you tied Lapis' current breakdown into it, it just distorted into a huge, twitching bubble of raw emotions that swirled above their heads. And Peridot was afraid to nudge it for answers.

But she couldn't be forever. Whatever Jasper had done, someone needed to be there to help sweep together the crumbling mess she had left behind and help glue it back together. And if it had to be a certain, sharp-tongued blonde who ran lights for a competitive university theatre troupe. . . then so be it.

Peridot frowned into the tough fabric of her jeans as she steeled herself. She released a sigh, mustering together enough patience for the next hour of emotion. "Talk about it with me. I know you may not want to, and I understand that. But. . . I know it's good to talk about things. I like to when they're upsetting me- I don't know if it's the same for you! But it. . . seemed to help on your birthday."

Crap. She must have overstayed her welcome by now, blabbering on like she was trying and failing to console a child whose favourite toy had busted. Peridot nervously glanced over to Lapis,
analyzing her body language and trying to discern what her offer had done.

She stiffened when she saw deep brown eyes watching her through a gap in the wavy blue bangs, flickering with an emotion Peridot herself couldn't name. She wondered if they were mirroring her own.

"I'm here whenever you're ready," she whispered.

Silence again, this time stretching out for a few minutes. The cicadas at bay churred whimsically, blithely unaware of the somber couple situated at the heart of the clearing, backs to an ancient log. The wildflowers around them whispered to one another speculatively, bluebells swaying in tandem with the asters and daffodils that pooled around the two soundless students.

"I used to love it," Lapis suddenly said. Peridot's eyes darted to take a gander at her as she began to explain herself.

"Water. I- I do still love it, I think," she admitted, albeit in a very troubled, hesitant way. "I was even part of a swimming team. In Hawaii, then California, and even here for a year. The Beach City Seals. Not quite as renowned as we always made ourselves out to be." The Hawaiian sighed and rubbed a brown hand through her hair, tussling the locks dangling there.

"What... made you stop?"

Lapis looked up, eyes distant and misted over with torn memories Peridot couldn't even begin to imagine haunting her. She didn't want to imagine them haunting her, either.

"When Jasper and I broke up, we... we were on the beach. It wasn't a calm, understanding breakup - it was, bad, and violent and... " Lapis shook her head. "I tried just going in the water because I was a dumb swimmer and it was what I did best. It was where I felt safest... " A jittery breath. "Jasper followed me in, trying to call me back. I was just, so mad at her- I tried to... I tried to hurt her, Peridot. I was angry and upset and just wanted to take it out on her, I-!"

A sob stopped her, coming from deep within her chest as she bowed forward, hands gripping her shoulders ferociously. "I thought I could just end it there and not have to deal with her if I just... drowned her. But then she started fighting back like she a-always did. She... she was trying to kill me too, I think." She let out an ugly bark of laughter as tears spilled down her freckle-spattered cheeks.

"Hell, why wouldn't she? It was horrible between us! She- she had every right to try and drown me like that. She held me under and- I've never felt more afraid in the water. I couldn't- cant, get back in the water after that. I'm just reminded too often of... that."

"So when Sugilite dropped you in the water... "

"I thought of her," Lapis finished for her with a shudder, clenching her arms tighter. "For a moment I thought it was okay. I wanted it to be okay- I missed the water. Badly! But that damned night, it- it ruined everything about it!"

Peridot's visage became downcast as she ruminated. There was still so much about Jasper and Lapis that she didn't know - and again, she didn't want to know about it. Not because she didn't care, but because she thought she cared too much. Her chest already ached with grief for a traumatic event she hadn't even been there to witness or even known about until two minutes ago.

"Why are you letting one bad thing define what you love?" Peridot tried, resolutely keeping her eyes on the line of trees across the sunlit dell, watching a grey squirrel skitter up the coarse trunk of an
oak. "It doesn't have to be that way- I have no room to talk here, but . . . I've kind of been in your shoes. In a much smaller way!"

Lapis huffed disbelievingly. "You've been in my shoes?"

"No!" Peridot cried. "No, no! Not . . . not in that particular sense but in . . . guh, just bear with me." Stars, how was she going to put something into words that she didn't even understand herself?

"I get it. I do. And it really must suck to have something you love ripped out of your life like that because of what happened on the beach, whenever that was. But you loved water. Isn't there some part of you that wants to let it go? And . . . move on?"

"It's not that easy, Peridot!" Retaliated Lapis, twirling on the blonde who shrunk in on herself to escape the sad, withered brown eyes. "I would love to be able to swim again! But I can't. I- I tried once, and I almost drowned because all I could think of was Jasper! I thought I could still feel the hands holding me under, I couldn't even come up to breathe even though I was alone. . . ."

Okay. Peridot's word choice could have been a little more compassionate. But she believed her point still stood. "I can't imagine it. Maybe you can help me with that. Tell me about Jasper, whenever you're ready. I . . . I want to know so I can . . . I don't know, be there for you."

Lapis sighed. "And why would you want to do that?"

Peridot, hesitant, turned to Lapis and wrapped her arms around her. She could feel the body beneath her tense, and retracted her right arm to tilt Lapis' face in her direction. "Because I'm going to help you. I don't care if you don't want that, because you're going to get it even if you keep pushing me away. Got that, Laz?"

A watery chuckle escaped Lapis. "Okay," she sniffed. "I don't know when I can . . . but . . . if I had to tell anyone about this," her arms left her sides and wound around Peridot, pulling her so close that they could feel one another's heartbeats pounding through their clothing. "I'd wanna tell you, Peridot." Peridot shivered at the chill that rushed through her physique at the cold, wet clothes pressed against her own.

The technician held on tighter still, receding only when she could feel Lapis' grip slacken and felt the long arms curl around her waist. "Thanks, Peridot," she murmured into the crook of Peridot's neck, voice muffled by damp grey hoodie. "I- I didn't know if I could have gone back there alone."

"Who said anything about going back there?" Peridot pressed. "We can stay out here for as long as we need. Plus I think that a few of the Gems need a couple of hours to really think about the shit they just pulled on us," she added, snorting contemptuously.

"Seriously." Lapis uttered, lowering her eyes. Peridot chuckled at the wry sentiment, finding her own giggle weak from contained tears.

They stayed like that, hands curled around one another's waists. Peridot wasn't sure about Lapis, but the longer the silence between them wore on, the faster her heart thudded and the more she wanted to do something rash to break it. She craned her neck up, drawing Lapis' lethargic attention from their crossed legs.

Understanding crossed Lapis' face in the split second it took for Peridot to lurch forward and press their lips together. She could feel hands course up the sides of her jacket, gripping the loose material in bunched fists. It was like if she let go, Peridot would fade and never return. Little did Lapis know, Peridot had no intentions of doing so. In fact, Peridot was leaning in closer, unbeknownst igniting a
fire that unraveled and surged through Lapis who took things a little bit farther.

The blue-haired girl's hands left Peridot's sides be, instead lowering slowly, surely down to the rims of the technician's hoodie. "Ah-aha," Peridot stammered, physically growing weaker as fingers swished elegantly over the skin of her lower torso. The red in her face was so prominent it could've been mistaken for an awful sunburn. "I don't think now is the opportune time, Lapis."

Faintly disappointed, Lapis dropped the jacket's bottom, returning her hands to Peridot's back to keep her close. "I guess," she agreed quietly. "Are you saying that there will be a time, though, Peri?"

"N-Now I didn't say that!"

"Sure you didn't," Lapis drawled with a chuckle. Peridot sputtered, mortified. "B-But!" She started, making Lapis flinch from her shrill of a voice. "Consider that returning the favor for your birthday," the blonde shot, a bold smirk taking her lips just as Lapis took hers in for a quick kiss, earning a surprised peep-like noise that made the darker girl laugh.

"Consider it returned," Lapis murmured coolly after receding and unraveling herself from Peridot. She plopped unceremoniously back down onto the grass, reaching down to intertwine her fingers with Peridot's. The short girl hummed pensively, staring blissfully ahead as she focused on the pleasant feeling sweltering away in her heart.

"Can I ask you a question?" Lapis asked, staring at their joined hands with a strength that definitely hadn't been there when Peridot had found her earlier. The blonde nodded consent.

"Why didn't you want to get in the water? Did you not get in because I didn't?" She asked, brushing her thumb over Peridot's thin wrist. "Because you didn't have to do that. I would've been fine on my own up there."

"You tell yourself that," Peridot murmured with a weak smile, fending off the anxiety confiscating all her excited mentality by binding her fingers closer around Lapis'. "I wasn't lying. I can't swim. Not that I never learned how. . . ."

Lapis narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, resting her cheek on her lifted knee. "If you know how to swim, what do you mean you can't?"

"Because. . . because. . . " Peridot's jaw ticked. She didn't know if she could confess the truth about her avid reluctance to get in the water. Whenever someone did learn about her disability, sans Sadie, they could never look at her the same. Their voices always carried a lighter tone, like saying the wrong thing might snap her like a brittle twig. Their eyes were always squinted with sympathy, and in worse case scenarios, pity.

Lapis wasn't a someone. She was there, and she was willing to understand her. Willing to know the truth, willing to know one of the biggest truths someone could ever learn about Peridot Diamond.

She was probably getting a little too deep with this. She should at least return the favor for Lapis sharing why she didn't get in the lake.

"Because. . . " Peridot echoed again, bowing her head and resting her hands around the baggy ripples of her jeans over her left foot. "Here, let me show you."

She gripped the ends of the fabric and slid them up, revealing the metal rod that jutted out from the black vans she had put on the fake foot. She could hear Lapis take a sharp intake of air beside her, and her heart dropped slightly as she rode the pant leg up further to reveal where her prosthetic's grey liner met with her skin.
"I lost it seven years ago," she murmured, staring down at the fake appendage with palpable remorse. "And... I've never been a swimmer, so I didn't see any need to waste the extra funds to replace the material with some special water-compatible substance." She reached her hand down, running her shaking fingers over the prosthetic. "So... I can't swim because I don't have a leg to swim with."

Lapis twisted, her free hand extending to caress the grey liner, fingertips trailing as gently as the phantom she portrayed over the smooth material. "Peridot," she breathed, "I'm so sorry, I didn't know-

"You don't have to say sorry. I've been like this for years," Peridot intervened before Lapis could get any farther with that thought. "I don't want to be pitied either. It's why I don't talk about this impediment of mine. It changes how people look at me and I hate that!" She gripped the edge of the pant leg, twisting the fake foot towards Lapis.

Lapis dragged her eyes off of the limb, meeting Peridot's jade-green eyes. "I trust you with this because, well, you trusted me with your thoughts," Peridot explained as she rolled down her jeans to hide away the prosthetic once and for all. "The only other person to know about it here is Sadie, and that's only because I live with her.

Lapis' eyes followed the cuff of the pants as they once again swallowed the leg. Through her peripheral vision Peridot could make out a myriad of emotions crossing over the speckled face, first something along the lines of an assimilation of sorts, proceeding into concern, and then finally lapsing into curiosity. "When do you think," she began, drumming her fingers over her knees as she murmured, "you'll tell the others?"

"Tell the others?" Peridot gawked. "It's... nyugh, it's complicated, Lapis. I at least enjoy pretending around others that I'm norma-

"Nothing about this makes you abnormal." Lapis' voice was steely firm, efficiently putting to end any further disagreement on Peridot's part. "It's okay if you don't want to tell them. I... understand that much. But don't you go around telling yourself you're unlike everybody else just because you have that.

Peridot's nose crinkled as she mulled this over; her tired brain could only manage to cogitate on it for a few seconds before it fizzled out and was replaced by an intense desire to rest. She released a breath she didn't realize she had been holding, and rested her head on Lapis' shoulder, an insipid grimace on her face. "Thanks. Now, all I would really like to do is sleep. This day has been the literal equivalent of hell."

"For you and me both," Lapis mused. Her features diverted from amusement into sincerity, and she draped an arm firmly over Peridot's puny shoulders. "I'm... glad you told me about it, by the way," she told Peridot. Then on a more lighthearted note she remarked, "I was wondering what that cold thing that kept touching my back was when we were sleeping."

Peridot scoffed, exasperated, lifting their conjoined hands and shaking them threateningly. "Watch it, Lazuli, I can still kick your ass with one foot."

"I'm terrified," the actress deadpanned, half-lidded eyes rolling at the hollow threat. Her face languidly pivoted to the leaf-veiled boughs shivering above the duo, taking in the weakening beams of light shooting through the gaps. "Do you think we should head back? I dunno what time it is. And I don't feel like walking back."

Peridot's free hand reached down to her pocket to pull out her cell. Which, by some unfortunate turn of events, was not there. "Ugh. I left it on the dumb bus," she bemoaned childishly as she plunked
the back of her head against the log, immediately regretting that ill-advised decision when it send a brief ache through the back of her neck. "Figures."

"Let's hope so. Or else it's going to be one hell of an awkward ride back to campus." Lapis stood, hand pressed to the mossy trunk of the log as she helped Peridot up. "You don't happen to remember the way you came, do you...?"

Peridot's eyes went huge behind her round glasses, paused mid-stretch. "Aw crap."

"Stole the words right out of my mouth," Lapis said. "I think that trail over there by that big bush is familiar. I remember stepping on that red root thing."

When they finally arrived back at Dead Man's Mouth, the sky was a bruised purple. Wisps of rose, amber, and dusky blue tore at the horizon, dancing in welcome as the first stars peppered the twilight. The bus lights were on, and they could see bodies shuffling inside, restless and brooding.

Someone must have noticed the two walk back in between the boulders at the mouth of the hollow, because the bus doors shot open and Amethyst and Steven came tumbling out. The boy was a mess, sprinting over to the couple and throwing his arms around them both simultaneously. "You're okay!"

He blubbered into Peridot's pant leg, viciously closing his arms around them like they might try to dart off again. "I was so worried, we didn't know if you'd come back!"

"We did," Lapis weakly whispered to him, pressing a hand to his dark locks comfortably. "We'd never leave. Peridot came out and found me..." She looked down at the shorter girl, fondly pressing their foreheads together before tearing away to glare at Amethyst who was shuffling her feet in the dirt.

"I, uh." Amethyst lifted a hand before faltering under Lapis' harsh glare. "I wanted to say sorry. That was a real dick move on my part. Shouldn't have, like, made you do something you really didn't wanna. To you or Peri." She pushed a thick hand through her lavender hair brusquely. "... We good?"

Peridot's shoulders drooped. Loud, clamorous Amethyst reduced to an anxious, tense wreck: not something she enjoyed seeing, despite the self-gratification the apology gave her. She glanced up to Lapis, who returned the look with a tired sigh. "Yeah," Peridot told Amethyst. "We're good."

Amethyst visibly relaxed, slouching over, eyes slamming shut as a relieved sigh scraped out. "Good. That went way better than it did in my head." Suddenly she brightened, pointing a thumb at the lit bus entrance. "Bismuth and Sardonyx ordered pizza for everyone - y'all two hungry?"

"Yes," both girls whined in sync, racing towards the vehicle doors and climbing inside, immediately stealing an untouched box before they retreated to the back. The looks they got as they meandered down the middle aisle were ones of apology, commiseration, and guilt. Good, Peridot regarded. Let them feel bad. They didn't do squat to help us. Sugilite's head was rigidly twisted towards the window, thick shades obscuring her eyes and thereby shrouding her visage from Peridot. Her chest twanged with a nauseating mixture of anxiety and agitation as she passed the brute by; she hoped there would be some good ol' repercussions for her asshole antics back there.

Steven came to the back with them, sitting in the seat across from them. "Is it okay if I sit back here with you guys?" He asked when they both looked up at him mid-chew through wolfing down their first slices. "It's silly but I feel like if I look away for a second you'll disappear again!"

"Go ahead," Lapis smiled wearily. "I don't think either of us have the energy to run off again."
Peridot's falling asleep in her seat."

"Am not," the blonde muttered sleepily as she worked the crust of the pizza. Steven laughed and plopped down on the edge of his seat. "Okay," he sighed. "I'm glad you two are okay. Thanks for, y'know, coming back. I was gonna run out there too but my dad said you'd come back, and you did!"

Peridot nodded. "That we did. And we did some other things too," she murmured before she could stop herself, slapping a palm over her lips when Lapis glanced over her shoulder, face bright with embarrassment. Peridot stammered to elaborate. "Like talk! We talked."

Steven giggled across the aisle. "Okay, you talked."

Peridot hid her face in the folds of her hoodie the rest of the ride home, passing out for a few minutes at a time but never enough for it to fully register. She only unscrewed her eyes when she felt herself bounce over the speed bumps at the edge of the Temple parking lot as Greg pulled the bus home.

Lapis tapped her on the shoulder and she groaned. "Three more minutes."

"In three more minutes the bus will be empty and locked. Don't make me carry you out."

"Please," Peridot mewled sarcastically, holding out her arms to Lapis before stealing them back when Lapis looked ready to oblige, albeit moodily. "Kidding. I can walk myself." She sleepily reached under her seat for her satchel, throwing it over her body to follow Lapis down the aisle.

She numbly stepped off the bus, scratching her head as she bid Greg an awkward good-bye at the door. The man had a warm, thoughtful look in his eyes as he regarded the blonde. "Stay safe out there, kiddo," he said as he shut the bus doors behind her to take the bus to its dock.

Will do, older man, Peridot thought. Her eyes sought out Lapis who was crouching beside her Ducati on the opposite side of the lot, giving Steven a good-bye hug and saying something Peridot couldn't make out even from a minuscule distance. They split, Steven bounding off to catch up with Amethyst at the entrance of the Temple before the two vanished inside together while Lapis watched after him affectionately.

"Do you want a ride back to the dorms?" Lapis offered with the phantom of a smirk tugging the corner of her lip as Peridot came up, lifting a leg and mounting the motorbike fluidly. Peridot barked with sharp laughter. "I'm okay. I think I. . . I feel strong enough to walk the way back tonight."

"Strong enough, huh," Lapis repeated as she bent the golden motorcycle over, drawing her face closer to Peridot's. "Okay. Don't run into anymore forests."

"I'll have you know that it was you who ran into the-" Peridot's unbelieving retort was cut short by Lapis closing the distance between them, pressing their lips together for the chastest of kisses before pulling back. ". . . woods."

"See you tomorrow, Peridot," Lapis said, face soft as she started the engine and drove off.

Peridot stared after the actress, watching the wild head of wind-whipped blue hair vanish from sight as she left the Temple. Her body fizzled with energy from the kiss, and she even lifted her hands up to press them to her damp lips to make sure it hadn't been a figment of her imagination.

Peridot turned and started down the path to the C dormitory, muscles humming with a vitality they hadn't ever felt before.
Next chapter may not be up for a week or so! Gettin' a little busy, and gonna let myself work on eleven and twelve before publishing ten. Thanks for commenting and stuff,, yee
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Peridot's thinking about Lapis a lot, and Pearl has some helpful hints. Things get embarrassing, courtesy of Garnet.

Chapter Notes

Firstly I want to apologize for the delay! My own OAP stuff got busy last week (I got back from bi-district last night, we're advancing onwards!) but I got some good ideas for the next few chapters! Plus, spring break's on now, which means updates every few days-ish!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A late morning sun glittered down over Beach City University, shrouding the verdant courtyard and its numerous milling occupants in light. Despite the sun's eminence, the day was ticked a few degrees below what the students had initially prepared for.

The monotonous voice of her mechanical engineering professor still droned like a hive of disinterested bumblebees in Peridot's head as she plodded across campus. Her arms were tucked safely into the comforts of her worn grey hoodie while she perused over the other shivering students crowded together.

A definite up to attending a morning class would be the complete and utter lack of self-preparation it took, aside from getting up and throwing on something more than her alien-print boxers. And by that, it meant throwing on the nearest warm, soft piece of clothing that she could fall asleep in when the professor's lectures on the Industrial Revolution grew too lifeless for even her to tune into.

There weren't any other real advantageous exploits to it. Waking up before noon and sitting through three tedious hours of lectures on any given day was still hell.

Her feet were carrying her down a familiar path, one that seemed practically automatic now with how often she'd trek it. The courtyard faded away into smaller clusters of green, divided by criss-crossing cobblestone paths that ran from building to building.

Eventually the bronze statue of Rose Quartz emerged from around the corner, as well as the elegant entrance to the Temple behind it. She knew rehearsal wouldn't begin until two, but she was frankly too tired to care. She would rather get the walk over here done than she would march back to her dorm and then make a whole trip back.

What was two hours alone in a light booth?

It seemed like a clever idea when she left class. Too late to turn back now, I'm already opening the door, Peridot mused as she swung open the heavy Temple doors and stepped inside the dark lobby.
She wound her way through the dimness, entering the auditorium and crawling along the shadow-strewn walls to get to the back. When the light booth door clicked shut behind her, she let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

This place was creepy when it was dark.

And no one was around. Oh boy.

Peridot involuntarily moved to the edge of the room to spin the knob that would turn on the blue lights: special LEDs installed over her electric boards that would light up the space just enough to not make her think the Rake was going to come out of the darkness to get her.

The blonde dumped her satchel down on her chair before collapsing into it, leaping up with a yip of alarm when the chair made a squeaking noise as the wheels carried her across the vinyl floor.

"Stupid chair- don't they oil these things?" Peridot hissed, ducking down to give the noisy wheels a contemptuous glare. "Oh, so now you shut up."

She paddled her way back over the table, bringing up her prosthesis and resting its sole against the cushion, absentmindedly massaging the swollen flesh above the liner. Her eyes scanned the proscenium arch beyond the glass of her booth, barely illuminated by the weak light fixtures high up on the auditorium's walls.

The blue lighting and desolate nature of the Temple made her think back to when Lapis had found her snooping around. Joke's on her, this is my territory now! Peridot thought with a cocky smile, tapping her knee thoughtfully as she was pulled deeper into her own mind. Which, like it had been so often lately, was currently revolving around a certain blue-haired actress.

It had been a few days since the Crystal Gems returned from their Surf City clinic, and in turn, Dead Man's Mouth. Peridot hadn't seen much of Lapis since, other than rehearsals which were steadily getting busier and keeping them apart more than she liked. It was making her chest feel like it was being filled to the brim with cold cement that was only getting harder as time wore on.

She frowned and turned her eyes away from the dark theatre and onto her satchel, which she ended up rifling through it to find Lapis' broken cell phone.

She had a few hours until people began coming in. She should at least make the most of her time by doing something useful.

A bit of grumbling, growing, and cursing whenever the tiny tool she was using would escape her fingers later, and Peridot was piecing together the outer shell of the device. The dull light in the room made it a bit more difficult than it should have to see what she was doing, but she was also hunched over Lapis' phone like she was trying to protect it from some barrage of arrows.

She was in the process of trying to restore whatever information might have been lost when she heard a click, shimmy, and the gentle turn of a knob behind her.

Peridot spun around, fingertips digging into the back of her chair as she stared at the intruder opening the back door.

When the silhouette stepped in, it was only Pearl, who looked just as surprised as Peridot felt to see someone in the Temple. "Oh! Peridot, I wasn't told that you would be here this early!"

"That's because I didn't tell anyone," Peridot exhaled, loosening the knots in her shoulders and dropping them as she fell back into her seat. "And the same goes for yourself, Pearl. It's..." She
checked the time, "an hour and a half until rehearsal starts!"

"It's always good to arrive early to begin what the cast so easily forgets," the taller student preened, chin raised with pride. "And, well, I enjoy the solitude of the Temple. It's such a therapeutic place to be."

"I'm sorry- therapeutic?"

"Of course!" Pearl walked over and dropped the binders that had been bundled in her arms neatly down on the table by the light consoles. "The Temple's a place of escape for a lot of us. We of all people should know and experience firsthand the undoings of university. Myself especially. I don't quite know what I would have ever done with myself had Rose never coerced me into it."

The mention of the Crystal Gems' former director brought an arch to Peridot's brow. "Rose Quartz?"

Pearl's face suddenly grew bright. She lifted a slim hand and pressed her palm to her cheek to hide it as her light blue eyes left Peridot and instead focused on the dim proscenium behind the glass. "Yes. She inspired most of us to join, but I was the very first. I've been helping to run shows from day one."

Peridot knew so little about Pearl, she realized. There was a definite soft undertone to her, something you really didn't get to see when she was squawking for actors to put their phones in the box under the stage apron.

You were just thinking about stepping outside your little box of introversion with the Gems, she told herself when she found herself nurturing the idea of ditching the place to escape. Here's your shot.

"What made you want to join?"

Pearl looked up, appearing shocked to have received a response that wasn't something even remotely biting. Peridot even tried her best to at least present herself as interested. After all, she was a little curious. Just a bit.

"Rose made me feel like I was... everything," Pearl began as she turned and daintily seated herself on the edge of the table, legs crossed. "I think I wanted to keep feeling like that, and what better way than to join in on her little theatre caper."

"The years I spent with her were the best I ever had. I'd give anything to feel like that again. I love OAP, the Crystal Gems... but it's difficult with her gone."

Was it just the light booth? Is that what kept throwing Peridot into these extra-personal confrontations? Was it just the LED lighting that made it that much more intimate? If so, she was going to have some regrets about choosing this particular role in the troupe. Also, she figured out quickly that Pearl might have been expecting a response because the co-director was now looking at her, blue eyes glowing in the LED.

"Well," Peridot mumbled, chest a-flutter with anxiety as she tried to throw anything together to say that would be relevant and appease Pearl's apparent heartache. "What's making you feel any different? I know that Rose Quartz is, err, gone." She gulped. "But you seem like you've still got a good grip on the One Act group. At least, from my point of view. I'm only back here in the shadows making the lights work for you lot."

"And Steven! You're taking care of him, right?"

"Yes. I- since Greg was unable to take care of him I took custody. It helped that I was already his
"And I don't know if you know this, but that boy looks at you like you're the whole world. Did you know that, Pearl?"

Pearl was taken aback, body frozen atop the desk as she registered what Peridot was saying. The silence that engulfed the room was palpable and still, disrupted only by the faint rattling hum of the AC unit in the back. "Some part of me does," the peach-haired woman sighed at last, dropping her shoulders and rubbing one insecurely.

"Doesn't that mean something to you then?" Peridot rested her arms over the back of her chair and bore up at Pearl, green eyes hard with intent. "And then there's the others." She ignored Pearl's offended scoff. "My point is, Ms. Pearl Laughlin, people here actually care for you. Even if we chafe when you shout at us to get back to rehearsing. There's no reason for you to feel bad just because one person's gone."

Pearl looked ready to argue but Peridot raised a hand, glowering, to stop her. "I don't know what kind of relationship you had with Rose other than what you've told me, so maybe I'm not allowed to judge here, but I did anyway. You're a big part of this group, Rose Quartz or not. Congratulations."

It was at that point Peridot decided that she should just drop out of mechanics and earn a degree in psychology. Interacting with any Crystal Gem landed her in a counselor's chair - she wasn't even sure how she was pulling that off. She was awful with emotions, especially when it came to other people's, but somehow words pieced themselves together before she even understood them and left her mouth before she realized what they could mean to the other person.

But by the stars, it sure as all hell seemed to work.

And now Pearl was just staring at Peridot, lips parted in what was probably awe or shock or something in between. The blonde felt her lips twist with self-consciousness as she straightened her back and tightened her fingers on the back of her chair. "What are you looking at?" She challenged, feeling vulnerable under the intense cyan stare.

Pearl startled, blinked, and laughed as she pushed herself off the table. Loathe as it was to admit, seeing the high-strung woman unraveled and in a state of ease was favorable to seeing her distraught and in stress-induced tears over a misplaced utensil prop. She almost missed it when she turned back to the technician and tilted her head thoughtfully. "I can see why Lapis has taken such a liking to you now."

Now it was Peridot's turn to flush with colour. "I, uh. . " She recovered from her embarrassed falter and replied with an, "I do my best?"

"And I think that's just what Lapis needed," sighed Pearl. "It pains me to say but, we haven't exactly given her the easiest time. I know." An indefinite guilt washed over her features. "It's been hard to break down that wall for some time now. That incident I heard took place at Dead Man's Mouth was indubitably just some more sealant for it to keep stuck together." She met Peridot's eyes, which were narrowed with hazy suspicion. "But she's also the happiest I've ever seen you when she's with you."

A sensation like a water balloon expanding inside of her rib cage transpired, making Peridot hug her arms close to her chest to abate the feeling. "Why is it that she's like that with you all? What happened? I'd expect for at least some of them to know about her and wate-" She stopped herself before she could dig herself into a hole by revealing something private about Lapis, mouth clamping shut as her eyes flicked nervously up to the watchful Pearl.
If she wanted Peridot to finish the argument, she didn't press on it. She only shook her head in defeat. "That's for her to tell you, I should think. It's nothing explicitly bad, but the milieu of it all wasn't exactly good either."

"And what about Steven?"

"He was a big part in getting her to join. They were friends before she joined, and he helped her through a rough patch, I understand. I'm not fully enlightened on all the details, but I know enough to know that she needed the help." She smiled softly at the shorter student. "And I think you're delivering that quite well."

Peridot's hands found an astray tuft of air and twiddled it between her fingertips, drinking that in. During the clinic she'd thought of how Lapis had been affecting her; she wasn't sure how she was affecting her friend in turn. Thinking of Lapis as just a friend made something in Peridot's chest twang with an achy disappointment. She enjoyed thinking that they were more than that - if the close moments they'd experienced together weren't telltale signs of it, the knowing look Pearl was giving her now was a pretty good one.

"I just want to be there for her," Peridot murmured into the arm of her hoodie, knowing well that it would muffle her voice, but she still hoped Pearl would hear it regardless. "She's been there for me, too. I think she was the primary reason for me even joining the Crystal Gems. And I know I've done a crappy job of including myself in Crystal Gem affairs - and the last one turned out to be an absolute wreck with the drama at Dead Man's Mouth." She chuckled dryly. "But it still turned out okay. I think."

Pearl tapped her chin. Peridot believed she could see a pall of familiarity misting over her eyes as the other regarded her. "Have you two talked about it?"

Peridot frowned. "Talked about what?"

"You know. You. Even Steven knows just how close you two have grown. It would be nice to have an official notice that you two have begun to date."

A very, very red face was promptly shoved into the baggy folds of her hoodie's arms. "No," Peridot huffed hotly, only the tops of her eyes visible to scrutinize Pearl as the taller Crystal Gem smiled knowingly down at her.

"We're- we're not- guh." She couldn't say they weren't. Some part of her wanted them to be together. And she really did think that Lapis might want that too. But she wasn't sure if she was ready - she was still so naive to the situation with Jasper and how it left her, how it might leave her in another relationship. She didn't want to trigger anything; she wanted Lapis to be at ease.

If it was just her, though... if she made sure Lapis knew it was Peridot, and not someone else... Maybe it was worth a real shot after all.

"We haven't talked about that, per se... but... we know where we stand."

"I think that you should. I know firsthand that withholding your feelings can land you in a place you really, really don't want to be," Pearl explained, voice an empathetic, mournful whisper.

"It's been hard to contact her," Peridot commented. "She left her phone with me to fix." Pearl's eyes followed Peridot's to the device sitting on the table top, for the most part pieced back together in prime condition.
"You could talk to her during rehearsals," Pearl pointed out.

"Things get so busy on-stage I don't feel it's appropriate to pull her away from rehearsal. Especially with district only days away."

"That's... true." Pearl reached over and handled Lapis' repaired device gently, rolling the thing over in her pale palms before she handed it back to Peridot. "I suppose I can allow her an extra break away from the run-throughs this evening. Perhaps send her up here to you."

Peridot's eyes widened as yet another blush steadily crept onto her cheeks. "You're not joking me, are you?"

Pearl gathered up the binders, and Peridot realized that they were papers for the district competition that was only three days away. "Now why would I do that, Ms. Diamond? After all, I'll only be sending her back to retrieve her fixed cell phone!" She mused as she passed her by, pausing by the light booth entryway to fix Peridot with a meaningful, softened gaze. "By the way, I'm thinking Garnet and Bismuth have arrived to rehearsal. I just heard the back door swing open. Turn on the house and work lights, would you?"

Peridot flailed to switch on the channels and irradiate the Temple just in time to see Garnet and Bismuth walking out from the wings of the curtains. She heard Pearl call out a hello before seeing her hop up onto the apron and cross over to give her troupe mates a proper greeting. Garnet turned away from Pearl at one point, who was gesturing purposefully at the notebooks in her arms, and looked up to the light booth.

It was impossible to tell from a distance, but Peridot thought that she could see a small smile on her lips as she silently lifted her arm and... gave her a thumbs-up?

The technician leaned back in her chair, heart suddenly pounding viciously in her chest. Alone, her conversation with Pearl carried so much more weight: it sagged her shoulders and made her ribs feel like they were being filled with concrete that was beginning to dry in the most uncomfortable of ways.

She tried to link a skeleton of ideas together for when Lapis came back to her later, whenever she arrived and whenever Pearl sent her back. She couldn't just suggest them... getting together outright. She needed lead-up, she needed supporting evidence.

*Now you sound like a literature major,* Peridot mentally remarked with a grumble as she fixed her glasses. *Just don't be an idiot when she gets up here.*

Peridot distracted herself by finishing work on Lapis' phone, managing to return it to life, functioning lock screen and all. The only evidence that it had ever been thrown had been the webbing cracks licking at the edge of the screen; Peridot supposed she could have fixed it, but with limited resources and an equal lack of technology shops in Beach City, this was the closest she could get to fully functional.

At one point Garnet called her down to the stage through the headset system. Peridot stuffed Lapis' mended device back into her satchel, standing up and popping her back before marching down the aisles of the theatron. She paused as she eyed the steep stairway shortcut onto the stage, deciding to skirt around it and take the elevated railing; she didn't feel like dealing with that steep platform of cursed wood today anyway.

More and more Crystal Gems began to filter in from both the side door and the main door as the clock ticked by and two finally arrived. Only a few faces were missing from the crowd gathered on
stage as Garnet dropped the headset around her neck and addressed them as soon as the final stragglers shuffled in.

Lapis Lazuli was among them, the last to arrive at rehearsal, hovering near the edge of the congestion as she adhered Garnet's instructions.

Peridot wasn't sure if Lapis had seen her in the tangle of people. Even so, she could tell Lapis was looking distant and blase; not exactly uncommon, but still enough to make Peridot want to rush over and offer solace of some kind.

"District competition in Bayburgh is this Thursday," Garnet began, making Peridot realize she'd been staring at the back of Lapis' blue head for a full minute. She turned her attention fixedly onto Garnet as the manager beckoned Pearl, who readily supplied her with the same white binder she had up in the booth with Peridot.

"I've just received word that there will be six schools competing, ourselves included. District has always been a particularly aggressive bump in the road - despite being the very first contest OAP troupes have to face." A ripple of murmurs overtook the Crystal Gems as Garnet's words sunk in.

Said leader rose her hand to silence them after a few moments of this. "As you all know, only three schools may advance to area to compete against the other Delmarva districts. If we don't make it past this, it's over for us once more. I don't intend to let that happen. We have a strong team this year, and I have an unbroken faith in our capabilities. Now let's make this rehearsal the greatest show we've put on yet; we need to be brilliant for the judges on the seventh."

A concurring uproar followed that sentiment, led by Smoky and Amethyst that the rest of the Gems joined in on. Peridot took up a few woop's of her own, but cut herself off when she saw Amethyst eyeing her. Her poor body damn near crumpled when the only-slightly-shorter girl pounded over and slapped an arm over Peridot's thinner shoulders. "And let's give it up for P-dot, nerd techie extraordinaire who made it so we could qualify for district in the first place!"

"Amethyst, I really don't think that's necessa-"

"Shut up, Per, this is your moment!" Amethyst hissed in her ear. "Bask!"

Sure enough, most eyes had diverted from Garnet and were focused on Peridot. Part of her loved the attention, loved the awareness of her important role and loved the celebration of her. The alternate half of her really, really wanted to go crawl into a hole and suffer because damn it, everyone was looking at her.

Stevonnie and Bismuth both came up behind her, slapping their hands down on her shoulders simultaneously and making her jump with alarm. A second wave of laughter erupted from the Crystal Gems at that, and a few like Rainbow, Alexandrite, and Stevonnie. Even Pearl came up to smile at her, followed by Steven who threw his arms around her before dashing off-stage when Garnet began to disperse the group.

Lapis came up too, and Peridot had to control the primal thudding in her chest when lean arms came up to wrap around her neck and pulled her in. The withdrawal had left her grasping, like a fish out of water. Even these few little drops were enough to appease her as she relaxed into Lapis' grip and returned the gesture. "Hey," she murmured into Lapis' lower shoulder, breathing in the wild, tropical scent that she never realized she’d taken for granted until now. She wanted to remain like that forever.

Until Amethyst broke in not a few seconds later and they pulled apart with a fair amount of
"Come on, you two - Sardonyx has got to get Lapis' make-up stuff put on today!" Amethyst mused, turning her eyes to Peridot and giving her eyebrows a suggestive wiggle. "You can mooch over each other later."

"Amethyst's right, beauties!" Sardonyx cut in, appearing from being a curtain and strutting over, gloved hands filled with little tubes of blue cosmologist substance and tins of foundation. "If we're to do this dress rehearsal correctly we need our lovely phantom backstage in the dressing room! Now come, come, let's see what we can do with that hair!"

Before either girl could get a word in edgewise Sardonyx was patting Lapis' back coaxingly to lead her to stage left and into the dressing rooms. Lapis took a glance back, eyes rolling in a way that made Peridot chuckle before she vanished behind the right wing. That left Peridot and Amethyst, the latter of which was standing with her arms crossed smugly over her thick chest as she simpered at Peridot. The technician placed her hands on her hips, unable to hide the amusement from her tone as she asked, "Mooch?"

"Whatever fun stuff y'all get up to, I want deets."

"You're vile."

"And you're supposed to be up in your booth doing tech stuff. Now andale! Before Pearl finds you lurking around on stage! Go!"

With a yelp Peridot scrambled off-stage, waving the stout girl a good-bye as she raced back to her booth. After entering she slumped back into her chair, visibly deflating as she watched the last of the cast and crew fan out and disappear behind the wing curtains. She shoved back on the headset and recognized Garnet's voice talking with Pearl on the other end.

She set up her cue system with a few clicks and taps before announcing that she was ready to begin.

"Great. Give the cast a few moments to get in costume, and we'll begin."

It was an hour and a half into rehearsal. Garnet was busy reminding Opal of her forgotten lines in the fourth living room scene with Blake and Robyn when Peridot saw Pearl move across the stage, stride dutiful, before skidding to a stop in front of Lapis who was sitting sprawled out in-costume in the floral brown armchair.

Whatever Pearl said to Lapis, even from her distance, Peridot could tell it excited her. She sprung up from her seat, the flouncy blue dress of the ghost flowing around her tan legs as she padded across the vinyl and jumped off the stage.

She's coming, she's coming, came the alarming thoughts as Peridot kicked back from the desk, chair carrying her to the other side of the room as she jolted to her feet with an undignified sway. She floundered back to the console to transition the AB faders just in time to change the lighting to pin Blake alone under a spotlight just as Lapis entered, lithe physique obscured by rich blue shadows.

Peridot didn't realize just how... light Lapis' Mirror Gem attire was. It seemed so much less revealing from the stage. Her face was caked with crisp make-up, dark navy eye shadow, blue-tinged foundation, and mascara that sharpened her into the powerful, vengeful being she was playing. Naturally she had bare feet, and a knee-length blue skirt with a downwards navy triangle at her hips, complemented by a halter top with a similar triangle design that tied together with nothing but a sash ribbon on the back of her shoulders.
Peridot both hoped and feared that it could the knot could undone with but the swift tug of a deft finger. She caught herself romanticizing the idea and internally groaned. Thank you, gay thoughts. Now get, I've business to do.

Whatever outline her mind had haphazardly thrown together to talk to Lapis about them vaporized the instant they met one another's eyes. So much for not feeling like an idiot.

"You called?" Lapis mused, gliding into the room and hopping up to her place on the table beside the dual monitors, crossing her legs. Peridot was trying very, very hard not to let her eyes droop any lower than Lapis' prominent collar bones behind the v-neck of her top at that point.

Peridot took off her headset, throwing it onto the desk and trying her best to look casual and failing spectacularly. "I didn't call- I thought Pearl told you to come?"

Lapis' eyebrows shot skyward before dipping inward again, features changing into a smirk. "That was sarcasm- but were you just watching me sit in the chair? And how did you know she told me?"

Peridot's lips twisted downwards. She kicked aside the shovel she was digging a hole with for herself and sighed. "My eyes were on you when Pearl approached you- and I didn't know she told you! I was just assuming, that from a hypothetical standpoint if she and I were planning to send you back here during a lull in rehears-

"Peridot. You're rambling."

Peridot sighed a deep, worried sigh before grabbing her office chair and dropping herself into it, legs crossed in front of it as she scooted closer to Lapis who seemed to have taken notice of the blonde's anxiety. "Peridot?"

"I just wanted to talk to you, is all. It's been a couple of days since we could really, you know, do that." Peridot rolled to a stop just before the back of her chair could touch Lapis' knees. "We've both been busy with stuff, so that's pretty understandable."

"So you and Pearl made it so that I could skimp out from being backstage during a run-through?"

"It sounds much more underhanded than I'd originally intended when you put it that way!"

Lapis snorted and bent down. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

"I kinda wanted to talk about... us."

"Us?"

"Yeah."

"... What about us?" The actress asked, legs tucking beneath her silky skirt as she leaned lower, face stricken with concern. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, things are fine!" Thinking that she could have been alluding to the fact that something was wrong with them made her throat constrict. The only thing wrong with them, in Peridot's mind, was that they didn't have this kind of officiating talk sooner! "I just... I wanted to know what we are."

"What we are," Lapis echoed, tone faint yet thoughtful. "What do you mean?"

Oh my stars, I'm going to die. Peridot's shoulders hunched like she was a turtle trying to recede back
into the safety of its shell. "I've been, thinking lately. About us. A lot. You- You make me feel happy, Laz. I've never been one for stuff like this, at least I never considered myself good until I met you."

"I wanted to know if you wanted to. . . be something a little more than just an actress and a lights person." Every word had a numbing effect on her tongue, making it harder to speak with every dictation and every enunciation of every word. Somehow she was able to spit out the most challenging request of all. "More than. . . friends."

And here it came, the Titanic that would ram into the tip of the iceberg and end up capsizing this whole engagement.

"I'd say something cheesy like you walk in my dreams every night, but. . . I really do like you, Lapis. And I mean that."

*Quiet.* It filled the room as thickly as an Empire City morning bog, thick and choking and oh-so nerve-wracking.

It was always hard to read Lapis. Even when they were face-to-face, it was hard to tell what was going on through her mind. She began to worry about what was happening behind her brown eyes. Was she upset? Oh stars, what if she was angry or something equally terrib-

A quick shift, the flapping of loose clothing, and arms that were suddenly wrapping around Peridot's shoulders. Warm breath tickled the hyper-sensitive flesh of Peridot's neck, starting up a sea of goosebumps that thrilled over her skin. "I like you too, dork," came Lapis' breathless confession in her ear. "Glad all those kisses we had weren't all for naught."

Peridot snickered, reaching up a hand to gently cup Lapis' speckled cheek to angle her face downward. "Never for naught," she consoled, free hand reaching down to curve around Lapis' waist as they subconsciously wound their bodies together. "So. . . Lapis Lazuli Kaile'a. What do you say about us. . . together?"

In reply Peridot's face was lifted up to catch the pair of lips tipped towards her. Her body was boiling with so much joyful relief she didn't even care that she had to tip-toe just the smallest bit to be comfortable in the kiss.

It was unlike anything they'd had before. It was wild but in the same regard tranquil and peaceful. It was craving and longing, but reverent and understanding all the same. Tan hands wove experimentally over wide hips, ghosting over the edges of shirts and asking quiet permission that granted itself when neither flinched away from the sensual touches.

When they separated, Lapis' eyes were coyly squinted as she leaned over the smaller student. "How was that for an answer?"

"Convincing," Peridot whispered as she was pushed to the edge of the desk, resulting in needing steadying herself with one palm clasped around the edge as the other crawled over the actress' side. "Do you think we need a little more convincing though. . .?"

Lapis leaned over Peridot, planting an arm around her on each side, lids lazy, but pupils dark with captivated consensus to what Peridot was hinting at. "Gladly."

Before Lapis could do anything more than trail her fingers along the goose-flesh of Peridot's neck and collar bones, the static-y voice of Garnet filled the quiet space, ripping them both into reality as they stared in astonishment at the abandoned headset on the table. Peridot noticed with horror that the
green light on the little box was on.

"I believe you should really check that your headset microphone is off before you and Lapis hang out in the booth from now on, Peridot."

Chapter End Notes

Why's it always Garnet intruding on their intimate moments? Because I get secondhand embarrassment and love every minute of it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems go to their district competition. Hotels, shows, and award ceremonies, oh my!

Chapter Notes

Since this chapter came out very quickly after the last, make sure you've read chapter ten before continuing. The chapter's also quite long, so I hope you all enjoy it! The next one could be up by the end of the week, or next week. Gonna rough draft a couple of them before I start posting again!

Peridot stood down centre of the stage, facing upstage where most of the gems were aggregated, swarming over the collapsible table Pearl and Amethyst had set up and placed the district papers on. Their tech rehearsal had been moved to earlier into the morning, from 9:30AM to 6:30AM to compensate for the Aqua Town OAP group being caught in an unforeseen hailstorm that left their bus with a battered engine and broken windows.

And people thought Ocean Town had a streak of eccentrically bad weather phenomenon.

Regardless, this wasn't well-received. Bayburgh was a good two hours away, and the Crystal Gems would be damned if any of them had to get up at three in the morning to get to the Temple, get dressed and covered in cosmetics, then spend two hours cramped on a bus.

No. That wasn't appealing in the slightest.

Garnet's resolution rung well with them in the end: they would stay the night in Bayburgh, and leaving at six o'clock sharp from the Temple that evening after packing their Penske vehicle and loading all their required items and articles.

Pearl, Amethyst, and Garnet were operating the table, handing the other students their filed excuse papers to leave with their teachers. For most of them, as soon as the papers were thrust into their arms they took off in a running sprint to deposit it in their professors' boxes. Peridot was smarter than that; she could just scan the paper and digitally transfer it over to her teachers with the magical thing called e-mail. She'd be damned if she had to dart all over campus and get back before six, which was only an hour away, her phone confirmed.

Speaking of that particular item, hers dinged and she pulled it out of the front pocket of her black-and-white flannel to see two new text messages from none other than Lapis.

Lazuli [5:05 pm]: grab papers for me, running late

Peridot [5:05 pm]: What's happened this time?
Lazuli [5:05 pm]: stopped at the strip club and had shots.

Peridot [5:06 pm]: I should think not! District is tomorrow, we need our cast sober, Lapis!

Lazuli [5:06 pm]: I'm kidding peri. I was finishing an essay bc I dont wanna stress over it on trip

Peridot [5:06 pm]: That's a better excuse. I'll get your stuff.

Lazuli [5:06 pm]: can you help me email it to my professors too

Peridot [5:07 pm]: So neeeedy. Sure.

Lazuli [5:07 pm]: thank youuuu

Peridot held her phone still in her hands, worrying at her lip as she stared down at the glowing screen, wondering if she should reply with anything else. She ended up with cold feet, dipping out of her conversation with Lapis and instead opening up her inbox with Sadie. She'd yet to pack, and apparently there was some sort of dress code for the award ceremony at the end of competition. She needed something a little more than a plaid overshirt and slightly over-sized men's jeans.

Peridot [5:08 pm]: Can you get out my duffel? OAP's leaving overnight and I'm gonna run in and pack like I'm running away to Mexico in a few minutes.

"Peridot! Come get your papers, please!" Pearl's voice cut in the minute the blonde hit send, and she had to palm the device as she ushered herself to the table. "I'd like to get a few for Lapis, too," she explained as Pearl swiftly handed over her exemption notices. "She's a little occupied right now."

"What with?"

"Finishing an essay to avoid some inevitable stress over the trip."

Pearl's brows lifted, mouth twitching into a small, knowing smile. "That's certainly not something I'd normally see out of her," the co-director chirped as she slipped a couple extra papers out from her notebook. She lifted her twinkling pale eyes up to Peridot. "I wonder why that is."

"I haven't been giving her lessons on her oceanography classes, if that's what you're implying."

Pearl made a dismissive noise as she handed the papers back to Peridot. "Well! It's always pleasant seeing Crystal Gems taking a better handle with their studies!"

Garnet came over from the other side of the table after handing a packet to Bismuth and Sugilite. "Hello, Peridot," she smiled, so minutely that Peridot had to squint to make sure her eyes weren't deceiving her. "Picking up things for Lapis, I see."

"Yeah!" The technician confirmed, a little too loud. "I mean- yes, I'm picking these papers up for her. Because she's late. Running late. Doing stuff."

"Hmm-hmm," the director chuckled. "Okay. Say hello to her for me when you see her next." Peridot couldn't tell beneath her dark aviators, but she felt like Garnet winked at her. Her face bubbled with warmth when she remembered the dreaded microphone incident two days ago. "Sure," she squeaked, stuffing the papers into her satchel and getting away from her directors as quickly as humanly possible.

She left the Temple after that, rushing back to the C dorms. She flew into her room, startling Sadie who was tacking away at her desk. "Fancy clothes! Of course I'd need fancy clothes!" Peridot
complained as she rushed to the closet, ripping out an appropriate "casual-formal" outfit and the first black shirt she saw.

Not even five minutes later and her quaint little duffel bag was packed, including sleepwear, her crew attire, and clothes for the awards ceremony tomorrow night.

"When do you think you'll be back?" Sadie asked as Peridot stuffed a couple extra socks and silken prosthetic liners into the front pocket of her bag. "Bayburgh's not that far away."

"It's far away when you have to get up at four in the morning to drive there," the amputee commented dryly. Sadie laughed. "I guess you're right. Good lu- wait, no, break a leg! That's the saying you theatre kids use, right?"

"I'm offended that you're including me in that brand, that's a very broad term to use!"

"You are a Crystal Gem now."

Peridot huffed. "You're not wrong," she concurred as she zipped up the duffel and hoisted it over her shoulder. "Feed my alien while I'm gone, would you? He comes out at eleven and three, respectively."

Sadie's expression of confused horror was enough to elicit a pleased cackle out of her roommate. "We should be back tomorrow night. I'll try to be quiet on my way in."

"Key word try," Sadie chuckled as she turned back to her laptop. "See you in a day, Peridot."

Peridot was halfway back to the Temple, listlessly carrying herself to the sway of the music provided by her earphones, when her jam session was rudely interrupted by a text alert. She growled as she pried the phone from her flannel pocket, but softened when she saw the culprit.

Lazuli [5:39 pm]: i get to the temple and you're gone. you better not be ditching

Peridot [5:39 pm]: I resent that. I went back to my dorm to get my duffel!

Lazuli [5:40 pm]: or youre off with your side chic

Peridot's tongue twisted and she felt like she might choke from the accusation. Of course she wasn't with a- a side chick! Who did Lapis take her for?

Peridot [5:41 pm]: That's ridiculous! Lazuli, as your girlfriend, it would be wrong of me to go off like that.

Lazuli [5:41 pm]: lol calm down, i'm joking

Peridot [5:41 pm]: I'm going to get grey hairs because of you by the time I graduate. It's so hard to tell sarcasm over text. Or in general.

She decided that dawdling to banter with Lapis could wait for another time. After all, they had a whole night of nothing ahead of them. So she pressed continue on her playlist and pocketed the device, continuing on the rest of the way to the Temple. When she arrived, Greg's bus had been pulled up front, its yellow coating gleaming in the afternoon sun as troupe members loaded their belongings.

Standing by and talking to Steven was Lapis, the same fond smile on her face that was ever-present whenever Steven was with her. It tickled her heartstrings seeing Lapis so genuinely happy; not that it
wasn't uncommon, but it was a hard feat to accomplish on even her best days.

"Steven, Lapis!" Peridot greeted as she marched over, repositioning the duffel over her shoulder so she could wrap her arms around Lapis. The tan-skinned girl eagerly obliged. Before they could separate though, small, chubby arms were wrapped around their waists to keep them bound together. "Group hug!" Steven sang.

Lapis snorted and freed a hand to ruffle the young boy's hair. "Not for too long. We still need to finish loading our things."

Steven pouted, jokingly, and retracted his arms from around the couple. "Okay!" He chirped. "Do you want me to help you carry your stuff, Peridot?"

Peridot, in her obstinate sense of pride, was ready to decline the offer. But it was one swift glimpse to Lapis and the way the actress' head gestured for her to agree that the headstrong sentiment faded. "Sure," she assented, handing the duffel over to Peridot. With surprising strength the boy lifted it up onto his shoulder and jogged onto the bus, joining Amethyst as she trampled like an animal on all fours up the bus steps.

Lapis' shoulders slackened as she ghosted her hand over the small of Peridot's back, sending an electric rush thrilling up the smaller girl's spine at the spectral touch. "I'm really glad we're able to do this together," the actress admitted quietly, thoughtfully. "I'm glad you're here, Peridot."

Peridot's hands reached out to hold Lapis', an enlivened smile painting itself onto her pale features. "Me too. Who else could run the lights as awesomely as me?"

"Is awesomely even a word?"

"...I'm not sure. But we should get going!" suggested Peridot, leading a huffing Lapis up to the bus doors. "I heard we're going to Jason's Deli for dinner! I want that panini."

Most of the Gems were fine with the rooming arrangements. Amethyst, Sugilite, and Bismuth were paired together, as were Opal, Rainbow Quartz, and Sapphire. Pearl and Garnet were together, being the directors and all. Pearl would probably be up until well into the morning contacting contest managers and worrying about setting up and striking.

Peridot fidgeted beside Lapis as the last of the rooming arrangements were divulged. She wouldn't mind it (much) if she wasn't paired with Lapis, but the idea of needing to share a bed with anyone else felt unsettling and downright awkward.

"Staying in room 224 will be Ruby, Lapis, and Peridot."

Utter relief filled the blonde. She beamed, wide grin splitting her face as she stumbled over and took the room key from the Garnet. Lapis fell in beside her, humming contentedly as she rested her chin over Peridot's shoulder to admire the print of a sheep in a golden field that was very unfitting to the fancy ambiance of the hotel. "Sounds good."

Ruby wasn't as pleased with this outcome, however, and immediately went up to Garnet to barter for a better rooming arrangement. Specifically one that paired her with Sapphire. "We both know what you two would get up to," Garnet mused as she patted the short, muscular girl on the head. "If last year is anything to go on."

"Oh and those two won't?!" Ruby scoffed, pointing an accusatory finger at Lapis and Peridot and their overnight luggage. Garnet's lips twitched like they wanted to break into a smirk. "I don't believe
they will. They're well-behaved."

"Sure they are," Ruby muttered, grumping all the way back to her roommates.

Peridot might have laughed at Garnet's assurance. Maybe she'd forgotten the incident with the microphone, but the small tilt of her head as she... probably... made eye contact with Peridot said otherwise. She awkwardly grinned and turned her face away from the director as Ruby joined them.

"Don't feel too bad," spoke Lapis as the three all turned to make way to the elevator with Opal's group. "Consider it payback for you always coming into my dorm room with Sapphire while I'm sleeping."

A wild, stubborn blush cascaded across Ruby's cheeks as she punched the elevator button. "They could have at least made it a double date," she muttered as the groups filed into the elevator onto the second floor.

When they arrived to their room, it was decently sized with two queen beds covered in plain apricot comforters. "Dibs on this one!" Ruby exclaimed, staking her claim by throwing her backpack onto the best closest to the door.

"Whatever," Lapis murmured as she laid her bag down on the other bed. "I'm gonna crash already. Bus rides make me tired."

Peridot tilted her head as she set her bag beside Lapis'. "But you slept the whole way here?"

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not patronizing!"

"I'm going to deck both of you if you rib each other all night, 'cuz I kinda wanna crash out early too," Ruby spoke, flashing them the I'm-watching-you signal as she disappeared behind the bathroom door to change.

"She's just cranky because she isn't roomed with Sapphire," Lapis chuckled. "They've been together since middle school rumors have it."

"That's... very impressive."

She wondered if she and Lapis would last that long. It was a nice thought that she hoped could come true.

Ruby skidded out of the restroom and flung her things into her bag before collapsed onto her blankets. All three ended up watching some uninteresting documentary on bears in Canada (Ruby thought it was mildly terrifying) for about half an hour until they were sure Ruby had drowsed off after stuffing a pillow over her head. Lapis had gone off to shower and change some a few minutes prior, leaving Peridot alone in the lamp-lit room with a sleepy Ruby.

Peridot waited until she could hear soft snores rising from Ruby's form across the room before unpinning her leg and leaving it to rest beside the bed. Her stomach brewed with anxiety about how Lapis would react to sleeping with someone with a stump for a leg, and she was seconds away from slapping the damn device back on when Lapis emerged from the bathroom in her pajamas.

She bunched the blankets over her legs so it was less obvious as Lapis drew nearer. This didn't go unnoticed.
"You don't have to hide it," Lapis whispered as she crawled over the side of the bed, resting her back against the headrest and leaning over to comfortingly rest a hand on Peridot's thigh. "There's no reason for you to."

The very instant Peridot willed herself to look up at Lapis, tearing her eyes away from the shielding covers, the sincerity in those deep, powerful brown eyes evaporated each and every last drop of fear she'd had about the leg.

"God," Peridot chuckled, throat thick as her eyes began to sting. She rubbed a hand through her disheveled hair, face bright with what she could only describe as some off-brand delight. "Wow, um, thanks."

She wasn't even sure why she was getting emotional over this.

Emotions were dumb.

Lapis smiled before throwing herself under the blankets beside her, sighing contentedly as soon as her head hit the pillow. "I guess we should be nice to Ruby and not have any fun," she pouted as she glanced over at their extra roommate. Peridot blushed. "Fun?"

Lapis' lips twisted into a roguish smirk. "Don't act innocent with me, Diamond. I saw that face of yours in the light booth!"

Peridot gasped, diving under the covers and hiding herself from her girlfriend. "I don't know what you're implying here."

"That you were totally down for some."

"Good night, Lapis."

Lapis giggled and slid further under the sheets, reaching over to turn out the light on the nightstand. Since Peridot was facing the window, all she heard after was the shuffling of a body against a comforter and a gentle exhale. She was slightly disappointed she didn't hear a good night, Peridot, but she wasn't about to let that bother her. That totally didn't bother her, not in the slightest. That was why she was currently definitely not overthinking it.

Okay, it was bothering her. She was planning to open her mouth to say good-night again to hint for an answer, but the feeling of warm lips pressing against the back of her neck stopped her. "Aah-" A hand silenced her, brushing around her curvy waist and settling experimentally in front of her stomach, clenching the Camp Pining Hearts t-shirt softly. When Peridot didn't do anything to stop her, Lapis' body relaxed against hers.

The same mildly tropical scent of her flooded her nostrils, making the hair on the back of her neck stand with every inhale of the sweet aroma.

Stars, she had it bad.

"Night, Peridot," Lapis finally murmured into her ear, probably knowing full well of the paralysis she'd just instilled on the smaller girl.

Said smaller girl's stupor lasted a few minutes. A rebellious part of her really wished to rip Lapis back into the world of wakefulness and show her just how much she meant to her, but if Ruby woke up in the middle of that... yikes.

Her more reasonable half rejected the idea, instead settling for slowly rotating herself in Lapis'
drowsy grip to watch the gentle rise and fall of the Hawaiian's chest beneath the covers.

It was so odd and unfamiliar, falling asleep with another living, breathing human on the same mattress as you. Yet, here she was, Peridot Diamond, currently about to doze off in the arms of Lapis Lazuli Kaile'a.

Funny how things turned out sometimes.

Even without her glasses, Lapis' face was still wondrous to look at. It filled her with such an impregnable sensation of affection that it was impossible to not reach out and trail her fingers along the edge of it. She feared that Lapis would flinch away from the touch, but to her joy and surprise she instead leaned into it, sighing contentedly into the pillow.

Peridot blinked, pulling back her curious fingers and holding them close to her chest which felt ready to burst at how busily her heart was working.

Tomorrow was district, and in not twenty-four hours would the Crystal Gems be putting on their show to begin their competitive season of the school year. They were formidable; Peridot was no theatre expert, but their show hit its audience in all the right places, and it was only getting better. Wy-Six's input from their clinic was a definite help; a character study was something they all needed.

So long as they dazzled the eyes out of the judges, there would be nothing to fear.

She closed her eyes.

Tomorrow would be a breeze.

A breeze.

. . . A breeze.

If that's what she wanted to call that tumultuous morning at the Hampton, then she needed to read herself the entire Webster's dictionary a couple times over to make sure her English vocabulary was still up to date.

Sardonyx burst into the room after somehow obtaining a working room key (she could have bribed the staff for all Peridot knew,) and announced her arrival with an exuberant, "ohoho! Time to get up, lovelies! Our directors want us down in the lobby in fifteen minutes, tops!" She sauntered over and clicked on the two lamp posts between the dual beds. "Rise and shine!"

Peridot rushed to cover herself, namely her lower half, and darted her eyes to the floor on the side of the bed where her prosthesis was resting. Lapis was considerably less responsive. Her eyes hesitantly opened, staring needles at the very loud, very flamboyant thespian as she danced out of the room to bother the other sleepy Crystal Gems across the hall.

"That was one hell of a wake up call," Peridot heard Ruby mutter across the room, nothing more than a wild afro of hair just barely poking out from under the creamy duvet. Peridot snickered and rolled over, drowsily bumping her sharp chin against Lapis' bare shoulder. "Get up. That's something we should probably do," she drawled lazily, eyes turning to the desk with the digital clock. She couldn't read it without her glasses. "What time does it say?"

Lapis grumbled, fingers digging into her eyes as she shifted from under Peridot's jaw. "5:45," she muttered. Peridot could hear Ruby gasp across the room, and in record timing the burly brown-skinned actress had thrown off her blankets and rocketed into the bathroom with her clothes. "We've
gotta go! We're taking off at six!"

Peridot followed suit after she heard the bathroom door slam shut. She hurriedly strapped on her left leg, throwing on her jeans over her sleeping boxers and rushing over to the other side of the bed to yank Lapis out. "Come on, Lazuli, we need to move! I don't want to be here when maintenance shows up to disturb the peace later!"

Lapis eventually did get up, and was hoisting on black leggings when Ruby emerged from the facilities. She had on a form-fitting black t-shirt and black jeans, and rushed across to slap on her tennis shoes. Peridot changed next, and finally Lapis, and after gathering all their belongings the trio rushed downstairs to the lobby where the rest of the One Act troupe were waiting.

It was standard protocol, albeit a very loose one, that OAP members wore dark clothing to events - a regulation that bled into genuine Broadway productions when it came down to crew members. Still, it made Peridot think the Crystal Gems were all lining up at the ticket booth for a Fall Out Boy concert in their dark garments. At least she fit in, even though the only real black shirt she owned had a small white alien insignia where the pocket should be.

The whole bus ride consisted of excited thespians yelling and Pearl using the intercom to calm them and go over customary rules that came with official tech rehearsals. Most of it was "for the love of everything, absolutely do not swing from the iron beams like some of you did last year!"

Greg had the bus pulled up front and Pearl wasted no time in hurrying everyone outdoors. Everyone ditched their things in the undercarriage before scrambling into the bus. The university their hour rehearsal was scheduled at was only ten minutes away, mostly due to the fact that it was on the other side of Aqua Town. The minute the bus pulled to a stop in the back lot of the auditorium Garnet and Pearl threw everyone off the bus to help unload the Penske truck. "We've got fifteen minutes until our time begins! We don't need to spend that precious hour loading our things indoors!"

The whole set was stacked into the crossover behind the stage so that they could practice their seven minute set-up: the thing that everyone was scared of for their official contest show later at two. The contest manager, a large blonde woman with a slight German accent was giving them the run-down. "You have one hour to set, rehearse what needs rehearsing, and show the present critic any and all scenes involving physical conflict. In other words, fight scenes. You must also have struck and set all stage items in the designated taped box in the left crossover area by the time the hour is over. Hop to it!"

Peridot moved to the wings, watching as the cast members rushed to set and mark their props with their bright blue tape: fitting to their play's namesake. One of the Bayburgh stage hands noticed her inflexible cluelessness and directed her towards the side exit where she could go down to the light booth. "Yeah, okay," she acknowledged, waving off the offender. She walked down the side walkway and entered the tech room on the other side of the theatre, where the school's technology director was waiting to instruct her.

She was given the same old set of instructions about the regulations of the contest that still applied at rehearsal. Peridot tore out her notebook that contained her little green notepad filled with areas, looks, and cues, and begin to plot and record them the minute the very first set piece was spiked with tape.

Rehearsal flew by in a blur. The first twenty minutes were reserved for spiking and testing the curtains, and by the thirty-minute mark Garnet was communicating with her over the headset, running light cue to light cue to make sure the actors were transitioning correctly.

Before Peridot knew it was time, the stagehand behind her alerted her to the face that there were ten
minutes left from their hour-long practice. "Ten," she echoed, thanking him aimlessly as she popped in a disc drive to record her programmed cues onto. "Thanks."

Once she had swept the console clean of her cues and left the disc with the tech director she left the booth, rushing back down to the stage as the Crystal Gems began to load their things into the box on the crossover.

"Things go good up in light land?" Amethyst asked from behind her, emerging from behind the trap curtains. "Yeah," the blonde concurred. "What about backstage? Garnet's pretty uninformative on that stuff."

"Bismuth punched a hole through their wall."

"What!?"

"I'm jokin' ya- she only punched Sugilite."

"Oh thank the stars. But, um, what now? Do we just... " Peridot motioned to the empty auditorium. "Stay here until contest time?"

"Nope," Lapis' voice cut in from behind them, and the actress came up, ruffling her hair to return it to its natural messy state. "They assign us a classroom to stay in until it's time for us to perform. We just stay in there the whole day."

"Sounds riveting," Peridot said with a raised brow.

A member of Bayburgh's production led the Crystal Gems out of the auditorium after their rehearsal's closure, taking them across the building to their classroom. Spanish phrases covered the walls, and if that didn't scream "I teach Spanish V!" enough, a sombrero was draped over the teacher's desk.

Thirty minutes prior to their showing, Pearl sent everyone off to change into their costumes. The cast already had their make-up on, including Lapis. Her dark olive face was flushed, the eerie make-up applied still making Peridot's stomach flitter when they would meet eyes.

In the last few minutes, where Opal and Stevonnie were running lines with one another because the former forgot her lines for the fourth living room scene again, Lapis and Peridot were huddled together in the corner of the room, sitting against the wall with their shoulders almost touching.

Peridot's phone alerted her to a new message in her inbox, and hesitantly the amputee lifted it from the floor and froze when she saw the sender. Mother. She was motionless as she stared down at the lit screen, contemplating what directive she should take.

Answer her now, and not receive rebuke later for ignoring her mother? Or wait until later but inevitably face the consequences when she would forget to respond.

She would have to wait until later. They were due to leave for their show at any minute.

"What a way to ruin a mood," Peridot frowned. "I just got a text from a very unsavory character. Eugh."

Lapis knitted her brows. "Who?"

"My mother," grumbled Peridot, glaring loathsomely at the sender title. "I can't imagine what she could want right now. She only ever contacts me when she needs something done or wants to prattle on about her company."
"Oh yeah," the other whispered, scooching back to peer over Peridot's shoulder at her smartphone screen. "You told me a little bit about her... not exactly close, are you?"

"How could you tell?" Peridot bitterly chuckled whilst tapping her phone off, storing it away in her satchel and trying her best to forget the new and ominous e-mail. "I'll tell you about it another day," Peridot promised as Lapis helped her up onto her feet and they were ushered out the door by their directors to the auditorium.

She forced the thoughts of her mother out of her mind. That was something she could deal with another time. Now, she needed to focus on putting on an incredible show.

The cast were costumed and in-character, assuming their roles' gaits and qualities. Even Lapis faded into the baleful phantom she portrayed as they padded down the hallway, her footfalls silent and fateful. Peridot could only admire her from the side, watching as her eyes became typical of the mirror spirit hellbent on revenge.

They entered through a door at the back of the left stage wing, depositing their green-capped prop boxes at their assigned positions as they all rushed to the centre of the stage. The stage manager, the same woman from their rehearsal that morning, was waiting, stopwatch in hand. A stagehand stood beside her with an identical timer around his neck. "Is the company ready?" The woman inquired after the Crystal Gems had formed a messy, tight-knit circle around her.

"The company is," Garnet confirmed.

"Then your seven minute set-up begins now."

The stopwatches beeped and the stage was a blur of costumed legs, arms, and torsos, all moving to the spot where they had stored their set pieces. She stopped Lapis for a moment, holding delicately onto the thin brown wrist as it tried to rush away to retrieve her mirror set. "Break a leg," she told her with an affectionate smile, before bolting behind the right wing and exiting through the director's door.

She moved down the side of the auditorium, doing her best to avoid the eyes of any and all witnesses. Steven and Greg were in the audience, and when Steven saw the short technician running to the booth in the back he excitedly waved at her. She returned the gesture with a one-sided smile before ducking into the light room.

Peridot seated herself behind the desk, readying the disk Mirror Gem's light cues were programmed onto and inserting it into the console. One of Bayburgh's crew hands hovered behind her to oversee that she didn't cheat or anything, and Peridot almost had the audacity to scoff at the silly thought of her needing to cheat.

It took five minutes before she could Garnet's fuzzy voice through the headset on the desk. "Are lights ready?" The staid voice came through the headset the moment it was placed over her thick blonde hair.

Peridot exhaled slowly, methodically bringing her hands down and settling them over the appropriate keys to start the performance.

The blonde stage manager came out from the curtain, smiling broadly as she addressed the waiting audience. "Welcome to the third play of the evening, ladies, gentlemen, and those who identify as neither. Currently presenting are the Crystal Gems of Beach City University, showing Mirror Gem by playwright Paul Villeco." She promptly moved behind the curtain again.
"Lights are ready," she confirmed as she turned off the work lights, plunging the auditorium into an awaiting darkness. She could only imagine what those backstage were doing as she switched off the house lights.

"Very well," Garnet affirmed, before officiating the beginning of the performance with, "Curtain in five, four, three, two, one."

Peridot emerged from the bathroom stall, crumpling her day attire and sticking them in her satchel. Covering her short legs were crisp, dark, pine-green slacks, fitted around her waist by a brown leather belt. There was just enough space around her ankles to hide her foot, which she had rolled an extra sock on to maintain its normal physical volume. Her free hand fidgeted with the red bowtie wrapped around the stiff collar of her white dress shirt. Truthfully the only thing keeping the tie together was the tape she slapped on it last minute because the tiny metal clasp broke; she never really learned how to properly fasten a bowtie, but she loved them anyway. So she just used fake ones.

It had been a handful of hours since they had finished their show. They'd been stuffed in their waiting room since four in the afternoon. It was just rounding on eight now, and the Crystal Gems were taking turns in changing in the restroom stalls into their evening wear.

She thought their performance had been stellar. Not once did she see a fumble in dialogue, but there was one instance where Opal had gone out of her blocking zone and stepped a little bit too far into the living space when she shouldn't have - she'd rushed to catch her face with a light the moment the shadows grew too dense around her. Otherwise, it had been their best production of *Mirror Gem* yet. The minuscule audience they'd had certainly seemed to enjoy it: they had laughed, sighed, and gasped at all the right moments throughout it.

Their seven minute set-up and strike had gone well, too. At least, that's what Peridot was told. She never knew the mayhem that went on backstage during those things, because she was busy preparing and washing cues in the back.

Opal and Amethyst were milling around by the sink. Fuchsia leggings clung to Opal's legs, topped by a nice-looking mint-green blouse patterned with gentle yellows. Amethyst, on the other hand, like Peridot, was in dark grey slacks and a collared velvet-ombre shirt. The taller of the two helping comb the mane of lavender that was Amethyst's hair. Peridot and Amethyst locked eyes for a moment, and an appreciative whistle rung from the darker student's lips. "Damn, P, didn't know you could pull off dapper!"

"And I didn't know you cared enough to run a brush through your hair," Peridot shot back, the playful undertone diluting the bite in her words. "Where's your tie?"

"They can put a tie on me when I'm laying in a casket."

"Your loss," Peridot shrugged, approaching the sink closest to the pair. She grabbed her gel capsule from her bag, beginning to smear the glossy substance through her wild head of hair. "Is this dress code really necessary? Not that I don't enjoy dressing up like this, but it seems diminutive if the audience is going to be so small."

"It's first impressions nonsense," Amethyst clarified, hissing curtly when Opal brushed through a particularly rough patch at the base of her skull. "Hey! Calm it a little on the strokes, you're gonna tear somethin' out! But, yeah, it's always good to look *seemly* and *professional*, as Pearl has shrieked about before."
The next to emerge from the stalls were Bismuth and Rainbow, who spent little to no time at the mirrors before leaving to the Crystal Gem's classroom. Garnet and Pearl came into the restroom after they exited, and as soon as they disappeared behind the stall doors, Lapis opened her stall and traipsed out.

Peridot was sure her chest was about to concave at just how painfully pretty her girlfriend made out to be; she was sure she had a heart palpitation just thinking of Lapis like that, and knowing it was reciprocated by the other half made it skip a few more beats.

Her hair had been straightened, reaching down to lick at the edge of her soft jawline. The fringe of her bangs reached down to her dark eyebrows, swept neatly to the side by a pair of nimble hands. Lapis' dress was black as night, flecked with indigo the closer its skirt got to the floor. A thin v-crop ran up her thigh, exposing a flash of leg every time she would take a generous stride forward.

The first thing to catch Peridot's eye, however, as the lapis lazuli gemstone necklace resting delicately over the Hawaiian's supple neck. Its gold chain caught briefly in the light as she noticed Peridot's awe-filled stare, and smiled expectantly as she glided over.

"So?" Lapis coaxed, holding out her arms to further expose her physique. "How's it look?"

"Gh- it's great! Great," Peridot stammered, mentally slapping a palm to her forehead at the vocal blunder. Maybe she'd be able to focus on what she was saying if her heart wasn't beating a mile a minute and she felt like she was being stewed from the inside out. "You look really nice, Laz."

"That's good," the blue-haired actress sighed, reaching out to grab hold of the soft edge of the blonde's bowtie. "Shame this thing isn't longer. I could've pulled you in and given you a little something like in the movies," Lapis remarked quietly.

"Wait 'til everyone's outta the restroom before y'all pull some lovey-dovey stuff," Amethyst groaned from behind them, standing and pulling her hair into a thick ponytail as she prepared to leave. "Or I'm gonna barf."

Pearl came out from her stall in a teal dress, waist covered with a daffodil-yellow sash that trailed elegantly down behind her. "No time for that! Awards could be beginning at any moment!" She twittered, flicking her wrists at Lapis and Peridot to get moving. "Tell everyone in the room to make way to the auditorium!"

"Guess we've got to move," Peridot prompted, swirling and moving to the door. She held the door open for Lapis, who passed by with an amused scoff, before they moved down the hall together to gather everyone from their contest-assigned room.

Together the Crystal Gems plodded across the building, and the whole time over Peridot's hands were hotly tingling like she's stuck them in a toaster that one time when she was seven (a very regrettable life choice). Lapis' waiting fingers were not three inches away from hers, arms swaying with every purposeful stride.

"You know," Peridot heard Pearl saying to Amethyst as they approached the large wooden doors of the auditorium, "I heard that Homeworld is advancing to area after their district on the fifth. I had hoped we would still have a few more contests until we had to see their snobbish faces again!"

"Ughh, it's enough that we got those wannabes from Lake City here already," Amethyst complained. "I don't wanna face up against that dictator-director and her patrol of crazy hyper-competitive thespians yet!"
Peridot twirled her head back to Lapis, who was also listening to their conversation. "Who's Homeworld?" Peridot asked as she moved past Garnet standing and holding the door, and Lapis made a disdainful huff. "Just some very not-nice people from Delmarva State. Pearl considers them our archrivals; just about everyone does. They make it a point to cuddle up to judges and bribe their way through any contest they can. They've been known to sabotage other OAP groups sometimes."

The technician sneered as she followed Ruby down the aisle and dove into their designated row of dark red-cushioned seats. "They sound like real clods. They'd better not mess with our stuff at area."

"Knock on wood. Hopefully Garnet is enough to scare them off again."

"Again?"

Lapis hummed humorously and seated herself after Peridot, face impassive. "They stop at nothing to get things done their way. Sucks for us, but also helps us, because literally every other OAP troupe in Delmarva hates them. They've got no allies aside from the judges they seduce."

"Scandalous," Peridot grunted as she sunk back into her seat.

A woman emerged from behind stage right, who Peridot recognized as the German stage manager from before, holding a clipboard and approaching the collapsible table covered with medals. "Good evening! Cast, crew, directors, critics, judges, and everything and everyone in-between, I gladly welcome you to Bayburgh's sixth hosting of the annual One Act Play contest. Before we announce the plays that will progress to area, we have singular awards that will be handed out to cast and crew."

Honored crew, honorary all-star cast, and all-star cast members were announced. Amethyst was called up for her work with the fog machines in Mirror Gem. Sardonyx, Stevonnie, and Sapphire were called up for all-star cast, but that was it for the Crystal Gems.

When the manager finally sent them off-stage, the room stilled and all eyes were firmly fixated on the theatrical master of ceremonies.

Peridot felt Ruby's hand brush against hers, and she quickly retracted it and held it to her chest as Ruby frowned, perplexed.

"We hold hands when they announce the advancing plays," Lapis explained to her when she stared dubiously at Ruby's open palm. "It's just a luck thing."

"Oh," Peridot uttered, grabbing onto Ruby's hand as they focused back on the manager who was giving a spiel on how spectacular all the plays had been that evening, and how hard they had all worked to get there.

Ocean Town were announced as the alternate play, where if one of the chosen three were unable to attend area, they would fill in their spot. The group that took the stage looked pleased to have placed something over nothing, but still seemed dejected that they hadn't earned a winning title.

Bayburgh's own One Act group were the first troupe to be announced for area. They were seated behind the Crystal Gems, and Peridot twisted around to watch them mosey through the row and march on-stage, gladly accepting their awards with grins brighter than the lights shining on them.

"That's one school down," Lapis murmured beside Peridot, leaning over and bumping their shoulders together. "Two more to go. . . "

Next were the Zookeepers from Surf City. Amethyst burst up from her chair three seats down from
Peridot, her happy hollers rising above the acclamation of everyone around her as she lauded her family. Bismuth laughed beside her and stood too, followed then by Sapphire and then Garnet, until every single Crystal Gem was on their feet giving the Zookeepers a standing ovation.

The buzz died down and everyone re-seated themselves after the Famethyst tread off-stage back to their places. Peridot locked hands again with Lapis and Ruby, feeling the anxiety more or less pumping in their blood. She was sure Ruby was about to pop a blood vessel with how hard the veins in her wrist were throbbing against Peridot's.

"And the last school to advance to area competition..."

If they didn't make it past district, *Mirror Gem* was over. The Crystal Gems were over for another year, fueled only by what the university would fund them with and school showings that only Mrs. Winchester's painting classes would attend.

It was so still in the auditorium that you could hear a pin drop onto the carpeted walkway floors. Someone sounded like a teakettle going off behind her, and Peridot was pretty convinced that it was Pearl crushing the blood out of Garnet's hand.

"...The Crystal Gems of Beach City University, and their rendition of *Mirror Gem!*"

Everyone in their row was up on their feet in an instant, voices raised in celebration as the people at the edge of the rowed seats moved to file out and onto the stage. The contest manager eagerly began to shake hands, and Peridot's eyes ran out to the crowd, hardly visible beneath the harsh light of the apron spotlights. *So this is how the cast feels up here.*

Before she knew it, Lapis was waiting for her at the end of the line of Crystal Gems who'd already been acknowledged by the manager. Peridot shook hands with her, dipping her head to accept the medal being placed around her neck. It bounced against her chest as she walked down the stage and fell in beside Lapis, this time not even hesitating to thread their fingers together as the last of their troupe accepted their awards.

"I present to you, the Crystal Gems, area qualifiers!" The manager smiled, giving the photographers in the audience their minute of shooting, leaving Peridot blinking to clear her flash-blighted vision.

What grounded her was the sensation of a slender thumb kneading the back of her hand. With huge eyes Peridot risked a glance over at Lapis, whose lips were curled faintly upward into a euphoric smile that bled into her eyes. They eventually found Peridot's, and time stilled as the two met eyes before the crowd of clapping competitors. The din of applause softened into white noise as Peridot grabbed Lapis' hand just a little bit tighter and they stepped just a little bit closer together.

Sapphire, on Peridot's other side, reached over and grabbed Peridot's hand in her own gloved one. "Time for the company bow," she murmured to the confused blonde, raising their arms together as Lapis mirrored the gesture. Together the Crystal Gems took three dignified bows, all linked by conjoined hands and like hearts.

They were dismissed from the stage, and the moment their feet were on solid ground everyone was hugging one another, faces filled with radiant colour as they embraced each other. Amethyst came up and threw an arm around Peridot, cackling, "See? Told'ja we'd make it!" Then the thickset girl leaned in and gave her a hug. "Thanks for makin' it happen, dude. We wouldn't be able to even be here if ya hadn't come in clutch."

"Yeah," Peridot agreed, face flushed all over again at the praise. She watched Lapis smile on beside her at the celebrating Crystal Gems who weren't listening to Pearl hastily asking them to abate
themselves and sit down for the critique. Her chest fluttered like a caged bird when those clever brown eyes shifted over and met with hers, and the smile deepened.

This whole Crystal Gem thing might just work out fine after all.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Peridot assesses the situation with her mother.

Chapter Notes

This chapter came out quickly after the previous, so make sure you've read chapter eleven before continuing! Thanks!

People thought that waking up the day after a theatre contest would be remarkably easier than getting up after running a couple miles at a track meet, or something even more extravagant than participating in the Olympics.

Peridot wanted to chuck her alarm clock at their heads for their ignorance.

The minute she stubbornly peeled open her eyes and the grey morning light crawling into her dorm flooded them, exhaustion racked her body like a tidal wave. She couldn't remember the last time she'd ever exerted herself in a way to feel like this in the morning.

Actually, she could name a couple of times. But none of them had ever been accompanied by the sense of pride and fulfillment in oneself.

Sadie was absent from her bed, but like Peridot had requested of the both of them, the blankets were nicely laid back over the mattress and pillows propped up like they'd gotten it straight from an Ashley's furniture store. It was Saturday, so Sadie had probably gone off to work her shift at the Big Donut.

Peridot's drive for productivity willed her out from under the covers. Her movements were languid and idle as she pulled off the blanket and reached out for her phone.

It wasn't that she hurt, per say, but the area where her leg cut off was sore and swollen from spending an entire dawn-to-midnight trapped inside of the prosthesis. And she had an uncharacteristic desire to be indolent: she wanted to avoid doing just about anything after yesterday. She could afford to hang around her dorm until the outside world beckoned her.

The first thing to appear on her phone screen was another unread message from her mother.

"For the love of. . ." Peridot's shoulders sunk while she glowered at the tiny text. What could her mother want? As far as Peridot knew, her academic performance had been phenomenal, which was nothing out of the ordinary. Nor had she gotten herself into any legal or financial troubles, which would also be a plausible cause for an out-of-the-blue message like this.

So what in clod's name did Yellow Diamond want?
She may as well just find out. She didn't want to go a day without distraction, like, say, a One Act Play competition, stressing about what on earth her mother wanted with her.

With high reluctance, she opened the message.

Sent Friday, October 7, 2016, 3:40:47 PM.

Good afternoon, Peridot.

Following the mediocre work of a terminated amateur employed at Diamond Enterprise, a position has opened within the company that is willing to accept someone of the same, if not a higher, caliber.

The position coordinates the digital marketing aspects of Diamond Inc., acting as one of the directive strategists responsible for overseeing media advertisement, monetization, and task completion. All of these I expect you to achieve and maintain a clear understanding of prior to your application.

I expect you to submit registration before the end of the business quarter. I put in a good word for you, and I don’t like you to reject an opportunity like this.

Yellow Diamond.

Bitterness so strong it could kill a small elephant welled up inside of Peridot, molding her features into a trepidation frown and numbing her fingers. Or maybe that was her clenching her phone so tightly her knuckles were now snow-white. She dropped the device onto her bed without hesitation.

The message was so painfully curt, but the threat hovering underneath like freezing waters beneath thin ice was unmissable.

There was an excel document attached to the e-mail, conveying hours and the date of the end of the business quarter... which was dangerously close. October twenty-first. Her work would pick up the literal day of her acceptance, which would come about. If her mother really did have the entire company wrapped around her finger like she would boast, then Peridot would the hired the moment her application arrived in office.

Accepting this would be a huge blow not to her studies, but to her loyalty to the Crystal Gems. Even to Lapis!

Her mother sent this without the knowledge of any of that. She was wholly unaware of Peridot's affiliation with the Crystal Gems. And she really wanted to keep it that way; drama was a distraction, an extracurricular unworthy of any Diamond's time. Frankly, anything that didn't host any kind of outcome was a waste of time.

Sadly, a competitive One Act group fell under those conditions.

As did Lapis Lazuli.

Peridot's heart twisted in her chest. Her mother had always thought relationships were overblown and unnecessary anyway, even before the divorce. But that didn't mean Peridot shared the same sentiment. Maybe she once had, but it wasn't until she had begun to notice just how lonely she was that she grew more keen of the idea of it all. And lo, in stumbled Lapis.

Breaking the news to her mother that she was not only in a relationship, albeit in the early stages of one, and part of an irrelevant theatre troupe... would be difficult.
So she wouldn’t.

Even so she couldn’t just accept the terms immediately. That would be the same thing as submitting the application itself; hell, her mother might just raise her into the position anyway, even without it. She didn’t care how Peridot felt about it. She never had.

Only when an iron tang prickled her tongue did Peridot realize she had been biting her lip so hard the skin broke. She stumbled up, wiping the back of her hand over her mouth and staring at the crimson stain over her thumb. "Damn it," she cursed, shaken by the vulnerable tremor scourging her tone.

Her mind, overridden by the weight of her mother’s proposition, decided that ignoring it would be the best thing to do. But just letting it to sit and rot wouldn’t do her any good; she’d be reminded of it every time she opened her inbox. So with a determined scowl, she deleted it.

It didn’t help the heavy feeling in her chest, but it made her feel like she was getting a say in the reigns of her life for the first time.

She would just have to hope and pray that Yellow Diamond wouldn’t revoke anything when she didn’t receive a reply. It wasn’t like she had never responded to any of Peridot’s messages, either. Now the feeling could be mutual.

Peridot slammed her phone back onto her bed and rubbed her forehead, bringing her fingers down to cup her sharp-edged chin. She needed to get out. Whatever coziness had once engulfed her dorm room had been flooded out by a sense of suffocation.

She strapped on her leg, ripped off her sleepwear, and replaced them with her glasses, vintage grey jeans, a striped green-and-white tee, and a black sweater for good measure. She stared at herself a little too long in the mirror before throwing on her vans and grabbing her satchel.

The amputee considered texting Lapis as she left the dormitory. They’d been fairly consistent since Peridot returned it to her, fully functional, and it would be nice to vent her thoughts on her mother’s overture to somebody. Who better than the person she was currently closest to? Then again, she didn’t want to push her problem onto Lapis. This dumb thing was wholly personal, a battle she would need to overcome herself before she could publicize it. Ugh.

Peridot stalked across campus, refusing to open her phone again to even plug in earphones and let her favourite Pandora playlists steal her away into their rhythms’ ambiance. She was rounding the edge of the large grassy courtyard in front of the main crop of school buildings when a cool, familiar voice called out to her.

"Hello, Peridot."

"Garnet!" The blonde spun, catching sight of her director sitting leisurely on one of the wooden benches on the edge of the cobbled path. "I was just-"

"Walking," the larger woman finished for her, fixing her sunglasses. "Something's wrong."

"Wh- what?" Peridot stammered, before scoffing. "I don't know what you're talking about. There's nothing wrong."

"You wouldn't have stuttered just now."

"You don't know that!"

Instead of pursuing the interplay between them, Garnet lowered her hand and patted the wooden
planks of the bench beside her. Peridot pressed her lips together before plodding over to join her. She swung a leg over the other, knotting her fingers together as she stared bleakly out before them.

She could feel Garnet's eyes burning into the side of her face. "You seem upset, Peridot."

"What gave you that idea?" The other flouted, rolling her shoulders dismissively. "I'm fine."

"You know that you can speak to me if something is troubling you." The bench boards creaked as Garnet shifted and reclined to be at better level with the blonde. "I may only be your director, but I would like to think I'm also your friend. I'm not going to make you tell me, but if you want to, I'm all ears."

Peridot sighed. This served her right for silently agreeing to involve herself in this talk when she didn't turn away the second she saw Garnet lounging there. "It's nothing monumental," she began, voice tart and flat. "My mother contacted me for the first time in weeks since arriving to Beach City. A job recommendation for her company." She shook her head. So much for keeping it to herself. "It's not that I'm *upset* by her entrusting me with a position, let alone one so *high* up in the business caste! I'm just-" She grasped at her thick tufts of hair in frustration. "Annoyed! She's been controlling my life since I was born! When I came here I really thought it was a chance for me to step *out* from under her. But, no-no-no, she's got to follow me all the way to the edge of Delmarva!"

"Why don't you take the job?"

Peridot stuttered to a stop, giving Garnet an incredulous look. "*Because*, Garnet! Because I'm tired of needing to *bend* to her command every time she calls. It's... *so tiring.*" She sighed, dropping her hand and averting her eyes to the sidewalk. "Plus, accepting it would really put me at my limit. It would leave no room for anything but classes... there'd be no room for One Act."

Garnet hummed beside her. "Does your mother know about you and the Crystal Gems?"

"No! That's the problem!" Peridot threw herself back against the bench, hands grasping at the fabric of her sweater in overt resentment. "If she knew I was part of a theatre troupe- oho, ha, she would lose it! Anything that isn't," she used air quotes, "'Further advancing my academic success' isn't worth the effort at all. And when it comes down to it, that's what OAP is. It's just a hindrance!"

Discharging all these bottled feelings onto Garnet, of all people that could have played shrink with her, might not have been the *cleverest* of ideas. Peridot realized this as soon as the words had left her mouth and she found herself grasping at straws to try and rectify them. "$I mean! It's-* it's not to me, I rather. . . I *like* it! I like being a Crystal Gem, I liked yesterday, the competition. The sense of... ease we all had, the unity." She wrung her hands nervously. "Of course there are still the *flaws*, but it was like a... like a-!"

"Family, I think is the word you're looking for." Garnet's hand rested firmly on Peridot's shoulder, and timidly the smaller Gem turned to face the dark-skinned woman, eyes swimming with bewilderment. "What?"

"Family. I do think that was one of the first things you learned about us, before you became one of us." Garnet patted Peridot's shoulder, earnest. "You're saying you like being part of it."

"Now I didn't explicitly say *that-*"

"But you were implying it." The ghost of a smile was present on Garnet's full lips. Peridot groaned and clenched her jaw to hide the rosy hue spreading out across her cheeks. "There's no need to be embarrassed by it. I'd say that it's good on you, Peridot. I have no say in what your life was like..."
before you joined, but I think you did need that closeness that being a Crystal Gem provides, even if you don't see that yet."

Garnet was right. Like she always was. Family was the thing Peridot had never really had before. Never experienced. She wasn't quite sure if she was there just yet with the Crystal Gems, but being with them filled up some of the empty spots inside of her, like finally piecing together a puzzle after finding the missing pieces hiding under your grandmother's couch for years.

"Fine," she seceded, bringing up a leg and resting her chin over the knee. "A family. I like it, being part of that. Even though it's only been a handful of weeks, I'm... glad I'm part of it. Even though I'm not a very big part of it."

"Nonsense. Every Crystal Gem plays a huge part," Garnet put out, sliding her arm across Peridot's shoulders, lightly at first, before relaxing into it when Peridot didn't move to stop her. "Think about it, Peridot. No person is too small, nor is any role. Our alternates, our cast, our crew hands, our lights." Peridot's sulky grimace softened slightly at that. "We would not be complete without them, in production or out."

Deep inside of her, Peridot knew that her technical job was a huge cross to bear. Hell, the Crystal Gems hadn't even been legible to compete until Peridot joined. And now they were going to compete at area! Yet, with the shadow of her mother looming over her and instilling about every single anxiety-causing emotion into her, she was worrying about what would happen if she did need to leave One Act behind.

"She wouldn't want me to be part of it. If she ever learned about it... she'd make me leave," Peridot explained, defeat watering down her words until they were naked and fragile, unguarded by her commonplace pride. "I deleted the message she sent me. I know that probably wasn't the best choice, but it was the best that I could do. I'm..." She spat out the last words. "I'm not strong enough to outright say no. To her."

Garnet was quiet, and a glance up betrayed a pair of eyes, absent of their aviators, studying Peridot. Her innards coiled under the pensive stare, green eyes flicking from one eye to the other, and then to the floor like it was suddenly the most interesting thing in the universe.

"I don't doubt your decision, Peridot," came the late reply. Peridot watched as Garnet folded up her sunglasses between strong hands, tucking them into her shirt's neckline, all movements benign and very deliberate. "But you should know that even that will have consequence. She will keep coming back to you, especially after the time window is up." She paused. "She will learn eventually. Whether it be through you, or by more unfortunate sources."

Peridot's eyes became huge. "You won't tell her, will you? Or anyone else?"

Garnet shook her head, but that didn't help quell Peridot's apprehension at all. "No one would be so cruel. But I do think that you should tell your mother that you want control over your own life. And joining the Crystal Gems, I think, was the first step in doing that."

"I would have thought that transferring to Beach City University was the first step?"

"Mm, but didn't your mother also dictate that?"

"...Yes," sighed Peridot.

"Then my point stands. You don't have to tell her that you're a Crystal Gem, but you should tell her that you're going to live your life your way. No one, not even a mother, should be able to tell you
otherwise."

Peridot's hand clenched into a fist that rose and rested against her scabbed lip. She knew Garnet was right. She couldn't keep ducking under the radar when it came to dealing with Yellow Diamond. Even if she could hide the fact that she was in cohorts with a bunch of thespians... "I wonder what she would say about Lapis."

Garnet softened her grip ever so slightly. "What do you mean?"

"About us. I mean, you know..." She unraveled her hands and stared down at them, like staring into them would make her a better palm-reader. Like there was a better future waiting out there for her that didn't involve her mother. "She's never been entirely accepting of relationships in general. Let alone..."

"Those of the same gender."

Peridot made a defeated noise. "You got it."

They sat like that for a couple of moments before Garnet pulled away, and Peridot was shocked that she felt disheartened by the retraction. She focused on Garnet as she cupped her chin with her pointer and thumb, giving the courtyard in the distance, gaze pondering. "I've dealt with similar fears. My own guardians were less than pleased with my sexuality, but before any real harm could be done, I left. I didn't have to deal with them any longer."

"But I don't think I can just escape her," Peridot hissed helplessly. "I'm already a state away and she's still poking her nose around in my business!"

"I'm not telling you to escape her. I burnt bridges as soon as I crossed them, making it impossible for them to reach me," Garnet pressed. "But I feel your situation is much different."

"You can say that again," snipped the blonde. "Every time I try to get away she's right on my stupid tail. Like a bloodhound! And I'm- it's not me I'm worried for. She can cut me off for life, disown me, I don't care. But my mother has allies in very high, very scary places. I don't want anything to happen to Lapis because of my mother's stupid homophobia..."

Garnet's jaw ticked. Peridot couldn't tell if it was from sympathy or displeasure. "She's got the power to make just about anyone's life hell. Even a complete stranger's. Wouldn't it just be better to not even bring it up to avoid an awful thing like that?"

The other Crystal Gem's jaw worked, hands balled into fists at her side. Peridot was almost regretful for bringing up the foul inclination. That is, until Garnet spoke up again. "Hiding something like that forever can ruin you. It would be better for you to take charge of it, take pride in it, instead of let it fester and come in at exactly the wrong moment. It's better to get rid of the poison in your life instead of let it infect you, too." The utter sorrow in Garnet's voice quieted any further arguments Peridot might have brought up.

She pressed her back against the wooden planks, chest tight. They had a minute together to opine over that conclusive statement, each giving the other their respective moment of contemplation, until the older of the two decided to break the barrier of silence.

"If you don't mind my asking, Peridot," Garnet began, "why don't you want to take the offer? Aside from it coming from Yellow Diamond."

"Back onto this train again. Peridot wasn't even sure how Garnet knew her mother's alias. She didn't have it in her to care at this point; Garnet was this omniscient being. She might as well just admit one
"It would really cut out my time with the Crystal Gems," she admitted, self-conscious all of a sudden as her arms wrapped over her chest. "I don't want to have to leave because of something my mother coordinated. Like you said it's... my first step out of the bird's nest, practically. Excuse the use of a strange metaphor but I feel like if I don't keep flapping my wings, I'm just going to plummet back into the nest again."

Garnet seemed satisfied with that. She plucked her sunglasses from her v-neck and unfolded them, planting them back over her dark nose as she tenderly smiled down at Peridot. "Then my work here is finished. The biggest thing to do for yourself is to realize what will happen to you if you let yourself under her wing again. And I think you've done just that."

"But-!" Peridot startled as Garnet made a move to stand up. "But I don't know how to deal with this! I can't- I can't stand up to her! I thought I told you that?!"

"You did, but with time that can change."

"Why must you always be so painfully vague?"

"Hmm-hmm." Garnet chuckled and extended her hand to Peridot, which the amputee grumpily accepted as she was hoisted from the park bench. "That's what makes me Garnet. Plus, it's always a reward to see people realize something for themselves, rather than let other people realize it for them."

"Oh." Stunned, Peridot let go of Garnet's hand and let her arms fall closely to her sides. Her director's words rung in her head, a broken tape recorder that, with each repeat, made more and more sense. However, it still didn't deplete her fears any. And as far as she was concerned, they were still incredibly valid when it came to her mother. "So... you're not going to tell me what I should do...?"

"Nope," Garnet confirmed. "But I've given you some outside insight to what you can do."

"I see," the blonde murmured. "I... appreciate the help."

"No problem. Besides," the taller student mused, grabbing her dark leather jacket from the bench and throwing it over her arms, "I rather like seeing you at rehearsals." A pause. "And I'm sure Lapis does, as well."

"Hhrck- if that's another jibe about the microphone being on-"

Garnet smirked a modest smirk, like the memory amused her instead of mortifying her. "No. Lapis really does care for you, Peridot. There's something there for you that I've yet to see with her and any other Crystal Gem, aside from Steven." Peridot's eyes narrowed at the ground as she remembered Pearl saying something similar a few days ago. "You're helping her. And she's helping you, too."

"How do you know that?"

"There's a lot of things I know," Garnet hummed, tucking her hands into her jacket pockets. "Anyway, I really must be off. I promised Pearl and Bismuth I would meet them in town before eleven."

"Okay." Peridot dusted off her sweater, looking up at Garnet. "I'm glad we had this talk- um, Garnet."
"I am, too. You look better than before."

"I... feel better than I did before, as well," confessed Peridot, tilting her head curiously.

"Bang," Garnet disclosed, sending Peridot a brief finger gun before twirling around to walk away. "Then my work here is finished. See you at Monday rehearsal, Peridot."

Peridot watched the director roam down the path, the faded outline of the Nirvana avatar on her bomber jacket glinting in the sun as she moved. "Yeah," she murmured after the leaving woman, looking down at the buzzing phone she'd just dug out of her pocket. There was a new text from Lapis. It brought a tiny but much-needed smile of appreciation to her quivering lips. "See you there."

Peridot flicked open the text.

Lazuli [10:18 am]: I've got like 20 min until my lecture starts and im bored

Peridot [10:18 am]: I'd be bored too if I was about to walk into a lecture hall.

Lazuli [10:18 am]: cheeky. you comin?

Peridot [10:18 am]: To do what?

Lazuli [10:19 am]: Idk, I'm in front of the temple. need me a boost before sitting in class for three hours

Peridot [10:19am]: Okay, I'm coming. I'm outside anyway. Be prepared!

Lazuli [10:19am]: you got it ;)

Peridot narrowed her eyes at the winking emoticon, trying to decipher what had brought it on, before catching onto the insinuating drift. "Oh," she mouthed, body hiccuping with an embarrassed laugh as she tucked her phone into her pocket.

Lapis definitely had a way to make just about anything Peridot said sound sensuous. Truly, a talent Peridot had only ever seen in others and never been able to relish in herself. Maybe that was for the better, though. She'd be a constantly-blushing mess if her mind warped words like that for her.

She traversed down campus, leaving the courts and entering the arts district. By the time she had reached the great cobblestone walkway, seven minutes had passed, and Lapis was sitting on the edge of Rose Quartz' fountain. She was in a loose grey sweater that showed her tank top beneath, paired with a pair of black joggers.

When Lapis didn't immediately take notice of the newly arrived technician behind her, Peridot took a slow step forward, before stopping in amazement. In silent fascination, she watched as Lapis sifted her bare toes delicately through the water's surface, sending out tiny torrents that rippled across the calm penny-filled pond.

It was bittersweet how Lapis did it. But in every shadow and contour that Peridot could make out from behind the locks of blue hair covering her cheeks, she could see the heartache, the longing.

"Lapis!" Peridot called out at last, tired of seeing her partner in such sorrow. She completed her stride over and waited for Lapis to climb off the plaster to embrace. When they fell into each other's arms, she heard Lapis chuckle quietly. "Thanks for coming. I just didn't feel like walking to class alone."

"No problem," Peridot quipped. "Like I said, I was outside."
"That's new," Lapis noted, untangling herself from Peridot, but not before giving her sweater-clad shoulders a caring squeeze. "Why were you outside?" She inquired next as she sat back on the edge of the fountain and shoved on her black flip-flops.

"I think the more appropriate question of the day is why are you wearing flip-flops?" Peridot gawked. "It's got to be sixty degrees out!"

"My teachers don't like it when I walk into the classroom bare-footed," Lapis shrugged as she rose back to her feet, grabbing her brown-felt knapsack from the ground beside her. "Even on weekends."

"That's not what I meant," Peridot tried to argue, but only shook her head and began to laugh.

"I know," Lapis snorted, grabbing hold of Peridot's hand as she led the way to her class. She must be headed to her oceanography course, Peridot deducted, as they left the Temple behind and entered the science district of campus by heading east.

"If you really do want to know," the smaller found herself saying as they turned a vine-covered corner of a building, "I was talking with Garnet."

Lapis' strut slowed, and she turned now-rigid eyes on Peridot. "Is something wrong?"

Peridot's lips parted to console Lapis that everything was perfectly fine, that she wasn't currently being subjected to an indirect threat from her dictatorial mother, but found that she couldn't just confirm a lie. When she didn't answer, Lapis stopped and thereby stopped Peridot, too.

"Peridot?"

The blonde sighed. "Do you remember how my mother contacted me yesterday, in the classroom?"

"Yeah." Lapis' expression darkened, a veil of concern flitting across her eyes. "What happened?"

"From an objective standpoint it wasn't... bad," Peridot started, only to be interrupted by Lapis who remarked, "I'm sensing a but in there."

Peridot grunted, noncommittal. "It was a business opportunity. An employee was kicked out of the company for his inferior work, and my mother wants me to apply for his replacement. Even if I don't send something in, she'll keep pressing me until I'm dragged into it anyway," she explained with a sigh. "Like I said, not exactly bad, but definitely not something I want to do. Not now."

The skepticism in Lapis' visage deepened. "Do you want to in the future?"

Peridot caught eyes with Lapis, half-heartedly fostering the silly belief that staring into the brown pools might spawn some kind of hint on how to answer her. "No, I don't," she grieved. "I'm afraid to tell her that."

"You should tell her."

"I can't do that, Laz," pleaded Peridot, the inflection of her voice riddled with desperation. "You-you don't know my mother, or what she's capable of. With just the snap of a finger she's ruined lives. It's not that I can't take the job. It's that if I did... I'd be right back under her watch. And I don't think I could stay in the Crystal Gems if I did listen."

Lapis' frown lightened as that sunk in. "Why not? It's just theatre."
"She'd hate it!" Peridot insisted. "Drama! What an incorrigible waste of my daughter's time!" She mimicked, even going as far as to take on her mother's steely, sedulous intonation. "She sent me here to get an education, and I thought that's all I'd be doing too. But no, I decided to get myself wound up in the One Act business."

This must have been the wrong thing to say, because Lapis unwound her hand from Peridot's and held it up to her chest like she'd been scorched. "Wound up?"

Peridot sharply drew breath. "Not like that!" She protested, throwing her hands out helplessly. When Lapis only blinked in response, lips pressed firmly together in a straight, insecure line, Peridot concaved in on herself. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to word it right." Not even her talk with Garnet was able to help her thrack a title onto how she felt about it all. "But I'm frightened, okay? She won't be kind at all if she learns I've rejected an honest-to-god job, for her company, for the Crystal Gems. For you."

Whatever misgivings Lapis had, they all disintegrated when Peridot crumbled right before her. She filled in the space between them and wrapped her arms around Peridot's shoulders, pulling her in. Fingers trailed through Peridot's thick hair, pausing to massage the back of the short girl's neck as she sighed into Lapis' shirt.

"...I'm scared what she'll do about you, Lapis."

"She can't do anything to me," contended the blue-haired girl.

"You'd be surprised."

"Then have her surprise me. I'd like to see her try."

Peridot chuckled dryly and pried herself gently off of Lapis, gaze aimlessly plastered to the sliver of tan collarbone sliding out from the rim of her ash-coloured sweatshirt. "Grey hairs, Lapis," she mused. "I'm gonna have four of them by the time we get outta here. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now c'mon, we can talk about this another time, I should really get to class. It'll be my six-day streak of getting there on time." Lapis grabbed hold of Peridot once more, ignoring Peridot's shrill denial as they blitzed across campus and into Lapis' building.

It was 10:43 when they arrived, two minutes prior to the start of the lecture. Lapis slowed to a stop outside the door of the hall, twirling her head to Peridot. "Thanks for stopping by," she mused again. "Thanks for dealing with my family drama," Peridot replied back, hazily estranged.

Lapis leaned in and pulled Peridot close to her again, planting a swift, chaste kiss on her mouth. "Not like I'm not privy to the subject myself," the older whispered against her lips, eyelids fluttering as she towed herself away from the blonde, much to said blonde's dismay.

Peridot let go of Lapis, instantly regretting letting her go as her wild, botanic scent wafted away. "I'll see you later," she promised before being left alone in the chilly hallway as Lapis pushed the door to her lecture open. The amputee licked her lips, preparing to turn heel and take a trip to the campus commissary to raid their energy drink stash for the second time that month.

That is, until Peridot noticed a slip of paper flutter out from the pocket on Lapis' knapsack as she entered the classroom.

Peridot rushed to fetch it from the floor, confused because this thing was way too small a paper to be accepted by any professor, even the cool ones. She unfolded it, blinking perplexedly as she recognized the blue emblem printed at the top.
"A... bus ticket?" She muttered, squinting at the tiny receipt. It was covered in nicks and folds, dated for September 19th. The Delmarva 1A was its route, and in a brilliant moment of word and date association, she realized this was the bus ticket they had shared when Lapis dragged Peridot out to the Big Donut after the bonfire.

She kept it? Peridot looked up, ready to question Lapis about it, but the blue-haired girl was already vanished into the mass of bodies in the lecture hall. There was no way Peridot was just gonna march on in there and try to her dissect her from that - especially now that the professor looked ready to begin talking about tectonic plates and their correlation with the formation underground volcanoes. Oof, she had enough of those lectures in her high school geography courses.

She averted her eyes to the ticket again, her mind's thought process slowing into a halt as it tried to think of any logical reason Lapis might have saved the ticket and kept it on her person like this.

There was no non-gay explanation to it and it both frustrated and endeared Peridot to no end.

"That's incredibly sappy of you, Lazuli," she smiled into her hand, before her body subconsciously jolted with the arrival of brand new and an absolutely, equally sappy idea. "But I bet the stars that can do you one better!" She challenged with a beaming grin, pocketing the old bus receipt and pulling down her sweater to begin a purposeful journey to the Temple.

Her light booth needed some redecorating!

Chapter End Notes

I wonder what Peridot's gonna do with that ticket? Vote now on your phones!
"Peridot, I don't get why I need to close my eyes."

"Just trust me, Lapis!"

"This feels like something out of Fifty Shades of Grey."

Peridot choked, the dutifulness in her stride faltering as she related their predicament to the two characters’ in that ridiculous film. "No, it's not like that!" She stated, exasperated, as she led Lapis up the couple of steps that sat at the entrance to the light booth.

"Just. . . watch your feet and. . ." Peridot whizzed past Lapis, opening the door to the booth with a grin so blindingly gleeful it looked like it belonged on a child at Disneyworld. "Step on in!"

She heard Lapis scoff, amused, as she walked past Peridot into the dark light booth. "Okay, Mr. Grey." The slender girl did a once-over of the pitch-black room, hands poised on her hips, then made a pretty confused noise. Peridot was still in a tizzy, bones still vibrating from the sheer ingenious of her usage of material on such short notice.

Lapis had picked up on her exhiliration the minute Peridot had rushed out to greet her after texting her to meet back at the Temple after her lecture. But since all that she was seeing was a dark light room. . . "O-kay. . ." Her girlfriend turned, brown eyes catching against the glow from the lit stage. "I'm not seeing anything here."

"That's because the lights are off," Peridot pointed out helpfully, excitedly taking a step inside and resting her fingers on the LED light knob. "Allow me to. . . lighten things up a bit."

Peridot swiveled the knob, thrusting their world into a pall of rich royal blue. Lapis blinked in the new light, taking a confused gander at her environment like anything would be different from before. Peridot's eyes lit up when she saw Lapis freeze when her eyes latched onto the corner of the booth, which was now home to. . .

"Ta-da!" Peridot exclaimed, speeding up to Lapis and stretching out her hand. "I just threw it together! You, um, dropped your bus receipt when you were walking into class, and it made me think. We've only really known each other for a couple weeks now, but even in those couple of weeks, we've learned so much together. Not anything particularly new," she paused, eyebrows
knitting as she allotted the next few words. "But, about each other."

Seeing the blank look of misunderstanding on Lapis' face, she approached the little. . . well, she wasn't quite sure what it was, but it was some sort of craft. Like how people would vent their feelings into their creations!

She clicked on the nearby lamp, showing off the creation in a brighter light. She had found her old Mirror Gem script, the very same one Lapis had given her the second time they had ever seen one another, and with it her Greyhound bus ticket that she had used to ride down from Empire State to little old Beach City.

She had arranged these materials, plus Lapis' receipt, together in a simplistic but. . . meaningful fashion. The script was intricately stood on its bottom edge, and fortunately it was dense enough to withstand its own weight and simultaneously remain propped open. Mostly hidden inside of the pages of the booklet, with only their tips poking out, were the bus tickets, their white hue contrasting against the wan blue of the script.

"It's very simplistic," Peridot explained after allowing a moment of scrutiny on both of their behalves. "But. . . I think that's okay! I didn't make it to be flashy or attention-grabbing in any sort of way. I've just been. . . " She flailed her hands as she sought for words. "Thinking a lot today. About a lot of things. Most of it about my mother. But when you left and I saw the ticket, I just had an idea. What if we vented feelings and instead of just, bearing with them, we used things?"

She smiled expectantly up at Lapis, whose eyes had grown softer as she regarded Peridot's work. She walked over, gait delicate and bordering on disbelieving, and traced her finger gently along the edge of her ticket. "Why?"

Peridot's smile twitched as she came back over to Lapis and stole her hand back, holding up in her own between them. "'Cuz sometime's it's hard to talk about them out loud. It's hard for me to talk about feelings, it always has been. And I imagine you feel the same way!" She squeezed Lapis' hand comfortably. "But maybe with this thing, if we don't want to talk about it, maybe we can make it. You know, how musicians unleash through lyrics, artists and drawing... that!"

Lapis' eyes expanded. Peridot couldn't read her expression, like usual, but believed she could see the glitter of awe and tentative remorse swirling in her eyes. "Why did you use these things?" Lapis asked finally, twisting to look at Peridot, genuinely curious.

Peridot opened her mouth, before it slowly moved shut as she mulled this over. "OAP was really, if we're being at least ninety-three percent honest, what first drew us together," she started, directing her eyes to the display. "So I used Mirror Gem as the binding factor - it's holding the two tickets together." She swayed her hand over the script, resting it gently on the metal cabinet below it. "And there's your ticket; the one we used the day I joined the Crystal Gems. That one kind of speaks for itself, don't you think?"

Lapis nodded, face mostly hidden by the hand that was pressed thinly over her lips. "What about the other ticket?" She asked, voice weighted with an uncharacteristic sensitivity that plucked Peridot's heartstrings like the cords of Steven's ukulele. Stars, what she'd give to make her happier.

"It's my ticket from when I traveled here from Empire." Peridot trailed over the edge of the paper, giving it a thoughtful flick of her index before pulling back. "That's when it all started." She paused, something clicking in her mind that hadn't before. "Actually, let me correct myself here," She pointed to Lapis' ticket. "That was when it all truly started. My trip to Delmarva might've been a crucial part to everything, but. . . I think that day I spent with you, the day I became a Crystal Gem, that's when it started. My path to. . ."
She pursed her lips, struggling to vocally illustrate the jumble of impassioned thoughts coursing through her brain. "Freedom. When I talked with Garnet, I sort of realized I really need to take control of my life. I don't know... how to do that just yet. But I'm learning, I think we're learning! And we can do this thing together- if you want to. You can just come up here anytime, throw it together if there's something on your mind that you just can't talk about." Peridot smiled faintly, tilting her head towards her quiet girlfriend. "We can even make some, together!"

She ended that speech on an exquisitely maudlin note, she knew. She regretted none of it.

Okay, maybe a little bit. But that was primarily due to the fact that Lapis had yet to move from her place. Her eyes, even in the dim blue light, were rheumy. They were still focused on the creation between them, but under Peridot's worried stare they lifted, and it was realized that there was moisture building in the corners of her eyes.

"Lapis?" Peridot worried, taking a step towards her, eyes huge with culpability. "Is something wrong? Is it the arrangement of the tickets? I know they're a little ill-placed but I did my best to make sure they didn't fall."

Before she could finish her excuse for the askew placement of the slips, Lapis had thrown herself around Peridot. The blonde's hands quickly found their way around Lapis' back, holding her close and quietly allowing Lapis to shake against her.

What was wrong? Did it remind her of something, like Jasper or the ocean? Something Lapis hadn't even told her about yet? If it did, she would be the clod to personally burn the thing in the nearest fire pit while chanting in Latin to reverse any psychological effects it inflicted.

"Nothing's wrong."

Lapis' voice was so thin in her ear that it physically ached.

"Then..." Peridot's features softened. Her eyebrows furrowed as she tilted her head up to Lapis', green eyes pleading. "Why are you so upset?"

"I'm not upset," Lapis assured in a small voice.

"Are you sure?" Peridot stubbornly pressed, reaching up to pry Lapis' hands from around her and held one up to her cheek. "Because-" She stopped when she felt something warm and damp drop down against her cheek. It wasn't her tear. "Stars, Lapis, you're crying! That's not a believable sign for I'm not upset!"

"No, no, Peridot," Lapis sniffled, cupping Peridot's lean face in her hand and trailing her thumb over her lightly freckled cheekbone. "Listen. I'm not upset. I like it- I do. It's just... " She exhaled through her teeth, head falling to rest on Peridot's warm shoulder. "You're so good-" she whispered into the blonde's sweater. "I'm nothing like you. What makes you think... I'm so special? To go through all this with me?" It was an authentic inquiry, pervaded with enough melancholy and defeat to make Peridot's heart sink into her stomach, burdened by the utter powerlessness in the actress' voice.

Peridot ran her fingers delicately through Lapis' hair, letting her cheek briefly rest on the crown of her head as Lapis sunk into her. Right now, Peridot was her rock, and she'd be damned if she was about to let Lapis down when she was certain she was needed most.

"I want to help you," she rasped. "From the moment I first saw you. You were so enigmatic but in every right so, so captivating." Her fingers left Lapis' hair and her arms snaked around Lapis'
drooped shoulders, holding them firm. "And I knew that you deserved so much more the more I got to know you."

"I deserved everything that happened to me," Lapis protested, clenching her fists in the loose fabric of Peridot's pullover. "I always thought I might be bad, now I'm. . . " She giggled, a tad hysterical, into Peridot's neck. It sent shivers running down her spine. "I'm sure that's true."

"You're not bad, Lapis," Peridot insisted. "Look at me. Please." Lapis complied, raising her head slowly from Peridot's shoulder. Her eyes were wetter than they'd been when she hid them.

"Do you remember what I said at the lighthouse?" She asked, fondling Lapis' hands between her own, gently rubbing circles. "No one is good. There's something in everybody, I'm sure of that. But please, please, believe me when I say that you, Lapis Lazuli Kaile'a, are not bad."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you'd known me a few years ago."

"No." Lapis startled at the firmness in Peridot's voice. "Even if I had known you from the day you stepped foot on this continent, I would be saying the same thing I'm saying right now. That you are not bad."

Even now, Lapis appeared to want to argue. Peridot's heart broke all over again. She knew she couldn't expect Lapis to overlook things she's done, things Peridot didn't know about but would never grill her for. Lapis' insistence didn't make so that Peridot ever had to stop trying to help her see the better in herself.

Lapis' hand trailed down and curled around Peridot's shoulder blades, tugging her nearer like softening her grip for only a heartbeat would send her away. Peridot leaned into the embrace, brows sagging when she heard the gentle, "what did I ever do to deserve you. . . ?" in her ear.

"Everything, Laz," she whispered, hiding the truth of her watery eyes in Lapis' shoulder. "And don't even try to argue with me on that. I'm going to prove to you one day that it's true."

No words followed. Peridot was all right with that. What Lapis needed was just someone close to her, a presence that exhibited equal relief that didn't need words to do it.

They eventually sunk down to the floor, backs pressed the wall of the light room, faces shaded the farther away they got from the LED overhead. Side by side, they sat in peace together, each upholding their own fusillade of thoughts about the other.

Peridot would have killed to know Lapis' thoughts about her.

Soon the lack of talking grew tiresome. Peridot was fidgeting, rubbing her right hand fingers over the edge of her prosthesis liner to mollify the nettled skin, cleaning her glasses, and trying to perform ferrokinesis on various metal objects in the room. Then, finally, as her eyes fell over the display that began this whole thing, something concurred.

"What do you want to call it?"

Lapis blinked, rubbing a thumb across her tired, glistening eyes. "What?"

"The. . ." Peridot frowned. "See? I don't even know what to refer to it as." She chuckled quietly, lifting her hand to point at the script-ticket admixture on the filing cabinet beside them. "That. Art seems like such a loose term. It doesn't quite fit."

Lapis stretched her neck to see over Peridot's upstanding hair from her spot on the floor. The words
that came out of Lapis' mouth were the last things she had ever expected to hear out of anybody's mouth.

Especially Lapis'.

"Meep morp."

"Meep morp?"

"Yeah." Lapis let her head fall back onto Peridot's shoulder again. "Meep morp."

Peridot pressed her lips together so hard her cheeks began to numb. There was only one feeling she could associate with Lapis' creative label, and it was grew stronger with every second. "I love it."

Lapis lazily pumped her fist into the air like this was a triumph. Then Peridot piped up again. "But can I ask why?"

Lapis shrugged against her, scoffing playfully. "I don't know. But it seems more fitting an art, don't you think?"

"It makes us sound like we're speaking an alien language."

"And are you upset with that?"

Peridot couldn't say that it did. She loved it because it made her feel like she was asking a space rock, definitely a polymorphic sentient being, where the rest room was. Or telling her to go screw himself. Hopefully the former, she didn't feel like getting on their bad side. "I like to think that's why I love it already."

"Good. Because I now refuse to call it anything else." Lapis rose her arms far above her head, hands clasped, to stretch. Peridot didn't avert her eyes quick enough to not admire the lissome muscles beneath, outlines rippling in the blue sheen. To her mortification, the actress caught onto her ogling and coyly smirked. "Like what you see?"

"I can say that you're a. . ." A devilish beam broke out on Peridot's face, stretching from ear to ear. "Work of meep morp."

Lapis' face blanched. "Okay, new word. We have to use a new word."

"What? Why?!"

"You used it wrong." Peridot scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "In what way did I use it wrong? It's literally a synonym to art!"

Lapis' tongue peeped out between her lips and made a succinct raspberry noise. She surrendered and leaned back against the cool wall, eyelids partly falling to cruise her gaze over Peridot. "Am I a good morp at least?"

Peridot laughed. "The greatest."

"Then I don't suppose you'd be mad if I did. . . this!" Lapis reached over and rolled them onto the ground, Peridot face-up while Lapis hovered over her, arms planted on either side. Heat tingled all across Peridot's body, thrilled into existence by the closeness of their bodies and the intoxicating scent of Lapis' perfume. Lapis' hair trailed down and tickled against Peridot's face, the blue dye
emboldened by the LED. Her face was swathed in the shadows, the only things discernible being the thin, cute curl of her lips, the curve of her nose, and the mischievous flicker in her eyes.

Peridot's back arched as Lapis lowered, eyes fluttering shut as she expected for their mouths to meet. That never came. What came instead was the sensation of a lithe Hawaiian actress collapsing onto Peridot's torso, winding the smaller girl and snickering when the blonde gasped.

Sputtering, Peridot's arms flailed as they tried to find a convenient place to set themselves as she was pinned to the floor. "Lapis! Get off me! This isn't fair- you've got five inches on me! And at least twenty pounds!"

Lapis ignored her, weighing herself down against Peridot's stomach and being generally unresponsive to the squirming below her. "All the more reason to use them. And stop moving, you're kicking me."

A groan ripped from Peridot's throat as her hands found her face, covering the intense blush filling her cheeks. "I can't believe youuu," she whined. "How long are you gonna keep me here?"

Lapis' chest vibrated against the blonde as she chuckled. "For as long as I can. You don't have any classes on Saturday."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you told me."

"Ughh." Peridot renounced her struggle, pressing her head onto the cool vinyl floor and staring up at the glowing blue light. Lapis' arms crossed over her, supporting her chin as she twisted her head and glanced at Peridot in lazy contentedness. "Are you nervous for area?"

Honestly, Peridot hadn't thought about their next competition at all. "District was yesterday," she pointed out. "It hasn't really sunk in yet. Do you know when it is?"

"Mm-hmm."

". . . Elaborate?"

"I think Pearl said it was at the end of October," Lapis relayed with a dramatic sigh. "That gives us a the rest of the month to rehearse what we need to. That critique at district was pretty good. He didn't give me very many pointers though. . . all he really did was talk to Stevonnie."

"That does make the most sense," denoted the smaller. "They do play Blake, you know, the protagonist of Mirror Gem. I don't usually listen to the critiques. They never say anything about lights, so, I just zone out and think about extraterrestrial life."

"They're gonna get you for that one day," Lapis remarked with a fond smile. "But still, I'm worried about my performance for area. What if I'm not good enough? No judge has told me that I was a very convincing ghost . . ."

"I think you're very convincing!" Peridot's instincts told her to get up to support the claim, but the heavier body of Lapis still planking over her still kept her trapped. So she continued, begrudgingly, from her spot on the floor. "I never told you but every time I see you in-character, it's that ghost. The body language, the dialect, even the haunted look in your eyes! I don't know how you do it, Lapis, but when you step onto that stage, you're gone and the ghost is there. You're way better than a handful of the other actors we have; some of their projection is awful!"
Lapis snorted. "Why don't you tell that to Garnet then? It could help, you never know."

"I'm a lights person," Peridot preened, quirking a brow. "What do I know about acting?"

"You don't have to be a good actor to be able to tell if someone else is." Lapis blew a stray strand of her thick bangs from her eyes. "You get an opportunity that no one else in the show does. You, uh. . . see the fluidity of it."

Peridot's eyes widened with mock astonishment. "Wow, big word."

"What can I say? You're rubbing off on me." Lapis smirked and cupped her cheek in her palm, eyes never leaving Peridot's. "My point is that you get to see the show every time it's rehearsed. You, the audience we have to perform for at each contest. If you've got any input, even if it's just: fix Sapphire's hair in this one scene so it doesn't block her eyes, tell Lapis to turn stage-left instead of stage-right, tell them. It's super valid."

Peridot hummed. From Lapis' shared perspective, yeah, she did have a few ideas on what could improve their troupe's performance. Small, imperceptible things that a normal audience member would fail to catch, but things notable enough that a seasoned OAP judge would appreciate seeing.

"You're right," she said. "I guess that does make a lot of sense."

"Told you." Lapis sighed, appeased, before pausing and focusing on Peridot again. "The eyes. . ." The tan-skinned student shifted, elbows digging slightly into Peridot's abdomen as she leaned up, her poofy bob of hair twirling as she moved. "What did you say about them again?"

"The. . . haunted look in them?"

"That's it!" Lapis clambered off of Peridot, much to the blonde's relief. She was dragged up by her arm as Lapis scooted back to the wall, materializing her phone and meaningfully swiping it open. "I'm going to trust you here that my projection and movement is good enough - but physical appearance is also a big part. Sardonyx always says that." Peridot heard the taka-taka of a screen keyboard, and crawled over to try and see what Lapis was researching.

"Contacts?"

"We all know the windows are the eyes to the soul stuff," defended Lapis as she scrolled through Google images at various examples of white-eyed contacts. "If we're really going to sell this, we're going to need to up our game just a little bit more. With. . ." She brought up an image of a model wearing a pair of reflective contacts that hid the pupils. "This!"

Peridot shuddered, imagining seeing the mirror-like contacts replacing the warm, rich brown of Lapis' iris. Objectively, it was a great idea - it just upped the mystery-creepy factor on Lapis' character tenfold. "I like it!" She confessed, reaching over to get a better look at the display. "Are you going to order them?"

"No, Pearl will take care of that," Lapis said dismissively. "We never buy anything ourselves. It comes from our school fund."

Peridot narrowed her eyes curiously. "... Can I ask for a mini-fridge back here?"

"I don't think they'd do that. The school. . ." Lapis shook her head sadly. "It doesn't have much faith in the Crystal Gems. We haven't been to a state contest in years, or even gotten past area since 2013. It's more interested in keeping its sports teams funded than it is seeing its One Act troupe living comfortably."
The technician's lip curled distastefully. "I'll give those clods a piece of my mind."

"Please don't. The last time Pearl tried to ask for some more money, *politely*, they gave the Temple to the yoga club for a week out of spite."

Peridot huffed aggressively and brought her knees up to her chest. "Fine, I'll let them live. Besides, we're going to prove them wrong this year! We're going to get past area, then go on to regionals, and then compete at state! . . . Is there a national competition?"

"Thank god there *isn't*. I couldn't stand traveling across the country in a bus with these people for more than two days," Lapis expressed dryly.

"But you have me now," Peridot pointed out in a sing-song voice.

"As soon as the bus rides get longer, I'm kicking you out of my seat so I can stretch out and sleep."

Peridot gasped, feigning offense as she planted a hand over her heart. "But you love me."

"Not enough to sacrifice precious bus seat space."

"A-ha!" Peridot vaulted up from her slouching position, pointing an accusing finger at Lapis with a delightedly wicked grin. "So you admit you love me! Even if it's not enough to share a bus seat when you're tired!"

Lapis' response was lackluster. She raised a knee and perched her crossed forearms over it, brown eyes carrying the weight of the world as she look over. Peridot couldn't tell if she was disappointed or not when Lapis didn't answer. Instead of doing that, the actress perked up, eyes large, as she stared out through the glass panels by the light consoles.

"Did you hear that?"

Peridot frowned. "Hear what?" She asked, before the sound of a door slamming shut rung from the stage, followed by loud voices.

"I think someone's in the light booth."

"It's three on a Saturday. Who's gonna be back there?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's Homeworld!"

". . . In the Temple?"

"They'd stop at nothing to screw with us! C'mon, let's check it out."

"We just came to get our make-up boxes!"

"And kick ass. We can get the make-up later, hurry up!"

"They're coming up!" Peridot shrilled, voice a hissing whisper as she hobbled onto her feet, grabbing onto the filing cabinet for support as Lapis soared up beside her. "Are just gonna stand here or-

"The back door!" Lapis prompted. "Come on!"

Peridot was grabbed by the hand and led to the door at the back of the space. Lapis tore it open, letting the harsh white light of the hallway flood the tech booth before it flew seamlessly shut behind them. She heard puzzled voices passing through the door, muffed by the wood.
"It sounds like Stevonnie and Amethyst," she said as she pulled her ear away from the door. "Why'd we run again?"

"Because," Lapis shrugged, giving a deadpan explanation, "I didn't want them to see this." She lurched forward, catching the unprepared Peridot and tangling her in her long arms. In response Peridot's hands drifted around Lapis' slim waist, temples throbbing with a tactile electricity from the nearness of their faces.

She was ready for when Lapis dipped her head and their breath mingled on one another's lips, before they stole away the free space and enclosed it with their lips.

The kiss obliterated every thought, gaining control of Peridot's physique. Sparks ignited in her chest, and she dared let her eyes open to view Lapis this close.

Her eyes were delicately fluttered shut, the thick froth of freckles splaying across her nose, her cheeks so close that Peridot was tempted to try to count them all. In the light of the hallway, it was easier to see the rose tinging her cheeks. For some reason that made her own blush intensify.

Eventually they broke apart at the mouth, their arms still attached to the other like stubborn velcro that just wouldn't tear away. "Yeah," Peridot breathed, utterly red in the face. "I can see why you wouldn't want them to see that."

Lapis snorted and unwrapped herself from Peridot, giving her a gentle shove away as she fixed her knapsack straps. Peridot fixed her pullover sweater, tugging at the bottom to cover t-shirt that had ridden up in their little intimate moment there. In the middle of a hallway.

She prayed no cameras caught that.

"So... what do we do now?" Peridot asked, turning away from the door as the duo headed to the exit.

"We can go... to the movies," the older suggested. "I heard Dogcopter 4 is out."

"Dogcopter?" Peridot, unimpressed, placed her hands over her hips. "As in the overly-budgeted film franchise about a Dachshund, with propellers in his back?"

"Steven got me into it," Lapis laughed, tugging Peridot out of the arts building and leading her out to where her vehicle was parked. Or, bike, rather. Peridot wasn't sure what to think of it as other than Lapis' torture device on two wheels. The TDTW.

"We've got nothing better to do. And I want popcorn." Lapis threw herself onto the bike, straddling her legs on either side and, with a free arm, patting the spot behind her with an insidious smile. "C'mon, Peri."

"I'm going to die," griped the shorter girl as she trudged over and scrambled on.

With more ease than the last time she'd gotten on this god-forsaken motorbike, she slid on behind Lapis and knitted her hands together over Lapis' abdomen. It was comfortable, now that she thought about it. She blamed her initial hysteria about this whole thing on the panic attack.

"You ready?" Lapis asked from the front, roaring the Ducati to life and giving its engine an experimental rev.

Peridot snorted, digging her nose into the space between Lapis' slight shoulder blades. "I'm going to say yes to make you feel better."
Was it too early to admit to loving Lapis? She thought about this as Lapis left the campus behind, a cloud of dust flying up in the couple's wake as the Ducati tore down the Delmarva 1A into Beach City.

For the longest time Peridot thought herself to be aromantic because of how aloof and misunderstanding her outlook on love had been. It hadn't been until Lapis came into her life that she could really understand what love was: patient and kind, understanding and hopeful, durable and unwavering. She'd learned so many of those things by just spending time with Lapis, getting to know her and getting to begin to understand her.

She wasn't sure if she was ready to concede to that huge, daunting phenomenon just yet. It demanded so much. Besides, she still had a long way to go!

If things panned out right for them, they would have all the time in the world with each other, talking and creating and healing. Even if it wasn't love yet, then they were helping one another understand what it really meant before it truly happened upon them.

Peridot was happy with that.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

After a stressful week, Peridot needs an outlet.

Chapter Notes

AO3 was giving me a little trouble so this chapter went down for a little bit, but yay, now it's back! Please make sure you've read chapter thirteen before continuing as this was posted the day after.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a week until area. Four days a the week, from an hour a day to six, the Crystal Gems had been working hard to further develop Mirror Gem.

Pearl and Sardonyx had been happy to order the reflective contacts for Lapis, and said actress had stunned the entire troupe to silence when she emerged from the dressing room. Lined with dark mascara, the actress' eyes were mirrors that made it impossible to see inside of her, freezing people on the spot the second she struck them with her gaze.

Peridot would be lying if she didn't find that kinda hot.

The technician had also listened to Lapis' advice and would connect with Garnet during run-through practices, painting her thoughts and correcting scenes that she thought played out too awkwardly in the past. Peridot was feeling more and more confident about their competition at area on the twenty-eighth, and she could tell that the other Crystal Gems were, too.

They were currently rehearsing the resolution of the play, running over new technical cues and prompts after deciding it needed more flash and flare to hypnotize viewers.

Blake broke the ancient mirror prop holding the ghost prisoner. Peridot flicked her thumb over her console faders, flickering the masters at the same time to give the impression of the house shaking. The fog from Amethyst's machines billowed out around Stevonnie and Lapis, who were reciting their lines. The swelling gloom was controlled by a series of fans carefully placed around the set, hidden from audiences; it funneled around them, like a twister slowed by time as Stevonnie chanted the final verse and "set" Lapis free.

Peridot pursed her lips as she changed into one of the last cues in her program, while on her alternate monitor she recorded her recent light changes into a separate cue to install for later performances. She almost missed the final cue, catching on the very last second to put a blue spotlight on Lapis who stood on the tower at the back of the set, bouncy dress swaying freely in the shadows as she laughed, her spirit finally freed of its former spite and anger for being trapped.

She pulled down the lights and waited until she heard Garnet begin clapping, then a round of dog whistles broke out from backstage as the other cast and crew members spilled out. Peridot tapped on
the work lights, relieved that she could look away for more than three seconds before something needed changing.

She plucked her cell phone from the satchel on the table, a growl building in her chest and rolling up into her throat like bile when she saw the unread messages from her mother on her lock screen.

With the end of the quarter coming around, her mother’s insistence that she apply for the marketing role in her company only amplified. She'd received the first e-mail a week ago, and it hadn't been particularly nice. Then came another the day after, and then another, then another, until it was a daily feat.

If the e-mail didn't read from Yellow Diamond, Peridot would have thought it was some pestering bot and deleted the message the minute it popped into her inbox.

But, no. There was a living, breathing, and very agitating person on the other side of the e-mail who was adamant to see her daughter working in her service. *Eugh.*

She had told Lapis about it the third day of getting the e-mails, and Lapis still defended her argument from a few weeks ago: that Peridot should tell her that she could fuck right off and leave her be.

She wouldn't use those *exact* words, of course. Even if she really wanted to.

Curse the perfunctory manners she'd been raised to speak with with that crazy businesswoman breathing down her neck.

Peridot scrunched her nose, nudging her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose as she opened the newest message.

*Sent Friday, October 20, 2016, 5:13:08 PM.*

*Good afternoon, Peridot.*

*As you have yet to reply to any of my messages regarding your employment at Diamond Industries and the deadline for application is tomorrow evening at 8:00 PM EST, I must beg the question, what is so important to you that you would ignore a golden opportunity such as this?*

*A well-paying operation in my prestigious company is a chance that no one your age has ever had the opportunity to utilize. If I find that you are overlooking this shot for anything less reputable than finishing your bachelor’s degree in the mechanical sciences, you won’t like what happens next.*

*Your Mother, Yellow Diamond.*

Oh, that was new. Now she was using the mother card to guilt-trip her. *Splendid.*

Peridot's heart raced: a terrible, full-body *beat* that made her limbs shake and twitch from the overly anxious stimulation. She groaned as the butterflies in her stomach went wild, like a migration of monarchs caught in a north-moving typhoon.

She had pushed her mother into the very back of her mind. She was treating the situation like a dark stain on the ceiling, just keep ignoring it and it might fade away.

Except in this case, it just kept getting bigger and scarier. She didn't know what her mother meant by that last reproachful promise (threat); she didn't want to find out either, but she’d rather have her own torture chamber in hell than step back under that manipulative regime again.
She reached over for the bottle of water she'd stolen from the cooler backstage before the last run-through of the night began, unscrewing the cap and covetously chugging the rest of the lukewarm liquid. She didn't have the time to pick up a Mountain Dew, a remedy she'd found helped her with these anxiety spurts, from the commissary before rehearsal. Her multimedia class had run an extra thirty minutes because the professor came in half-hungover and was in a vicious mood, so that had been the start of this very unpleasant day.

It didn't help that she'd had a maximum of ten hours of sleep since the week began. With the end of her terms coming about, things were really picking up and it was driving Peridot up the wall.

Her eyes diverted to the newest meep morp that sat on the filing cabinet behind her. Lapis had been its creator: it was the small gift box Peridot had bought with the lapis lazuli necklace she had given to Lapis on her twenty-first birthday a couple weeks ago. She kept the blue ribbon, too, and had actually gone and found a green one that she used to tie them together into a neat bow for the white box.

Looking at it and knowing full-well the sentimental intention behind it made Peridot feel better.

The other Crystal Gems were already clustered together on the stage, a hive of excited chatter that carried into the light booth. Peridot clenched the empty plastic bottle in her hand, throwing it into the waste bin by her feet before standing and exiting the room. She climbed onto the stage, minding her prosthesis, and fell in behind Ruby and Sapphire as they chuckled over something together.

"What're we talking about?" Peridot asked, squinting when the brash light from her upstage spotters flooded her vision. "People are usually taking off the second rehearsal's over."

"Hi, Peridot," Ruby greeted, and her girlfriend twirled to nod in silent greeting, sweeping her light blue bangs back over her blind eye. "Amethyst was talking about meeting up at the abandoned warehouse for this month's get-together," Sapphire explained, motioning with a dainty hand to said partygoer, who was chatting up Smoky, Rainbow, and Garnet.

"Sour Cream has a rave there tonight," Ruby added. "And she thinks it would be good to get some good vibes before area. The glee club's going to be there with their own corner, too."

"Didn't he leave the troupe?" Peridot questioned, remembering the long-faced student who had been to maybe four rehearsals before bailing.

"His father didn't want him to be sound for us anymore," intervened Pearl, coming up from behind Peridot and untangling her headset from her thin neck. "Sour Cream was certain it was because he wants him to be a fisherman, but I really just think that with all the activities Sour Cream has, he does need some time at home. Besides, we have Sugilite on sound now."

Said soundsperson was hunched over their backstage speaker system, muttering darkly to Opal about crossed wires and how puny their speakers were.

"What's this abandoned place you mentioned?" Peridot queried, focusing back on Sapphire. Now that they were all in the same place, it was with surprise Peridot noticed that she maybe had an inch on both of them.

A quarter with the Crystal Gems and she had found more people honest-to-goodness shorter than her than she had in her entire lifetime.

"It's a degraded warehouse on the outskirts of Beach City," sighed Pearl. "It's so full of rock and debris I don't understand how anyone can stand being down there. Cut yourself on anything and
"Aww, c'mon, P!" Amethyst joined in, throwing herself between Pearl and Peridot and looping an arm coolly around the co-director's waist. "You gotta come! What's an underground party without the soccer mom freaking out in the back?"

"Yeah, Pearl!" Steven stumbled in next, throwing his arms excitedly around his caretaker's legs. "Can we go, please? I wanna do the karaoke!"

Peridot blinked. "Karaoke?"

"Yeah!" Steven peeled himself off of Pearl and bounced over to Peridot, dark eyes alight with enchantment. "Isn't it neat? I've never done karaoke before- I mean, I sing with my dad sometimes. That doesn't count, does it?"

Peridot shook her head. The boy beamed. "Great! Are you gonna come too, Peridot?"

After the long, anxiety-filled day she'd had thus far, Peridot was able to laugh at the idea of heading out to attend some barbaric rave. The only thing that stopped her was the imploring glitter in Steven's eyes, and the hopeful grin on Amethyst's face. "Um... I'm not sure just yet," she determined. "Give me a minute."

Then Lapis emerged from the dressing room, ruffling her hair back into its common disheveled state and wiping the last of the ghostly make-up from her eyes. "Excuse me." Peridot left the little group and made a bee-line towards her partner, stopping when the loose garments of Lapis' costume were shoved into her arms. Every inch of her skin touched by the smooth blue fabric tingled with flustered energy.

"I'm not a costume bag," Peridot pointed out helpfully as Lapis swung her hand through her thick bangs, letting them fall back over her forehead. "I know," Lapis chimed. "But I need you to hold that a second while I grab my outfit."

"Your outfit?" Peridot followed Lapis into the right wind, into the small side room that sat beside the dressing room that housed their costume racks. Lapis unzipped her bag, ebony-black with a golden fringe. "There's a party tonight, isn't there?" Lapis asked, taking out the crumpled clothes from the foot the bag and moving to let Peridot hang the costume inside the bag.

"And you're going?"

Lapis shrugged indifferently. "I don't see a reason not to. It's free snacks and if not that, then free drinks." She zipped up her costume bag and turned on Peridot, taking a step closer and winding her hands around her waist curiously. "Are you going?"

"I don't know," Peridot admitted weakly. "I got another message from my mother during rehearsal. She's... not pleased. At all."

Sadness contoured Lapis' facial features as she rose a hand and rested it benignly over the shorter girl's shoulder. "You need to get your mind off your mom. It's been eating at you for days, Peridot," she spoke. "Your schoolwork, too. You need a breather."

Peridot knew she was right. If she just went back to her dorm room, she'd share the events of her day with Sadie, study for two hours, and then attempt to sleep. But instead of sleep, she would lay awake and worry about her mother, her classes, and everything in between. "I'll go," she sighed. "But only on the condition that I can get drunk to forget my mommy issues."
"That's the spirit," Lapis laughed. "I'll be right back." She diverted back into the dressing room, and Peridot dug out her phone as she waited for her girlfriend to change into better night apparel.

Peridot had on her normal generously-sized jeans, a faux brown leather jacket with a grey-cotton hood, and a faded olive Legend of Zelda t-shirt beneath it. She was really selling the senioritis look quite well. If she did end up going to this thing, she sure as all hell was not going to march all the way back to her dorm just to replace her nerd t-shirt with an edgy one.

The most recent e-mail from her mother was still fresh in her inbox. It called up to her like a hunter with a duck call, luring her in before the sniper rifle went off. So, being the smart duckling she was, she deleted the message from her inbox with a snarl.

Her mother could suck it up.

She chucked her phone into her satchel, deciding she was done with staring at the tiny screen for the night. It would only make her more restless knowing how easily Yellow Diamond could contact her through it.

She wasn't left alone with her thoughts for long. Lapis emerged from the dressing rooms, her crew clothes replaced by a dark blue top, ripped dusty-blue skinny jeans, and a grey plaid overshirt that she was rolling up to her elbows. "You ready?"

"Yeah. You look nice," Peridot complimented, falling in stride with Lapis as they crossed over the threshold to a small group who were headed out to the parking lot. Bismuth was down with giving a number of them a ride in her large white van (free candy, c'mere kiddies!). Peridot and Lapis were among the first to clamber in, taking to the back before anyone else could steal away the remote seats.

"Finders keepers--oh." Peridot tried to be a smartass when Amethyst made the motion for her to shove over so she could climb in the back with them, and almost got away with it. Almost. Sugilite ascended into the vehicle, lowering her sunglasses menacingly. "Better let 'lil Ames in with y'all," she growled.

"Yep! Yep, c'mon in!"

"Sure, yeah, sit by Peridot."

Needless to say, it was a talkative drive into town.

When they arrived, the building lived up to its ramshackle title. Aside from the fluorescent beams of light pouring out through its broken windows and a huge gap in the wall, it was shrouded with eerie shadow. Greenery clung enviously to its chipped concrete walls, and if Peridot looked hard enough she could see mosses beginning to stretch over the brickwork.

The group left Bismuth's van and worked their way inside. Bass shook the ground from Sour Cream's aboveground stand where he worked with a DJ booth, a huge pair of expensive headphones perched around his head. He just happened to glance up at the newcomers and recognized them, calling out through the huge speakers, "heeeey, 'sup CG's?"

All the noise had Peridot shaken, and she gripped her temple while Lapis led her off to a standoffish corner of the warehouse. "I spy a cooooler," the blue-haired girl sang, ducking down behind an ancient wooden crate and pulling it out from behind. "How did you know that was back there?" Peridot gaped as the cooler was pried open and Lapis' arms emerged with two bottles of beer.

"Alcoholic's intuition," Lapis chuckled, handing one to Peridot. When she didn't take it Lapis sighed
and rolled her eyes. "I'm kidding. I know you'd have my ass under surveillance 24/7 if I had that much of a drinking problem."

Peridot snorted and took the bottle. "You know me so well."

The rave wasn't that bad. Peridot didn't like the hard thud of the bass or the shrill noise of chatter much, but just being able to remain on the shadowed sidelines with Lapis was fine. She hadn't opened her beer, mostly because she didn't feel like ingesting practical liquid poison when her anxiety already had her restive enough as is. The two of them were watching as Sugilite helped Amethyst set up a machine near a platform that looked like a rundown boxing ring.

"Karaoke," Lapis pondered when they plugged the thing in and its screen burst to life, chiming a welcoming jingle before fading into a melody like a pop elevator tune.

"Steven was talking about that," Peridot remembered. "Do you think Pearl let him come? I don't see either of them here."

"I doubt it. Pearl is determined to keep him save from all the world's bad influences." Lapis lifted her beer. "This place isn't exactly PG."

"We could adopt him and let him come with us all he wants."

"Aren't you supposed to be the voice of reason between us? He'd be corrupted the second the frat boys walk in."

"Welcome to the dark side, Steven Universe. We have the scenes and the junkies, please take your pick." They both laughed.

The first people to do karaoke were Ruby and Sapphire, who giggled and nudged each other through the entire ballad of *Don't Stop Believing*. Ruby was apparently the city boy, and Sapphire the small-town girl; Peridot wondered if there was any truth to that.

Lapis and Peridot did wander over to the small group aggregating to watch the popular couple perform, drawn in by the surprisingly on-key singing of Sapphire. Ruby was slightly off-key, but somehow they made it work. The song finished, and Ruby scooped Sapphire up into her arms and pressed a loud kiss to her girlfriend's cheek. Sapphire giggled and covered her face to hide it from the audience. "Ruby, stop it! You're embarrassing me in front of everybody!"

"Okay, mop it up, guys," Amethyst mused, covering her eyes with her forearm. "Save the fun times for later. And per the rules of Crystal Gem Karaoke, y'all gotta pick somebody to go after ya!" Amethyst stuck up her hands, all ten fingers up and beginning to count down. "Ya got ten seconds."

Ruby's eyes scanned over the small crowd. "We nominate..." Her dark eyes locked before Peridot could remember to look away like she always did in her inclusive mechanics lectures. "Peridot and Lapis!"

The amputee's jaw dropped to the floor. "Huh." A strong hand gripped her forearm and tugged her onto the small ring. Lapis was already on, reluctantly accepting a microphone from Amethyst and then shrieking when one was tossed at her.

Peridot caught the microphone, picking her jaw up from the floor with it, and stared as Amethyst hit shuffle and the karaoke machine spun its broad playlist. Lapis came up beside her, beer clutched in one hand and the second microphone in the other, staring impartially into the glowing screen as it ticked off its spinner.
"Looks like your song is..." Amethyst drummed her fingers over the edge of the machine.

"You aren't even gonna put up a fight about this?" Peridot hissed to Lapis, eyes broad. Her girlfriend shrugged. "It's karaoke rules. It'll be funny."

Peridot grumbled and squinted at the title of the song she and Lapis had to perform as it landed. ". . . House of Gasoline? What?"

"Ohoho, bro, that one's a sick mashup!" The lavender-haired student crowed, awarding the machine a very aggressive clap on its back for its good work. "It's no Journey but it'll do! G'luck, love-birds!"

"Wait- urk!" Before Peridot could try to weasel her way out of singing the music began. It was a familiar melody: sharp, bright cords of ukulele that only Tyler Jospeh could be responsible for playing. She was confused about the second half of the song title until, instead of a male's voice, Halsey's airy tone pumped through the speaker system.

And next to her, Lapis' voice emerged too. It was sugary, but not in the gentle or convivial way. It was smooth like aged Chinese silk, with just enough intonation wedged into every syllable. Peridot could only stare in astonishment as Lapis completed the first verses. She was slow and experimental at first, before she seemed to find the crevices to dig her feet into and keep singing.

"Are you insane like me? Been in pain like me?" She fell into the melody, growing more comfortable.

"Bought a hundred dollar bottle of champagne like me? Just to pour that motherfucker down the drain like me?" Her eyes narrowed at the karaoke screen. "Would you use your water bill to dry the stain like me?"

Suddenly the ukulele picked up, pingy but all the same warm and mellow. Peridot's skin flushed with goose-bumps as Lapis endured.

"Are you high enough without the Mary Jane like me? Do you tear yourself apart to entertain like me?" There was now a sureness to her stride, fingers curling surely around her exposed midriff as she surveyed the growing audience. "Do the people whisper 'bout you on the train like me? Saying that you shouldn't waste your pretty face-" she met eyes with Peridot, "like me."

Peridot was so caught up Lapis' caper across the makeshift stage that she almost forgot to check the karaoke machine for her lines, which had yet to come up. And when they did begin to roll across the screen in large gold font, her voice began unevenly. Compared to Lapis, it was rough and brash and full of scratches and rasps; it almost made her want to stop.

"I will make you," she started out uncertainly, fingers twitching when there were a few disinterested murmers from the audience. Their discontent only fueled her determination to succeed at this.

"Queen of everything you see." Peridot's hands clenched the microphone tighter as an easy smile found its way onto her face, and she looked up at Lapis. "I'll put you on the map, I'll cure you of disease."

There was a moment where there was no music, no audience, no deep boosters that rocked the ground beneath their feat. It was just Lapis and Peridot, together, and between them a silent pledge was asserted.

Lapis twirled away, her eyes a curious challenge that made Peridot's body chill as she began her next verses. "Are you deranged like me? Are you strange like me?" Like a coyote in the outback she began a pace around Peridot, feet slapping the cold stone floor in rhythm with every beat of the drum
in the instrumental. "Lighting matches just to swallow up the flame like me?"

Lapis' hand outstretched and grappled onto the fabric of Peridot's jacket, pulling her in until their faces were only inches apart, their excess body warmth meeting in the middle in a pool of animated heat. "Do you call yourself a fucking hurricane like me?" She sang, never letting her eyes leave Peridot's. There was something sad in them. "Pointing fingers cause you'll never take the blame like me?"

Peridot's brows knitted, and she nearly chipped into the karaoke with the instinctive need to console Lapis, even if they were just lyrics. But then Lapis turned to the crowd, which had doubled in size since the couple had been handed the microphones. The teenagers who had been hanging out on the other side of the warehouse had stumbled over, summoned over by the alluring blast of their favourite indie singer. Lapis raised her hands out to them, coaxing them to act as backing for the chorus of her part.

"You can't wake up, this is not a dream. You're part of a machine, you are not a human being. With your face all made up, living on a screen! Low on self-esteem, so you run on gasoline."

"Oh, I think there's a flaw in my code," maintained the actress, voice quavering beneath a shroud of remorse that only Peridot caught onto. "These voices won't leave me alone. . . " Stars, it was like Lapis was trying to prove a point through song!

But then it was Peridot's turn, and she was determined to make her own point known even if she couldn't use her own words to do it. She rushed back over to Lapis, circling her closely and keeping her eyes locked directly onto Lapis' disquisitive ones. "I will make you queen of everything you see! I'll put you on the map, I'll cure you of disease."

"Oh! And since we know that dreams are dead," Peridot spun herself away while Lapis' voice rose and fell in steady, glazed cadence, throwing out her arms in a grandeur gesture. "And life turns plans upon their head." She wheeled to Lapis. "I will plan to be a bum," her mind plunged into the ordeal with her mother, and with genuine fortuity she sang, "so I just might become someone!"

Lapis was rooted to the ground, the only thing standing still in a world moving too fast for Peridot to see. The microphone rose up to her parted lips, catching her astonished, "and all the people say. . . "

Her body throbbed with life. Each muscle sang its own tune, carrying Peridot in fluid rhythm with the beat of the mashup song over to Lapis, who joined in after snapping out of her stupor. They wound around each other, together singing the final chorus with the roar of their entrance audience whirring in the background.

"You can't wake up, this is not a dream. You're part of a machine, you are not a human being. With your face all made up, living on a screen!" Lapis cut off suddenly from the lack of black text on the screen, instead spinning around to Peridot as she finally reached the right pitch. "Will you take care of me?"

The ukulele faltered, dipping into a low, sad tune, and Peridot faltered with it. "I will," she took a step towards Lapis, eyes glistering behind her falling glasses, "make you," beat, "queen of everything you see." She got rid of the distance between them, wrapping her hands - microphone included - around Lapis'. Lapis looked down, brown eyes round and swimming with a concoction of so many emotions it was hard to name just one. "I'll put you on the maps," she murmured so closely that even the microphone had a hard time picking it up, "I'll cure you of disease."

A stunned silence had fallen over the crowd. Peridot was glad for it. But by the third powerful thud of her heart the rauous applause had started up, some even screaming for an encore performance.
Yet, even as she stood in the dusty limelight being lauded by a couple dozen partygoers, Peridot only had eyes for Lapis.

"You don't think I lied about all that, did you?" She smiled up to her, inclining her head to Lapis' which had sunk down as her freckled shoulders quivered. "Because it looks like even in karaoke I'm gonna be here for you."

A broken grin surfaced on Lapis' face, and she laughed as arms swung around Peridot. "C'mere," she begged in a fragmented voice, so watery it sounded like she was about to break down and weep into Peridot's front. "Urgk-" She stretched out her arms to catch Lapis, but ended up swiveling and losing her footing on her prosthetic, sending the both of them tumbling onto the floor, Peridot on bottom while Lapis was sprawled, tearfully giggling over her.

An ear-piercing dog-whistle rose up from the crowd, and Amethyst's loud cackle came from someplace above her. She didn't take notice of any of that.

The embrace was genuine and thorough, festering a flame in Peridot's blood that carried into each and every inch of her body. It entangled her deeper in the web of passion she felt for Lapis. She hardly noticed when she felt Amethyst prod her thigh, saying, "all right, you two, you can go do the do elsewhere. That crying kid over there wants a shot at the ol' karaoke machine!"

"I just wanna sing *Hamilton*!" Came a sob, coming from a broad-shouldered teenager in trademark lumberjack flannel with thick, short blonde hair. "I'm- I'm gonna cry."

"Yeah," Amethyst called into the microphone, pointing out the sniffling kid. "That guy's had a little too much to drink. Let's humor him, folks! C'mon up here, you."

"Okay, let's-" Lapis collected herself, steeling her fragile voice as she swiped a tear from the corner of her eye as she propped herself up on the other palm. "Let's let the kid sing. I think we should be going anyway."

"Y-Yeah," Peridot agreed, bolstering herself on her elbows before straightening up onto her backside and scrambled up. Her body still suffered from the aftereffects of her close proximity to Lapis, from the unabridged intimacy; she stumbled on her prosthetic, being saved only by Lapis throwing an arm beneath her chest to help her down the stage. "Thanks," she murmured, standing up fully when she was back on the concrete.

She got vertigo the moment her spine filled out, head swimming as the last few adrenalized minutes of her life dawned on her. Lapis was quick to lead her to the edge of the pumping warehouse, where the wall had crumpled apart and bricks laid strewn everywhere, revealing to them the full night sky over the whispering sea.

"You okay?" Lapis fretted, settling Peridot down against the outside wall in the grass that she soon joined her atop, swiping the sweat from Peridot's forehead. Her quick hands moved to take off Peridot's glasses to better reach her brow, but the blonde's hands were faster, grabbing hold of Lapis' and gently lowering them.

"I'm good," she lied. Her voice betrayed her by cracking.

Lapis huffed and removed Peridot's glasses, frantically removing her plaid to clean the perspiration from her flushed skin. "Was the karaoke too much?" She asked quietly. "I know you didn't want to do it, but you seemed- fine up there-"

"It wasn't the karaoke," Peridot broke in, pushing away Lapis' dabbing hand and patting the earth for
her glasses. "It's just that you sounded so sad up there, Laz."

"I was fine-"

"*Fine* doesn't sing like you just sung."

Lapis stilled, body easing away from Peridot's as she folded her hands in her lap. "Can you tell me why?" Peridot prompted, reaching over to gently hold her bicep.

". . . It's the same thing it always is," the blue-haired girl murmured.

". . . The thing about you being bad?"

Lapis nodded weakly.

A misplaced exasperation bubbled up inside of Peridot, kindling into a fire that burned at her innards. It was the overexertion from the whole week weighing down on her, the burdening her mentality that made her feel just so *tired* of this.

"How many times am I going to have to tell you?" She whispered weakly, searching Lapis' destitute face for anything even remotely telling. "Lapis, no matter what, I'm not going to stop this. We're," she grabbed Lapis' bicep just a little firmer, "not going to stop this." Her eyes began to sting as she proceeded, undeterred by the stupefaction on Lapis' face. "I don't *care* what crap you've done before that makes you feel this way. They're *valid*, I know, but you have to stop letting one *bad* thing ruin *everything* for you!"

"It was more than one," Lapis uttered.

"So *what*!" Peridot threw her arms up into the air, voice breaking as the her last string of patience was snipped. "*Everyone's* done shit in their life! *Everyone's* done something they regret - and sure, maybe you have a couple more than others. But it's not those things that are putting you down Lapis, it's *you*.

Lapis was stricken. Her body was twisted, a sliver of back facing Peridot to show she was ready to bolt away at a moment's notice from the onslaught of a very, *very* painful truth. "You- you don't *know*!"

The first tear trailed down Peridot's cheek, followed quickly thereafter by a number of others. "You think I *don't*?"

Whatever escape plan Lapis had conceived shattered into brittle pieces across the grass when the moonlight caught against the fresh tears streaming down Peridot's face. "Peridot-"

"I've done shit, too, Lapis!" The blonde croaked, jabbing her thumb at her red face. "I've done stupid things! *Hell, I-*" She rolled up her left pant leg determinedly, revealing the metal of her prosthetic. "I lost my *leg* because of my actions, Lapis. I get a reminder every *damn* morning. But I don't let that control me because I *know* I deserve so much better than that. And so do *you*.

Peridot's hackles dropped. A cold balloon of horror expanded in her chest as she registered the hurt on Lapis' face, hidden beneath the forced taciturn facade. "I'm sorry I snapped," she said. "It's just been this week. . ."

"I get it," soothed the other girl, lowering her hand and setting it respectfully beside Peridot's instead of over it. Peridot's throat clenched with appreciation for that.
"I've spent so long learning to cope with these things on my own," Lapis keened, a bitter smile on her face. "I guess I never really did *cope*, did I?"

"Of course you did. Maybe it just wasn't in the right way." Peridot brought her hands up to her eyes, ridding herself of the last of the moisture that still threatened to spill from her tear ducts. "I-" Pause. "I want to make things fair."

Lapis' sad eyes found her, the question in them evident.

Peridot slid her arm down her left leg, tracing her fingertip over the place where her agitated flesh was engulfed by her prosthetic's umbrella liner. "I wasn't the nicest person before either," she began. "I was with a bad crowd. You would be surprised at how out of control uppity kids can be. They were the only people I was allowed to socialize with, per my mother's instructions. She didn't want me to *muddle about* with those in the lower class."

Her palm wrapped sorrowfully around the warm flesh, curling in softly. "We were being... *huge* clods. We were starting trouble in a neighborhood that we knew was trouble to start with. The de facto leader of the group told us we should try breaking into an estate, and like the blind idiots we were, we actually listened."

Lapis was ever-reverential, dutifully listening to Peridot reveal a part of her past she often tried so hard to dissociate with.

"I was in their living room when the lights flipped on, and there was a man in the hallway." Peridot experienced a full-body shiver as she recalled the darkest moment of her life, accented with the bellow of the outraged tenant and the bloodcurdling sound of gunfire. Her next words were faint. "He had a shotgun."

Lapis' lips parted as the last part sank in.

"I don't remember anything past that, except for waking up in a hospital bed. My mother treated it like an *inconvenience*. 'Fix her up,' she said, 'get back on her feet.' The sheer *irony* in that, because the next day they ended up needing to amputate my leg because my circulation was ruined, there were too many dead tissues, the list can go on forever, really." Peridot's fingers wrapped around the rumpled cuff of her jeans to begin tugging it back down over the replacement limb. "The worst part is my mother was too stubborn to believe that it was impossible for me to be so imperfect that I'd *break* into a *home*. She got the damn guy *evicted* because he shot me when I was in *his* house- and I live with that guilt."

"It goes to say one bad choice, however life-changing it may be, is *never* enough of a reason to put yourself down." Peridot began pulling her jeans back down over her leg, but stopped when Lapis reached over and pressed her hand over the fake shin. "You know I can't feel that," the blonde disconsolately informed, gaze plastered to the ground

Lapis lowered her eyes. "I used to think I couldn't feel anything," she admitted quietly.

Peridot looked up. "... Used to?"

"Used to." Her hands ran up the length of the prosthetic, reaching the place where it met leg and resting her hand over Peridot's small knee. "But I think someone taught me that there are some things worth feeling."

"Steven?"

Lapis choked. "No- well, *yes*, in a way... but no, Peridot, it was *you*."
"It wasn't until I met you that I realized things about myself. Like how much I needed someone, how little I cared for everyone else in comparison." Glistening filled Lapis' eyes. A tiny tight-lipped smile sat on her lips. "Even the less impersonal things. Like how much I missed water and just having someone be there to actually care." She reached her free hand down to Peridot's, hovering above it for silent permission. When Peridot nodded, she took it in her own. "I know I've thanked you so many times now but. . . I'm not sure you understa-and." The older's voice broke in the last syllable.

"I think I have an idea," Peridot murmured, finally letting herself sink into Lapis. Their shoulders melded together, bodies leaning on one another for support. Now it was Peridot's head that rested on Lapis' shoulder, drinking in the flushed warmth that never failed to make her stomach flutter with joy.

They both had their own emotional baggage to carry. But they were still learning. Whether it was about life, about how to handle their emotions when they got out of hand, or even how to deal with each other: it was still part of the same phenomenal healing process.

Peridot dared to look up at Lapis through the corners of her eyes. In the moonlight, unstoppable even by the party lights flashing from inside of the warehouse, she was serene, an icon of beauty but all the same an avatar of power and fortitude.

She didn't know just how much she was worth.

She wished Lapis could see herself as Peridot saw her.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the emotions. (No, I'm not. Prepare for some more, kids.)
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems prepare for their area competition.

Chapter Notes

Because this chapter came out very soon after the last, please make sure you've read chapter fourteen before continuing! Now that school is about to begin ahead, updates will return back to their former weekly/bi-weekly goodness. Also heeey, happy one-month anniversary of this story! I began it a month ago and now have 76K+ words, whoa. I don't have a life, geez.

Peridot collapsed gladly onto the white duvet of the hotel Garnet had allotted for the Crystal Gems for tomorrow's competition. Fatigue sat in her body like lead, dragging her limbs down with her onto the bed. Her shirt collar was stiffly lifted on one side, poking against her cheek and being a general asshole of a clothing article.

But she was tired. Therefore, she was beyond caring. Even her mother's shadow was forgotten for the time being.

The Crystal Gems had left the Temple at eleven after a rehearsal ran late trying to perfect everything, from the position of an antique kettle on the coffee table to the composition of Opal's make-up. It was finally area contest, and they were scheduled as the fifth performance at 8:30 PM the next day. Or, more fittingly, later that day - because it was now one o'clock in the morning in Wilmingmore, Delmarva. Peridot was suffering.

Said suffering technician was fondly murmuring a number of "I love you"'s into the soft comforter's surface as Lapis entered their issued hotel room.

"Are you cheating on me with the bed?" Lapis' indignant voice cut through her thoughts. The amputee glanced up to where Lapis was shedding her hoodie and throwing it haphazardly onto the television cabinet in front of her.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Peridot consoled, lowering her face and pressing it into the plush covers to hide her face from the light Lapis switched on. "Where's Ruby?"

"Went down to the pool with everyone else." Lapis removed her sandals, arms reaching for her back. "Could you give me a hand here?"

As Peridot lifted her head her glasses fell from the bridge of her nose, making her utterly helpless in the visionary department. Lapis was just a blur of tan, blue, and more blue. "With what?"

"My zipper. I think it's caught."
She would have thought that with how much her face reddened around Lapis she would have grown a little immunity. Stars, was she wrong. "Uh, sure." The blonde scrambled off of the queen, throwing her wired frames back onto her face and approaching Lapis. The latter had cleverly decided that because she didn't want to rumple her dress in her backpack with her other clothes, she would wear it on the trip over and hang it up in the hotel. Truly, Lapis was the master of preservation.

At least she'd been kind enough to wear leggings with it. Peridot wasn't sure how she'd live if Lapis was sitting across from her practically bare-legged. It ended so far above the knee school superintendents would be lining up to throw fits for miles.

She rose her small hand up to the silver zipper between Lapis' shoulder blades. Her knuckles grazed against the warm flesh above the dress line as she fidgeted with the caught zipper, sighing in relief when it finally slid downward. She stopped it before it could go any lower than Lapis' mid-back. "Okay. You can go change now."

"If you say so."

Peridot turned around and marched back to the bed, pausing at the nightstand to dig out her charger and plug in her lifeless smartphone. She plucked the half-full water bottle from her satchel, rolling onto the bed while uncapping the drink to take a sip.

She had really bad timing.

Her eyes slid over to the other side of the room, where Lapis was now standing in a sports bra and underwear, hanging her dress on the hanger in the hotel closet.

"Oh my god." She spat and her gaze snapped to the ground so swiftly that she was worried she'd suffer from visual whiplash. If that even existed.

From the blurry peripherals of her vision she saw Lapis turn, blue hair swinging freely and voice gently laughing. "You told me to change."

"Yes, in the bathroom!" Shrillel Peridot.

"It's too late now." Lapis disappeared behind the other bed for a moment, popping back with a bundle of pajamas clutched in her hands. She launched over Ruby's bed, standing over Lapis and knowing full well of the mental paralysis the smaller girl was now victim to. "Scoot."

Peridot obliged, rolling to the other side of the bed. Despite the heat building up in her face, and likewise, her heart, she didn't feel the need to aver her eyes from Lapis' half-bare form. She didn't stare fully, but didn't try to hide her admiring of the lean, toned, speckled body as a worn black crop top with a yellow star was thrust over the sports bra. A pair of pajama shorts followed.

"Close your mouth, Peridot."

"Wa- Was it open?"

"Enough to catch flies, yeah."

Peridot scoffed and stubbornly clenched her teeth, a grin contradicting the embarrassment she felt. "I'm sorry that my girlfriend has a nice body," she remarked as she rolled off the other side of the bed. "Excuse me if I was a little starstruck, especially when you caught me so off-guard. I'm gonna go change too. I hate this shirt - it's itchy."

"Why'd you wear it?" Lapis asked as Peridot grabbed her nightwear out of her bag. "For the
"aesthetic," the blonde supplied succinctly, and heard Lapis snort before she ducked into the restroom.

She would have followed Lapis' suit and changed in the middle of the room. . . but Peridot really didn't feel like unclasping her bra and putting on a sports bra in front of someone else. Plus, she had pajama boxers. To put those on properly, you needed to be one with nature. In more understandable terms, that meant getting full-on naked. It wasn't that she was afraid of Lapis seeing her; it was more that she was afraid of moving things too quickly.

She didn't know exactly how Lapis felt about getting close and more. . . intimate. The thought of it was mysteriously appealing, despite Peridot's prior alienation to the idea of anything even remotely venereal. Crap. She was blushing again. Lapis was such a potent subject that even thinking about her in that sense made Peridot all hot and flustered, guh.

She swapped her clothes with a sleeping sports bra, a loose grey tank top, and her alien-print boxers. "Aesthetic," she whispered into the mirror as she stared at her reflection, snickering to herself as she trailed her eyes over her slightly curvy form. Then her eyes caught sight of the spot below her knee where her leg disappeared and the fabric of her liner came into view.

Peridot tightened her lips and gathered up her clothes, turning off the bathroom light and walking back out into the room. The only lights on now were the lamps on the nightstand, shedding a golden glow across the sheets and walls as Peridot chucked her things into her bag.

"Lapis?" She asked, green eyes dark with confusion when she didn't see the familiar Hawaiian sprawled across the bed.

"Out here."

Lapis' voice filtered through the thin hotel curtain to Peridot's left. She walked over, drawing aside the downy fabric that revealed Lapis, who was standing out on the tiny balcony.

"I doubt there's going to be anything interesting out here at one-thirty in the morning," the amputee remarked as she hovered by the balcony door, her prosthetic leg tucking self-consciously behind the other as she surveyed the other balconies around her. No one was out but them. Because they were insane, standing out in the sixty degree weather in pajama shorts at one in the morning.

"The others are down there." Lapis beckoned Peridot over, eyes never leaving the hotel pool below them. She moseyed over, bare arms resting over the cold material of the black-iron bars.

"Swimming." She peered over the edge of the balcony, where three stories under the Crystal Gems were relaxing in the pool. It was impossible to tell faces in the dark, but occasionally someone would pass by the underwater pool lamps and their silhouettes would be a little more individualistic, or their laughter would rise up and she could recognize them through that.

Peridot sagged, focusing back on Lapis when she saw the girl's shoulders dropped in defeat, eyes clouded in palpable sorrow that played Peridot's heartstrings like a fiddle.

"Do you miss swimming?" She asked cautiously, thumb dragging musingly over the inside of her elbow. "I know you miss water. . ."

"I miss everything about it," the blue-haired student corrected, vocals dim and drab. "But I know I still can't go back to it."

"Laz, if the water means so much to you, why don't you. . . try again?" Peridot's hands shot apart and make a grand gesture. "Start anew!"
"It's not that easy," Lapis scoffed, dry and intractable. "It's not like getting over your fear of a ferris wheel by getting on one. It's..." Her arms wrapped around herself, tugging wearily at her top. "It's scary, difficult." She bent, resting her smooth chin over her forearms as she watched the scene below.

"I'd love to be able to do it again, but I just don't know how."

Peridot glanced over to Lapis. In the night's gleam she was stately, the distant blue reflection of the pool water dancing across her brown features as she stared with grief down at the others. The blonde's heart ached for her.

She still had such a minuscule idea of Lapis' relationship with Jasper. She knew the event that started Lapis' fear of immersing herself in the water, and knew that it would take a truckload of patience, patience, and even more patience to even begin to help her get past that, which she was going to do. She'd promised.

But she didn't know how to do that right now.

"I'm sorry, Lapis."

The blue-haired girl shook her head, defiant. "No, it's my fault," she deterred. "I'm the one to blame. If I hadn't been so reckless and angry-"

"You don't have to talk about it," Peridot chipped in before things could get too deep, a hand crawling over the chilled railing and settling beside Lapis' clenched fist. She wouldn't touch her if she didn't want to be touched. Lapis' head pivoted slightly and the sensation of sharp needles burned in the short girl's knuckles as she felt a dark gaze pin onto her hand. "Is it weird if I want to?"

"Not at all!" Peridot affirmed, offering a hopeful smile. "I like clearing my head by talking, usually via podcast. That was a long time ago, though." Truthfully Peridot had considered picking up her log date computer recordings (as she had generously dubbed them) again with the agony of her mother boring over her. Even with Lapis there to lend a listening ear, when she was alone the anxiety built and built inside of her until she was sure it would combust and she'd die. Not an exaggeration.

"It's not the water that's scaring me. It's just the feelings associated with it," Lapis began. "I'm not afraid in the shower or in the rain, but the thought of being utterly surrounded like that, it's- it's not what it once was. I adored it, I- I think I still do."

"Then why don't you try again?"

"Because I keep thinking about Jasper!" Lapis shoved her face into her arms, a groan rumbling in her throat carrying over to a concerned Peridot. "I don't expect you to get it, but it's just something I can't shower out. It's always going to be there. She's always going to be there, and the water's just a reminder of that."

"Then help me understand it," Peridot demanded, coming up behind Lapis and standing so closely that their body heat bounced off of their figures. "I wanna help you get back this piece of you. It's heartbreaking seeing you stare down at the others like you're watching a funeral - you look miserable, Lapis. . ."

Mocha-brown eyes found Peridot's emerald, and for a few moments, no words were spoken. Inner defiance met willingness, tangoing together in a dance for dominance. It was Lapis to back down first, recanting her gaze back to the pool. "I don't know how to, Peridot," she whispered. "How can I when I don't even know how to help myself with it."

". . . You make a point there," Peridot uttered so quietly that the only proof she had even said it was
the vibration of her vocal cords. "Are you going to keep watching them?" She asked, stronger this
time, but quiet and deferential all the same. Lapis stilled, appearing contemplative, before giving a
modest nod. Peridot languished beside her then, body weight shifting onto her good leg as she
mimicked Lapis' pose. "Then I'll stay out here with you."

"... Thank you."

They must have spent a good ten minutes out there. A few Crystal Gems did leave the pool, the
sound of their laughter fading as they dove indoors with towels wrapped around their soaked bodies.
Only the late-night stragglers were left when Lapis finally propped herself up on her palms, releasing
a sigh that wasn't content, but wasn't dissatisfied, either. She headed back into their room, delicately
drawing past the curtain.

Peridot stared at the spot where Lapis exited for a moment before before following. She slid the
sliding glass door shut, pinning its lock and drawing the curtains together. Lapis was on the bed, legs
tucked beneath her as she steadily watched Peridot move around to shut off the lights.

Carefully Peridot climbed onto the bed beside Lapis, taking a moment to detach her leg and hide it
between the stand and the headboard. Those infatuating, ambiguous mocha eyes were still on her
when she swiveled back around.

Peridot withheld a shiver as her bare leg dragged up against Lapis'. There was a mortal sensitivity
that tingled in them when Lapis made no move to dissect herself from the position. Each brief brush
against the stump of her left leg felt like fire that shot through her veins, carrying a surge of electricity
that made the hair on the back of Peridot's neck rise to attention.

But Lapis never dared try to shy away from it. Peridot's heart swelled when Lapis finally found a
place to rest herself, one leg twined around Peridot's and the other bent to comfortably lean against
her lost one.

"... Better?" Peridot asked softly.

"Yeah." Lapis reached over and pensively looped her fingers through Peridot's. She pulled it up to
her chest, blue head sinking into the pillow, tired eyes slipping lethargically shut as she methodically
exhaled. "Better."

Peridot didn't sleep. Ruby must have returned at some point, because her brain only registered the
extra presence in the room when she heard the bathroom light buzz to life. She groaned and rolled
over, glaring at the 2:29 on the electric alarm clock. For clod's sake, they had to leave by ten to leave
for their tech rehearsal for area!

She blamed her stupid internal war with anxiety. Strangely enough, her mind had been remarkably
inactive since turning out the lights and watching Lapis fall asleep pressed against her. It was like she
was zoning out, but still registering and acknowledging the things around her.

She'd had enough. Peridot snatched her phone from the nightstand with her free arm. With a calm
tenacity she opened up the Amazon app, heading to her bookmarked inventory that showed an array
of prosthetic advancements.

There were few things her current prosthesis was vulnerable too, and water was one of its most
powerful oppressors. She would never be able to help Lapis if she couldn't even get in the water
herself. So with a grim face stained with wistful intent, Peridot found the auxiliary feature she was
searching for, and hit order without a second thought.
She set her phone back on the tabletop, rolling back onto her shoulder to better accommodate to Lapis' physical arrangement. With a mindful steadiness Peridot pulled her hand back from Lapis' chest, catching it in the middle with both of hers.

Something must have triggered her to recall their karaoke night, for the lyrics that promised she would take care of Lapis were suddenly on repeat in the back of her enervated mind. Peridot stared down at their interlocked hands, then their interlocked legs. She leaned in, placing her shaking lips on the edge of Lapis' limp knuckles.

She finally fell asleep.

Fortunately the morning was far less hectic than their previous competition. There was no loud Sardonyx busting down their doors at five, no Opal needing to run back to her room because she forgot her hair straightener, and no Pearl on the verge of tears because "we're going to be late!"

In fact, the Crystal Gems arrived to their tech rehearsal early, unloading their Penske in an (almost) orderly fashion. Their hour had, like always, gone by so quickly Peridot was rushing to leave the light booth by the time the stage manager's timers had reached fifty-eight minutes.

This particular auditorium didn't have a cue system. It was all manual. Not that Peridot was nervous about that, no! She could do it, she was sure; but there were the possibilities of that certain fader for the ending scene being too far away for her to reach. She didn't have long enough arms to stretch across that whole board and transition faders at the same time.

*No panicking,* Peridot told herself as she rejoined the group by the left wing, the last few running from the back storage unite where they'd just finished striking their set. Garnet gave her a thumbs-up as she stopped beside her. She was aware of the situation, but said she trusted Peridot to do just fine even without a schedule of programmed cues.

"The last school is arriving now," the stage manager, a man called Mr. Smiley, grinned. "Y'all should be gettin' outta here, 'cuz I don't think ol' Blue is gonna be happy with another troupe crowding her rehearsal space."

"*Ol Blue?*" Peridot muttered inaudibly. She twisted her head towards the back entrance to the theatre when the sound of a door clicking open filled the quiet space, and a tall woman in an elegant white headscarf stepped indoors, tailed by a thin, slender actress with short, thick hair that fell over her eyes.

"And there she is! C'mon, folks, let my crew hands take you to your assigned class." Mr. Smiley beckoned for one of the Wilmingmore students to lead the Crystal Gems out from a side door and into a hallway. Before the door shut behind them, Peridot snuck a glance back to the stage and saw more of the next school coming in.

"What school were they?" She asked Pearl as they followed their escort to their room. "That lady in there didn't look happy to see us."

Pearl sighed like she'd been holding her breath for the past two hours, a whole-body sag as she crossed her arms disdainfully. "That was Homeworld, and their director Blue Diamond."

"*Diamond?*"

"Yes, do keep up. I imagine she's unhappy to see us here for all the reasons we are her." The lissome woman unwrapped her arms and swept a fringe of bang away from her pale forehead. "It's no secret the Crystal Gems and Homeworld aren't the best of friends."
"No kidding," Peridot remarked. Her eyes rolled over the others, catching the irritated lines in their faces and the stiffness of their strides. It was like someone had come in and announced that something smelled sour, and everyone was affected. Even Lapis looked weary.

"They're the second group to perform. Odd, considering their rehearsal is at noon." Pearl shook her head while the Crystal Gems were led into their assigned classroom, which was coincidentally a black box theatre class.

"And we're the fifth." The technician tapped her jaw thoughtfully. She was curious, to say the least, as to how Homeworld put out their productions; by word on the street alone, they were formidable. But what if that was all just an overstatement? The Crystal Gems were an underestimated party with a lot to bring to the table. Call her biased, but she was sure they could kick Homeworld's asses when push came to shove.

"Last contest you said it was possible for us to go and see other shows so long as they aren't the two before ours," Peridot stated, following Pearl over to the desk that Garnet and Rainbow Quartz were setting up with bottled waters and crackers. "Do you think it's possible I could-"

"I don't want anyone going to see Homeworld's show if they can help it," the other bit. "It's bad enough the effect they have on us by just being here today to compete." Pearl motioned to the room. Most of the others had already shrugged off the animosity seeing Blue Diamond had rekindled, but some were still stealing glances at the door like the director herself would patrol in and tell them off.

"Don't you think it's good that we know what we're up against?" Peridot cocked her hip and locked her arms over her chest. "I could bring a blast canon."

"We don't need a blast canon, Peridot."

"I never leave home without one."

The startled look on Pearl's face spoke volumes. The amputee was ready to start another effort to convince Pearl when Garnet came up behind her counterpart, clapping her on the shoulder stoically. "It's fine, Pearl."

"Garnet-!"

"Not letting them see will only make them more restless." Garnet stepped in front of Peridot. "You can go, but I want you back in here before the third performance begins. If the lights are really as you say they are, we need to talk about it a bit."

"I've already come up with three consecutive plans in the event of a malfunction!" The blonde piped, chest swelling with pride as she tapped her temple. "We can speak about it later, then. What time does Homeworld perform?"

"3:30 this afternoon. You have quite some time before then." Garnet turned to leave, and in swept Lapis, tugging absentmindedly at the zipper of Peridot's hoodie which she had rudely stolen from her backpack that morning at the hotel. "What was that about?"

"Peridot wants to go see Homeworld's show," Pearl sighed, falling into the velvet office chair by the refreshment desk. "I couldn't possibly see the appeal in watching them go on. It's watching snakes pretend they can act!"

Lapis shrugged. "I'll go with."

Peridot snapped to attention, eyes wide with hope. "You mean it?"
"Sure. Beats sitting in this room 'til seven."

Pearl sighed from her seat. "Very well. But if you return shaken up about outperforming them, I will personally lecture you about it."

Peridot chuckled as she and Lapis moved off together to wall of the drama classroom. They still had three hours until Homeworld's showing, after all.

"I don't know about you," Peridot drawled as she rested the back of her head against the cool black walls. "But I didn't sleep for shit last night with your snoring." Lapis irately scoffed.

"I don't snore."

"Oh, don't you? You snore like this." Peridot placed her hands together and set them beside her cheek, tilting her head and mimicking Lapis' nightly noises. "Zzzz... snoooore."

Lapis' freckled cheeks coloured as she lightly punched the snickering Peridot in the shoulder. "Shut up. I heard you talk about aliens in your sleep once."

"I talk about aliens in my sleep a lot. Please clarify."

"Ooh, take me away," Lapis dramatically wept, throwing her arms up over her head and (definitely not) accidentally clipping Peridot in the cheek with one. "Hey!"

"I'm sick of being on this earth with these mortal humans. Give me abduction or give me death."

Lapis pounded her chest forcefully.

"You're quoting Patrick Henry," Peridot muttered flatly.

Lapis exhaled sharply and laid down, resting her head on the edge of Peridot's thigh. "And you're a nerd for knowing that."

"It's called being well-read. You should try it sometime."

"Try what sometime?" Came a new voice, and both girls gazed up at the newcomer. Steven stood over them in his red t-shirt and blue jeans, holding a closed pink Nintendo in his left hand.

"Hi Steven!" Lapis lifted herself up, much to Peridot's disappointment, to give the boy a hug from the floor. He was short enough that she could just sit up to wrap her arms around his back. "When did you get here?"

"Just now!" Steven smiled and returned the hug, laughing. "My dad took me to get fry bits from a little place nearby - did you know they sell them outside of Beach City?"

"I didn't," the actress admitted, scooting back to let Steven sit down with them. Peridot eyed the device in his hand, heart leaping excitedly in her chest when she saw the game card sticking out the back. "Is that Golf Quest Mini?" She asked, pointing at Steven's Nintendo. Steven tilted the device and glanced at the green chip. "Yeah! You know it?"

"Know it?" Peridot laughed. "I've mastered all ninety-nine levels!"

Steven's eyes blew wide with awe. "What? Really? You got the secret ending?"

"The exclusive ending. I was able to get the special edition copy."

"Can you help me get to it?" Steven attached himself to Peridot's arm, dark locks brushing against
her cheek as she tried to angle her face away from his very close one. "Okay, okay," she promised. "Let me get mine out. You're lucky I brought it with me!"

Lapis snoozed for a good half of the wait for Homeworld. Steven and Peridot battled one another on Golf Quest Mini for what felt like an eternity, high-fiving when they conquered a hole and deploring together when the enemy NPC teams got hole-in-one's three times in a row.

"Seriously, the multiplayer system in this game is rigged," Peridot was grumbling. Lapis was thumbing through her script, movements lazy and mindless as she set it aside and reached for her phone "It's 3:15," Lapis announced, causing Peridot to glance up from her device. "Already?"

Lapis revealed her phone to her, and sure enough, it was 3:15. Peridot groused and snapped her game shut, regretting it immediately when she heard Steven go "aww" beside her. "Sorry, Steven."

"It's okay!" He chirped, setting his own device aside and turning to the blonde with big, curious brown eyes. "Where are you two going?"

"Peridot wants to see Homeworld's show," Lapis told him. "I'm gonna go with her. But we'd better get going soon."

"Why's that?"

"We have to get the auditorium before they lock it up. They don't let anybody in two minutes before the shows start so it doesn't mess up the atmosphere or whatever." Lapis crouched and and gave the boy a more thorough hug before helping Peridot up from the floor.

"Okay! When will you be back?" Steven asked, giving Lapis a hug, and then Peridot. The blonde was praying Steven didn't feel anything too amiss with her leg.

They left the room after telling Garnet where they were off to, retracting the steps they had taken three hours earlier. They only got lost once, and it was quickly amended by Peridot taking them down a random shortcut and somehow landing right in front of the auditorium doors.

"Huh," Peridot beamed, "that was uncanny. But lucky."

Lapis hummed and drew past her girlfriend, holding her hands behind her back as she strolled down the auditorium's side alleys. "Front or back?"

"The front is a forbidden place," the blonde sneered and followed Lapis up the carpeted steps that bordered the dense rows of sparsely populated seats. Near the back were a fair-sized group all cackling to themselves, and the closer the couple got the more familiar they became.

"Hey, look, it's some Crystal Gems!" One of the Famethyst called out, waving Peridot and Lapis over with a welcoming grin. She was able to remember this one as 8XL, and beside her were Carnelian and Skinny, and Amethyst's other cousins. "C'mere! Sit with us!"

"Wanna sit with them?" Peridot asked Lapis, lifting her brows at her dubious-looking partner. "I don't know."

"We can sit behind them then," she decided, taking Lapis' hand gently and leading her behind the Zookeepers, who boo'd at their reclusive choice. "That one Famethyst girl is eyeing my hair like a dog toy - I feel like if I turn my back she's gonna touch it."

They found seats behind Carnelian and Skinny, collapsing down and keeping eyes on the red traveler curtains. Behind them, Homeworld were performing their seven minute set-up. Every once
in a while you could hear the scuffle of feet across the vinyl floor, or the contained squeak of a furniture set piece being moved.

8XL leaned back to speak with the two Crystal Gems. "So did you two gals hear about what's goin' on with us and Homeworld?"

Peridot and Lapis looked at each other, then back at the Famethyst member with mirrored puzzlement.

"Apparently Holly Blue struck up a deal with Blue Diamond," 8XL informed, sounding far from pleased. "She won't even let us in on what it's about!"

"It sucks," Carnelian lamented, flipping around to lay beseeching black eyes upon Peridot and Lapis. "Just 'cuz she was our director before she went over to Delmarva State doesn't mean she should still get a stay in what we're doin'!"

Lapis narrowed her eyes. "Blue Diamond used to be a director at Surf City?"

"Well, yeah," added in one of Amethyst's other cousins whose name Peridot had forgotten. "She took over a couple years ago after our. . . uh, after Pink died."

Astoundment tore down the line of Zookeepers at the mention of the name. Peridot slanted her head at 8XL who was glancing at the spooked Famethyst members. "Right." She sucked at her teeth, sending her troupe mate an adjuring glance from the sides of her eyes. "Holly doesn't talk about it. Neither did Blue. They just kept us busy."

"Regardless," Peridot muttered, "sorry about that. It must suck to be in cohorts with Homeworld. This is only my first time seeing them in person, but I trust you've got good reason to not want to be in contact with them."

"Oh yeah, you're a rookie!" Carnelian laughed. "See, Skinny, this is the chick I was telling you about!" The short girl nudged her friend, who laughed and waved aimlessly at Peridot. The blonde returned it sheepishly.

Her head pivoted to where the door on the outside edge of the proscenium creaked open, and Blue Diamond emerged, clad in the same snowy headscarf as before. She moved with fluid grace down the walkway before sitting herself in a seat. . . beside the judges?

The Famethyst grumbled in unison. "Told you," Lapis whispered into Peridot's ear upon seeing the disgust in her face, "they snuggle up to the judges."

Mr. Smiley emerged from the door next, marching over the apron to announce Homeworld's drama and raising his hand to quell the audience's babbling. "We welcome you to our second show this evening. The Cluster by Raven Molisee, presented by Homeworld of Delmarva State University!"

"The Cluster, huh," Peridot snickered into Lapis' ear, who in turn huffed her contemptuous agreement.

"Shh, it's starting!" Carnelian hissed from in front of Peridot. She clamped her lips shut, sharing one last glance with Lapis before the house lights dimmed on them and plunged the auditorium into darkness. The idle chatter died down as the curtains rolled open.

Suddenly the stage was plunged in a wash of red, and the sounds of grisly warfare shot through the speaker system. Peridot may or may not have jumped and kind of clung to Lapis' arm, and if anyone asked, she defied it with all her being.
It took Peridot some time to understand, but *The Cluster* featured a group of scientists during the Red Scare. Mad with the looming fear of encroaching communism, a clan of elites turned to experimentation on their own peoples to create a superweapon of a human to scare away the impinging Bolshevik regime.

They must have been twenty-something minutes into the production when a new actress stepped on stage. She was wide-set with robust framework, and a mane of white-dyed hair that spilled down her back over the ratty lab coat. Most interesting were the swathes of lighter vitiligo striking across her face and arms.

Lapis, who'd been wholly indifferent since the show started, stiffened beside her when the new scientist spoke, deep and coarse. Peridot squinted through the dim light escaping into the audience from the stage, unable to make out anything more than parted lips and wide eyes beside her. "Lapis? Lapis, what's wrong?"

"We have to go," Lapis sharply breathed, hands curling into Peridot's arm as she yanked them out from their seats.

Peridot's breath caught in her throat as she was pulled through the Zookeepers, all of whom were shocked to see the two Crystal Gems making haste towards the theatre exit. "But the show-!"

"We have to go, come on!"

The watchman at the door gave them a repugnant look as they shot past and fled through the auditorium doors, landing in the hallway. Peridot grabbed at her legs, fingers trailing down below her left knee to assure that her prosthetic hadn't been knocked out of place from the rugged escapade.

"What was that?" She exclaimed, spinning on Lapis with her hands thrown out, consternation written all over her visage. "It wasn't even over! What about the first prototypes, or the-"

Lapis, who had been bent over, palms digging into her shins finally straightened. The haunted film covering her eyes was enough to shut up Peridot's annoyed complaining. Her face had paled at least twelve shades, and when it rose to see Peridot's worried one, it lost two more.

"I- I can't be in there," she murmured.

Peridot's eyes widened as she got closer to the aghast actress. "Why not? Was it the experimentation? I'm not disgruntled by it but it's definitely not ethic-"

"I don't care about the experiments," Lapis cut, arms bracing around her torso as she sent the wooden auditorium doors the golden epitome of the deer-in-the-headlights stare. "It's her that's the problem."

Peridot blinked. "Who?"

The blue-haired girl ignored Peridot's inquiry. Her limber feet carried her across the tiled school floors; her eyes never left the ground as she rambled. "I-I don't know how she got in, or why she's in!" Her voice quaked. "It's got to be that she knows. She knows where I am, she knows I'm here. She's following me-"

"Lapis." Peridot cantered over, thin fingers outstretching to fold cautiously over Lapis' arm. "Who's she?"

Belatedly, Lapis' head ascended. Her eyes were dark, wan, and shrouded with distress. "It's her, Peridot," she revealed.
"It's Jasper."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems suit up for area while Lapis continued to be rattled from seeing Jasper.

Chapter Notes

As this chapter came out the day after the last, make sure you've read chapter fifteen for continuing! I was gonna post this Wednesday but I felt bad for last chapter's cliff-hanger - so now I'll just post chapter seventeen Wednesday. Enjoy your, uh, angst.

Peridot's posture was rigid, cautious in the way that a cat was curious as her mind properly registered the name to pour from Lapis' mouth. *It's Jasper.*

"As in. . . *Jasper-Jasper? The Jasper?*" The blonde nervously asked, hands finding each other and locking discreetly together as she studied Lapis. The lithe girl was still huddled in on oneself, contours void of any discernible disposition. Finally she turned to Peridot. "Who else could it be?"

Peridot threw her hands up in abdication. No matter what she thought, how close she believed she really was to Lapis now, she was still stuck on the outside looking in when it boiled down to Jasper. The only times she was mentioned were instances where the two had been folded into heartfelt discussion.

"Sorry, I'm-" Peridot shook her head to clear her jumbled thoughts. "What are you going to do?"

Lapis eyebrows drew close. The helplessness in her tone damn near broke Peridot. "I don't know. But I can't let her see me- I- I can't see her."

Peridot pinched lips together, her slipshod mentality frazzling at the edges as she weighed their options. Really they only had one option - return to the room. But expanding her horizons with other implausible possibilities made her feel like she had more control of the situation. "Let's just go back to the room then," she offered, closing in the distance between them and standing by Lapis' shoulder. Her hands outstretched gently to coil around Lapis' wrist, but the heartbeat skin met skin, Lapis flinched away.

Hurt flushed, cool and rapid, through Peridot's blood like ice water. But then she inspected Lapis and determined that she wasn't fully conscious, not emotionally. "Come on, we can go talk to Steven!" Peridot chirruped, starting with two steps away from Lapis and stealing a glimpse behind her to see fit that Lapis followed. She did, albeit only after five seconds of steadfast hesitance.

Even when they walked side-by-side to the black box room, Peridot never let Lapis out of her sight. It was like in the blink of an eye Lapis had transformed from an endearingly chancy and stubbornly passionate girl into. . . *this:* distant, abstracted, and something else Peridot couldn't quite pinpoint. They allowed themselves into the room after turning down the correct white corridor, met instantly
with looks of confusion from those who knew of their whereabouts.

"Peridot? Lapis?" Pearl inquired, brows shooting skyward as she turned away from Steven, who shared a similar sentiment. "What are you doing back? Was their show cut short due to technical miscommunication?" Her tone was wickedly hopeful.

"No," Peridot told her co-director, eyes soaring over the taller woman's shoulder to watch Lapis as she automatonically drifted to the wall she and Peridot had waited before. Their stuff was still strewn over the crunchy carpet floor. "But we did have to leave."

Pearl combed a thin hand through her pink-cropped hair, exasperated. "Why? It's frowned upon to interrupt a performance by entering or exiting while it's in session!" She squawked.

Peridot squirmed beneath the other's solicited gaze; as her director she had have some degree of authority over her, regardless of how Peridot was adamant she was this figure at the top of the OAP hierarchy, untouched by the meddling of stage hands. Still, she couldn't just leave without an excuse. "I'm not at liberty to say." She didn't say it had to be a good excuse.

Pearl wasn't buying it. "What could possibly have made you two leave while Homeworld's show was-"

"Stick your nose in someone else's business, Pearl!" The amputee snapped up at her, innately confounded by her lack of patience. Something in her right now was raw and hurting, an ache that orbited around the core of her being and put her on edge.

Pearl's teeth ground as eyes thinned into scornful chips of turquoise ice. "Well, I'd never-!"

"Pearl, Peridot." Garnet's indomitable voice rose from behind them, and both parties revolved around to see the dark-skinned woman looming not a foot away from either, arms crossed and lips downturned into an estranged curl. "I advise you to lower your voices. You're drawing eyes." When Garnet turned to regard their onlookers all eyes stiffly snapped back onto their own bearings, and a forced palaver overtook the classroom.

"Peridot," the head director calmly stated, craning her neck to get a full view of the irate lights person who withered sourly under the empty gleam of Garnet's aviators. "What happened?"

"Like I said, it's not my story to tell." Her eyes flitted away from Garnet's body, lingering on the spot to her left where Lapis had been approached by a wide-eyed Steven. Without even turning her head to see what Peridot was observing, Garnet emitted a pensive, muted sigh. "Lapis saw Jasper."

"Wh-" Dumbfoundment encased Peridot so swiftly it stuck in her lungs and prevented her from speaking. "How did you know?" How did Garnet know Jasper was here? On another note, how did she know who Jasper was, and furthermore her relations with Lapis?

Garnet remained still before twirling her wrist at Pearl. "If you would," she instructed her, curtly nodding and sending the silent message to leave so Garnet and Peridot could speak. When she did exit the space with a string of unflattering grumbles, Peridot let her shoulders lower from the offensive and fixed themselves in the defensive. "I shouldn't be talking about this," she disclosed, uneasy. "It's not any of my concern."

"But it is. Because Lapis is currently over there, needing assistance while you're here. Let's join her." Garnet's hand covered Peridot's shoulder as she led them firmly in the blue-haired actress' direction. Peridot was suddenly all aquiver, mind ceasing to format subjective functions into words that could help the situation.
Peridot settled down beside Steven as Garnet kneeled beside Lapis, who appeared visibly less shaken than when they entered. Steven undoubtedly had a part in that improvement. "Lapis," the director said quietly. "You mustn't let this interfere. I know that it must be hard for you, seeing Jasper again."

"Please," Lapis chipped in. "Don't say that name. You don't get to."

Garnet nodded once, stoical yet understanding. "All right. But I want to be sure that you'll be fine for later."

*Have a little faith, Garnet,* Peridot thought bitingly. Lapis was strong enough to contest against just seeing Jasper from a distance. No matter what she said, Peridot didn't think Jasper had any right to tribulate her. *She's come this far, so she can still go a little farther.*

Lapis and Garnet were involved in a quiet discussion that only they could hear. Steven turned to Peridot, sad dark brown eyes trailing over her green ones. "I heard that Jasper's back," he murmured. "Did you see her?" Peridot nodded. The boy's lips pursed as he thoughtfully scratched his cheek. "I don't get it. I know Jasper- she's not into theatre like all of you guys!"

"It's a little complicated. And a little, *heh,* personal for a room full of people." He smiled up at her. "Maybe another time." The boy's face held the judiciousness of someone who had seen the world and all its secrets, making Peridot's chest contract with curiosity. Again, she pondered on just how special this Steven Universe boy was, how much he really did know behind the ecstatic exterior. And, what he *did* know about was Jasper. "I know a bit about her," she told him. "I understand why Lapis is so effected but- I don't know how to help."

Steven glanced over to Lapis and Garnet. "The last time we talked about her, she kinda, figured things out for herself," he explained. "But this time, you guys saw her. That's got to be different than just thinking of her."

Peridot placed Lapis at her focal point as Steven spoke. She wanted to help, she *did.* But after coming to terms with the bitter reality, tackling a problem head-on like this was never Peridot's strong suit. She enjoyed hacking at it from the sidelines, breaking into the main vault only after the defenses had been shattered. She and Lapis had only ever talked about Jasper once, and even then, it had been concise and generally uninformative. Not that she was upset by that! She understood the need for privacy and knowing when not to prod. Still... it hurt to not know.

Garnet seemed to finish up whatever she was saying to Lapis, leaving the small group and leaving the other three together. Peridot and Steven both flanked Lapis, whose eyes had thankfully retained some of their usual pointedness.

"What did Garnet tell you?" Steven asked, propping his arms up on his knees. "Probably something really wise and telling. She's always like that when I'm not feeling too great."

"Along those lines, yeah." Lapis gently curled her fingers through the boy's crimped brown hair. "Mostly stuff about the contest. She's worried something is going to happen. She says she's checking with everybody, but, I think we all know that's not entirely true."  

"Don't get your hopes too low, I think she's going over to talk to Amethyst next," Peridot clipped in, pointing to where the director had paused beside the stout crew member. "Maybe you were just the first."

"Because I made her worry."
"No, Lapis, because... maybe you just reminded her. Some people just need that kick of... of... emotionalism to get things going?"

"Yeah!" Steven bounced his leg thoughtfully. "Sometimes when I see something I just go, 'oh, wow, I forgot to do this one thing!' The same thing." Lapis didn't look convinced, but accepted the persuasion anyway.

They stuck together until hours later one of Wilmingmore's crew hands entered the room to announce that the stage was ready for their arrival. The troupe readily gathered their bearings and marched across the school in their costumes, managing prop boxes and going over their most difficult lines.

They entered through the back of the theatre, watching as the last of Bayburgh's One Act group scurried off with the last of their set pieces. When it was free to enter, they all rushed in. "Break a leg," Peridot whispered to Lapis off to the side, daring to lean up and wrap her arms around Lapis' shoulders. The tan actress accepted, sinking into the blonde's respectful, warm embrace before they broke apart when Mr. Smiley moved to the centre of the stage to begin their seven-minute set-up.

"Is the company ready?" he asked Garnet, who nodded once Peridot and Lapis had returned to the circle.

"All right! Your set-up begins... now!" As soon as Mr. Smiley's timer clicked everyone shot off to retrieve their assigned set pieces. Peridot exited through the side door, running along the length of the side of the auditorium to the light room in the back. Two other OAP troupes were watching them, as well as some curious stragglers here for their fill of college thespians, but she paid them no mind, ignoring a chuckle from a thin student with hair pinned up like a lemondrop in the small group of Homeworld onlookers as she rushed past.

For the first twelve minutes, things went well. Not a blunder to be seen, no line too quietly projected. When it was finally Lapis' turn to reveal herself, in a cryptic mirage of smoke and mirrors, she strode out from her curtain, dress billowing in the artificial breezes put off by their hidden fans.

Stevonnie immediately launched into their lines, and Lapis returned hers with the appropriate vigor. When her reflective eyes turned out to beseech the crowd during a monologue, Peridot could pin the exact moment where her character splintered in half.

She continued to flounder throughout the scene, stumbling over lines and taking one-too-many glances out into the audience. Peridot was almost tempted to darken the lights over her so the judges couldn't see all the flaws in her acting. She could only watch Lapis as she bumbled about, losing the impression of a fractious phantom and instead emerging as a jittery, uneasy child who would be ready to check under their bed for monsters.

Peridot's eyes flickered worriedly as she watched the actress' disarray unravel from an auditorium away, spiraling Mirror Gem downward, utterly unable to do anything to help lure her back to life. What's happening, Lapis?

Everyone was terse and uncharacteristically laconic on their two-minute journey back to the auditorium for the evening's awards ceremony. They had all seen Lapis' calamity on-stage, and in turn, it ended up effecting the other members of the cast as they tried to make up for her lost lines and misdirected blocking. They had almost gone overtime with all the compensation, with Peridot and Garnet calling the show to a premature close to avoid going over the forty-minute mark.

Peridot's white bowtie was fastened a little too snugly, wrapped in the crisp mint-green collar of her
dress shirt, its metal edge finding every opportunity to jab against her bare neck when she wasn't mindful enough. Lapis was beside her, in a much better state than she was before, but still her face was a guarded veil that nullified any emotions that dared to transmit through.

When they entered the auditorium itself, Peridot didn't miss the way Lapis' cheek ticked and how round her eyes became. In a futile attempt for comfort, she reached down and braced Lapis' fingers in her own, giving them a fortuitous squeeze as the rows of seats came into view.

Only four schools were already seated, repelled from the opposing One Act troupes not unlike the like ends of a magnet. The Crystal Gems found themselves seated behind Bayburgh's company, curtly exchanging greetings before settling back into their chairs to prate to themselves.

Peridot seized the chance to fix her bow tie, fidgeting with it and in turn accidentally elbowing Lapis gently in the arm. Her girlfriend sighed and leaned over, reaching out to still Peridot's jittery hand. "Let me." Smooth hands reached over and tugged neatly on the tousled ends of the accessory, resting there a moment after its redemption before slithering back into Lapis' lap.

"Thank you," Peridot sighed, dropping her arms. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Lapis consoled. Her fluctuant inflection deceived her. Peridot frowned and tilted closer to Lapis, waiting for her girlfriend to mimic her before speaking. "You know she's going to be here... right?"

"I know." Lapis' eyes fell and scanned the tan fingers clenching in the fabric of her blue-flecked dress. "I'm not ready but... I'm prepared. If that makes... sense."

"It makes enough." Peridot slipped her hand over the armrest and wrapped Lapis' tense hand beneath hers, gently running her thumb over the taut flesh in hopes of alleviating some of it. And yet, like most of the good things in Peridot's life, this saccharine moment was short-lived. The sounds of the main doors opening from behind the theatron rose up, and Peridot's head spun around to see none other than Blue Diamond emerge from the hallway, followed devoutly by the rest of Homeworld's troupe.

The same girl whose hair resembled a fuzzy lemondrop was snickering quite loudly, not bothering to hide her revulsion as she passed the other groups by. The other members of Homeworld's group had like demeanors: conceited, fringing upon a petulant arrogance that made Peridot's throat tighten angrily.

The person that both Lapis and Peridot were dreading emerged as one of the last. Her hair, now pale beige instead of white in the normal lighting, was combed back into a tough bun, augmented by a white dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves and burnt orange slacks dressing her legs. Her sharp amber eyes found them immediately. No, they found Lapis immediately.

In an upsurge of protectiveness, Peridot tightened her fingers around Lapis' and stubbornly raised the conjoined hands, all the while staring daggers into Jasper's face. She saw those pointed eyes focusing first on their intertwined hands, then traveled meticulously up the length of Peridot's arm and then finally, up to her eyes. She met the shocked stare firmly, hoping that neither of her neighbors could feel her quivering beneath the eveningwear.

Jasper's brows knitted closely together as she scrutinized Peridot before she spun around and followed the rest of her party down the rows, headed to the two front rows that they were always assigned because they were always sucking up.

When Jasper's face was finally out of sight (but not out of mind), Lapis sunk back into her chair and
stole her hand back. "What was that for?" She hissed, rubbing at her palms like she was trying to scrub off a river's grimy residue. Peridot's nose scrunched in reply as she muttered, "Letting her know you're not going to just crawl on back. She looked so sure of herself!"

"That's just how she is," pleaded Lapis. "Peridot, please, don't get involved. I don't want you getting hurt. . ."

"Hurt?" Peridot snickered. "I'd like to see the clod try." Lapis only looked forlornly on at her before returning her eyes down to the fists in her lap.

Now this was hauntingly familiar; one appealing to the other for the sake of their safekeeping, and said other being painfully stubborn. The term disbelieving could have been imported into that statement, but deep down, Peridot wasn't so certain that Jasper wouldn't try to get her. She'd seen the adversity in her gaze when they met eyes. She'd seen the dismissiveness, like Peridot Diamond wasn't something to worry about.

_I'll give you something to worry about, all right_, Peridot silently seethed as Mr. Smiley emerged on-stage in a spry steel-blue suit, and before he had reached centre-stage the entire auditorium had fallen silent in eager wait for the news of advancement. He spoke of formalities, of witnessing masses of good team spirit and rich dynamics among the six groups he had supervised since dawn's breaking. But it was all null to Peridot. Never once did she let her eyes stray off of Lapis, who in turn never let hers stray from the back of Jasper's head.

Embers clouted behind her heart, billowing up and whenever they drew too near to the muscle, gave it a swift burn of inequitable envy, hot and searing against her innards. She gave Lapis' hand another squeeze as a reminder of her presence, and let herself relax slightly when Lapis tore her gaze away and onto Peridot, who saw the hardness in them melt away and rearrange into remorse.

Honorary and all-star cast were called up. Alexandrite, Ruby, and Opal were all awarded medals for honorary cast while Stevonnie and Sapphire were called up next to politely accept their all-star awards from the stage manager.

Finally it came time for the advancing plays to be announced. Truth be told, Peridot was utterly numb with anticipation. What didn't sting with pins and needles had lost its fifth sense. She was certain if you stabbed her in the right thigh, she'd feel nothing until later after the high had burned off.

Mr. Smiley gladly accepted a clipboard from one of his stage hands. "And now what I know we all have been waiting for since the awards began!" The audience laughed, but there was nary a chuckle from any Crystal Gem as they all stared with grim optimism at the announcer. All hands linked, each person grasping their neighbor's palm and praying they couldn't tell it was clammy with sweat.

"Our alternate for Delmarva regional competition this year is. . . Beach City University's Crystal Gems and their portrayal of Paul Villeco's _Mirror Gem_! Give 'em a hand, folks!"

Time stilled. Peridot was hyper-aware of all the bodies moving around her, of the half-hearted applause rising up from the other One Act groups, but still failed to register that she was holding up the line until she noticed that everyone to her left had already stood up and were filing out. She hobbled up and tapped Lapis gently on the shoulder; she seemed to be in a similar dissociated predicament. "Hey," she whispered, breathy voice the very apotheosis of ill-suited defeat. "Come on, we've got to go get our awards."

Lapis nodded, taking Peridot's hand and allowing her to lead the way out of the row of seats and onto the stage where the other half of the Crystal Gems waited.
Disillusion was an attribute that Peridot decided she hated seeing on all their faces—all her friends' faces—as they quietly thanked Mr. Smiley and accepted their accolades and stood in a soundless line so that the official photographers could have their minute of picture-taking.

We're not advancing.

The thought came so suddenly and so aggressively that it took all the willpower she had not to gasp aloud right then and there, before the eyes of all her competitors. The competitors who had beaten them, kicked them out of the spotlight and thrust them to the dingy sidelines to brood in the shadows.

Lapis seemed to come to a similar realization, because when Peridot looked over, her expression was tainted with a breathless dread. Then she noted the dilation of her pupils, the way they swam and just how focused they seemed. She followed them, slowly, precariously, until she too was staring at the large, blotchy, white-haired figure in the audience whose hands were raised in mocking applause.

A crescendo of bitterness so heavy it made her sick to her stomach rushed through her form, the first swell of emotion to be felt amidst the destitute storm her body had thrown itself into to prevent emotional catastrophe.

And just like that they were sent back to their seats as they had arrived from them, elliptically making way for the true winners of the One Act Play area competition.

The first troupe to advance were, artlessly, Delmarva State University. The Homeworld troupe. Peridot told herself she wouldn't covet them; she would not. Yet, as the triumphant group gathered up on the stage in a line to accept their golden medals that signified placing first, she was green with envy. What didn't help was that Jasper, while brandishing her award, sought them out. She did not sneer nor smirk, but instead found Lapis with an expression of congealed earnest. Lapis' hand curled around Peridot's just a bit tighter.

Next was a school from the other district, having come an hour from Charm City to compete. Risking a glance at the program, their play had been called the comedy the Game's Afoot. Following them were the Surf City Zookeepers, the only troupe that the Crystal Gems could truly begin to feel pride for as the Famethyst paraded on-stage, graciously accepting their awards. Amethyst cried out the loudest, and 8XL, Skinny, and 8XG all returned the holler much to the distress of a certain Holly Blue.

Finally it was time for the critique, and Peridot's heart positively ached for the sympathetic exposition to come. The judge to critique them was an older man with a long face and dark, scraggly brown hair. "My name is Quintin Frowney and I will be judging you tonight," he said in a saddened manner, breaking down the doors with asking the question that every Crystal Gem but Peridot was asking. "The ghost - after reviewing your script, it revealed to me that you portrayed the role all wrong. Might I ask, in what way is the phantom supposed to be represented as nervous, or skittish? I would think that she was written more as a magical goddess than a poltergeist."

"She..." Lapis' voice dipped beside Peridot. The amputee tried to squeeze their hands to ground her girlfriend, but to her dismay Lapis weaseled her hand out of the grasp. "I'm not sure, sir. I guess I... I just didn't know how to act anymore, I- I couldn't do it with..."

"Yes, yes," Quintin interrupted, raising a sluggish hand to quiet Lapis. "I'm well aware of your inability to act. Perhaps it was just a... returned case of stage fright," he remarked dolefully before turning his attention to the others for their reviews. When all eyes had pried off of Lapis, Peridot leaned over urgently. "You mean to tell me that whole thing up there was because Jasper was watching you? How did you know she was even in the audience?"
"I didn't know until I came out," Lapis betrayed coolly. "I saw her- she was in the front seat. And she saw me and I just- couldn't do it anymore."

"Yes, well." An uppity voice came in from behind them, and Pearl's hand came to wrap around the back of Peridot's chair as she leaned forward with narrowed eyes. "If seeing an ex is what cost the Crystal Gems their place at regionals, then I suggest you reconsider your role in the troupe. I won't hav-" She cut off as Quintin requested for both directors' attention, dropping her hard-nosed attitude and smiling up to the judge as he sadly recited his notes for improvement.

Peridot didn't like how Lapis' hands balled up into fists, clenching the sleek fabric of her dress and quivering in it. "Don't listen to her, Lapis," she tried to comfort, but Lapis had already started to climb up from her seat with a timid "excuse me" as she left the auditorium. The other Crystal Gems watched her go, somber. Peridot's eyes flickered nervously from face to face, trying to determine if anyone else was sympathizing with Lapis' situation. When she saw Garnet, the tall director was tilting her head towards the theatron exit. "Find her," she whispered.

Peridot's heart leaped into her throat as she, too, excused herself from the troupe and raced down the aisles, bursting out the auditorium doors and unhinging her jaws to call out Lapis' name. She slammed to a stop on her good heel, arms wheeling as she stared out at the confused faces of the other One Act Play groups waiting for their turn for critique.

"Look what the cat dragged in," a honeyed tone mocked, and Peridot spun around to see lemondrop-girl walking towards her with a smirk. "It's one of the Crystal Gems. What, did they chip away at you so badly you had to leave?" She laughed derisively.

"No, I'm looking for someone," Peridot snapped, brow twitching as she scanned the room for a familiar blue head. "Oh, you mean Smurfette? She ran off that-a-way." She pointed to the other side of the hall, and Peridot took off before she could get any more of a chewing from the spiteful character. She heard a quiet voice tell the lemondrop, "Yellow, that wasn't very nice of you-" "Who cares, Blue. She didn't advance."

Peridot's centre again twinged with anguish at the miserable reminder. She passed through the throngs of people, emerging on the other side of the masses and spotting wild cusps of blue hair hidden partly behind a khaki-brown pillar. She jogged the rest of the way over, leaning an arm against the edge of the structure as she let out a frazzled, guttural sigh.

"Why'd you run off like that?" She heaved. "I . . . I get it, I swear. We're all upset we're not going to regionals-"

"Yeah, because of me and my stupid acting," Lapis snapped, briskly turning her back to Peridot and staring at the marbled floor. "If she'd just- sat further back or not even shown up at all, we'd be the ones with those medals! We'd be the ones going to regionals, not Homeworld or whatever that charm group was. Everyone's looking at me like I'm some kind of . . ."

Peridot pressed her palm onto Lapis' bare shoulder, feeling the rangy muscles in her upper back tense beneath the touch. She softened her grip as she walked around Lapis and forced her to look at her upfront. "No one blames you, Lapis. I don't blame you. Nobody does."

Lapis ridiculed the thought with a snort. "Yeah right."

While their backs were turned to the other troupes, they were unwary of the large figure making way through the knots of thespians, boots clicking purposefully over the impeccable tile floors. "Lapis."

Lapis had turned to stone beneath Peridot's very fingertips: her skin chilled, straining so tautly that
Peridot feared for a moment she was going to pull something. Accusingly she turned to snub their perpetrator, only to lose her voice somewhere in her trachea when she was met with salient amber eyes cutting down at her.

Jasper was colossal. Standing a good foot and a half taller than Peridot and a head above Lapis, she towered over them. Peridot's hand pried itself flimsily off Lapis' arm, meeting with its partner to cross over Peridot's chest as she eyeballed the giant. No one said anything, until finally, Lapis spoke. "What are you doing here, Jasper." Not a question but a statement of staid officiousness.

"Competing, just like you," Jasper said slowly. She narrowed her eyes. "You don't look happy to see me."

Lapis frowned, eyes tight. ". . . Why would I be. I-I- we were awful, Jasper. Are awful."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do! And you do, too, so stop pretending like there's nothing wrong with-" Lapis motioned between them with a shaking hand, "this!"

Peridot gratingly cleared her throat and put herself between Lapis and Jasper, pushing up her glasses to glare up at Jasper. "I implore you to take your leave, Jasper. She doesn't want to see you." She heard Lapis gasp slightly behind her and she felt nervous because of it.

"Who is this?" Jasper grunted, motioning to Peridot, the antipathy in her voice sharp and piercing. The blonde tensed as she lifted up her chin, lip curling as she met Jasper's contemptuous gaze. "Peridot," she growled. "And I think it's time you left - Lapis doesn't want anything to do with you. So shove off!"

"This is between us, kid." Jasper's large arm swung out and Peridot threw herself against the pillar to get away from what she thought would be a punch, but only felt firm fingers wrap around her clavicle and wedge her aside. A strained noise escaped her throat as she was moved away from Lapis, nearly stumbling when she took a wrong turn on her prosthetic. Jasper found his mildly amusing, judging by her sardonic chuckle. "Watch where you step. You don't know how you'll end up with her, shortie."

"Jasper." A sotto voice carried over Jasper's shoulder, and all eyes diverted to the new figure: Blue Diamond, eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the trio. "We must be going. Our judge is ready to . . . commemorate our advancement." She was soft-spoken, but all the same carrying a stentorian and controlling edge that made even Jasper become amenable. "Yes, Blue Diamond," she grunted, fixing Lapis with one lasting look before spinning around and coldly stomping back to the rest of Homeworld. Blue Diamond lingered behind, veiled eyes denouncing the two silent Crystal Gems before she too returned to her group.

There was something vaguely familiar about the way the woman carried herself, the decorum and aura of supremacy she left oozing in her wake. She sharply released the breath she didn't realize she had been holding since the director's arrival.

The Crystal Gems had lost to these despicable peoples, the most conniving con artists of the system. And they could do nothing about it now that they were alternates, the back-up team that could only compete if a school couldn't go. One Act groups didn't just not go - they would fight through thick and thin to present, pushing through all adversity to make sure they emerged on top regardless of trials and tribulation.

Getting alternate basically meant the line was drawn. The Crystal Gems were over. Peridot felt the
unnatural temptation to cry.

Lapis was incapacitated, sinking down the side of the pillar and digging her face into her knees. Nauseatingly, the first thought to cross the blonde's mind were Jasper's last words to her. *You don't know how you'll end up with her.*

*But we're different,* she told herself profusely. *We're different than they were! We're...* Her eyes stared at the back of Lapis' head as it rose and those deep, ambiguous brown eyes converged with hers. *We're better, right?*

"Lapis, Peridot!"

Their heads snapped up to watch Steven run out of the auditorium, pudgy arms pumping as he approached them from across the way. "You guys just took off!" He panted as he skidded to a halt before them, young face wrought with worry. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Peridot consoled him, unwrapping her arms finally and letting one sit on the upset child's shoulder. He gratefully placed his own hand over it before moving over to Lapis' side. "What about you? Are... you okay? You look really shaken up."

"No," she heard Lapis whisper below her. Peridot crouched awkwardly as to still properly support her leg, one palm keeping her stable on the floor while the other nervously found her own shoulder. "Something is seriously wrong with me. It- it took me so long to finally get a handle on all this and- it took me so long."

Peridot smiled shakily. "Hey, no one said there's a rush."

Lapis huffed. "Sure, but I shouldn't be shellshocked every time I see her. Every time I think of her."

By then the rest of the Crystal Gems had emerged from the auditorium. Their steps echoed through the now-barren hallway, announcing their departure as the entrance to the school was battered open by disconsolate fists. Greg had already pulled their bus up at the front Peridot could see, with Bismuth stopped behind him in the Penske. "Can we talk about this later?" She inquired softly, looking up at Steven. "The others are leaving."

The boy nodded, patting Lapis' shoulder as he stood back up. Both of them offered Lapis a hand, both of which she silently took to raise herself back up onto her feet. They left behind the empty hall, walking past Garnet as she held open the door for the last three Crystal Gems. They boarded the bus, making way together to the back.

Peridot's eyes drew over every face. Stevonnie was comforting a disconsolate Pearl, aided by Smoky Quartz who was trying to cheer her up by showing her a trick with their new yo-yo. Sugilite was staring out the window, lips curled into an angry sneer, like staring out at the night would amend their losses. Amethyst raised her hand in warmish greeting when Peridot wove past, which the amputee leanly returned with a concise nod.

She sank into the seat after Lapis. She missed the confidence she had felt when she had spoken with Lapis before. Following their interaction with Jasper- no, even *seeing* Jasper on-stage during *The Cluster*, Peridot's tenacity had imploded on itself.

She was afraid. She didn't know what of, but the awful sensation cumbered her being and limited her physical, mental, and emotional conditions; all she could think about were the last forty minutes of her life and how mind-numbingly taxing they had been.

Peridot had never felt this way before. She'd never been so deeply involved in anything to feel the
raw grief she had just felt. She'd never cared so deeply for someone to let their emotions replicate inside of her like an infestation; she'd never understood the idea about emotions being contagious until now.

She didn't want it to hurt this way. She didn't want to feel so helpless.

"Lapis," she murmured over to the blue-haired actress. "How do I help you...?" When she didn't receive a response, she leaned over to try and just be closer to subside the harrowing feeling of being... left out. "Please, tell me how," she pleaded, reaching out her hand.

Lapis' arm shot up and blocked off Peridot's considerate hand, fingers braced like claws around the small girl's wrist. Peridot stared in shock at the hand, rough and unyielding and unfamiliar, that had vised her wrist, then up at the vexed face of Lapis. If it weren't for the rigidness of her jaw and the lines of fatigue stretching beneath her eyes, she could have almost looked sad when she said, in a low and mulish voice, "you can't."

Tortuous betrayal shot through Peridot, warping her limbs to pull her trapped hand from Lapis' vice of a grip, as she leaned to the edge of their bus seat. "But it's what I've been doin'-"

"You don't know what you've been doing," Lapis deferred, refusing to look at her partner. "And neither do I. We're both just... just... fighting a battle we know we can't win."

"If it's a battle we're not on the losing team!"

"Then what do you call this, Peridot?" Lapis snapped around, face contorted with anger. "This?" She motioned out to the other passengers of the vehicle, some of whom were peering to the back as their voices grew louder. "Do you call this a winning team? We lost. The Crystal Gems are done."

Peridot's throat felt like it was trying to shapeshift: throbbing, pulsing, and choking her to the point that it made moisture prickle in the corners of her eyes from the pressure. "Why are you acting like this, Lapis?" She begged. "I'm-

"Please, Peridot." Lapis' voice was strangled, dulling into a heartrending whisper that said, "I told you to not get involved. Just leave me alone."

Peridot froze on the edge of their seat. Never, not since day one, had Lapis ever told her to leave her alone. If she thought that the hurt she had felt earlier was harmful, then this new sensation racked her body and left her beaten until she couldn't move her limbs anymore.

When she did regain control of her body she threw herself out of their seat into the one across the aisle, eyes finding a listless spot on the window to glare out of. She subconsciously rubbed the sorely tingling spot on her wrist. If Lapis wanted to be this way, fine.

Peridot had been patient, Peridot had been kindly. But if Lapis wasn't going to let herself at least try to get better in return... 

Peridot would need to push a little harder.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the area contest. Or, the more appropriate title: everyone is crying, hardheaded, arguing, or amazingly all of the above.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry in advance. [@ my RL friends who read this and will punch me when they see me tomorrow.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peridot's tense fingers wrapped around the edge of the stage floor as she watched the other Crystal Gems unload their set from the Penske. They set the pieces without their usual vigor over their designated spike tapes, resetting the stage like they would actually use them to rehearse again.

They had returned only minutes prior, unpacking their things from Greg's bus and ditching their belongings in the seats of the Temple before returning to off-load the set. Peridot had marched up to her booth, turned on the lights and then returned to the apron to watch the others unpack.

Garnet and Pearl were off to one side, the former's mannerisms betraying nothing about their private discussion while, on the other hand, the latter's told Peridot that it was nothing good they were talking about. On the other side of the stage, Ruby and Sapphire were sat side-by-side, sharing comforting words that only they could hear. Amethyst was reattaching her fog machines behind them, helped by Smoky Quartz who was trying to crack jokes to help lighten the mood. They didn't work; they were all downhearted and self-deprecating. Everyone else was busy starting on unloading their prop boxes and setting their ornaments.

Whenever she found Lapis staring at her from the stage, the Hawaiian's head would snap away so fast she wasn't sure if it was because she was embarrassed or upset. Or even if she'd been looking at all. What had changed to make her this way? Was it something Peridot had done?

Peridot distracted herself by pulling out her phone, heart dropping when its lockscreen read 2:23 AM. They could have stayed overnight at a hotel, but the thing that everyone had wanted when Garnet suggested they stay another night in Wilmingmore was to just go home. Additionally, it was Halloween. She's forgotten with everything going on. Peridot busied herself in browsing through nameless social media articles, ending up reviewing a detailed Camp Pining Hearts essay that elaborated on the universal poutine theory and its relation to the eventual downfall of Percy and Paulette until a notification popped up.

Who's contacting me at two in the morning, she thought sourly as she read the bulletin. Turns out, it wasn't a new notice but part of the reminder system she had set for herself should she ever miss a new message. She had a new e-mail. Dread stopped her from tapping the notification that would take her to the message directly, so with increasing apprehension Peridot switched apps and opened her inbox.
The purpose of this message should not come as a surprise, Peridot.

You have yet to respond to my e-mails regarding your employment and my patience has worn thin. I gave you numerous chances for a better future and still you voluntarily reject them. I am aware that you have seen these messages and are deliberately ignoring them for reasons that I will find out.

Don't let me find that you're wasting my time.

Yellow Diamond.

Numbly, Peridot shut her phone off. Her mother must have had some sick parental sixth sense to determine whenever her daughter was in certain emotional peril. All that e-mail had succeeded in doing was giving Peridot another reason to want to drop everything and dig herself a hole to curl up in for twenty years of solitude.

Bismuth pulled shut the back of the Penske truck, snapping Peridot out of her stupor whilst caging off the heavy metal gate once and for all with a thick padlock. "There she is," she heard the muscular crew hand sigh. "Penske's all locked up." She turned to Garnet and Pearl. "Y'all want me to haul her off to the bus barn?"

"If you would stay behind a moment," the head director requested, lifting her palm in grateful acknowledgment before she turned to the others. "If you would all stay. Pearl and I have something important we have to share with the Crystal Gems." Peridot didn't like the discomfiture in her tone. Regardless, she joined the others on-stage as they all circled around their directors.

Garnet's indurate posture spoke volumes even if her eyes were tactfully hidden behind her dark sunglasses. Peridot fidgeted as she began. "You all know of Beach City University's... disbelief, you could say, with its One Act Play system," she cleared her throat. "Because Pearl and I didn't wish for any of you to feel under pressure during competition, we refrained from telling you the whole truth about competition this year."

Confused, the Crystal Gems began to buzz with suspicious murmurs and inquiries. Peridot's eyes instinctively searched for Lapis among them, spotting her beside Opal, stone-eyed and detached, like none of the director's words were even picking up. She still thinks it's because of her, she realized, chest twanging.

Pearl carried on Garnet's confession, hands clasped nervously in front of her. "We made an agreement with the school administrative board prior to this year's season," she quivered. "We didn't tell any of you about it because- well, we didn't wish for any extra stress for any of you! The agreement was that... " She faded, hands tightening until her knuckles were purely white. She looked up at the other director, a flush of humiliation creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. "Garnet?"

Garnet's full lips twisted as she rose a hand and slowly removed her aviators, revealing her downcast differently-coloured eyes. This action alone proved enough to enrapture everyone in the room as they waited for whatever it was the directors had to say. Peridot fiddled with the collar of the minty dress shirt she had yet to change out of.

"The agreement was that if the Crystal Gems were unable to surpass area this year, Beach City University would cut off funding to its One Act Play club." Garnet ran her eyes over the shocked faces of her troupe, freezing on Peridot for the meager fraction of a second before moving on. "I'm sorry, Gems. One Act Play is over."
"Wait, wait, hold up, G." Amethyst threw herself forward, a hand clenched in her thick purple hair. "You mean- we're done? Like, finished, done, no more Crystal Gems?"

Pearl nodded shamefully, rubbing a thumb over her dampening eyes. "I'm sorry to need to tell you this now, of all times, I-. . . It's only worse news atop bad news - but we just wanted to make it clear. The university is shutting down One Act Play."

"But-" Now it was Opal walking forward, her usually peaceful features blighted by chagrin. "How can they shut us down?"

"It's simple, hun," Sugilite frowned, falling in beside the quiet actress, taking off her own sunglasses to reveal dark, intense black eyes. "We lost. They never had no faith in us, not after Rose up and left."

"Rose didn't up and leave," Amethyst chafed, turning on her brawny troupemate, fists balled up at her thighs. "You know that." Sugilite shrugged, flashing a sliver of ground teeth between her lips. "Sure, but what good's it done for us? None."

Smoky Quartz came in between them, raising their arms placatingly with a concerned smile. "C'mon, guys, I-uh, anyone wanna see a new yo-yo trick? I've been workin' on it, and I think I'm gonna call it the Double-"

"I don't think now is the most appropriate time, my friend," Sardonyx intervened, resting her hand over Smoky's dark tangle of hair. "Besides, what good is. . . playing with toys at a time like this? Ohoho! . . . It's been long enough to joke about it, right?" Clamor broke out in affronted response to the farce. Peridot watched as chaos unraveled as the former Crystal Gems began to clash with one another, throwing accusations left and right and not caring where they landed in the scuffle.

Peridot somehow got involved after Amethyst dragged her in by the elbow to argue against Rainbow Quartz. They weren't even arguing about OAP - they were talking about Greg - Rainbow on the offensive, Amethyst the defensive - and it baffled Peridot to no end. It was a whirlwind of dispute, warping and undulating, wild and unfocused. Two minutes since the disbandment of the Crystal Gems and things were already crumbling.

The blonde searched for Lapis over the disharmony of tired, irritated faces. She could see a flicker of electric blue between bodies, slipping between shoulders and avoid confrontations with the fluidity of a freshwater minnow. She wanted to go after it, lured and baited, and try to catch it again before it could escape from the shallows.

"Gems!" Garnet's authoritative voice rose above the commotion, and all eyes returned to their leader whose face was taut with distress. "I know that you're all upset. But infighting is not the answer. It never has been. You all should know that." A ripple of understanding murmurs passed through the troupe, and Peridot wondered what they were all remembering. Their director pushed some more for amity. "All that this means for us is that we are no longer permitted into the One Act association. We may not be the Crystal Gems in contest, but whoever said we had to lose our Crystal Gem spirit?"

The riposte was unanimous. Chins lowered, hands opened and tucked themselves nervously into pants pockets to attempt to hide their previous frustration. Peridot's fingers wrapped around the strap of her backpack, fondling the green nylon fabric curatively. The tight clusters dispersed, expanding until everyone was at least an arm's length apart from each other.

Garnet was gratified with this. "Better. This may be the end of competition, but it should not be the end of us. In the rare chance of this happening, we've come up with a few solutions. . . "
Peridot might have listened to this on any other day. But something about what Garnet had said wrung clearly in her head: *This may be the end of competition, but it should not be the end of us.* Her heart lurched for reasons she couldn't figure out on her own. Then she saw a head of blue behind Sardonyx, and recognized the feeling as pining. Since Lapis saw Jasper during *The Cluster* they'd been at odds - farther than they'd *ever* been before because of one stupid actress.

Peridot could fix that. She knew she could. But dealing with Jasper reminded her of that niggling feeling that emptied her out and made her feel just so powerless.

Eventually everyone did begin to take their leave, bidding their friends good night with sorrowful hugs followed by apologies for their former outbursts. Peridot lingered behind only because she still wanted to talk to Lapis about what happened in the room, at the contest, with Jasper, the dissonance on the bus.

She did find her by her large mirror set piece, leaning against the structure, hands curled around something below her neck. The closer Peridot got, the more obvious the object in Lapis' fingers became: the lapis lazuli necklace.

"Hey," Peridot greeted, lifting her hand weakly as she stepped around the mirror, hiding from the others behind it just like Lapis. "I know I ask this an awful lot, but... you okay?"

They didn't even have time to themselves before someone interrupted. Sugilite came around the corner suddenly, dark eyes sharp with purpose as she caught Peridot from the corner of her eyes and whirled around to face her. "You!"

A lump caught in Peridot's throat me. "Me?"

"Yeah, you, *pipsqueak.* What kinda scheme are you runnin' here?" The large woman marched over and jabbed a finger in Peridot's face, painted fingernails glinting dangerously in the light. "Don't think I ain't been watchin' y'all two mosey it up. You're beacons for *trouble*- and some of us aren't likin' it." Peridot's pulse quickened. "Who doesn't like us? *Is she just lying, or...*"

She couldn't finish the thought because Sugilite kept up her barking. *Who doesn't like us? Is she just lying, or...* She pressed, towering over Peridot and pushing her back with a rigid finger pressed immovably to her sternum.

"Hey, it's not *my* fault!" Shot Peridot, flicking away Pearl's accusatory finger with an annoyed grimace. "Even if we *hadn't* gone to see them, she *still* would've seen Jasper-"

"So you *do* blame me." Peridot stifled as Lapis' presence darkened behind her, radiating complete knowing. "It's my fault that the performance went down."

Seeing the rabbit hole being carved for her, Peridot's pulse quickened as her senses grew frazzled with desperation. "No, no, *no,* Lapis, I- I didn't mean it like *that,* I-"

"Then what *did* you mean it like, Peridot?" Lapis crossed her arms, freckles glinting under the harsh glow of Peridot's lights. The lightsperson worried her chapped lips, teeth grinding against the scabbing pink flesh. She'd just walked right into that one, didn't she? "The opposite of what you think," she protested quickly.
"What? That Stevonnie making up dialogue for my lost lines, Sapphire nudging me back when I got too far out of my blocking zone, Amethyst needing to keep the fans on for an extra minute because I forgot where I had to go - were those all why we didn't get to regionals?"

"I'm still here, y'know," Sugilite voiced from behind them, teeth gnashing when both of the smaller students spun around and uniformly shouted, "back off, Sugilite!" She did, stomping off with a grumble. Weary faces watched her emerge from behind the mirror, quickly taking good guesses as to who were behind it.

Peridot turned to Lapis. She didn't want to fall down farther this messy rabbit hole she had already capriciously dug for herself. But she knew why Lapis was acting the way she was; she was sure that she did, too. "You're not upset about losing. You're upset about Jasper."

Lapis' nose scrunched as she took a step away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," Peridot insisted, following Lapis as she tried to duck away into the shadows of the stage's right wing. "You just- I know you don't want to talk about it, but I think that's what we need to do." She wrung her hands fussily when Lapis spun around to face her, the fabric of her skirt swirling and swelling up around her like badly-placed wings. "Why are you so determined about this?" The blue-haired girl asked, her irritation sounding suspiciously like despair now. "You weren't there. You don't know anything about us."

"Then tell me about it," Peridot pleaded, cheeks red with misery. "I want to know. I- I think I need to know."

Lapis stared at her for a long, long moment. Those beguiling brown eyes ran over her like she was this new unfamiliar being, pegging whether or not she was trustworthy. When she did make up her mind it was thankfully notably calmer than before. Her posture slackened and she let out a deep breath. "I don't know if I'm ready to share."

"But you have before," contended Peridot, her patience and composure quickly running dry. "And what about Steven? He knows what went on, and yet I don't? Your present girlfriend?"

"He doesn't know all of it. He knows my side of the story," Lapis muttered. Peridot tightened her lips and sagged her shoulders. "Then at least please give me that? I'm still on the outside looking in on this whole Jasper fiasco."

Lapis quirked a dark brow to brusquely state, "You're wasting your time. You don't need to know anything."

Wasting my time. Wasting my-"

"Time? Me, wasting my time. That's what I've been doing for months now!" The blonde demanded, arms splaying out and motioning at the theatre and the few stragglers remaining on-stage. She snickered, hollering, "I'd never have joined if I knew what a mess they could be! Oh, look, a group of cloddy thespians who are like some mish-mash of a family I've never had. I should join. They know each other but they don't know each other! What about Dead Man's Mouth? No one even tried to stop them from trying to put us in the water!"

"You didn't have to join if you didn't want to."

"You're the one who made me join this group of... of... Crystal Clods!" Shrilled Peridot, grasping frustratedly at her hair. Lapis frowned, otherwise inexpressive as she glowered down at Peridot. "I never made you join."
"Well-you were what made me want to! Otherwise, I wouldn't considered joining! It's theatre, Lapis! It's not the end of the world now that it's over with - hell, broaden up your horizons." Peridot pulled away, eyes burning, arms wrapped unsurely around herself. "You all should."

"It wasn't just theatre for some of us," Lapis retaliated. "You know that."

"Nyaagh!" Peridot groaned, head spinning so fiercely she felt faint. "Why is this so difficult!" She snapped, digging her palms into her eyes below her yellow-lensed glasses.

Lapis stiffened, dark eyes thinning suspiciously. "Why is what so difficult?"

"Being with you! I'm trying my best to be patient and good and open-minded and all these other things I never was before and. Yo- You're just making it so. . . nghh, hard! Let me help you with this," Peridot pleaded, hands close to her person but poised like they were ready to reach out and catch someone if they fell. "You've been doing it alone for so long-"

"And I've been fine."

"No, you haven't. Lapis, just let me-"

"I don't want your help!"

"Look, I get it, you know?" Peridot rubbed her throbbing temple, scowl deepening. "You feel like you're alone! No one could possibly know what that feels like! Oh, wait." Peridot pressed her hand to her chest as her adenoidal voice yet again rose a pitch, bordering on scraping. "I do! We're the same! Except. . . " Her offensive posture relented, regaining composure as she stared up at Lapis. "You don't have to be alone."

"So tell me then, what you want from me!" The short girl's face grew desperate as the first tear found itself in the corner of her eye, glistening in the harsh spotlight that was dramatically capturing this coarse engagement. "And whatever that is. . . " She sighed, a sound of vanquishment laden with vulnerability. "I'll do it."

There was a moment of silence, a yearned stillness like the eye of a storm before it knocked down your doors and ruined your home. A disbelieving snarl fell over Lapis' face. "I want you. . . to leave."

Peridot's bodily reaction said it all. Surprise in the widening of her eyes and her wary step back, anger in the flush of her neck and the clenched of her fists, and a gut-wrenching anxiety that put her under its tremendous spell: heart racing, damp eyes, and a throat so dry it hurt. Her lip trembled as her mind processed Lapis' one simple request. Leave.

A wave of cold crept over the blonde, steeling her against the tsunami of crude emotions threatening to topple her. She looked down then back up, face awash with bitter determination. "Okay."

She refused to let the sobs screaming in her chest erupt, raw and guttural and full of betrayal, as she spun around, left the wing, and made way down the theatre steps. Those who remained from the Crystal Gems watched, shocked, as she stormed past. "Move it, clods!" She barked, pushing past those obscuring her path on the way to the Temple doors. She ripped it open and stepped through, fighting the temptation to look back at the troupe who had shown her acceptance, shown her banter, camaraderie, and most importantly of all, what it meant to be part of a family. She hated what she'd said, how she'd said things she hadn't meant in her moment of rage.

She fought the temptation to look back at Lapis Lazuli Kaile'a. Her heart jumped into her heart. She'd pushed too much. Had she been insensitive? Should she have just let Lapis be? No, no, she
was right, she had to be - it wasn't good to be that way- but was it worth this?

She didn't even want to turn around to see if that voice that sounded hauntingly like Lapis' calling out for her, echoing forlornly in her mind was reality or her imagination.

The huge wooden door slammed shut behind her.

Peridot didn't care where she went. She ran until her legs ached and the stump below her left knee stung from the friction against her liner. It was useless, useless adrenaline, brought on by the ephemeral blitz of emotions rushing through her body and keeping her moving. She stumbled to a stop against one of the campus' antique street lamps, the glare of its overhead light casting her shadow to three times its usual size.

"Stupid One Act," she trembled against the post, shoulders quaking as her legs threatened to buckle beneath her. "Stupid Yellow Diamond, stupid- . . . stupid Lazuli-i-" When the first tear broke free, the rest followed in an unbroken stream. Tremors shook her form as she sunk down in resignation, the cobblestone scraping against her legs through the thin slacks, wearing thin holes in the fabric when Peridot didn't get up. Her vision was bleary, and she didn't know if it was because her glasses had been knocked off or if it was the fog rolling over campus or if it was just these annoying tears that wouldn't stop coming.

All in one night, she had lost everything she had cared for.

Screw what Garnet said. The Crystal Gems were over. There was no binding factor anymore, no link to keep them tolerating each other. She had seen what became of them after the reveal - they'd been in shambles! Besides, she couldn't just go back and face them now. Not ever, not after she'd shouted at them like that.

She had lost her liberty, her sense of independence. The Crystal Gems had been the first step. She knew that but- what good did that do her now? Was she just going to recede back into her boring humdrum of a life, going to class then hiding in her dorm room until the next came? I'm going to fall right back into my mother's stupid manicured claws.

Lastly. . . a fresh sob bubbled in her throat at the terrible revelation. She'd lost Lapis. There were so many different ways she could have handled the past twenty-four hours, and yet she had to choose this: leaning against a lamp post by the courtyard and being the literal physical equivalent of an emotional shitstorm.

"Well," she murmured groggily to herself, voice watery and sluggish. "At least it can't get any worse."

The clouds that had gathered overheard suddenly bellowed. The sky flashed with light, finishing its roar with an ear-splitting crack as rain began to pour relentlessly from the atmosphere. Peridot jumped up in alarm, clutching her left leg in dismay. "No, no," she hissed, protecting her prosthetic from the cold raindrops pelting down from above. "Nyughh- That wasn't a challenge!"

"Hey!"

Peridot wobbled as a man's voice carried through the aggressive plop-plop-plop of the rain, hiding half of herself by the street lamp as the beam of a flashlight ripped over her. "What're you doing out here? It's way past curfew!"

Of course a campus security officer would find her now. "I-I'm-"

"Wait a second. . . Peridot?" The figure wielding the flashlight snapped the device off, stepping into
the light and revealing herself to be none other than . . . Steven's father? "Greg?"

"Peridot!" Greg surged forward, coxing the student out from behind the lamp post and taking in the student's haggard appearance. "What's happened to you? You look awful!" Peridot's fingers dug into the sodden fabric of her dress shirt, glancing down at her leather shoes as her thick hair drooped to mask her eyes. "I don't want to talk. Why are you out here anyway?" She asked acridly.

The man's concerned face hardened for a moment into displeasure, but faded quickly enough for Peridot to not feel too guilty about snapping at her. "I take the night shifts when Barbara's outta town. She's off with her cousin in Ocean Town. Plus I had to take the bus back to the lot. Now c'mon- the last place you need to be right now is under this light and in the middle of the rain."

Peridot allowed herself to be led across the courtyard to the mess hall, which Greg actually had the key to.

Peridot seated herself on one of the polka-dotted footstools, backpack propped up against it, in the commune area of the hall as Steven's father moved behind the serving counter. The blonde dried herself the best she could, wringing out her shirt and running a hand through her limp waterlogged hair. One hand remained permanently fixed to her prosthetic beneath her pants, worrying over the possibility of it malfunctioning because she'd freaking forgotten that it was supposed to rain tonight.

Greg turned up again, this time with a white paper cup clasped in her palm instead of a blinding flashlight. "Here ya go kid," he offered her the cup. Peridot realized with a twitch of excitement that it was coffee, fresh from the brewing machines in the back. "Wow . . . um, thanks," she murmured, taking it from his fingers and finding solace in the warmness seeping into her chilly fingertips.

"Where's Steven? You two weren't at the Temple earlier."

"Ahh, I took him to Pearl's house," Greg told her, grunting as he settled down on the chair across from her. "He was real tired, pretty bummed out too. He really liked those contests, y'know?"

"Please, don't remind me," Peridot sighed, raising the lip of the cup up to her chin and inhaling the smooth, invigorating odor of roasted beans.

"Yeah, still a sore subject, I gotcha." Greg raised his hand. "I saw what it was like on that bus. Coffee hot enough?" Peridot took an experimental sip, mind fuzzing at the edges from the hot liquid drizzling tastefully over her tongue. "It's good."

Greg smiled warmly. "I'll walk you back to your dorm. . . If you live on campus." He looked at Peridot with a baffled smile. "Do you?"

"Yeah. C17. I room with Barbara Miller's daughter."

"Do you now? Huh, small world. I'll go find an umbrella before we go - I know they keep them stashed around here if this school's anything like it was twenty years ago. . . yeesh." Greg went off to the little 'lost-and-found' alcove of the mess hall, emerging a minute later with an umbrella decorated in small alien heads. Peridot blinked to make sure it wasn't just her tired mind playing tricks on her. He glanced out the door and his brows knitted warily together.

"Actually, I think we'll need to wait this out a bit," the man chuckled, slipping back over to the blonde. Peridot nodded, taking another sip of the hot drink only to find that it was empty. She stared down at the empty bottom of the cup, swishing it in hopes that the movement would bring the rich liquid back.

Greg took notice and laughed. "I'll grab ya another," he promised, walking back over to the brewing counter. "I may as well have one, too. Storm doesn't look like it's gonna be lifting up anytime soon."
Stay right there, kiddo."

Peridot watched Greg depart, before moving her gaze back to the bottom of her cup. In a quiet, strained voice, she murmured, "Not like I have anywhere to go now."

Chapter End Notes

. . . Oh nooo.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

A slowly deteriorating Peridot receives advice (and some surprising news) from an unlikely source.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! I really loved the feedback last chapter - it feeds my dark thespian soul.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peridot's fingers scraped through the dense swathe of blonde over her skull, massaging and kneading until her entire head had been adequately lathered in citrus-scented shampoo.

Four weeks had passed. Not one of them had tried contacting Peridot since her thunderous escapade from the Temple the night of area. Not one. Not even Lapis had contacted her. Stars, she hadn't even seen Lapis since that hellish night.

That having been considered, it was unofficially confirmed that . . . they weren't together anymore. No couple could have a blow-off like that and withhold any and all communication if they had the intention to rekindle that flame.

Funny how, in under twenty-four hours, things could deviate so quickly from the path it caused a break-up. Her break-up. When the thought occurred to her, it was like a piece of herself had been clawed out by the black talons of incapability. She didn't want to lose Lapis now, when things had begun to look so tantalizingly good for the both of them. *Up until the dumb area contest.*

The blonde frowned as she leaned against the wall of the community shower, waist twisted to allow her to pivot and rinse the sudsy white residue from her hair. A light hiss escaped her throat when a bit of the hygienic detergent dribbled down into her eyes.

Thinking of the Crystal Gems altogether brought on some sick breed of desensitization, like her body was sensing the emotion overload she was about to experience and releasing a chemical agent to euthanize it before it could begin. She'd even gone back to her old log date podcasts, finding remote places all across campus to vocally jot down her thoughts whenever it all became just too much to keep inside her head.

She rubbed viciously at her face like it could wash away the thought of it all. Maybe if she scrubbed hard enough the thoughts would fall from her head like the hot water bounced off her from the showerhead. When she was done she leaned over to snatch her conditioner from the stall floor and repeat the cleansing procedure.

Peridot regretted buying this new conditioner in particular. It ran blue over her hands in a shade similar of cerulean to that of Lapis' hair; every time she applied it her mind would slam to a halt and replay her last interaction with Lapis over and over again until it became unbearable.
Her stomach plunged lower, thrusting upon her the familiar physical feeling of remorse. She scrubbed harder, twisting the knob of the shower so the temperature of the water was so scathing it was mildly uncomfortable. It didn't distract her. It never did.

She should have texted her. It was immature of both of them to follow up that confrontation without even trying to make contact with each other. But that one thought of I'll text her before class turned to I'll text her after this lecture is over, and those hours stretched into days that thereby extended into weeks. By the time the second week had rolled around and neither party had made attempt at communication, Peridot gave up. She just couldn't do it, it was too late.

Her hesitance to speak to Lapis translated into hesitance to deal any of the Crystal Gems altogether.

The first week after their disbandment, Peridot was awestruck. Disbelieving of the discordant way things fell apart, she wanted to return to the exultant, adventurous lifestyle of One Act Play she had grown to like and appreciate. She knew better.

The second week had been filled with bitter depression upon realizing that it really was over. The Crystal Gems had their run, and they were tripped and fell three yards before the finish line with the award of alternate.

The third, this week, Peridot had finally begun trying to make emotional amends for herself for the past two weeks. She focused on her schoolwork and on her job at Diamond Enterprise.

Two days after the break-up of the troupe Peridot had agreed to take the job at her mother’s company. Despite the disdain and contemptuousness that her mother treated her with after finally replying to her ignored e-mails, she had been hired the night of her impromptu application. She received no treatment better than her coworkers, all of whom were digital and placed systematically across the country to best assure their marketing campaigns appealed to greater audiences.

Peridot was loathe to be under her mother's vigilant gaze once more. In all their discussions, however few there were, Yellow Diamond unfailingly held a rigorously victorious air. Why wouldn't she? She had won the battle with whatever was distracting her loyal, infallible daughter from her true potential as a member of the industry.

The amputee drove the shower knob the other way, letting it run cold over her nude form to ease the sting of the scalding waters of before, then shut it off. She stood in the stall, back pressed to the cool wall and eyes trained onto her prosthetic, propped against the wall and protected by its plastic casing.

Peridot found her striped green-and-yellow towel, first ruffling it through her short hair and then brushing it against her leg and a half, then up her waist, torso, and finally up to her face. Once satisfied with the dryness of her complexion she unbagged her leg, unfolding the liner and rolling it to just below her knee. She clipped in the prosthesis itself, a nasally sigh leaving her as it clicked into place.

She threw on the clothes she had brought in, safely stored on the shelves directly beside the low-lying showerhead. First came her undergarments, covered by a thin white tank top that was in turn hidden by a button-up grey flannel shirt. She rolled on her blue jeans with regard, finishing the look with her faded lime-green converse.

Peridot left the bathrooms, combing her fingers through her half-dried hair on her way back to her dorm room. She slid back into her room, slapping her sleepwear onto her desk and proceeding to tousled her towel through her hair to get rid of any excess moisture. She would die before she let it dry on its own into a tangled, flat mess; it needed guidance or else the madness of it would allow some sort of hair follicle sentience to occur.
Sadie was seated on her bed, flicking lethargically through a magazine that she must have snatched from the paper stands outside the Big Donut. "Heya," she had said when Peridot returned from the showers, lifting her brow knowingly when Peridot ducked down behind her desk to rifle through her personal belongings to pull out a capsule of gel.

"Taking the easy way out again, Peridot?" Sadie's amused voice carried from her bed, and Peridot threw her friend a comically withering look over her shoulder. "I don't feel like dealing with it today," the amputee grumbled without any real flame, which earned a mirthful giggle out of her roommate. "It's too fluffy to deal with. You need a trim."

"A trim?" Peridot repeated, giving her semblance another scrutinious look in the mirror. It was true that her hair had become exceptionally unruly. More noticeable now that she'd ruffled her hair dry, it stuck up in spots, unquelled by even her strongest of hair gels. "I guess... is the campus barber open?"

"Umm... no, I don't think so," Sadie mused. "I think the girls who run it are off at a cosmetology convention in Aqua Town. You'll have to go down to Beach City."

"Ugh, of course I do." Peridot had done the best she could to avoid doing such a thing. She never saw the Crystal Gems when on campus unless she deliberately sought them out (which had happened only twice, mind you,) but the chances of coming across one of them off-campus were ten to one. "May as well keep the gel capped if I get it cut," she decided, sealing shut the tubed capsule and placing it back into her drawer. "Save the poor cosmetologist the need to tear through three layers of hair product."

Sadie tucked her thumb between her current pages, looking prepared to set it away for another time. "Do you want a ride?"

The other blonde shook her head, terse. "No, I can take the bus. The next arrives soon anyway."

Something like realization crossed Sadie's round face, and she laughed. "Okay, good. I just remembered my mom took her car to deliver some mail in town anyway. If you'd came earlier you could've just gotten a ride with her."

Peridot stared at her roommate with wide and evidently disturbed green eyes. "Err, no thanks," she stated simply. "No offense, Sadie, but your mom is a little... much." There had been an instance a handful of weeks prior where Barbara Miller had rushed into their dorm, arms filled with envelopes and amazingly, two Amazon packages she was somehow balancing on her shoulders. Talk about a mailwoman.

"Don't I know it." The other took no offense to the comment, flipping open her graphic pamphlet once more to peruse over its inner passages. "She texted me earlier, though, said she actually had mail for you."

"For me?"

"Mm-hmm! I don't know what it is, but it was a package. Maybe you'll see her in town and you can pick it up from her." The mental image of Barbara Miller bursting into the barber shop, package in hand, while Peridot was trapped in the hairstylist's chair with her hair pinned up was terrifying.

"Let's put hope on that maybe," Peridot mumbled to herself, raising her arms and patting down her hair one last time for good measure. She turned back and grabbed the brown faux leather jacket dangling from the back of her chair, shoving it over her arms and pulling it close over her frame. "Okay. I'll go. I don't feel like running back to catch my three o'clock class."
"Multimedia, right?"

"Yes." Peridot searched around for her satchel, finding it lying with its contents spilling open at the foot of her bed. "We're finally turning in that collaborative software project," she added begrudgingly, thinking back on her involvement with her amateurish classmates with far-less-than-fond recollection. "Teamwork is stupid."

This captured her roommate's attention. The magazine flipped softly shut, and Peridot heard the mattress sigh beneath a shifting Sadie. "You didn't use to think that," the stout girl faintly spoke, twirling a strand of her curly blonde hair between two pale fingers. "You were pretty fond of it."

"No, I wasn't." Peridot replied too quickly to be wholly convincing. Sadie caught on, lips flattening into a concerned line as pensive blue eyes regarded their stubborn roommate. "Come on, Peridot. You can't keep trying to tell me you didn't like being a-

Sadie cut herself off when Peridot snapped a hand up, palm towards Sadie in hopes of silencing her from continuing. She felt smaller because of it, but this wasn't a conversation she wanted to have. She'd already had enough of a psychological battle in the showers. "I'm not saying I didn't like being a Crystal Gem," she sighed. "I just can't be one anymore. You know that. We didn't advance."

"It doesn't mean you guys have to be over." Sadie propped her elbow up on her knee, fingers twining together in empathy. "I know they're still around, I see them in the mess hall together and on the courtyard. They're still there, they're just not... competing, I guess." She shrugged. "I don't know all the fancy theatre things you do. I don't really know what any of it means."

Peridot deflated. "Lucky you." She slid her satchel from her bed and positioned it cleanly over her ashen button-up. "I'm going to go. See you later, Sadie."

Her roommate sported a mindful, careful expression, shoulders taut like she was ready to slide out of bed and follow, but surrendered last minute and pushed herself back across the comforter. "See you later."

Peridot left the dormitories, trekking across campus to the bus stop. Her timing was impeccable, for only after three minutes of languishing around the glass bus pavilion one of the university's buses pulled up. She stepped on, seamlessly reticent, and chose a front seat to conquer in hopes of a swift leave as soon as the doors opened close to the Beach City boardwalk. She knew she'd seen a barber shop there the last time she had traveled into town.

The shuttle arrived into town without incident more than other students or civilians pouring in and out the sliding doors at stops. When it was finally Peridot's turn to step off, she gathered up her belongings, fists tightening around the leather strap of her messenger bag as she hopped off the step platform onto the sandy sidewalk. Her palms ran along the length of her bag strap, and pain abruptly pricked against the sensitive skin on the inside of her ring finger. "Aw- motherf-uhh- Her hand ripped from the truss of the bag, perplexed eyes focusing on the round pin button the blonde had forgotten she had pinned on.

The bus rumbled off behind her as Peridot delicately unclasped the adornment, studying the round pin in her fingers. It was sleek and black, with a light blue rhombus-shaped gemstone overlapped by the two iconic comedy and tragedy masks in white. They had been in a bowl at the beginning of a rehearsal weeks ago, just after district contest. Peridot had been inhumanly headstrong about brandishing the thing on her person, letting everyone know she was a Crystal Gem. What if someone sneaked a picture of her with their phone, posted it to social media somewhere and somehow her mother saw it?
She might have been over-analyzing things. She'd left her satchel in the theatron seats during the run-through, and returned to see it pinned onto her bag. Whoever had done it, they obviously meant for her to have it. So she let it stay. Now, rolling the thing between her fingers with teeth digging sorely into her chapped lower lip, it made her feel regretful. She didn't deserve this. She wasn't a Crystal Gem.

But Peridot couldn't just . . . trash it. Even with her disaffiliation, it felt immoral to abandon the pin in some boardwalk dumpster. Her eyes waded across her environment, and found the old shock of burnt sticks and forgone coals in the distance where she had first seen the Crystal Gems together: the bonfire pit.

Call her sentimental, but Peridot thought it was better to send off the trinket like it was a valiant soldier lost in battle instead of something expendable. The blonde raced across the planks of the wooden promenade, wallowing through the sandfront until she was at the pit's edge. Imitating a coin flip, she sent the button spiraling down into the depths of the burnt remains with a flick of her thumb.

Peridot was astounded to feel naked in its absence. It wasn't like she had been aware it had been on her this whole time. Now without it, though, it was like she had lost a part of herself. *Maybe I did.*

She marched her way back to the boardwalk before she could regret the action, stomping sand from the soles of her converse when she reached solid ground. Now she had to find that barber's shop - she knew it was here somewhere. . .

An abrupt peal of guttural laughter shot through the pier. Peridot froze, heels digging into the sand-crusted planks of the boardwalk as she stared ahead at her. She recognized that voice. And it was only getting louder.

The heat of alarm throbbed into her neck, flushing through her system and spurring her into motion. She burst from her spot, darting between the narrow alley between two pier shops and ducking narrowly behind a clutter of debris and limp cardboard boxes as a shadow fell over the alley entryway.

"C'mon, c'mon, keep walking," she grumbled, spying around from the edge of the damp stack of rubbish. Peridot learned about the damp part when her hang slipped down the edge of an uneven box and brushed against something unsanitarily wet. "Eugh. . ."

The person did pass, the repetitious sound of footsteps fading down the pier. Only after another minute of waiting did Peridot slide out from behind the refuse, a shudder wracking her small body as she stared ahead at her. She recognized that voice. And it was only getting louder.

"Gross," Peridot grunted, bending over to pluck off the unsavory piece of garbage. "Dumb pizza receipt-"

"Yo! Peridot!"

Panicking. That was a cool gerund verb to apply to Peridot Diamond right at that moment.

The perturbed feeling seized Peridot, stilling her limbs and freezing her in place as she heard the heavy footfalls of a familiar someone rushing up to her from behind. In the time it took for her assailant to come up beside her, panting faintly, her mind had cooked up a multitude of possible excuses to escape this rendezvous. Among them were *Who's Peridot? Not me., Can you point me to the nearest bathroom?* (the only phrase she remembered from her two years of Spanish in high
school), and, the most arbitrary of them all, *Sorry, I have to go wash my cat.*

Thankfully none of these spilled out her mouth when a frenzied head of pale lavender hair bobbed into sight. Amethyst Flores. At least it was someone Peridot had been on agreeable terms with throughout the season, despite that one unpleasant affair after the clinic. She wondered if that had changed after her graceless drop off the face of the planet.

"Dude, I haven't seen you in *ages!*" Amethyst bellowed, arms shooting skyward in celebration. "Thought you *died* or somethin'! . . . Nice hairdo, man."

It sounded like things were the same. Still, Peridot was leery, raising a hand to self-consciously cover her fluffy golden hair. "No, I'm alive," she confirmed stiffly, gesturing diffidently to herself. "Not, in fact, dead."

"Aww, geez, you're still the same too. But you're all grown up now." Amethyst pretended to wipe a tear from her eye. "But I saw you walkin' across from up there and hadda come over! Seriously, no one's even seen heads or tails of you since. . . y'know. . . ."

Unadulterated guilt diffused through Peridot's skin, plunging her bodily temperature a good couple of degrees while Amethyst gazed up at her with nonplussed brown eyes. "Yeah, that was. . . kind of the intention," the blonde admitted, scratching contritely at her tapered chin. "I didn't know what to think."

"Well, I'm seein' ya now, so I can pass on the news that P-dot's still up and kickin' life in the ass!"

"If that's what we're going to call it, sure." Peridot turned, ready to retire from the conversation early. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to-"

"Wait a sec, Per!" A hand caught her around the worn cuff of her overshirt, and Peridot stared down at the fingers wrapped around her wrist. It brought back a feeling that brought it bittersweet longing for heady dark blue, full and ruthless as her head filled with that damn intoxicating floral scent. Amethyst was quick to let go and pull her arms back to her thighs, while Peridot on the other hand (no pun intended) rubbed the spot on her wrist where it tingled from the contact. "Don't ya wanna come to regionals with us?"

Peridot's mouth twisted with incredulity as she stuffed her arms into her jacket pockets. "Regionals? *We lost!*"

"Wrong!" Amethyst corrected and mimicked the blonde, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her ratty black jeans. "We got the alternate spot."

"Ha! That's the same thing as losing, isn't it?"

". . . Maybe." Amethyst lopsidedly squinted. "But me, Smokey, Sugilite and a couple'a others all wanted to go to the contest anyway," Amethyst rolled on her ankles, dark combat boots squeaking as she did so, a smirk of knowing playing across her thick lips. "To just sit in the crowd, y'know? Throw rotten tomatoes at Homeworld. But Garnet told us we can't really do that anymore though."

Even if that excursion could have been really risky to articulate, especially with how highly-regarded those Delmarva State *suck-ups* were among the One Act officials . . . it would have been incredibly fulfilling to see. Peridot tilted her head to pose the question. "Why can't you do it? Those clods deserve for all the crap they've pulled!"

"Tell me about it." Amethyst sneered. "Garnet said it wasn't, and I *quote*, verbatim: *very professional to slaughter your competition with spoiled vegetables. Even if it would be a little*
Amusement flickered somewhere in the back of Peridot's subconscious, but the starting flames were rapidly doused by confusion. "Wait, 'your competition'?!" Echoed the amputee.

The serenity, however untamed it was, on the other girl's face shattered and was gleefully replaced by elation. "Yup! Guess who dropped outta the damn race, P! Bayburgh! They played dirty at area, dude! Got found out!"

"Wh-" Peridot reeled, brain careening to fully comprehend the news. The Crystal Gems were... going to regionals? "Hold, please. Correct me if I'm wrong- you're advancing?"

"Correction: we're advancing. You're part'a the team too! But yeah, that's what I'm sayin'!" Cheered Amethyst, sportively pounding her fists against Peridot's shoulder. "And what the official D-Marva One Act Association's sayin'! The Crystal Gems are back on the radar!"

To say Peridot was delighted to hear this breathtaking news was an incorrect use of the term. There were far too many emotions and thoughts soaring through her head, solutions of amazement and speechlessness compounding together to make something entirely new. Next came the skepticism, the distrust that Amethyst was only playing tricks and looking to seek revenge on Peridot for leaving the troupe as uproariously as she had. One look at her jocular face, though, and that skepticism was outshone by a relief so powerful it nauseated her.

When Peridot turned an unflattering white instead of churning out words of celebration, Amethyst lost her exultance and replaced it with an expression of bemusedment. "Uhh, earth to Peridot? You listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening, I-" Peridot pressed two fingers to the side of her forehead to suppress the headache threatening to flush her over after such an abrading flow of feelings. They all seemed so achingly familiar, like old ghosts come back from the past to haunt her for her misdeeds; but they didn't feel bad. "It's just a lot to take in, I thought it was all over for sure..."

"Nope." Amethyst clapped her hands together, linking together her fingers as she stared up at Peridot. "So... how'sa 'bout it? You down for kicking some more thespian ass?"

In a brilliant moment of adrenalized word association that completely ignored all the cons of her rejoining, Peridot responded a little too quickly, "Yes!"

Amethyst blinked. "Oh. Crap. I had this whole speech thing planned out 'cuz I was totally thinkin' you were gonna say no."

It was in that moment Peridot realized she might have fucked up. Just a little bit. "... Now that you mention it, I-"

"Oh no, you don't - you don't get to back out now." The lavender-haired girl pumped her fists as she began a chant, voice rising from a scratchy whisper to a loud and rambunctious shout. "One of us... one of us... one of us! One of us! One of us!"

Peridot slapped her forearm over Amethyst's mouth. "Shh! Okay, okay, one of you! Don't tell the whole boardwalk!"

"But they gotta know! Our light techie's back in business!" Amethyst mumbled into Peridot's arm, and the slightly taller girl ripped it away with disgust riddled all over her as she smeared the probable spittle on her cuff over her jeans. "Did you have to do that?"
"Yup." Amethyst brushed her hands off on each other before directing her body towards the end of the boardwalk. "Seriously, let's go! The G-Squad's gonna be stoked when she hears about this! *Hohoho,* Pearl too! Hell, everyone!" The girl took flight, short limbs carrying her across the floorboards away from Peridot. She only noticed Peridot wasn't following after a few generous strides, slowing to a stop to glance back at the motionless technician. "You coming or . . . "


Everyone. There was that thought of *I f*ucked up. Peridot's mind roared callously as the term was tossed around the cavern of her skull, rebounding off walls and making it impossible to focus on anything else at all. Everyone: Garnet, Pearl, Opal, Sardonyx, Bismuth, Ruby . . . the list could go on and she could waste her time thinking of each Crystal Gem in turn. But there was only one Crystal Gem who had such an impacting effect on Peridot that it would dare disrupt her anticipation and intervene with some classical anxiety.

"I can't," she admitted quietly. "I can't go back there, Amethyst. Not after what I did."

Amethyst took on a slow-paced approach, rolling her eyes up into her head as she spoke. "Oh, *c'mon,* Peridot, no one cares about that anymore!" She declared. "No hard feelings, promise. Everyone was kinda on their last ends that night anyway. Lotta things were said, none of 'em meant it."

The wounded faces of the Crystal Gems as she pushed past them, snarling and shouting, flashed through Peridot's conscience. "Well, they certainly looked like they took it to heart," she grumbled. "Besides, I- I have a job now."

". . . A job." Amethyst, deadpan, lowered her eyelids and scrutinized Peridot beneath them, a confused grimace twisting her features. "An honest-to-god, paying job? It's been three weeks! Three!"

Peridot sighed. She only told Garnet and Lapis about the job opportunity her mother had presented her for, of course she would need to explain this to Amethyst. "It's not as if I found it the day after- um, actually, I technically did. But it had been in the air for weeks before area. My mother owns an enterprise and offered me a position as a digital marketing executive."

"Wow. That's a fancy name for a job."

"It really isn't."

Amethyst shook her head. "But you ain't at work now! That means you've *gotta* have some free time on your hands to come back, right?"

"I . . ." A frown tightened Peridot's face. On the downside, reuniting with the Crystal Gems would prove to make things significantly more difficult for her in terms of her employed work. If she up and quit that would be on her resume forever, and it wouldn't look good, especially from such a renowned industry.

Even if it was work, well-paying and a position that many would kill to obtain, she hated it with all her being. She didn't want it.

Then what did she want? One look to the distant plains past Brooding Hill where she knew Beach City University was hidden, and the answer was revealed. "I guess I could, but- are you absolutely *certain* that no one's going to throw a tomato at me when I walk inside. . . ?"

Amethyst crackled her knuckles, pounding her clenched fist into her palm with a smirk. "I'll chuck it right back at 'em if they do."
Okay. Number one issue resolved; but what about Lapis? She doubted (hoped) Lapis wouldn't be the one wielding the cart of old vegetables ready to be thrown - it didn't seem like a very Lapis thing to do anyway. What could she do about her? Or with her?

But stars, if she didn't miss her. . . it brought her physical pain just to think of never seeing Lapis again, of never reconciling and just falling back, laughing, into each other's warm embrace as they had done so many times in the past.

Screw what her mind was telling her. Peridot was hurting, and it was because she was missing her. She was just too foolishly afraid to fess up to that.

"What about Lapis?" The blonde asked, voice so thin it could have been shattered by the prick of a sewing needle.

Amethyst shrugged. "What about her?"

"What about he- Amethyst, we didn't exactly part well!" Peridot's desperation grew stronger. "We haven't even talked since I ran off. Who knows what she's thinking or what she's been doing."

"Lapis is fine."

Peridot's lips sealed together at Amethyst's curt insistence, then mutated into a high-strung grimace. The other Crystal Gem took note of this and elaborated further. "She's been bummed out, for sure, but honestly Lapis was always that way. She's still with us."

Knowing Lapis was still a Crystal Gem brought both relief and apprehension upon Peridot. Maybe they could sort things out? Talk it over and ride into the sunset together on the back of Lapis' Ducati motorbike?

No, it couldn't be as simple as that, no matter what those cheesy Camp Pining Hearts fanfictions read true.

"I still don't know," she sighed frailly. "I don't know how I should talk to her again. Hell, even the thought of seeing her again makes me nervous!"

"Then talk to her, dumbo!" Amethyst said it like it was the easiest thing to do in the world. She didn't quite understand how much Peridot couldn't just do that now, not after three weeks of perpetual abandonment on both sides of the spectrum. "I can't do that," Peridot insisted, helplessness dampening her visage. "I couldn't even make her talk to me about Jasper, nothing that I didn't already know! I tried, Amethyst, but I can't make her talk."

"Per. You don't have to make her talk."

Peridot looked up. Amethyst stood poised in front of her, thumbs curling into the loopholes of her slack jeans as she regarded the blonde behind atypically sagacious eyes. "I'm gonna be really real with you for a sec. Like, really real. This whole thing with Lapis, it's been you focusing on what you can't do. I've noticed."

When Peridot opened her jaws to voice her contradicting conviction, Amethyst shushed her with her hand. "You're not gonna get anywhere with that. Running away from the problem's making it an even bigger one." She blew briefly at a tuft of thick hair slipping down to cover her eye. "Believe me, I know."

Peridot scowled slightly. "Do you really?" The other girl nodded, posture bracing as she prepared to explain herself.

"I thought runnin' away would solve some issues I had a little before I got to good ol' Beach City.
'Cuz I had the idea that I couldn't just stand up to all the bullshit that was goin' on. Instead of trying to sort it out with the folks I was upset with, I took off with nothin' but the shirt on my back."

Amethyst's arms wound together over her chest, gaze pointedly trained onto a specific crack in the floorboards. "Thought ditching the joint could make me happy"

Peridot's scowl softened. "And did it?"

Amethyst frowned. "Nope. Those folks, they came out to find me, those folks I was talkin' about, and we . . . just talked it out. Like we had to." Her hand came up to cup at her round chin thoughtfully, a finger rising to probe the silver piercing below her lip. "And I think that's what you gotta do, compadre. I don't know Lapis, but I know she can be a hardass when it comes to this stuff. But seriously, talk it out. If she doesn't wanna spill? Don't make her. But you gotta know you're not at fault here. Not totally."

"Gee, thanks," Peridot snorted, but then let the other student's words sink in. She did consider herself partially responsible for this whole fiasco, but she had good intentions! She didn't know what was going on in Lapis' head the night of it all. Peridot didn't need to apologize for that, but she did need to talk to Lapis and chalk out what exactly had gone wrong together.

Whoever thought she would be receiving some table-turning advice from Amethyst Flores, of all the Crystal Gems? This was usually Garnet's job. "You know," she chuckled into the back of her palm, "those are the most prudent things I have ever heard you say."

"Shut up, Peridot, I'm trying to be a sap here." Amethyst was grinning. "Take the advice or I'mma ditch you." Peridot dodged an incoming fist, a wry smirk holding up her features. "But I'm being for serious, Peri. You gotta man up to this!" Entreated her mock attacker, who pulled back to pose with her arms flexed out over her head. "Or as we call it, gem up."

Peridot's brows fell flat and she put on her best unamused veneer, despite her genuine mirth for the wordplay. "I have never once in my life heard a Crystal Gem utter the words, gem up."

"News flash - I just did. And so did you."

Peridot balked at the revelation, slapping her small palm against her forehead. "You're right. I did."

The other girl chortled and elbowed Peridot in the rib before jabbing her thumb in the direction of the distant parking lot. "C'mon, let's go find her. Everyone's at the Temple for rehearsal. Or, they should be."

Suddenly chary, Peridot thinned her green eyes at her friend. "Why aren't you at rehearsal?"

". . . I was really craving boardwalk fries."

"Amethyst!"

"What d'ya want, I'm scrappy!" Boisted the stage hand, cackling as she began down the beach promenade. "What were you doing here?"

"Getting a haircut."

Amethyst gave her a quick glance over her shoulder, and goaded Peridot with an amused "Yeah, I can see why. But that can wait another day 'cuz this 'biz can't! c'mon, I got my car waitin' in the yard over there," she directed with her hand flying outwards to point again at the car lot. "Vámonos!"

"I can't even get the haircut!??" Peridot squeaked, sending the shops they passed a helpless stare.
Amethyst answered with a, "Nope! We gotta go, bud! Right now!"

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on!" Peridot skidded to a halt as the two of them arrived at the edge of the sidewalk. Amethyst gave her a curious grimace over her shoulder, brow quirking when Peridot's neck twisted so swiftly it was sure to strain a tendon or two. "What is it?"

"At least let me-- I- I forgot something!" The blonde's gaze snapped onto the dark trough in the sand which the ravenous ocean current was gradually encroaching its presence upon. "Stay right there! I've gotta get it!" Peridot took off before the Crystal Gem could utter another word, bolting down the gritty esplanade and crashing into the sand. She did stumble this time, her prosthetic losing footing in the uneven sands. She caught herself, however, and scampered the rest of the way to the bonfire pit. She heard the bemused crashing of weighted footsteps behind her but ignored it as her fingers dug through the blackened remnants.

"Uhh, Peridot," Amethyst leaned in over her shoulder, lips curled downwards in confusion. "If you're lookin' for gold down there, don't bother. I've tried."

"I'm not looking for gold, Amethyst, I'm--" Peridot cut off as her fingers brushed against something oddly smooth amidst the disarray of rough. "A-ha! This!" She gripped the dirtied pin button in her fingers and lifted it up to the sun, grinning broadly as a ray of sun glinted across its glossed surface.

"Oh hey, look-y there!" The other student crowed, sweeping her infringing purple bangs away from her eyes to get a better look. "The button thing we got! Mine's hangin' on a bra somewhere."

Peridot didn't know if she should be surprised or not. "That's a bit uncomfortable, isn't it. . .?" She asked, features traited with lightheartedness. She couldn't imagine that being comfortable at all.

". . . Naaah. Bras prick ya so much you wouldn't even be able to tell if it's the damn button or just the clasp. Besides!" Amethyst flourished a hand through her hair, brows shooting up to shimmy in a hilariously libidinous fashion. "Whenever things get frea-kay back home people will know what kinda gal they're dealing with. Need me a freak who can get down with a theatre kid. Maybe you can seduce Lapis back into your arms with it."

"Now you're just being lewd." Peridot was softly smiling as she said this, brushing the archaic ashes from the surface of the button and unveiling the two plastic masks beneath.

They needed her. Lapis needed her.

And Peridot was pretty convinced that she needed Lapis, too.

With newfound vigor and a determined face, she pinned the icon to the pocket of her plaid. Let's get this techie back to her booth.

Chapter End Notes

Let's get these girls back on track, huh? Stay tuned to see how Peridot tackles this bump in the road and maybe she'll realize a few things along the way.

EDIT: 5/3/17 -- Oh my gooosh, I'm so sorry for the wait! I had my own OAP for basically the entire April (we're finally over, we got the Texas State Champion crowns!) and I got outstanding technician (because I'm also the lights person nyahah-). I have a
few big tests lasting until the 6, but after that, it's a homestretch towards the completion of this story. I thank all of you so much for your patience. Keep your eyes peeled!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Peridot makes her return to the Temple.

Chapter Notes

Now, this will be a legit paragraph about what kept chapter 19 from being published. One Act Play, SAT, EOC, and school have been keeping me on my toes. I swear, I've had almost no downtime since April began. But, hey, my OAP group won our state competition! Like, legit, we're the Texas 2A State Champions! Our play was Golden Boy, if anyone is familiar. But, now that things have kinda calmed down for me, I can hope for a . . . less wacky updating schedule. School lets out in three weeks, so summer's almost here - which means lots of free time on my end. Anyway, thanks for waiting and being so patient with me! The next chapters will have more interesting things, I just really needed to get this buffer out of the way.

"Amethyst, I don't think I can do this."

"Yeah, you can."

"No, I literally cannot. This door must have gotten three times as heavier since I last. . . gyehh!"

Peridot's hands wrapped firmly around the cool handle of the two huge auditorium doors, tugging with all her puny might to try and pry it open enough for the two of them to enter the Temple. She wasn't having much luck.

"Seriously, dude, you've been away for like, three weeks. Did you spend it on your ass the whole time?" Amethyst cackled, pushing the blonde aside and giving the Temple doors a good old heave and swinging the entrance open. She turned to Peridot. "Now get goin', homegirl!"

Peridot yiped and threw herself into the Temple before she could go back on her mission and high-tail it back to her dormitories and therefore back to safety. But that safety came with that crippling, numbing misery that she didn't want to let herself fall back into.

She made way through the Temple lobby and entered the side door, staring ahead at the distant proscenium arch where countless bodies poured over the stage, rehearsing lines, re-blocking scenes that had grown monotonous, and a blend of voices testing their enunciation and diction thrown from one side of the Temple to the other.

Peridot didn't realize her eyes were wet and stinging until one of her hands came up to massage them.

"Soooo." Amethyst strolled up behind Peridot, arms stretched behind her back as she stared at Peridot through the corners of her eyes. "You ready for me to let everyone know you're actually
"Amethyst, I should do that myself," the short technician explained, but nodded to the lilac-haired girl appreciatively. "It's my mess, right? I intend to clean it up. I'll just... walk on stage! Yeah!"

"Lotta good that'll do ya. Well, I told Ruby I'd help her with something, so see ya. G'luck with Lapis, P-dot." Amethyst gave the blonde a sardonic two-fingered salute, taking off down the last theatron aisle to the shortcut backstage.

Peridot faltered, suddenly feeling very vulnerable and alone in the darkness of the theatre house.

She really needed to formulate a plan for what she needed to do here because she was blanking out. Talk to Lapis, find the directors... well, she couldn't exactly diverge from there. Apologize to the whole of the Crystal Gems? Would they even listen to her?

Screw it.

Peridot walked dutifully down the Temple towards the stage, stepping into the light by the stairway onto the apron and raising her worried green eyes up to see the reactions from the nearest Crystal Gems.

Sapphire and Rainbow Quartz were chatting by the first leg curtains, and once Rainbow looked up and keenly pointed out Peridot, Sapphire's face lit up with a knowing smile. Okay, good start for Peridot. She took another step, twisting her neck around to spot Stevonnie, Smoky, and Bismuth looking up from the living room set with expressions of surprise, delight, and watchfulness, respectively.

Across the way Sugilite was by her sound system, and without her usual thick, dark sunglasses, her eyes were dark and hard as they scrutinized Peridot. She shuddered, pressing on past the surly character to upstage left where it was more remote. Thus far, no one had come up to engage her - slightly disappointing, but definitely relieving all the same.

*That wasn't so bad*, she mused, placing her hands determinedly on her hips as she scanned the theatre for a particular cerulean-coloured head. *Now where's-*

Gleeful laughter that sounded borderline relieved rose above the controlled clamor of the Temple, interrupting her mid-thought, and before Peridot could locate the source of the hysterical noise her waists were wrapped between portly arms. Her breath hitched at the top of her lungs as Steven hugged the living daylights out of her with a strength she didn't know someone of his small size could possess. What did Pearl *feed* this boy?

"Peridot, you're back!" The boy jovially observed, staring up at the shaken technician with huge dark eyes. "I knew you'd come back! Pearl told me not to try and go find you incase you didn't want to but I *knew* you would!" Warmth tingled in Peridot's chest, alerting her to the sensation of fondness creeping slowly back into her form after so many weeks in its bleak absence.

The feeling augmented, sticking together into a bubbling mess in her gut that in turn escaped as a bubbling laugh. "Steven!" She greeted, snickering softly as the boy's grip tightened around her as she spoke. "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

Steven glanced up, and she could see the reassurance visually seep into his cheeks. "Because you love us?"

"Would you happen to know where..."
"She's in there." Steven angled his body so that he could point off into the depths of the right wing of the theatre where the dressing rooms were situated. "I think someone's with her - maybe you wanna wait?" Once again, Peridot wondered but nonetheless very much appreciated the boy's innate cleverness and altruism. He knew exactly what she was out for.

But if someone was hovering around while Peridot tried to speak to Lapis, it would be that much more impersonal. She needed to talk to Lapis alone, away from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears. "Yeah. I just really want- need, to talk to her, actually."

"I getcha!" Steven grabbed hold of Peridot's loose hand and started them over towards the dressing rooms. "I'll go with you!"

Discomfort welled up inside of Peridot, and Steven must have noticed it spread across her face as they stepped out of the shadows of the wing and into the weak white LEDs of the outer dressing area. "I meant that I'll wait out here with you," he consoled, and Peridot relaxed. "Thanks," she murmured, leaning against the wall as they patiently waited for the someone in question to exit the dressing room.

They had lapsed into a lighthearted discussion regarding the Dogcopter franchise, which Peridot forged interest in to keep the boy from being disappointed by her innate revulsion for the bad graphics and mindless plot and... well, you understand. In no time did Alexandrite emerge from the room, swiping her tanned hands on a cloth stained with blue. She paused briefly when she spotted the loiterers outside, but after studying Peridot a moment she shrugged, waved at Steven, and went back behind the crossover curtains to join Sardonyx and Opal.

"All right, you can go in!" Steven coaxed, flashing Peridot two confident thumbs-up that the blonde returned with half the zeal. She took a step into the doorway of the dressing room, and she saw Lapis before Lapis saw her.

The dressing room had a gentle porcelain wallpaper, and was covered wall-to-wall by mirrors supported by grey marble vanities. Bright bulbs ran along the top of the mirrors, casting the room in a brilliantly white luster. The room was heavily fermented with the sharp fume of hair dye among other cosmetic products, and its source was obvious.

The slender actress was draped over the edge of a low-backed swiveling chair, leaning over the sink with soaked hair obscuring her features from Peridot. An arm reached over to shut off the running faucet as Lapis rose back up, swiping bright blue bangs from over her eyes and promptly freezing when she locked eyes with Peridot through the mirror.

Peridot couldn't make out what she was feeling. It was a stomach-turning concoction of anxiety and joy, determined and foreboding. But she entered the room anyway, offering a light-sounding, raspy "hey," as she shut the door quietly behind her to bar them off from the rest of the intrusive world.

Lapis rapidly reached for the black towel hung over her legs, prying it off her sweatpants as she tepidly rose. "Peridot?" She sounded genuinely puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

Peridot's throat constricted as she battled for words. "Amethyst told me the Crystal Gems are going back to contest," she explained, fingers finding the arm of her plaid and rubbing the patterned fabric uncertainly. "So I came back."

"Oh."

Should Peridot jump right into it? Lapis' nonverbal communication, her strained but comely stance, her skeptical eyes, made it really hard to decide that. There went her confidence, out the imaginary
window and off into the unknown where she couldn't even try to look for it. *Now or never.* . . .

"I wanted to talk to you. About. . . what happened?"

Lapis' fidgeting fingers stilled, wrapping around the towel uncertainly. "Okay."

Peridot blinked. "Really? *Wow, um, okay-* I just. . ." She didn't expect to get this far, in all honesty. What did she want to do? Prompt an apology? Give one of her own? But what did she do? *She* hadn't been the one to push the other away to the point-

_No, no, do not get into this right now. Talk. That's what you came to do. Right? Right._

"Look, I know that tensions were a bit *high* the last time we saw each other." Peridot's eyes met the cold tile floor. "I do admit I should have been more sensitive to what you were going through, I was,-"

"Peridot." Lapis shook her head from the vanity. "It's. . . it's okay. It was me being stupid."

"I think it something a little more than that," Peridot remarked, earning a miffed glance from the blue-haired actress. Quickly, the shorter girl made vocal amends. "What I meant to say was something was bothering you. And I know who to blame for that. All I wanted to do was understand."

Lapis was watching her, guarded, an entity closing itself in behind doors jammed shut with the key lost at the bottom of the Marianas Trench. "I was so mad, but- but not at you. But I had no other way to take that out, all that *feeling*. I didn't know how to react to all that. I *can't* react any other way."

Peridot leaned back against the dressing room door, a long, tired breath slipping out of her chest. "Was this how it was? With her?"

Lapis stiffened, her mouth drawing into a thin line as she, too, dropped her eyes. She didn't speak. Peridot took it upon herself to start things up again, and to get to the point as soon as she could.

"I kind of got the. . . implication that you were pushing me away. You kind of were, for a little. In a sense. Just since we saw- her. And I want to know why."

There was a lapse of quiet, only the electric hum of the dazzling light bulbs filling the room, both girls staring unbreakingly at one another when Lapis rose her head as they awaited the next turn of events. Finally Lapis' mocha eyes drifted back down to the cold tile floor and her stature subdued.

"I didn't want to hurt you."

. . . *That's it?* All that senseless rut? Embitterment snowballed inside of Peridot, starting at her head and passing on a thick cool feeling that dribbled down the length of her physique until everything had been flushed in frost.

In a forlorn way, it made sense. Lapis had always been more on the self-deprecating side, and granted her relationship with Jasper had been toxic (from what little Peridot had learned) it would leave a lot of room for that self-criticism to mold and shape into fear of oneself.

Still, Peridot had been trying. And it hurt to think that all she'd been trying to do to make Lapis better wasn't working in her favor.

"It's a little late for that, I think," Peridot murmured, green eyes trained on the refined floor while her hand gripped the doorknob. Lapis' wide eyes watched, swimming with dismay, as the amputee
tentatively pried the door open. One last look traded between them, green and brown clashing together in a battle for answers that neither were strong enough to issue, before Peridot left the dressing room feeling worse than when she came in. *So much for actually getting somewhere with that.*

She should go back inside and finish what they had begun. She could have accepted Lapis'- was that an apology? Or words thrown out in self-defense for Lapis' actions at area? *Ugh, I can feel a headache blooming again.*

She'd almost forgotten where she was when Steven jumped up from his spot on the floor, a hopeful grin on his face. "Well?" He beamed.

Peridot sighed and shook her head. The boy's exultance dampened, but the spark of hope never left his features. "That's okay! I know things will work out between you guys," he offered, coming over to tenderly pat Peridot across the knee.

The blonde couldn't help but smile, even when Steven's hand was dangerously close to the place where her leg ended and her prosthetic began. And if she was doubting what the boy was saying, about things working out. She wanted them to, *badly,* but wasn't sure how they could.

They were both just really stubborn lesbians with enough pride on each side to not want to move out of this tense stalemate they’d landed themselves in. And what Peridot just did wasn't going to help her cause any. She smacked a hand to her forehead and withheld an exasperated groan. She'd better get some shovels to dig herself out of this one.

She didn't get the time to lament over her poor reconciliation skills, for Garnet was making way across upstage and headed straight for Peridot, holding an emotive lime-green binder in her hands. Peridot froze up, internally withering under the unseeing stare from behind the South African student's glasses, but soon blinked in astonishment as Garnet smiled and held out her plot binder. "Welcome back to the team, Peridot."

"I- um-" Peridot balked at the binder and accepted it gratefully, staring at the few alien stickers she'd stuck to the plastic front cover. "Wow, thanks. . . You're not upset?"

"Ehh, I was a little upset."

"Oh, um-"

"Was. The fact that you've returned washes a lot of that away." Garnet placed her hands over her hips, staring down at Peridot, before flicking her sunglasses up to her forehead. "What about you, Peridot?"

"What. . . about me?" Peridot's lips pursed in a small frown.

"You weren't exactly in the best shape the last we saw of you. You don't need to explain - I'm aware of what happened."

Face pink with dismay, all Peridot could do was weakly chuckle. "Yeah. I'm sure everyone is."

Strong fingers wrapped around her little shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, Peridot. There are more fallouts in the Crystal Gems than we do let on. But even so, we band together when the time calls for it. That's what families do."

Peridot sighed. She understood. Yet, there was a chilled coil inside of her threatening to uncurl and displace her bones should she take a step too short or too far. "I just don't want another area to
"The last thing we need is for another thing like area to happen," the director enforced. "I know that this is a state-worthy play, and I do believe everyone here deserves a chance to walk that stage at the Delmarva State OAP Contest." Garnet flicked up her shaded glasses as she knelt to be nearer to Peridot's eye-level. "We're going to need you. And I'm sure Lapis will, too - I do trust you to do the right thing."

Peridot's eyes swam as she tried hard to read the expression painting itself on the director's face, only managing to depict a trace of empathy and a worldly knowing before a new but familiar presence made itself presently known.

"Peridot!" Greeted Pearl, pink-cropped hair shining under the half-lit bucket lights as she crossed the stage to meet them. "It's good to see you again! When Sapphire told me they saw you walking on-stage like you meant business I thought it was almost too good to be true!"

"Actually, I was looking for Lapis, really.

Pearl slumped, brows knitting together in understanding. "I see. But, we're pleased to have you back, Peridot- and we'll need to send in our light cues as soon as possible!"

Peridot's lips pinched. "As soon as possible? When are they due? They usually give us until the day before competition!" She uncapped the lukewarm bottle from the table, taking a tepid sip.

". . . That's today, Peridot."

"What!" Peridot had to stuff her arm over her lips to prevent the water from being coughed up and onto Pearl, which could've earned her another hour of affronted squawking. "T-Tomorrow? Why didn't anyone tell me sooner!"

"Everyone has known for a week now," mused the co-director. "Didn't you get our reminders?"

". . . About that." Peridot sucked at her teeth and leaned back on her heels. "I might have removed myself from the OAP group message. . . and lost contact with everyone inside it."

"Now why would you have done that?" Pearl inquired, pale eyes narrowed.

Peridot's cheeks darkened as she mindlessly grasped for an answer that wouldn't sound too virulent. "Because I thought the Crystal Gems were done. Defeated. Out of the limelight. It wasn't exactly with a light and happy heart I ran out those weeks ago. . ."

Garnet's jaw ticked. "I don't think there was a single happy face leaving the Temple the night of area."

"That's right," Pearl twittered, flapping a hand dismissively to dissipate the despondent memories. "What's truly important is that we're as prepared as can be for regionals tomorrow. It's a big step in the One Act world! Because after regionals is-" Pearl paused to make a wistful face, "state contest! This year I hear it's to be held at Delmarva State, regrettably the very base of Homeworld, but grand in every other aspect."

"You mean if we advance we'll be performing at Homeworld's theatre?" Peridot asked, brows raising worriedly. "Doesn't that. . . concern you?"

"Oh, it concerns me substantially!" Pearl laughed. "We'll need to be poised and keep our wits about us from the moment we arrive at the capital to the moment we leave. But enough about Homeworld -
I think we've all had enough of them at area alone. Are you packed for departure?"

Peridot blinked. "I only heard about the Crystal Gems returning not even half an hour ago. . . "

"Oh. That's right." Pearl tapped her chin with her pen. "I expect that you remember the dress protocols anyway. Nothing revealing, nothing unsavory, something that preaches respectable and representative of Beach City University!"

"Yes, Pearl," Peridot droned, rubbing her fingers below the gathering circles beneath her eyes. "Anything else?"

Pearl nodded. "Be sure to bring attractive attire! This year, the One Act Play Masquerade takes place at the regionals award ceremony! So you'll want to appear. . . um, seemly."

The way Pearl's eyes flitted nervously to Peridot's wild hair would have made Peridot snicker had it not been for the dread settling into her stomach. "A masquerade? With masks?"

"Mm-hmm," Garnet hummed with a knowing smile.

"That's great, but, um. " Peridot squirmed on the spot. "A masquerade is like a dance, correct?"

"Of course it is. Not to mention the utter mystery that enchants the place! You never know if the partner you're dancing with is a member of Homeworld or one of us!" Pearl hummed like this was a joyful thing. "This year I wanted to commission custom-made masks to boast about Mirror Gem's return! But then I realized, that defeats the entire purpose of keeping it a mystery, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does." Peridot's fingers tightened around the clasp of her light binder. "So. . . competition is tomorrow. As is our rehearsal, and somehow in between that and the contest is a masquerade dance. With masks."

"The masquerade is actually after all the shows have been completed," Garnet chipped in. "The last show is at ten o'clock, meaning the masquerade should begin around that time. We're the fifth show to perform, after the troupe from another area contest and before the Zookeepers."

Peridot's mind whirled as her internal mind clock ticked away at the time chopped out of her day tomorrow. "What time is the tech rehearsal?" She inquired, suddenly apprehensive of this sudden schedule intrusion.

"Ten o'clock AM, sharp!" Pearl informed. "That means we should be leaving the Temple at approximately. . . oh, I'd like to say 6:20 AM, if we're going to stop at the McDonalds in Charm City like Garnet suggested." The slender woman faced Garnet. "Will we?"

Garnet shrugged. "It's the best choice. We don't want any Gem to be grumbling about an empty stomach when we're taping our spikes."

Pearl deflated with a contemptuous curl of her lip. "McDonalds. Honestly, what will we be feeding our company next? It's unhealthy for an acting troupe! What if all the sugar ruins their voices?"

Peridot looked up thoughtfully. "They do have salads at McDonalds."

"But not at seven in the morning!" Lamented the co-director, throwing her head back dramatically and clutching her clipboard to her chest. Sensing her visual distress Pearl pulled herself together with a sigh, and tapped the clipboard with her pen.

"In any case, it's nice to have you back, Peridot. I'd like to see you here at six tomorrow morning, no
questions asked! If you've anything tomorrow, make sure you give your professors the excuse notices. They should understand."

Pearl left the two of them be, and Peridot glanced up at Garnet with concern billowing in her eyes. "I might have a slight problem with that specific schedule. You see, I- might have accepted that job my mother offered me."

Garnet's features drew pensive. "Is there no way out of it?"

"Not unless I want an angry mother to be watching every move I make," Peridot growled. She had a business meeting over Skype the next morning at eight, which meant she would be in transit from Beach City to wherever regionals was. From the way Pearl explained times, it must be a handful of hours. "I have a Skype conference tomorrow. How am I going to make that happen when I'm surrounded by movement and noise?!"

Garnet was silent a moment, then spoke. "Everyone will be relieved to have you back. I'm sure I can ensure quiet on the bus during your meeting."

"For a whole hour, though?"

The director's lips pursed. "The best I can do is ten minutes. Maybe eleven." 

"Gyuhh, that won't work!" Peridot exclaimed. "We'll think of something. Tomorrow. When I'm not frazzled and tackling twenty things at once - oh, wait, I'll be doing that tomorrow, too."

"Tomorrow, then." Garnet nodded. "You had best go up to your booth and get yourself situated. I trust you remember how to fill out a cue sheet."

Peridot shook her head. "Oh, no, I don't quite remember how to write Cue One, Look One in repetition for thirty-two different cues," she huffed sardonically, earning a humored hum from the director. "I'll head back now."

"Good," Garnet said as the small student turned away to make her way off-stage. "And Peridot?"

Peridot stopped, throwing a moderately enervated look over her shoulder. Garnet's hand came up to fix her aviators. "You know you can always come to me if you need help. Or any Crystal Gem. Each and every one of us are willing to help you if you need it."

Numbness permeated through Peridot's fingers, making them furl so tightly the knuckles bled white. "Um, th-thank you," she said, puzzled, briskly averting her eyes and making her way further across stage and away from Garnet's knowing stare.

She let out a breath as she watched Opal and Alexandrite make their way together back to the crossover to help Bismuth move something, while on the other side of the auditorium Sapphire and Stevonnie were practicing diction together like they had been when Peridot had entered the Temple. Amethyst and Ruby were doing something by the ladder up to the rafters, goaded on by Smoky who was giving the curtain draw-ropes a couple of playful tugs.

Before the school year began she would've considered all this trivial, a waste of time. A mindset similar to her mother's, almost.

Now, though, there was something tantalizing and exciting about this. Tantalizing how every piece and part fits together into a completed production, exciting how the show takes your breath away by the sheer passion and ardour of the actors.
It's good to be back.

Peridot was making her way off the stage when she caught a strong flash of blue through the corners of her peripheral vision. Instinctively her body pivoted to acknowledge it, and she saw Lapis making her way across the stage with the towel over her shoulders, damp hair ruffled.

Their eyes briefly locked. Peridot's heart rate amplified tenfold, and she had to tear her eyes away before the dumb muscle would pound its way out of her ribcage and send her to the E.R.. She quickly made her way off-stage, wondering if she was imagining the bubbly sensation of eyes boring into the back of her messy head.

The technician made her way back to her light booth, stepping in through the doorway and reveling in the faint blue wash that crept over her body as she slipped inside. "Ohoho," she breathed, running her fingers along her lightboard when she walked over and rapping her knuckles along the faders. "I've missed you, you complicated hunk of technology."

She couldn't help but have her eyes sweep over the room to see the various meep morps she and Lapis had made together. There was still Lapis' jewelry box Peridot had gotten for her on her birthday. The Mirror Gem script with their bus tickets was still on the cabinet, the morp that started it all. A weak smile crept onto her lips at the thought of it.

What she didn't expect to see while perusing was the new addition to their meep morp collection. An intruder.

Sitting beside Peridot's light board, lying below the tall LED lamp where Peridot would sit and doodle aliens when she wasn't needed during a practice was a small turquoise vase, brimming with green carnations. There was a small canister of water next to the vase.

Beads of moisture had collected on the delicate carnation petals, glittering vivacious aquamarine in under the lamp light. Peridot leaned closer to the display, face curiously awestruck as she took in the meep morp. There were balled-up pieces of paper stuck in between the flowers, and if she hadn't been paying close enough attention she might have just thought they were wilting flowers.

She plucked a crumpled wad out from the middle of the vase, prying it gently apart as to not tear the semi-soaked paper apart.

The penmanship was almost unreadable, the fine blue ink having smudged after making contact with the water from the vase. But she was able to dissect a few words from the blear of white and navy.

"Apologize. Face. After," Peridot read aloud in a low, cautious voice. "Pe... Peridot, ... sorry."

Was this an apology letter? One that just never found its way out of the light booth?

Peridot hurried over to the vase and snatched another one of the crumpled papers out from the carnations, unfolding it hurriedly and cursing when she accidentally ripped the slip in half. She was able to find a few similar words on this paper anyway, finding a sorry and a dumb in between the wet ink smudges.

These are all notes from Lapis! Peridot gawked, gently removing the rest of the abandoned slips from the vase and placing them on the table in front of the lightboard. Did she mean to give them to me? She could've found me... she knows where my dorm is?

Peridot's eyes roamed up to peer through the glass pane separating her light room from the rest of the Temple. The Crystal Gems had already amassed near the apron, listening to something Pearl was saying to them while making one-too-many extravagant hand gestures. And among them was Lapis,
lithe arms crossed over her chest.

If she looked closely, she could've sworn she kept sneaking glances up at the light booth when no one was looking her way.

Or maybe that was Peridot's imagination. But stars, if it wasn't, she was ready to jump for joy.

She didn't get the chance to think that hopeful thought over before the headset hanging next to her filled with temporary static to announce someone from backstage logging onto the line. "Peridot?"

The technician reached over and fastened the headset over her ear, lowering the microphone down to her mouth as it pursed in a slight frown. "Yes, Ruby?"

"Garnet says she'd like to do a quick light cue-to-cue." There was a slight scuffle on the other line before Ruby's voice came back. "Just to, y'know, check things. Not that you need to be checked."

"My feelings won't be hurt if they think I've forgotten our light cues, Ruby."

"...Okay. They want to make sure you haven't forgotten the light cues."

"Thank you for the honesty." Peridot smirked half-heartedly, pulling up her old cue logs on the monitors and resetting the stage wash to pull it to darkness. Her fingers performed the maneuver seamlessly, once again reminding her of just how fitting it all seemed in the scheme of things.

She briefly set up a blue work wash to let the cast in the first scene rush to their places, and she fished her timer out from the clutter of things she kept stashed in her little office drawer by the lamp.

Her arm brushed the gentle petals of the lively carnations, sending waves of heat crashing through her veins and turning her mind to static, thrusting her back into a state of yearning contemplation.

She almost missed the first cue of the run-through because her eyes couldn't leave the little drops of moisture scattered across the petals, or from the misshapen wads of wet paper that littered the vase around them.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The day of regionals.

Chapter Notes

Note that this chapter came out shortly after the other. Please read Chapter 19 if you haven't yet. Additionally, slight spoilers for the latest Stevenbomb! /// Because I felt bad about leaving you guys to suffer for a month I made this chapter extra, um, good? Don't quote me on that. But I was so excited to post this all day after finishing it earlier. It's my favorite chapter to date and was really fun to write! Be sure to tell me how your hearts are doing by the time you finish the chapter. I'm loving all the amazing feedback on the last chapter! (I track the OAP AU tag on Tumblr!)

The morning as utter, unadulterated chaos.

At least to Peridot. The other Crystal Gems seemed fairly pleased with how things panned out.

She hadn't finished her light cues until 11:14 the night prior, a teetering thirty-one minutes before they were due for contest. Pearl nearly fainted when Peridot mentioned that particular finite accomplishment.

As for the outcome of her dreaded Skype conference, she was actually able to weasel her way to the back of the bus, and out of a mutual respect the rowdier of the Crystal Gems kept themselves in the front. And even then, they were quiet for Peridot's sake.

Sapphire let Peridot mooch off of her smartphone's hot-spot, as well, something Peridot would have to repay the sweet actress for in time to come.

The meeting ended up making Peridot's employment situation more difficult to deal with. While her responsibilities had never quite been lenient to begin with, they seemed like vacation activities by the time Peridot had slammed shut her laptop and thrown her head back with a groan. In addition to her prior duties, now she was tasked with compiling and analyzing sales data from a sizable chunk of the corporation, verifying credibility and altogether summing together to be a major pain in the ass.

She thanked Sapphire for generously offering her services and shoved her laptop into her bag like getting the dumb piece of equipment out of her sight would get that stupid job out of her life. That being said, she did it grumpily and noisily, throwing her satchel beneath her bus seat with distaste and thunking her forehead against the bus window. "Ow."

Peridot breathed, feeling the migraine that always followed these clodding meetings beginning to pulse behind her eyes. "Clods. All of them. Stupid executive, stupid trend tracker, stupid Yellow Diamond signing me up for this-"
"Are you okay?"

Startled, Peridot's head collided with the hard plexiglass again, luckily missing her frames as she shuffled around to confront her invader. Her heartbeat increased tenfold when she realized it was Lapis hovering over the back of her seat, a studious look about her.

"I'm- no, I'm really not," she chuckled, cynical. "My stupid mother coerced me into her corporation after all. With the Crystal Gems gone, I- I didn't know what else to do with myself. I had to have an objective, something to fill my time with." Peridot's eyes widened, realizing just how much she had revealed. "I didn't mean to ramble."

"It's okay." Lapis drooped her head and rested her chin lightly over her crossed forearms. "I remember you talking to me about it."

"Oh. Yes. That talk did happen once upon a time."

"Yeah."

Peridot's eyes darted from the bus floor to the vacant seat opposite her where a couple of prop boxes and a lonesome costume bag were stashed, then to the fabric of her chair and then dared to stray up to look at Lapis. Their eyes met and split apart in a heartbeat.

"It's a headache, this work," added the technician, hoping to strike something to latch onto to keep this talk going. It had been so long. "I didn't want to do it. It's more as if I needed to do it. Felt obligated to."

"Why did you think that?"

". . . I just needed something to fill the void, I suppose."

Lapis' eyes pried over Peridot, asking a thousand questions but her lips mouthing none. Peridot was about to say something further, but Lapis had already retracted herself back to her seat diagonal to Peridot's.

The rest of the bus ride was uneventful, save for gas station stops.

Tech rehearsal went by in a flurry. Because of her pre-recorded cues, the most Peridot had to do was run over and check that no cue was forgotten and that each set area was fully lit. The Gems were hustled out at fifty-five minutes so the Zookeepers could begin their hour.

Their show was at nine, and it was only eleven. By popular vote, it was decided that the Crystal Gems would remain on their performing campus, ordering food from some sandwich delivery service uptown for lunch at three.

Sitting in a green room waiting for their showtime really made Peridot appreciate the liberty of alone time. There was no such thing as quiet when Smoky Quartz, Amethyst, Steven, and Sardonyx were stuck in the same room together for more than three hours at a time.

The cast were started early on their make-up, meaning Lapis was taken away before Peridot had the chance to leap and continue their talk from the bus. She hoped she could reach her before showtime. Rainbow Quartz at one point waltzed up to Peridot at one point and inferred about fixing her crazy mop of yellow hair, and after staring at the frozen Javascript window on her laptop, she hesitantly agreed.

Getting a haircut surrounded by a ton of people you knew was disconcerting. For example, every
time Rainbow Quartz snipped a loose tendril of hair off, someone would scream like it was harming them.

"You don't have to look so concerned," Rainbow mused during the procedure, blowing a thick pink-dyed bang out of her eyes. "My degree is in cosmetology, remember?"

The stress on Peridot's face didn't alleviate much. "I'm well-aware, Rainbow, but I'm more worried about those scissors Amethyst keeps leering at me. . ."

Said crew member was sitting across from Peridot on a marble vanity counter, holding a pair of silver scissors and making threatening snipping gestures whenever Rainbow did something to her hair.

When her impromptu hairstylist was finally done, she hastily pressed on her glasses and gaped at the trimmed face that stared back at her from the lighted mirror. Her bristly hair still retained its gravity-defying geometricness, but was tamed and styled in such a way it seemed intentional instead of natural.

"Honestly, I think I'll just head over to your apartment from now on, Rainbow," Peridot muttered in grateful awe, combing her hands playfully through the longer gelled hairs on top. "When I'm in need of a new haircut, that is."

The rest of the wait went by lethargically. Since there were two parts of their green room, one dressing room and one room filled with modern leather couches, Peridot didn't see many people other than other crew members and make-up artists running back for supplies. She actually fell asleep for handful of hours, having finally forgotten the calamity of her morning.

By the time the clock struck eight-forty, the cast were rocking on their heels in-costume and caked in cosmetics, and crew members were organizing their present equipment to ensure there were no glitches or mechanical failures.

"Amethyst's fans are functional. Wonderful!" Pearl chirped as she walked through the room, signing off her clipboard like this was an actual fact that needed affirming. "Sugilite has her sound cart, as does Ruby her backstage visual equipment. Peridot, you have your light binder, I trust? Good!"

The co-director spun to a glad halt beside Garnet, her upbeat nature an evident cover-up for the mental hysteria the pale woman was currently undergoing. "It looks as if we're all covered technologically, Garnet! What else needed checking?"

"Their minds."

Pearl tilted her head. "Come again?"

Garnet stood taller beside Pearl, running her aviators over the readied troupe, a band of practiced faces and deft crewhands. "The Crystal Gems have had a rough time, this we all know. But from the moment we had our first rehearsal, I knew that this was a state-winning production. I believe that it is in all of you to do your very best today on that stage. There is no winning and there is no losing. There is only showcasing a wonderful story about loss, love, and redemption."

A couple Crystal Gems clapped, while others remained silent in lieu of Garnet's next words. "Each and every one of you has something unique to bring to this team. Something that makes you, you. I'm proud to have been able to lead this team together through adversity to regionals, an accomplishment we haven't been able to achieve since Rose passed." A few of the Gems dropped their heads reverently. "But by no means does this hint to our journey ending here. We have enough heart to get to State and, as I believe Stevonnie states in scene four, "we'll fly our way to the top of the
world."

A knock on the door announced the presence of their caller, telling them that the staff were ready to introduce the Crystal Gems to the stage for their seven minute set-up. Garnet nodded before turning back to her troupe. "It appears we've run out of time, Gems. All that I can say to you know is go have fun!"

The move from the green room to the stage was a blur. Down three different hallways and across a lobby filled with audience members, they had to sneak into a back hallway that bordered the auditorium. The minute they stepped in, the show before them had only just finished striking away their final set pieces.

Aquamarine, their short, almost puerile contest manager (with an unfitting teardrop tattoo below her left eye) was ready with her timer, sending the Crystal Gems to work with a high-pitched, "you've got seven minutes to set up your set, lovelies! Go over and you're out!"

The weight-bearers of the troupe immediately moved to decompact their set from the back, and Peridot had to run to catch Lapis before she got to setting out her props. "Lapis, wait!"

The actress spun around, the contacts in her eyes catching hauntingly in the dull work lights. "Peridot? Don't you have to-"

"That can wait a minute. I wanted you to know- I'll be- um, looking out for you." Peridot bounced on her good leg, eyes nervously darting to the crewhand who was waiting to take her up to the light booth. "Up there. And, don't be afraid. If not for me, then... for the Crystal Gems." Her hand disappeared into her satchel, reappearing with a slightly wilted green carnation trapped between her fingers. She placed it in Lapis' open palm, studying the blue-haired girl's amazed face, before she ran off to do her job.

The light booth was just as it was during the rehearsal. The only thing different was the heavy, stifling feeling of suspense that hung over her as she seated herself in the stool to man the light board. Garnet was conversing with Aquamarine over the headsets when Peridot connected, deciding adequate measures to take should anything off-putting happen during the production.

After what felt like ages of waiting for the audience to settle and Aquamarine to take her place on-stage, Garnet ordered the curtain call, and Sugilite's backstage speakers announced the beginning of the play. The timers began.

Like any other show, Peridot's heart raced despite her mind's misplaced serenity. Her cues were as polished as ever, transitioning accurately with the tempo of scene changes and the blocking of the actors. When it was finally Lapis' turn to take to the stage, however, she began to feel that peaceful monotony edge into paranoia.

She didn't know if Jasper was present and watching. Her eyes darted to the sliders of the board, all downed save for the panel that controlled the lights in the booth and outer areas. Maybe... if she pulled this off, keeping Lapis trapped in the world of Mirror Gem... This will have to work.

Each time Lapis' eyes strayed out to the audience when they weren't supposed to, Peridot flashed a front light. Hasty enough to not draw attention from the audience, but enough to deter Lapis from what Peridot knew she was looking for. Or more rather, who.

She was reminding her that she was still there, still watching. Still caring.
This practice carried on throughout the entire play. Eventually Lapis did catch on, accepting the occasional glimpses of extra illumination and even incarnating them into her scenework. But the longer the show ran, the less occupied Peridot's mind became with keeping times and the more it favored blowing her through a mental slideshow of some of the best moments she'd ever had.

Peridot's eyes were wide with awe as the mellow strumming of the ukelele strings filled Lapis' dorm room. The slender girl was propped on the edge of her bed, tanned fingers strolling across the neck of the instrument. "I didn't know you could play!" The blonde gawked from her place on the floor, where she'd been writing a paper in the silent, comforting company of her favorite blue-haired counterpart. "Let alone so well!"

Lapis blushed faintly as Peridot scrambled up from the bean bag and approached the bedside. "I learned when I was in Hawaii. I never really liked to play then, but, Steven got me back into it. It all just came back to me after that, I guess."

Peridot watched with keen interest as a tune she wasn't familiar with began playing out. "What song is that?"

Lapis' face coloured slightly as her fingers drew deftly over the instrument. "A song called ke ala e haha mai ia'u. It just came back to me, honestly, I-"

"Hold please. Can you pronounce that again?"

Lapis laughed at the befuddled expression on Peridot's face. "'Ae, I can. Which means, yes, I can. Ke ala e haha mai ia'u. It. . . the translation that makes sense is. . . 'the way you make me feel.'"

Peridot smirked through the hand poised around her sharp chin. "Why, miss Lazuli, I didn't take you for a musical sap."

The blue-haired actress scoffed and grabbed a pillow from the bed to throw at Peridot's face. "Shut up! Do you wanna hear me play or not?"

"Yeah. How come you don't speak Hawaiian around me more often, though?"

Peridot shook her head to push away the suddenly resurfaced memory. She toyed with the controls to help the lighting better match the music, quivering during the scene where the house shook and rising and falling with the pitch of the audio. But it was all still only absent-minded convention; her mind was only for one thing, one freckled, blue-haired person.

"So. . . you're ranting because Paulette and Percy are the, quote unquote, 'inferior' pair?" If she were a cat, Peridot's messy hair would have swollen to double its original size to portray her chagrin. "You just don't get it yet," she snapped, jabbing an accusatory finger at Lapis. "You've not yet seen the pique of season two! Percy and Pierre go out into the woods together and you just see how much more compatible they are! It's all in the subtext!"

Lapis frowned at Peridot's laptop screen, which the technician had brought in for rehearsal to stream Camp Pining Hearts after practice, as she pointed out a new brown-haired character coming in from off-screen. "Is that Pierre?"

"No, that's Peter," Peridot sighed, squinting at the screen through the dark before shooting up from the soft black blanket Lapis had brought for the occasion. "Oh! Oh! But look, look, look, here comes the camp counselor! Ooooh, she's gonna really break up this gross make-out session now that Peter's."

"Spoilers, Peridot."
Peridot sunk back down beside Lapis, snickering guiltily. "Woops. But, seriously, just see what happens! You'll love it!" Lapis chuckled lightly, shuffling beneath the blanket and finding Peridot's hand in her own. "Sure."

Before she knew it, the show was drawing to a close, with the phantom that had been trapped for so long finally redeemed and set free. Peridot checked her timer, rubbing the thin sheen of sweat from her forehead. 38:31, a perfect time.

The crinkle of a damp paper between her fingers, smudged in dark blue ink.

She needed to see Lapis.

Peridot ripped off her headset the moment the curtains finally fluttered shut and she was dismissed. Shivering hands flew to bring up house lights, throwing the auditorium into an incandescent glow as the blonde stole out of the light booth before astounded tech handlers.

Cool grass pressed against the back of her neck, the distant pinpricks of the star systems millions of miles away twinkling ahead over them as their lips brushed for the first time.

Peridot made it past the first set of theatron seats, and she spared a glance at the audience as they whizzed past. A few curious eyes found her as she made her way alongside them, but most were buzzing about the outcome of the performance. She turned when she reached the second level of the auditorium.

The feeling of Lapis' leg against hers beneath the plush white duvet, breathing electric, pumping life into a limb Peridot had long since thought had died long ago.

Past the eyes of the audience, down the side of the theatre, Peridot's heart beat so rapidly in her chest it was comparable to a caged bird desperate for freedom. The door to the right wing was so close but so far, and what laid behind made her body thrum with an enthusiastic, pulsing energy she hadn't felt in weeks.

Silky laughter tumbling out of lips usually so jaded, chasing away darkness and bringing light the colour of the ocean.

Peridot tore open the door to backstage, vanishing behind it and hiding herself away from the overbearing eyes of the audience. A shocked Alexandrite and an equally perplexed Smoky stopped short right in front of Peridot, who maneuvered swiftly around the armoire they carried together, eyes scanning over the mayhem of seven-minute strike. Everyone was soaring past one another, mumbling and ordering one another towards the back where they could carry their set back onto Bismuth's Penske.

But that didn't matter. She needed to find- there! She finally found her, clasping shut a green-lidded prop box near the crossover at the back of the stage.

The world zoomed past, a mirage of greens and greys and blues, as Peridot held firmly onto Lapis as they tore down the Delmarva 1A into Beach City. Her thoughts bubbled up, posing the question: is it too early to admit to loving her?

Even if it was too substantial to admit outright then, maybe it wasn't so bad to admit it now.

Her heart twisted in her chest as she launched into a desperate stride across the stage before she skidded to a halt as Lapis turned around, glassy eyes ample with astonishment. There was only a few feet between them. . .
. . . and then Peridot tripped over one of the platforms.

Accepting her demise, Peridot retracted her arms and bound them to her chest as her body dove to the soft vinyl stagefloor, wrenching her eyes shut and expecting to meet the worst. But it never came.

Instead, warm arms were wrapped firmly around the amputee's waist, keeping her from touching the ground. Peridot twisted around to get a look at her savior, and was met with a breathtaking speckled face staring down at her, contacts still glistening milky-white. "Peridot, are you okay?"

In retrospect, this little feat of theirs was really ill-timed. The other Crystal Gems were hurrying all around them, working to complete their strike before their seven minutes was up. Yet, time was the last thing on Peridot's mind as she returned Lapis' bemused gaze. Then she began to laugh: a soft, closed-mouth giggle that shook her shoulders.

"Um. . ." Lapis' face coloured as she helped Peridot back up to her feet, turning away and tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Then Pearl decided to barge in, ordering them both to assist in dismantling the set because, "we only have five minutes left! Five!"

"I have to go strike my mirror. I'll- um. Can we talk later?" Lapis whispered, eyes searching the floor for an answer that could only come from the shorter student. "Please."

Peridot nodded fervently, feeling the heartstrings in her chest ping with enchantment. They separated, running off to take down the last of the set and the troupe was finished striking at exactly five minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

It was mayhem trying to catch Lapis alone after that. Because they were the fifth show of the evening, it was a hurry to load their set and home-brought platform pieces into the truck. Peridot couldn't find a time to capture Lapis alone. It was an ironic, sick dance that twirled them together, arms outreaching to interlock eager fingers, before the rhythm yanked them away into the conundrum of preparation for the masquerade.

"Here you go," Sardonyx exclaimed as she offered Peridot a marbled mask that matched the hue of her red bowtie, the same one she had ripped off of a huge alien plushie when she was eighteen. "Make sure it fits nice and snug! Don't need it to fall off in the middle of a waltz, now do we?"

"No, Sardonyx," Peridot shook her head and accepted the mask, handling it with staid curiosity. Small white feathers protruded from behind the hard glittery fabric, giving it a more frilly complexion than Peridot was willing to stomach. "Are there no other. . . available embellishments?"

"I'm afraid not, my faithful technician. It's a very selective process, deciding who attains what mask. Now go on! The others are waiting by the dance hall!" Sardonyx directed Peridot to the place, which was located within the large performing arts centre in a separate bank of the building.

Peridot was leery to enter. Through the heavy doors shielding her from the masquerade inside, soft music passed through the wood, outshone only by the monotonous hum of conversation. How many people were there?

Steeling up the nerve to at long last give the hall doors an audacious heave, the blonde made her way into the dance.

It was far more elegant than she had anticipated. When one thought of a party crowded with college students, they thought of the stereotypical film adaptations of wild, sociable university fare. This, though, was immaculately beyond that.

The room was bathed in a humble flaxen light radiating from a glass chandelier overhead, which
fluidly pivoted on an axis from its base in the ceiling. A small apron stage was near the back, draped in rich crimson curtains that remained closed, hiding the stage's contents from any onlookers. All across the lemon-waxed floors, all of the competing troupes were walking, talking, or dancing with one another. Masks covered each face, sealing away the distinctive identity these students had so long worked to obtain.

Peridot navigated through the dotty outskirts of the masqueraders, feeling both suffocated and liberated by the red mask covering her face. There was no threat of judgment in this strange, otherworldly place, but the tense anticipation for the award ceremony to come on that very stage hung like a frosty bog in the air.

And then there she was.

Peridot saw her back first; the slope of her shoulders, the generous spray of freckles that thinned the further they crawled down her skin. A backless navy-blue dress that came together at the nape of her neck, tied into a drooping bow with ribbons that slipped smoothly between her shoulderblades.

Lapis turned, and even from her distance she could see the familiar glint of a tear-shaped gemstone sitting proudly below her throat. Her mask was a sleek alabaster, mottled with aqua dapples and feathers a vibrant, luscious teal.

She was dancing with Steven, and the young boy was concentrating hard on making sure he did this dance correctly. Lapis had to correct his hand position more than a handful of times, but she was smiling so brightly it made Peridot's heart jump.

It was Steven who caught Peridot's keen eye first, and he delightedly tugged on Lapis' hand to direct her gaze toward Peridot. When she smiled, the soft, endearing smile that Peridot knew and stars almighty, did she love it, the technician took the chance and walked over.

"Oh, Steven, your hand slipped again." Lapis was glancing down at Steven's hands again, placing her own over them to help fix the placement. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"I'm not!" Steven defended amusedly. "It's just different! When Connie and I dance she's not a couple heads taller than me!"

"So you and Connie are dancing now."

"Lapis!"

"I think you should stop teasing him," Peridot suggested from the sideline. "He's all pink now."

"I'm not! And besides, it's too dark in here to tell if I am because the lights are all dimmed." Steven swelled his chest and remained steadfast in dancing with Lapis. "You realize that you're next, right, Peridot?"

Peridot chuckled. "Whatever you say. I think I'm going to go get a drink..."

"Drinks are over there!" Steven freed a hand to show off the distant drinks booth. A bored-looking thespian was manning the station. Peridot nodded her thanks, turning to leave before Steven called out again. "You're next, Peridot!"

Peridot laughed in reply, "I look forward to that excursion!"

Peridot took her drink from the booth and receded into a quiet spot against the wall, taking in the elegant affair playing tastefully out in front of her. The fizzy carbonation of the soda she'd grabbed
kind of threw the mood off, but stars, she'd been up for eighteen hours and she needed this.

"She really likes that kid."

Peridot spun around as a gravelly voice sounded from just beside her, and settling down into the chair beside the small girl was Jasper. She had on a dark red-shaded suit, with a hyacinth pinned to her lapel. She had a mask of the same quiet pink colour strapped over her vitiligo face.

"What- I mean- yes, she does." Peridot grasped for words, dropping her eyes inadvertently to the floor. "What are you doing here?"

She could feel the muscular actress' eyes boring into the back of her neck, raising gooseflesh that spread from her shoulders to her knees. "I'm in One Act."

"Right! Right." Peridot mashed her hands together, heat boiling beneath her skin. Dumb question, dumb question. 

". . .You've obviously come to me for a specific reason. I think I can begin to pinpoint what that specific reason might be. . ."

Jasper grunted beside her, shifting in her seat and crossing one suited leg over the other. "I'm not here to fight you, if that's what your little mind is thinking."

"Oh good- wait, little mind? I'll have you know-"

The Homeworld member put up a hand to distill Peridot's indignance. "Nevermind. I don't come to start conflict. I come to tell you that that girl," Jasper motioned to Lapis, who was laughing as Steven struggled to keep his hands in the proper place by her waist, "is not as blameless as she seems. That cleanly exterior is hiding some pretty shitty interior."

This was definitely not a conversation Peridot wanted to have right when she was certain a reconciliation of sorts had formed between her and Lapis. A cursory, sweet-mouthed reconciliation that was just them recognizing their wrongs.

She just needed to be careful with how she administered this talk, then.

"I'm. . . well-aware of this, I regret to inform you," digressed the blonde. "She's told me a lot of things about her. Stars, I've told her a lot of things about me."

"And you believe her?"

Peridot turned to Jasper, a little shocked to see genuine confusion starting to build beneath the pink mask she donned. "Of course I do. I know she's had a. . . rough past. With you, especially."

"Rough. Heh." Jasper chuckled, a rough, but not entirely unappealing sound as the chair groaned beneath her as she leaned over. "How much do you know, really?"

Peridot's head shook mournfully. "Knowing. What's the use of it? I. . . I discovered recently that knowing isn't the key to everything. It won't make you happy. It won't satisfy you. Sometimes, it can just complicate things further than they were meant to be."

Jasper blinked behind the mask. Peridot glanced up at the Homeworld actress, struggling to read her facial features as she appeared to drink in this brief spat of philosophy. Then she laughed. "You're more of an intellectual than I thought you'd be. At area you seemed so uptight, controlling."

The noise equivalent of a minuscule bomb erupting resonated in Peridot's brain. "What do you mean by that?"
Jasper narrowed her eyes. "I mean that you were kind of an ass. You were possessive. I took it that you knew the past Lapis and I have, and you were trying to ground her. Or tell me that she was off-limits."

"Well, you see-"

"I get it. You didn't know how to react, did you? Something from the past dredging itself up in perhaps one of the safest places on earth for you two: the theatre." Jasper nodded slowly. "The truth is, I didn't enter this joint to see Lapis again. When she and I were... she changed me. I saw potential in this OAP business. But that didn't mean we were good for one another."

Peridot listened with half a mind. Part of her was in denial of the fact that she was hosting an honest-to-goodness conversation with Jasper, the culmination of her late altercation with Lapis. The other was itching for more, itching for the truth from a source that wouldn't tear itself away and not contact her for weeks.

"...What was it like, with her?" She finally asked. "From all I've heard it... was much different from how we are."

A long, drawling breath slipped from Jasper's mouth. "It was probably as she said. In the beginning, it seemed all right. But sooner than later things took some bad turns, we made some bad choices together. Did some bad things together. And neither of us were ready to admit we were in the wrong."

Peridot looked up at Jasper, trying to read the face behind the mask. The Homeworld actress' expression was far off, diverted, cast into another time and place.

"...Do you miss her?"

Jasper flinched like the question startled her. Peridot might have laughed with such a brawny person startling because of something an undersized amputee asked, if it wasn't for the sincerity of the situation. Plus, she felt like she couldn't judge Jasper too harshly now - not after all this.

"I do," Jasper gruffly admitted, bowing her head to Peridot's. "But that doesn't mean I should try to bring back what screwed us up in the first place."

Peridot blinked, astonished by the other's judgment. "You mean-"

"-That I'm over it? Far from it. And I know Lapis won't be, either. Even before things went to shit, Lapis was always a bit of a mess, emotionally."

"I feel inclined to defend her."

"No need to. The look in your eyes tells me you know what she's like and accept her anyway."

Jasper stared at Peridot long and hard. "She needs a special kind of intensity to match her. I was surprised to see you, of all choices, with her."

Peridot stared off onto the dance floor where she could just make out Steven and Lapis disappear behind another pair of dancers. "I don't think she needs it anymore. She's changed since I met her. She's- she tells me she's never been this open before. We've had talks about this stuff. The effect is... evident, apparently. I've had more than one Crystal Gem come up to me and tell me how different she seems... how... happy she is now."

Peridot's hands covered her face, warm to the touch. "Stars, we were stupid."
"I think everyone is stupid, in one way or another.." Jasper huffed and stood, swiping her hand through her semi-kempt bleached hair. She turned to look at Peridot sternly. "You really do love her, don't you."

Peridot couldn't look up, not after that weighty discovery was just thrust onto her. She sighed.

"I do."

Neither said anything. Peridot thought she heard Jasper release a disconcerted breath before the sound of Jasper's footfalls started. She only looked up to watch after her as she vanished behind the swaying bodies. She almost didn't realize that Lapis and Steven had come up to her, laughing as Steven extended his hand to her. "C'mon, it's your turn now! Lapis says her feet kinda hurt."

"It's the heels," Lapis insisted. "Shoes are dumb and I don't want to wear them anymore."

Lapis and Peridot switched places, but before Steven was able to take off with Peridot, a toned arm slid across the small of Peridot's back, fingers lingering there a moment before retracting as Lapis moved to seat herself. "Have fun, you two."

She'd never slow-danced before. She doubted it was much different with a prosthetic limb, but if she took a step wrong and everything went awry because of that. . . well, she had to ask Steven for the tips Lapis had given him while they moved around the masquerade floor.

Peridot was only a couple inches taller than Steven, so their caper together was significantly less awkward than that of his and Lapis'. But even though Peridot was trying to keep herself focused on the boy in front of her, she could feel her eyes averting and trying to find Lapis back where they left her.

She didn't think it was obvious until she felt Steven's grip soften. "You can go to her, Peridot," he consoled, a knowing smile draped across his round cheeks. "I think she'd like it a lot."

"You think so?" Peridot inquired wistfully as their feet switched directions, turning her in the direction of Lapis. Over the rich curls of Steven's head, there was a flash of blue against the meek beige of the hall walls, and then the dance spun Peridot away. Regardless, her mind had changed. "I think I will."

Steven beamed and let Peridot go, whispering 'good luck' as the amputee made her way back to Lapis, narrowly avoiding being elbowed in the cheek by a Zookeeper and their dance partner.

Lapis removed the heels she had foolishly sported, letting them sit beneath her chair as she gladly sat with her feet touching the cool floor. The actress looked up, questioning, as the blonde closed in and timidly outstretched her open palm.

Lapis took it with minimal hesitance.

The two of them slid out onto the floor, Peridot's hand curling serenely around the Hawaiian's waist as their bodies naturally assumed their places. Yet, they could never meet eyes as they swayed and stepped (Peridot was extra mindful of the bare feet with her dress shoes,) to the slow song that sounded the same as the last ten songs the musician played.

"I saw you with Jasper," was the first thing said by Lapis.

Peridot looked up, seeing the troubledness in her face. "Nothing happened," she answered. "She. . . she came to me. She wasn't angry or mean. She just. . . talked. Like we did-Do. Like we do."
"Are you saying that she's like us?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all." Peridot's hands grew clammy. "I let her talk."

"So you two talked?"

"We did. And I've decided, Lapis. I know what I'm getting into. I know the impact she's had on your life and I know it was selfish on my part for trying to peg you for answers. . . if you can forgive me for that, I'll be grateful. . .?"

Lapis dipped her head so low that electricity shocked Peridot's forehead where the long pieces of Lapis' bangs ghosted across it. "Of course I do," she whispered, earnest. "It was dumb of me. Really dumb. To push you away, like that."

Peridot smiled softly, eyes squinted contentedly. "Yeah, it kind of was."

Lapis scoffed. Silence lapsed over them again, only a shred of tension lasting, but not in the awful sense as it had before when Jasper had been brought into the equation those weeks ago. The longer they moved back and forth together, the more and more Peridot's hands wanted to venture away from their traditional places and place themselves somewhere that didn't seem so stiff and constrained. Even if it would be awkward, seeing as Lapis had about half a foot on her.

"I found the notes, you know," the technician murmured, peering through the mask. "In the flowers in the booth."

Lapis' face dropped with dread. "I. . I was going to try to give them to you but- I couldn't." Her rigid shoulders sank, and Peridot took the chance and rose her hand up to Lapis' shoulder, which was about to her brow-level.

"It's okay," Peridot affirmed with furrowed eyebrows. "It's okay that you didn'- well, it would've been nice to get them earlier. Regardless! Seeing them made me realize that you hadn't just moved on about it. . . how many did you make?"

". . Eight."

"And they all were thrown into a flower vase because. . .?"

Lapis tried to shrug nonchalantly. "They weren't. . . good enough. And I wanted something in there that was green. There's so much blue in there, I felt. . ." She droned off when she realized Peridot was beaming at her with the warmness of a hundred suns. She flushed.

"I wasn't being fair to you, Peridot. I was making everything about me and my problems and I didn't stop to even think-" Lapis shook away the mist gathering in her eyes. "I really should have texted you, or called you, or even shown up at your stupid dorm door with those messed-up letters," Lapis quietly admitted, her genuine guilt shining through, upfront and living and real instead of smudged blue pen on paper. "Fixing it sooner would've been better than-" "Better than this?" Peridot gestured around them, at the dozens of masked faces, at the handsome chandelier winking at them from above their hands, and then to themselves, dancing in undivided harmony together in the middle of the dance. "Lapis Lazuli, I think your sense of judgment is a tad skewed. I have no other place I'd rather be than right here, and no other time than right now."

If Lapis' mask was red like Peridot's, her cheeks would have matched it. Her head ducked then rose back up, this time painted with a relieved smile. "Then let's have this dance."
The way the golden light captivated them from straight above and the music swirled like rising ocean tides around them made them feel as if they were the only dancers in the room. The rest of time and space fell away until it was only one, two, three, *one, two, three*.

Slowly their feet shuffled closer, having long-since adopted and accepted the tempo. Bodies inched inwards, and dark arms found their way around collared shoulders as their bodies intertwined further, until their faces were dangerously close.

Peridot barely registered the warm breath on her lips in her dreamlike state, waking only when Lapis' eyes fluttered curiously shut and their lips met for the first time in what felt like eras. It was tender and wholehearted, yet underscored with a withheld desire that both halves shared, an amour that had been left to gather dust for far too long.

In what could have been a few seconds that stretched into decades, they pulled apart, unable to speak but nonetheless knowing what the other was thinking behind the mask. *I'm sorry.*

"Lapis. . ." Peridot breathed, pulling her head away slightly to speak, green eyes huge. "I. . . l-

"*Good evening, competitors!*"

Peridot startled, fumbling forward and catching herself on Lapis for the second time that night, whipping her irate eyes around to glare at whatever clod had just interrupted a very heartfelt confession. Aquamarine had taken the stage near the back of the hall, a single pin light focused on her as she tapped the microphone expectantly. "Hello? Is this thing working?" She inquired.

Judging by how a good chunk of the troupes ended up covering their ears from the sheer volume, it was.

Peridot heard Carnelian mutter something to Skinny not too far from she and Lapis. "Who let this fairy manage contests?"

"I'd just like you all to know that the awards will be starting momentarily," the tattooed manager declared. Peridot realized the tiny woman spoke with a British accent. "Please find your troupemates and remain with them throughout the ceremony - this is for the best! You know, to avoid certain dooms regarding accidentally ending up riding in the wrong group on the way home."

The Crystal Gems all found one another, whether it be by the familiar physique or by a select few, like Amethyst, hollering so loudly for her troupemates to come join her. Peridot and Lapis walked over and joined them, standing beside Ruby and Sapphire.

Aquamarine, fed up with the buzz, loudly cleared her throat into the microphone. "If you're all done with your camaraderie, we have state-qualifiers to announce! That's right, I'm speaking to you, Zookeepers!"

Said group, who were jostling and grinning, immediately tucked their arms behind their backs and feigned attention. Once the short contest manager was appeased, she opened the vanilla folder she had tucked under her arm. "Topaz, if you would bring out the medallions and plaques, please."

A large woman emerged from stage left, carrying in her arms a box containing smaller glass boxes housing medals of gold, silver, and bronze. There were two plaques for the winners. Aquamarine wasted no time in launching into a spiel about the OAP administration and its generosity, and how very, very notable it was that these drama kids had gotten so far into their competition. "I'm so moved, I'm crying. Oh wait, that's my *tattoo!*"

"But as you all know, only two troupes will be able to advance to state competition at Delmarva
State University," Aquamarine attested. "This year the board has decreed that there will be no alternating spots. Whoever goes goes."

A wave of trepidation swept over the companies, and Peridot heard Pearl somewhere in the back starting to chant some mantra. Aquamarine continued, finishing her self-indulgent speech on her devotion to the administration and how honored she was to be able to host such a grandeur event.

Then she began to list off the all-star honorable mentions and all-star cast members. Rainbow Quartz and Sardonyx were crowned honorable mention. Stevonnie and Lapis earned the all-star cast award, and Peridot was cheering (with as much etiquette as she could manage, surrounded by dressy people,) all the while.

A member of a troupe she didn't know was also awarded all-star cast, and Peridot was shocked to see a prosthetic leg beneath a frilly white skirt. She stepped onto stage without hesitation, beaming as she gladly accepted her award. Her heart thrilled for this stranger; Peridot glanced briefly at her own leg, feeling an odd pulse of pride rather than ire.

At long last, after the stage had been dispersed and only Aquamarine and Topaz remained, it was time for the advancing plays to be announced.

The second Lapis returned she found Peridot's hand, and Peridot's other hand found Ruby's. A thrill of adrenaline rushed through their arms, cast down the line of Crystal Gems as everyone connected.

"We'll be fine, Sapphy," Peridot heard Ruby whisper to Sapphire. "Those judges didn't know what hit 'em."

Peridot looked forward, chest tight as Aquamarine unsealed the first slip. "In no particular order... the first play advancing to the One Act Play state competition is..."

"My, what a coincidence! The Cluster by Homeworld, of Delmarva State University!"

A simultaneous breath of dismay passed through the Crystal Gems, one that Peridot could feel in her heart as well as in those around her. Of course Homeworld was advancing - when didn't they?

"Don't lose hope," she heard Lapis whisper beside her, but she could tell that Lapis was just as anxious as she was. "There's still one more play to advance."

Blue Diamond moved onstage, followed by the tall, thin girl with pale blue hair from area. The Homeworld director murmured something Peridot couldn't hear to Aquamarine, and the contest manager positively glowed as their award was handed to the girl and they made their way off-stage.

Aquamarine was still preening when Blue Diamond left. "Please don't moan if the last play to advance isn't your own. Getting to regionals all in itself is an accomplishment to be proud of, according to the board. So, let's get this over with. The last play to advance to state competition is..."

Peridot's hand tightened around Lapis'.

"Mirror Gem produced by the Crystal Gems of Beach City University!"

Euphoria. It started at the bottom of her stomach, a boiling entity that clawed its way up her body and came out of her as a radiant laugh. Lapis' arms were around her, she remembered, bobbing with tearful laughter as Garnet and Pearl left the troupe to proudly march their way on-stage to accept the awards.
"I told you you could do it!" Peridot exclaimed like a child would, practically bouncing as she held Lapis to her. The actress sniffled and buried her eyes into the collar around Peridot's neck, a jubilant, rejoicing laugh breathing into her shoulder. "State, Peridot! We're going to State!"

The thunderous, reverent applause around them finally faded after their directors left the stage and returned to their group with their grinning teeth shining brighter than when they walked up. Garnet held out the regionals plaque for the Crystal Gems to admire: a polished trapezium plaque made of dark oak, implemented with golden plates to make it clear that this was a state-qualifying One Act troupe.

"Looks like we're headed to the Capital, Gems," Garnet smiled, pushing up her aviators to reveal damp eyes. Pearl beside her was sobbing intense happiness by that point, furiously wiping her eyes and nose with the handkerchief from her handbag.

Peridot and Lapis finally unraveled, but never detached, keeping their hands twined firmly together as they stared proudly at the award that would propel them to their final competition.

A smile, weak and vulnerable, came across Peridot's face then, replacing the triumphant grin from before. She didn't notice the moisture collecting beneath her eyes until Lapis' thumb came to stroke them away and beautiful brown eyes were searching her own. "Peridot?"

The blonde sniffled, flushed with embarrassment as she scrubbed her eyes with her thumb and index. "It's nothing," she chuckled.

"I'm happy to be home."
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Peridot makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

Things get a little spicy in the first part of this chapter--HMMMMm. But since I want this story to focus more on emotion and experience (as well as kind of keep a general audience,) it's kind of implied rather than described, if you get me. (And I'm an immature dork who laughed every time I tried to write something detailed.) Finals have been kicking me in the shins lately, but school's out on the 26 and then I'm freee. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You know, Garnet really made a mistake putting Lapis and Peridot together in a room," Peridot could hear Alexandrite remarking down the hall. Sardonyx laughed a reply, but Peridot couldn't make out anything other than, "She knows very well what she's doing!"

Lapis slipped the key card and led them into their room. Peridot did initially wonder why their room was so separate from the other Crystal Gems, but after entering and seeing only one king-sized bed rather than two queens, her questions were answered. "Cheeky," the blonde chuckled, disposing of the clothes on her that were causing the most immediate irritation. "Looks like we'll have to share."

"I don't think that's a problem," mused Lapis, a roguish curl to her lip. Peridot nervously tittered, bending over to grab her sleepwear from her bag. "Do you think it was really necessary that we stayed so long at that Denny's?" She asked, grunting at the fatigue pulling at her limbs. "I've been ready to meet our bed since midnight. And now it's two."

"Meet our bed, huh?" Lapis crowed behind her. Peridot snickered back, "you know what I mean."

One could have likened their situation to the phrase distance makes the heart grow fonder. Every time Lapis spoke or even made an appearance at the corners of her eyes, Peridot's heart stuttered with glee. Likewise, Lapis had hardly detached from Peridot's side since the masquerade, having sat with her throughout critique and even the celebratory bus ride to the hotel.

Lapis' face appeared on her shoulder, strings of soft blue hair poking against Peridot's cheek. She didn't say anything for a moment, but when she did speak it was worth the wait. "I really missed you, Peridot."

Warmth like that of the inside of a volcano permeated throughout the amputee as she tilted her head and rested it briefly on Lapis'. "I missed you too. She smiled and bundled her clothes in her arms, waited for Lapis to remove herself then turned to leave for the bathroom to change. But a pair of arms coaxed around her neck and pulled her backwards. "Ngah- Lapis?"
"You don't have to change in there."

"I- oh. I don't?"

Lapis shook her head no, and twirled Peridot around to face her like they were still at the masquerade. They were still so close Peridot could see every freckle that dappled the actress' face. "I don't think you even need to change at all. Just... lose the outfit."

Peridot's eyes widened as she finally registered what was happening. It made the tingling sensation in her lower abdomen multiply, raising static all over her body as Lapis' hands began to fidget with the buttons on her collar.

An exhilaration she didn't think she had ever felt this strongly before ballooned inside of her as she gently assisted in peeling off her dress shirt. The bow tie fell to the floor, trampled by two pairs of feet as they worked their way bare. Before Peridot could deter from the deluge of red obscuring her mind and vision, she was already without shirt and half-way without pants.

A strike of apprehension washed through her stomach, making her feel ill as her fingers pulled lightly at her waistline. "Wait! Wait- please." Peridot's eyes went huge with disconcertion as the Lapis' hands roamed down the slacks, causing them to cease movement just below her knee where her leg stopped and the prosthesis began. "Um- I-I don't know if this will be weird, or anything-"

Lapis' eyes flashed with confusion before her mind seemed to click. She replaced the bemusement on her face with solace, resting a hand on the knee while the other stretched up to cup Peridot's cheek. "Peridot, I told you long ago that it doesn't matter to me," she murmured. "This is you." Appreciation so wholesome filled Peridot that it send wild gooseflesh riding up the length of her body.

They hit the bed together, shaking with anticipation. Peridot's back pressed against the white comforter, thick hair tangling with the turquoise pillows as Lapis crawled her way over her exposed form, pinning her down with arms braced proprietorially around the blonde's head.

Bleaching moonlight, thinly exhausted by the half-drawn curtains, framed Lapis' head in backlight. It danced in the fibers of her thick, wispy hair, pulling the unruly strands together into an ethereal halo of fuzzy moonshine that framed her features flawlessly.

Even though Peridot's own face was swathed by Lapis' shadow, her bold green eyes were bright, examining, prepared.

Her back instinctively arched upwards, carrying her face towards Lapis' as their lips met in the darkness. The kiss began small, albeit as time drew on it grew more intense, more sensual and craving. Lapis' tongue traced the bottom of Peridot's, tentative, before they both lapsed into pulling at one another's lips with a fervor neither knew they had hungered and starved for until that moment.

Hot breath clashed as mouths parted and traveled elsewhere, with Lapis dipping down to drag her lips over the inside of Peridot's neck. A flushed hand gripped Lapis' shoulder while the other found the back of the actress' azure head, raveling her fingers in deep enough to keep a grip but soft enough to not pull. Peridot could feel Lapis' heart pounding against hers.

Suddenly there was the unexpected sensation of teeth clipping into her neck, and Peridot involuntarily canted her hips towards the source of the intimate nip. The grind of their legs didn't stop Lapis, however, only stimulating her further as her mouth carried down, trailing kisses down to Peridot's sternum until rising back up to run along the length of her throat.

They separated briefly after time had long since become but an illusion, the actress leaning up to bore
into those deep, deep green eyes. "Peridot." Lapis' voice was soft, mellow like she was on the verge of tearfulness. But Peridot could see, even through the pall of darkness that hid them away from the rest of this wild, wild world, that she was happy. "I love you."

Passion pooled so deeply inside of Peridot that her only reaction to the confession was to bring their bodies ever closer, each twitch of her lips and flutter of her fingers over bare tan skin painting a picture of just how deeply she returned the sentiment.

She felt hands cruise down from her throat down to her sternum, brushing past her chest and down her stomach. Intoxication thrilled like wildfire inside of her as Peridot wrapped her arms around Lapis and drew her closer, breath rapid and full of heat as she crashed their lips together to invite her in. When forced to divide for breath, all Peridot could whisper was, "I love you too, Lapis Lazuli."

And all Peridot could see was blue, blue, blue.

---

*Three weeks later. One week until State.*

Peridot capped the bottle of aspirin that had become a daily intake as much as the other medicines she routinely consumed. The past two weeks had been nothing but one stressful happening after another, foolishly and almost failing to balance her One Act life and the more mundane corporation life. She groaned as she took the pills, rubbing her stinging eyes before replacing her glasses.

"You look like you need some respite," Sadie remarked from across the dorm as she pulled a sage-hued jean jacket over her work shirt. "You look tired, Peridot," she added, concern etched into her face.

"It's the makings of living a double-life," Peridot muttered, glancing up through her fingers at her roommate. "It's been exceedingly hard trying to keep up with rehearsal and running that job. I don't remember the last time I had a full night's sleep. . ."

Sadie dryly chuckled. "It is university. Isn't that the point?"

"Don't even remind me of that part," lamented Peridot. "I have my final in engineering soon and my study time is limited because of all. . ." She made a wild, indirect gesture to the air. "This."

"Well. . . look on the bright side!" Sadie chirped as she shouldered on her backpack and made her way to the door. "Aren't you and Lapis gonna hang out later today?"

"Yeah. A few others are coming, as well."

"The more the merrier, then." The thickset blonde grabbed the door handle, turning it and letting the door swing open before turning back to Peridot. "I think you should do something about all this stuff you're stressing out about. It's really taking a toll on you."

Peridot leaned back in her chair, exhaling slowly. "Yeah. I know," she grumbled, before offering a cynical little laugh. "Sadie, I swear to the stars, you're the Jiminy Cricket I know I don't have most days."

Sadie twirled her keys thoughtfully as she exited the dorm. "It's an obligation when your roommate is a Crystal Gem," she mused, waving her roommate good-bye before clicking the door shut. Peridot stared at the closed door a moment before grunting and leaving the comforts of her seat and making her way over to the bed.

With state competition hovering only a week away, the Crystal Gems were hard at work perfecting
any flaw that might have been present at any other showcasing. Rehearsals had been running later than usual, and more often than not Peridot had to be excused by Garnet so she could rush home and account for her job.

Her job. She hated referring to that deathtrap as a job - it seemed more fitting as as a cage or net. It wasn't directly hurting her, per se, but the feeling of knowing she was once again depending on Yellow Diamond (even if she didn't need to anymore, after reuniting with her troupe,) was loathsome. She thought about this at least four times a day now.

She fondly let her mind fondly wandered back to the late night of regionals to dispel some of the bitterness. To the moment behind the curtains, to the golden lights of the masquerade, to the night that followed. The blonde felt colour bubble into her cheeks as she recalled that particular event; since then, she and Lapis had been as inseparable as ever. Even though finals were kicking both of their asses, they still found the time to meet up at least once a day despite their pressuring schedules.

This was usually at rehearsal, actually. Amethyst had even started up the trend of referring to the light booth as the barn', because of all the fabled happenings that went on in there. It caught on quickly with the other Gems, who snickered and elbowed whenever Lapis would venture off up the Temple when it wasn't her scene. Let them assume what they wanted - it only encouraged the barnmates even further.

Peridot's train of thought deflected off-track, blurring into a compilation of various mental snapshots of herself and the Crystal Gems. Her first impression of them at Fish Stew Pizza, her warm welcome at the first rehearsal, the exhilaration of advancing from district, the fall-apart of area, the reconciliations.

It seemed like such a complex puzzle grasping for its last pieces to create the perfect picture. State was the only thing Peridot could think of that could so finely complete the game. She could envision it now: a dazzling theatron, complicated tech panel, and a huge, polished stage floor for actors to flounce upon. Posters advertising the final six One Act shows in Delmarva, and the most notable of them all the Mirror Gem flyer that Lapis herself had supposedly helped design with Steven.

She imagined how their show would pan out. Fast but not in the sense that it was rushed. After all, something their last critique gave them was the idea quality over quantity, meaning that it was better to embrace and enrich important moments in the play instead of run through them like it was a cue-to-cue. That had been the Crystal Gems' new motto ever since leaving regionals behind.

The curtain would unravel, showing us the first scenes as Peridot would flip her cues with expertise, never missing a beat with the cast's locomotion. Scenes changed, dialogue projected, and blocking was accurate. Suddenly the lights flickered, throwing off-tandem the performance and thereby Peridot, who scrambled to search for what damn slider is malfunctioning, now of all times?

No matter what she tried to pull, there was no fixing the light chaos on-stage as the actors floundered for their places. Lapis was stood in the middle of the stage, staring in dismay up at the light booth as the world rocked in flashes of colour around her. A spiteful, hauntingly familiar voice boomed across the auditorium, screaming in Peridot's headset as she violently tried to rip it off her ears.

What do you think you're doing?

There was the brief outcry of a curtain call before the entire stage was plunged in a loud, brassy yellow.

Peridot startled awake, blinking, directionless and weary.
To find oneself confronted by a phantasm of memories and then whatever that was... awakening to a blank and colourless ceiling is a disorienting thing. Her heart pumped vivaciously under her skin, and there was the cool sensation of sweat lining her throat. Peridot squinted irritably, pawing blindly around for her phone to check the time.

4:32 PM.

"I'm late! I'm really late!" Peridot threw herself up from the comforters, stumbling and falling first because of the numbness running up her right thigh. She swappied out her baggy sleeping attire for vintage grey jeans and hastily threw on a pattereded overshirt, finding her hightop vans and racing out the door. She ran back in a heartbeat later, snatching her bag and her brown jacket from the desk and took off again, slamming her dorm door shut behind her.

She arrived on the scene of Rose Quartz’ fountain yard ten minutes later, leg throbbing and heart crashing. Lapis, Ruby, Sapphire, and Steven were all sat along the edge of the fountain, flicking water at one another and fluffing their coats up against the cold. Steven was the first to spot Peridot, eagerly waving her over as she slowed and regained her bearings.

Lapis twisted around, kicking her legs out of the thin waters and welcomed Peridot with a hug and a chaste meet of their lips.

Lapis looked down at Peridot in surprise as she took in her guise. "Peridot, you look like you've seen a ghost."

Peridot's wide eyes thinned, confused. "I... I don't know if you're making a reference to the play or telling me upfront."

"No, I mean you really look like death." Lapis pressed her thumb to a wily cusp of blonde hair curling over Peridot's ear, taking in the rest of the smaller girl. Peridot leaned her worn head into Lapis' soft, supportive touch. Her girlfriend's lips pinched. Ruby and Sapphire curiously glimpsed over Lapis' shoulder, taking in their technician's frazzled account.

"Lapis is right, Peridot," Steven chipped in, coming up beside them and frowning at Peridot's haggard semblance. "You sure you're doing okay?"

"Just tired." Peridot shook off their concerned gazes, willing her hand out of Lapis' hand. Lapis wasn't deterred. "It's your mom, isn't it?"

Peridot's lip curled with surprise. "How did you know?"

"You have that look on your face when you're thinking about her."

Peridot bent over Lapis' leg dramatically and mumbled into her arm. "Curse your girlfriend powers of facial intuition."

"It's a payless job," the blue-haired girl shrugged. Then she braced with a more solemn manner. "Seriously. I know Mirror Gem's taking up a lot of time, but you like being part of it. You hate the job- you hate your mom!"

"Yeah," Ruby spoke up, planting her hand on Steven's head to ruffle the boy's hair and steal back her maroon headband. "I dunno the whole deal, but you've been kinda out of it from what I've seen. Sapphire?"

"I can guess that if things keep going like this, Peridot, you'll just end up shattering apart."
"That's not a very encouraging insight, Sapphire."

"It's the most accurate insight."

"Am I really that readable?" Peridot sighed, shoulders sagging down to her chest as she leaned against Lapis. "Also, I think my being late's made us miss the bus for the next twenty minutes."

"It's no problem! Ruby and Sapphire can just take us in their car!" Steven chirped, hopping up onto the fountain wall to sit beside her and Lapis. "But it's been nice just chilling out here! Even if it's kinda cold."

Steven was holed up in a cottony blue sweater with stars across the midsection. With December underway, around three weeks until Christmas arrived, the climate in Beach City had dropped significantly. Like every other sea-blasted beach town on the Delmarva coastline, the ocean carried in the Atlantic winter winds. Peridot huffed emphatically, watching her breath billow and crisp in the wintry air. "Remind me why One Act takes place in the first semester, anybody?"

"It didn't use to be," Lapis hummed into the back of Peridot's head, thoughtful. "It usually began right around now, the choosing of the play and deciding who gets what part. But it conflicted so much with other school things, people couldn't devote time to OAP to get anything off the ground."

"Hmm." Peridot glanced down at her hands, the tips tucked into the folds of her jacket. "I guess that job qualifies as one of those upsets, huh?"

"If you really think so." Lapis leaned an arm around Peridot, taking solicitous hold of her cool hands. "I do. And not because I want you to be able to do the lights without worry."

"Shut up, I'm not done," interjected Lapis, stern. "And I want you to be better than you are right now. You know, to not have to deal with that dumb mom of yours."

"Dealing with her is the only thing I know how to do. She's always been hovering over me and I've learned how to deal with it."

"Maybe it's time you don't have to deal with it. Quit the job."

Peridot stared helplessly up at the taller thespian. "I can't just quit it!"

"Why not?" Steven asked curiously. "I mean, I do understand the downfalls of quitting a job but- if it's really upsetting you, Peridot, why don't you?"

"Because it's my mother who I'm working for," the blonde parried, deflecting questions like she knew Pearl would a foil in fencing. She pressed a hand to her clammy temple. "Who knows what she'd do? I don't want to be the clod on the receiving end of that hurricane!"

Peridot's gaze lowered. "She hasn't spoken to me straight since I can last remember. I'm an employee to her - a pawn to get closer to what she wants. If I rebel now it'll just be like firing a crappy intern."

She felt Lapis shift beside her, and before she knew it intense brown eyes were boring into her green ones. "Then it really is important that you get this out of your life now," her partner pleaded, taking hold of Peridot's pale hand, insistent. "Think about how much happier you'll be!"

"I'll be living in a state of constant fear for my social security networks."
"You'll finally be free like you've always wanted."

"I'll lose my funding."

"You'll get by. You're smart, Peridot - hell, you could start up a little tech workshop, or a hardware store. Something you can work on with your hands?"

Peridot stopped Lapis by gently squeezing her fingers. "I don't know, Laz. . ."

Lapis glanced sadly over the blonde's shock of hair. "Trust me on this. You've- you've helped me enough, Peridot. You still are. Let me do this, for you. Let me help you get out of this. It's poisonous, this thing you've got with your mom. Toxic. It's important that you get out of it. It's important to me."

"Me too!" Steven piped, placing a strong hand over Peridot's slacken shoulder. "To all of us. There's not a Crystal Gem who would want that for you - we're gonna do this, together. I know we can!"

Ruby hopped up onto the fountain beside Steven, comically cracking her calloused knuckles as she posed for Sapphire. "And if they don't, we can beat that old Yellow Diamond into a lemony pulp!"

"Ruby!" Sapphire laughed.

"What? She probably deserves it. As much as Blue Diamond! The names are even the same."

Peridot remembered the initial apprehension she felt around Blue Diamond upon learning her alias; of course, it could be a stage name for all she knew, but the resemblance to her own mother's name was uncanny. As was the fabled Pink Diamond that Blue supposedly replaced. "I don't know why that is. It confused me when we first saw Homeworld. She doesn't look like my mother, so I don't think there's any relation. . ."

Lapis shrugged. "It's probably just a popular surname. But back on topic - Steven's right, Peridot. We can all help you with it. I do remember someone once telling me, 'you don't have to be alone.'"

Peridot smirked softly. "I hate it when you quote me when I'm right."

Lapis nodded. "How about it? Let's get it done, today. The boardwalk can wait another hour. This is bigger than getting some sandy splinters stuck between your toes."

The smaller girl nodded in dubious appreciation. "I suppose it is," she concurred, risking glances at Ruby, Sapphire, and Steven. All three wore supportive expressions, each a different kind than the other. "Where, though? And when?"

". . . Why not in the barn?" Ruby inferred, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the Temple entrance. "It's practically a second home to you, right?"

"Will you stop calling it the barn?" Peridot scoffed, despite the grin she could feel building on her cheeks. "It's elementary and immature."

"I like the barn," Lapis spoke up from behind, feigning innocence.

"You hush, you have no right to speak. It's because of you it's been named that."

"It's because of us it was named that."

A pink tongue poked stubbornly out from Peridot's lips before receding, replacing her playful demeanor with one more sincere. "But it's not a bad place to conjure this up. . . after all, it's a primary cause of this withdrawal. It seems appropriate."
"That's the spirit," her girlfriend remarked, hoisting Peridot up as the others hopped off the fountain wall and grabbed their things. "You have your laptop, right?" Peridot patted her bag in response.

The five of them headed into the Temple, which fortunately was kicked open by an overzealous Ruby followed by a giggling Sapphire. Both ran off to the wings of backstage, while Steven, Lapis, and Peridot all headed back to her light booth to compile the message.

Addressing Yellow Diamond,

I regret to inform you that my time as an employee at the enterprise must be cut short. I have other functions to be attending to, ones that will occupy me for quite some time. I'm certain that another person can be found to fill in my position as a digital marketing manager.

This is a letter of resignation.

Peridot Diamond

"...That's all you're going to send?"

"I think that's all I can send, Steven."

"We've been sitting here for forty-five minutes, though."

"It's enough," smiled Lapis as she hovered sleekly over Peridot's shoulder, gem necklace hanging low next to her girlfriend's wary eyes. It was glinting in the azure light of the technician's booth. "Let's send it."

"Yes, let's." Lapis pressed her chin down onto Peridot's tense shoulder, slinging her other hand to cradle the opposite one. She cut Peridot off before the smaller girl could argue. "Sure, we let you write it yourself, but don't you feel better with us here instead of doing it alone somewhere?"

"...Yeah, it was." The other relented, melting into Lapis' arm like she would a pillow. "But should I really send it? I mean, this isn't miniscule- this could land me in some serious stuff, Lapis."

"I know it can, but that's why you need to do it."

"I'm failing to see the logic in that argument."

Lapis rolled her eyes, fond but annoyed. "You... you helped me out a spit. So I'm here to help you out of yours. This mom thing? It needs to end - I know that, and so do you."

Peridot stared long at Lapis' face, framed in evocative blue light as it stared down from above. The eyes settled there were filled with such concern that the blonde felt herself crumble with resolve. She turned and stared at the screen until her eyes stung, before her weeping subconscious willed her finger to tap the mousepad.

What Peridot felt after watching herself click the send button and see the message dive off to her mother's corporate inbox, she couldn't discern. It was a nauseating combination of feelings, relief and regret, anticipation and apprehension. Who said Yellow Diamond actually had to take the notice seriously? Let alone even read it? Regardless, the blonde couldn't help but feel like she had just made a huge mistake.

"Woo-hoo!" Steven pumped his hands into the air and threw himself over the back of the swively chair, squeezing beneath Lapis and popping up just beside the Peridot. "Don't you feel better now, Peridot?"
"I'm not sure what I'm feeling, but I think relief is somewhere in there," chuckled the amputee dryly, returning Steven's glad embrace with a one-handed hug of her own accord. Lapis joined in, too, leaning her arms over Peridot's free shoulder to be level. "I'm proud of you, Peridot," she insisted, pressing her lips to the side of Peridot's head. "I know that wasn't an easy thing to do."

Steven nodded briskly as he allowed the two girls their moment by pulling back. "Sometimes the best thing is the worst thing. But it really is important to you- and the rest of us, I think- that you push it through! My dad told me this thing about a kidney stone once. . ."

Peridot, touched, timidly folded her laptop back into her satchel, a disbelieving but clement smile gracing her lips. "When did you become so wise, Steven?" She asked genuinely.

The boy blinked and pulled back, clasping hands over his star-printed shirt. "I dunno. My dad's pretty smart, maybe it rubs off."

Lapis ruffled a tan hand through the boy's thick hair. "It sure did," she laughed simply. "This is good, Peridot- even if it doesn't seem like it now. Things are going to start looking up for you! For us."

Peridot felt inclined to believe her. She thanked them both for being with her for it, that she probably wouldn't have even considered pressing the first letters on her keyboard to initiate the message without their silent encouragement. She hated that it was true.

They eventually re-grouped with Ruby and Sapphire in the Temple theatron where they said they had been checking prop boxes, but both Peridot and Lapis weren't as innocently keen to believe the story as Steven was. They tore out of the Temple, taking on the outside as the sun began to slip down behind the large limestone buildings of the university campus.

Peridot marched after the rest of the group, where Ruby was flexing for Sapphire while Lapis looked on with eyes at half-mast, flashing a mellow thumbs-up while Steven bubbled with laughter at the couple's antics. She had to will the joy up from inside her, despite the lightness that shrouded the air all around her.

She looked back at the Temple that glinted in the dusky afternoon light. The waves of water cascading down from the curves of Rose Quartz' statue glinted an intrepid white and tangerine, and cicada-song filled the air so fully it could almost seem serene. She didn't realize she'd stopped to stare until she heard Lapis calling her name.

"Coming!" Peridot returned, twisting around and making haste to make up lost distance.

Peridot should've been jumping and praising every deity she could think of that she'd finally torn free of the leash her mother had on her, she realized as she fell in line with the rest of the Crystal Gems.

So why did she still feel as though she'd just done something terrible?

Chapter End Notes

Ruby and Sapphire's car is a Ford Fusion ;)
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems host one of their last rehearsals before their State show.

Chapter Notes

I have like, -34% of the right to have an excuse as to why it took me literally a year to continue this story. 'Cuz I don't have one; I call it me getting distracted by summertime apathy, then senior year taking over my life, and getting upset about losing the three chapter drafts then recovering them JUST last month! But-- special callout to the Lapidot Cafe & friendly comments who inspired me enough to want to finish this story! Enjoy. Sorry for any discrepancies, it's been literally more than a year since I wrote this AU! I wouldn't blame you if you need to re-read some chapters to know what's going on; I'm honestly going in blind.

It had been three days and Peridot had yet to receive a response from her mother or any faculty of her company. She wasn’t sure if she even wanted to obtain an acknowledgment of her resignation; it was both a daunting and scary thought to know that her mother was aware of her jumping ship.

On the other hand, she was glad not to have been contacted by anyone. The way Diamond Enterprise worked, it wasn’t like they didn’t discharge faculty members on the daily. Peridot’s report, if found by a lower-level executive, would be tossed amid the other letters signed by agitated, underpaid workers and her name removed from the administrative system.

Peridot knew better than to think she should just let this slip her mind. But she didn’t let it take over her life - she pushed it to the very back of her thoughts, letting her classwork and One Act Play take up the best of her thought process instead.

Things at Beach City University had gotten festive in lieu of the oncoming holidays. Peridot had never quite understood nor cared enough to participate in these sorts of festivities, and neither had Lapis, she learned the evening prior when the topic arose during rehearsal.

“A . . . secret Santa?” Peridot had inquired, her tone the very epitome of skeptic condescension.

“Yeah. Steven’s the one who came up with the idea, two or so years ago,” Lapis informed, her back to the light booth floor and her legs kicked up on the dark walls, a heavily edited copy of the most recent Mirror Gem script tucked between her fingers as she thumbed through her scenes. “We don’t have any outright holiday celebration thing to go on, but, we usually have a party for all of them-- you know, some don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Well, I knew that,” Peridot objected, spinning around in her chair. “Then why have a secret Santa at all?”

Lapis regarded Peridot through a half-lidded gaze. “Do you really want to be the one to tell Steven
that he can’t host one this year?”

“Definitely not.”

Lapis snapped her script shut and sent her girlfriend an upside-down smirk. “Good. It’s all about the spirit of the holiday. I think. Besides I got a really cool book last year from Smoky, so, it’s not all bad.”

Peridot hummed, eyes briefly switching back to the stage and lurching forward to execute Sapphire’s light cue before it was too late. Having Lapis up in the booth was so distracting. Granted, a welcomed distraction, but a distraction nonetheless! She wondered why Garnet even allowed it at this point in the game. “It’s really inconvenient, to be honest, how close the State show is to the holidays. You’d think it would be more practical in the spring semesters.”

Lapis made a noise that sounded like she was caught between agreeing and begging to differ. “But if it was in the spring all the sports and other academics competitions would crowd the schedule. Haven’t we had this conversation before?”

Peridot rolled her shoulders dismissively. “Probably. But-- Stars, Lapis, State is really only days away! Do we even know what order we’re performing in?”

“Mmm,” Lapis mumbled, kicking her legs and sending her blue skirt tossing across her legs. “I think Pearl mentioned to me that we’re the last show to go on.”

“Wh-- the last show ?!” Peridot snapped towards Lapis, eyes huge behind her glasses. “As in-- the very last show to close the night?”

“That’s what being the last means,” Lapis divulged with a half-smirk before rolling onto her stomach and lifting herself up off the booth floor, dusting down her costume. “I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing. The directors are going to talk to us about it tonight before rehearsal is over.”

Peridot worried at the flesh of her lower lip as she turned back towards the stage where Stevonnie and Sapphire were sharing a pivotal scene together. Being last didn’t immediately push them into last place, did it? Wasn’t the order ranked based on previous achievements and performances? Peridot swore she’d heard somewhere that the order had nothing to do with hierarchical placement but the more cynical part of her wanted to argue.

Lapis must have sensed the disenchanted churning of the cogs within her mind because a pair of slender hands wrapped around her shoulders, and she could feel Lapis’ tapered chin rest in her hair. “It’ll be fine,” she murmured into the fluffy locks of blonde hair, stressing the pause before she snorted and finished with a, “probably.”

“You’re so inspiring.” Peridot smirked, rolling her neck until Lapis was forced to disengage, a hand flying out to prompt the next light cue before she missed the line. “You know, you should probably get back on-stage. Your next entrance is coming up soon.”

“Oh, is it?” Lapis focused on the stage, and from their place in the booth across the Temple they could make out Pearl’s frantic hand slipping out from behind the stage-left grand curtain, wildly gesturing to someone else in the wings before gesticulating with ire towards the booth.

“Too late now,” Lapis snorted nonchalantly. “By the time I get down there I’ll miss my cue.”

“You’re incredibly flippant today,” Peridot replied, billowing her cheeks and blowing into Lapis’ face to send her away with a gasp. “Moreso than usual, at least. Considering how State is literally days away.”
I’m flattered,” Lapis chuckled, utterly unfettered by Pearl’s backstage flustering and Peridot’s good-natured remarks. “I think it’s just... the Crystal Gems are in a good place right now.” Lapis turned, the ribbons piecing her halter top together twirling as she paced back towards Peridot. “We’re in a good place right now. It’s... kind of hard to let anything ruin it. Even if it’s State. And Homeworld.”

“Oh,” was Peridot’s very sophisticated and very eloquently-thought-out response. She could feel colour creeping into her cheeks and traveling down her neck when Lapis came around once more, arms wrapping contentedly around the technician’s shoulders. “I’m... strangely, I’m not worried. I want to be-- I feel like I should be. But I just... can’t.”

Peridot felt the making of a proud smile beginning to shape her lips. Lapis had come so far in just a matter of a few life-changing months-- or, even weeks, since the incredible turnout at their regionals show. And... well, maybe she had, too. The notion left a pleasantly warm feeling ballooning in Peridot’s chest as she stood from the chair.

Peridot felt that she should be confident for State, too. In an eccentric little way, she was! The Crystal Gems had been waited on bated breath for seasons for a chance to perform at the Delmarva State competition, and a tiny, tiny part of her was sure she was some sort of lucky charm that had granted them access to it. Not to discredit any of the work of the other cast and crew, though; but Peridot had come in as a sort of an “our last hope” circumstance.

But the other part of her still clung onto the dubiety stemming from her predicament with Diamond Enterprise. Something still felt so inconceivably wrong about how unresponsive her mother’s company had been to her less-than-compliant e-mail resignation. Yet it was still something she pushed to the back of her mind, determined to not let the aching concern hinder her ability to be the best light tech she could be-- for the Crystal Gems and for Lapis. They all deserved it.

Peridot let out a long, languid sigh, moving over to Lapis and wrapping her arms around her in absentminded affection. “Me too,” she smiled into the fabric of Lapis’ top, warming to the touch when Lapis’ arms slid knowingly around her smaller frame. Her eyebrows shot high with realization when she realized they’d gently been guiding each other towards the booth wall, right next to the cabinets housing their arrangement of meep morps and other little creations.

Soon Peridot felt her back being clemently pressed into the wall, the soft velvet of the room rushing up to rub against the fabric of her shirt as Lapis did the very same on the opposite side. Iridescent blue light silhouetted the actress’ features, providing a winsome contour that made Peridot’s poor heart thunder at the back of her mouth. Peridot couldn’t help but be swept back to the first time she’d been in the light booth with Lapis, alone. Had she been blushing this hard back then? Doubtful, but she liked to think she hadn’t been.

“Hey,” Peridot murmured up to Lapis, “I’m proud of you. You know?”

Lapis’ lips twitched, a sliver of white teeth becoming a stark contrast to the deepness of her skin and the darkness of the room. “I know,” she breathed. “You don’t think tha--”

Will all present Crystal Gems please report to the stage for a company meeting!"

Both Lapis and Peridot jumped when Pearl’s voice ricocheted through the Temple, obviously making very good use of the new speaker system that other crew members had attached to the director’s new headset. They gawked at each other for a second, sending a spare glance to the stage where the Crystal Gems were slowly amassing below, on, and around the stage apron.

“That probably doesn’t include us,” Lapis dismissed, grabbing onto the strap of her halter top that had mysteriously been removed from her collar bone (Peridot would not confirm nor deny any
allegations as to how that happened) and tossing it back into place.

“Including Lapis and Peridot.”

“Spoke too soon,” Peridot teased, adjusting her glasses and removing herself from the wall, finding humor in Lapis’ annoyed reaction to Pearl’s rude intervention. “Come on, let’s go before Pearl hands both of our asses to us.”

Lapis and Peridot hiked down from the light booth, but not before Peridot flipped on the main bucket lamps to give the others the convenience of seeing where they were setting their feet. Alexandrite had fallen off the stage a few days ago when it had been too dark during a company meeting, so Peridot made extra care to avoid something like that again.

By the time the two of them had reached the edge of the apron, leaning across it together as Garnet took the headcount, most of the other Gems had already congregated. Pearl was on Lapis in the fraction of a heartbeat, headset lowered down to her neck and her script clipboard hugged tight to her chest. She jabbed a pen accusingly at the blue-haired actress. “Do you have a good reason as to why you weren’t backstage before your scene?”

“Garnet told me we weren’t going to go over that scene until later tonight,” Lapis replied back coolly. Pearl looked ready to retaliate, but Garnet had come over with a tallied sheet that she attached to her co-director’s clipboard and took over. “She’s right; we need time to allow the make-up crew to put on Lapis’ cosmetics.”

Pearl huffed, shook her head, and accepted Garnet’s sheet with a grumble before turning back to face the rest of the Gems milling about the stage. Some had resorted to sitting down, legs dangling off the platform, while others were bumbling together in groups, discussing the script or just amping for State altogether.

Garnet looked down at the couple with a suggestive smile and flicked down her sunglasses and gave them a knowing wink. Lapis responded with a lackluster thumbs-up, brown eyes light with gratitude. At Peridot’s confused blink, Lapis crossed her arms over the stage and sent her a mischievous smile. “I was actually supposed to be there. I got... distracted.”

“Oh, says the distractor herself!” Peridot shot back in mock exasperation, elbowing Lapis’ side softly. “I nearly missed half my cues in the last scene because of you.”

“Are you complaining or bragging?”

“First of all, how dare you--”

“Right!” The loud quip of Pearl’s voice clipped off whatever remark Peridot was going to make. Pearl flustered for a moment, realizing that her new microphone was on and very much connected to the loud-speaker, quickly switching it off before clearing her throat dismissively. “Anyways! Garnet and I received the papers yesterday night regarding the order of performance at Delmarva State.”

A collective cacophony of ‘oooh ’s rose up from cast and crew alike, earning a few singular responses from the enthused crowd.

“Well? Where are we?” Amethyst called out, voice raucous with excitement. “Don’t leave us hangin’!”

“Are we first?” Opal inquired next, curiously leaning over Garnet’s shoulder to take a gander at the sheet that presumably held the performance timetable schedule. Pearl instinctively placed a hand over
the listing to prevent any other curious onlookers-- namely Smoky, Sugilite, and Sardonyx-- from spoiling the surprise. “No, no, we’re not... first. In fact, err... Homeworld is first.”

Again, a collective series of groans and growls rose up from the Crystal Gems. “Oh come on,” Amethyst was the first to beseech, throwing her hands up to exaggerate the troupe’s cohesive displeasure. “Who’d they bribe this time to get first dibs?”

“It is their home turf,” Stevonnie chipped in thoughtfully, resting a hand comfortingly on Amethyst’s shoulder as they stepped in. “Why wouldn’t they?”

Peridot felt the back of her mouth sour at the thought of Homeworld’s troupe shaking hands under tables to ensure that their show had the best turnout. Now they’d stolen the opening to the State performances.

“I hope they go over their seven-minute set-up,” Peridot grunted more so to herself than to Lapis, but her partner responded nonetheless with a humorless chuckle. “Blue Diamond’s probably gotten very friendly with the judges already. Just our luck.”

They focused back onto Garnet, who was marshaling everyone’s attention back onto the directors after the barrage of outbursts. “We mustn’t let this bother us. Homeworld thinks that State is child’s play, that the other troupes will squander knowing that we’re in their territory.”

“Say it again for the oppressed spirits in the back!” Came a holler that Peridot was sure came from Smoky.

Garnet tapped her pen against her clipboard once, twice, then clicked it shut and palmed the device. “But Homeworld’s never seen us this strong before. We have members-- new and old-- bonded together for the first time since Rose was still our leader.” A brief quiet lapsed over the Crystal Gems in memory of their old director, to which Peridot looked down at her fiddling thumbs, not knowing how to react appropriately.

Garnet nodded affirmatively when all eyes reached back towards her, wide with the desire for more information. “Onto the remainder of the list,” she spoke, flipping up the pamphlet and perusing its contents. “Second is Canary Cove, a school from upstate. Port City is third, Snowmelt fourth, and Bromwich Bay performs right before us.”

“We’re last?” Sardonyx determined with a dramatic gasp, a hand flying up to her lips. “My, something seems extremely wrong about that, doesn’t it?”

“Huh,” Amethyst piled in next, reaching up for the schedule, which Garnet handed her with little more than a shrug. “Maybe they’re savin’ the best for last?”

“This is Homeworld we’re talking about,” Alexandrite commented from the edge of the group. “If they’re even remotely responsible for the placements, they couldn’t have had good intentions for us.”

“As much as it pains me to recognize it’s true, Alexandrite’s right,” Pearl put forward, though she didn’t look as disheartened as she sounded. “But let’s think optimistically, for the sake of ourselves and for the show! Being last isn’t a bad thing, necessarily... right, Garnet?”

“The way they’re tip-toeing around it like it’s going to explode in their faces makes it sound like it’ll be a disaster,” Peridot whispered to Lapis, voice strained with the first hints of nervousness for the upcoming competition. “I thought you said being last was okay?”

“It is,” Lapis confirmed, fixing Garnet with an expectant look that the director didn’t miss.
She hummed and adjusted her shaded glasses, turning out towards the mumbling party of crestfallen Gems. “Being last certainly might seem like an encumbrance, but Delmarva State has now left to us the closure of its performances. It is up to us to wrap up the night with a story that will leave the audience talking until it’s time for the awards. We will be the ones to leave the lasting impression.”

A general murmur of consensus spread around the Crystal Gems at Garnet’s influence, the masses put a bit more at peace with the aspect of showing last by their director’s stolid encouragement.

“What time will we be going on, then?” Peridot was the one to inquire first. She didn’t know about anybody else, but anytime a performance ran past midnight she found herself getting a little crabby up in whatever light booth the hosting theatre would provide. “Will it run any later than any other competition we’ve shown at?”

“Oh! Right, yes, our time!” Pearl chimed, brows furrowing as she dipped her head to review the schedule table. “It looks as though. . . oh my, we’ll be starting our set-up at roughly 11:15PM.”

“Eleven!” Peridot bemoaned, disgruntled fingertips pinching the bridge of her nose. “Eleven at night, we’re performing. I was ready to give Homeworld the benefit of the doubt but now I know they’re doing this on purpose.”

“You’re speaking like they’re targeting you, specifically,” Lapis provoked with a smirk.

“They are! Ugh. . . Pearl, at least tell me our rehearsal is at some hour that isn’t unhealthily early?”

Pearl glanced down at her sheet again, teeth snagging neurotically at the corner of her lip. “That depends on what you might consider unhealthily early. Our tech hour is scheduled for five in the morning.”

“Why.” Peridot sank down onto the apron, the black vinyl rising up to press unpleasantly against her nose. How many hours would they be waiting in a green room, exactly? Knowing their luck with the ruddy likes of Homeworld, they probably got the smallest room out of all the available compartments! Just out of spite!

Fortunately she wasn’t alone in her resentment, because a number of others were expressing tasteful crossness in the sporadic placement of their stage-time. Garnet and Pearl looked sympathetic, but everyone knew that there was nothing they could do to change their scheduled times-- not if they didn’t have a good reason to challenge it for.

“Chins up, everybody!” Pearl was quick to re-establish control over the ears of the Gems, lowering her clipboard and giving an assertive tut. “The BCU board has approved our request for two overnight stays at the Delmarva capital -- which is especially gracious, considering the hotel rates in that city. We’ll be leaving the Temple at three in the afternoon on Thursday, so we’ll be able to reach the capital before six o’clock the same night.”

Peridot made a mental note to pick up the pamphlets she’d need to distribute to her professors to excuse her absence. They only had one more day of buffer before they’d load the bus and embark towards the competition they’d been striving for since the beginning of the season; frankly, even longer than that!

“One day more,” Lapis quoted beside her, pulling her attention off of the technicalities of leave and onto her partner. “Okay, now it’s beginning to feel a little surreal.”

“Join the club, we have t-shirts,” Stevonnie laughed from near the couple, crouching low and placing their hands keenly over their knees as they smiled down at Lapis and Peridot. “It’s so exciting! I
can’t believe it, still!”

“Speaking of t-shirts!” Bismuth’s commanding voice spread out over the stage, effectively rendering many conversations null as she emerged from the back dressing room, a large cardboard box balanced between her strong arms. “We had an interesting delivery come in today.”

Peridot tilted her head curiously, wanting to rip open the box herself and indulge in whatever interesting contents were hidden within. She shared a look with both Stevonnie and Lapis, before following the latter in climbing up onto the stage and circling around Bismuth as she set the package down. “What is it?”

“Glad you asked, tiny!” Bismuth barked gladly, reaching over to pat Peridot willfully on the back. Peridot wanted to sputter about being called tiny, but whatever indignance she’d manifested was swept away when Bismuth yanked out a boxcutter and slipped the razor over the protective film tape.

“Here we are. . .” She uttered as she stuck a hand into the box and drew out a deep, navy-blue t-shirt. “Voila!”

Peridot’s eyes widened as Bismuth revealed the graphic printed onto the front of the t-shirt. It showed the graphic of a shattered mirror in the foreground, and within its broken reflection snippets of the ghost’s semblance-- a tan hand, a flick of blue hair, glassy, reflective eyes-- they all shone through. Dark water was printed behind it, glinting suspiciously like real water in the light.

Printed in text above the image, though, were the words Beach City University Presents: Mirror Gem by Paul Villeco, in elegant, thick cursive font. Beneath the graphic in smaller but not any less notable text read Delmarva State Competitors.

It was would be inappropriate to say that the Crystal Gems reacted mildly. A number of them rushed forward, actually collapsing the box where it stood as they rushed to grab a shirt in their size. . . Peridot included.

Peridot had managed to snag two shirts (perks of being tiny)-- one in her size and one in Lapis’-- climbing to the top of the group of Crystal Gems with a triumphant hah! before climbing out, hair sticking up every which way. “Lapis, I got two!”

“Great!” Lapis chirped from elsewhere, and Peridot reeled around to find Lapis bent down, talking with Steven, who was blushing brightly watching the Crystal Gems just devour the new apparel. “Hi, Steven!”

“Hi, Peridot!” The boy cheered with a welcoming wave, and Peridot moved over, handing Lapis the shirt that was her size. “I think this is right.”

“If it’s not I’ll just steal yours,” Lapis snorted, accepting the t-shirt and mouthing ‘thank you’ before turning her attention back to Steven. “You said you helped make them?”

“Well-- yeah!” Steven giggled, positively glowing. “My friend-- Buck-- his dad had a bunch of press machines, and I had this little doodle I made for Mirror Gem that Garnet really liked so I thought I’d. . . I dunno, make some shirts, I guess! I’m glad everyone seems to like them!”

“I like saying that they like them is a very powerful understatement,” Peridot observed wryly, throwing a weary look over her shoulder as the other Gems mooned and fawned over their new shirts. She turned her eyes back to Steven then, an appreciate lilt to her smile. “They’re great, Steven. I wouldn’t have rushed into that mess if I didn’t think it was worthy of wearing!”
Steven laughed lightly. “Thanks, Peridot! My dad helped me pack them up this morning-- gosh, I was so nervous on the drive over here! I only told Pearl, Garnet, and Bismuth what was up-- I wanted it to be a surprise! Right?”

“Right,” Lapis smiled, ruffling the boy’s curly hair warmly. “There isn’t a Gem in here who isn’t going to be wearing this tomorrow, you can count on that.”

Steven beamed fondly, throwing his around the both of them and crushing them in a quick-lived bear hug. “Thanks guys!” Then he pulled back with sudden ferocity, dark eyes huge. “Oh my gosh, I forgot to get one for my dad! Uh-- be right back! I’m gonna make sure there’s still the extras! Hup!” Steven broke away from Lapis and Peridot in a fast-paced jog, stepping out of the wings and in no more than three seconds of being exposed in the light, had been affectionately swept up by Opal and Sardonyx with a gasp of surprise.

Peridot watched as the boy laughed while struggling in the tall women’s arms, budging her gaze to fall back onto Lapis beside her, who was sizing up the t-shirt with a speculative eye. “Do you think you could still see enough my midriff in this size?”

Peridot snorted. “Are you asking for the common public or for me, personally?”

Lapis sent her a sly look over the shirt. “Whichever will keep you up at night.”

Peridot felt a thrill of stimulation trail up the length of her spine, wisely refraining from some newfound desire to throw herself onto Lapis in the presence of the rest of the Crystal Gems.

“If it troubles you so much you could just snip the bottom off,” Peridot absently suggested, realizing she sounded more serious than she’d intended to be-- judging from the way Lapis’ brows knit thoughtfully together. She made a note to keep Lapis’ hands off of any scissors she had readily available in the light booth.

“So!” Pearl’s voice carried over the speakers once more, and Peridot found the co-director standing a little smugly, her microphone poised daintily over her lips as her voice boomed from the stage wings. She switched the device off with a contented simper, glad to have finally acquired everyone’s attention and stopped (at least, for the most part) the mayhem.

“Now that we’ve revealed our timetable for competition day and received our new shirts-- courtesy of our very own Steven Universe--” Pearl had to stop because a radiant outcry rose up from the Crystal Gems, and Peridot could spot the boy in question sitting on Opal’s shoulders, a hand pressed humbly to his cheek as he waved off the praise. Pearl continued, face soft as she regarded Steven. “I say it’s time to begin rehearsals again. Crew, you are dismissed for the evening; we’ll be working with our cast for the remainder of practice.”

“Nit-picking our talented actresses, are we?” Amethyst churred coyly, already one foot out the door as she started to close up her equipment.

“Nit-picking warrants less critique from even nit-pickier judges,” Pearl called back smoothly, flushing with colour when a number of Crystal Gems ‘oooh’ed at the witty comeback.

Peridot let out a sigh of relief and tucked her hands into her pockets. She could get back to her dorm before nightfall for once! She turned to Lapis, then felt her lips purse knowing that Lapis may very well be here for the next handful of hours. Stars forbid it, maybe all night. “You gonna be okay?”

“What?” Lapis blinked, turning to her girlfriend. “Oh, yes. I’ll be fine. Why?”

Peridot shrugged with forced aimlessness. “Nothing. Just wanted to check. Do you know how long
“Hopefully no later than I can stand,” Lapis lamented breathily, shaking her head. “I’ve still got to get my makeup on, so I don’t think it’ll be over for me anytime soon, at least.”

Peridot’s lips set into a firm line, her heart making a decision before her brain could put its own two cents in. “I’ll stay here with you, then. I should work on my cues, anyways. I kept messing up on them earlier for some star-forsaken reason.”

“Star-forsaken, is it?” Lapis wanly smiled, dipping her head and pressing her soft lips carefully against Peridot’s forehead in a gesture of appreciation. “Thanks. I was kinda worried about being stuck one-on-one with Pearl by the end of the night.”

Peridot shuddered involuntarily, and whether it was because of the kiss or because she was imagining being trapped in the same room as Pearl when she was this stressed, she didn’t know. “Y-Yeah, no problem.”

The two talked in the wings until most of the crew had dissipated, leaving only cast members to dawdle and go over their scenes while the directors convened. Steven had begun chatting with Ruby, who had stayed behind to wait for Sapphire.

Suddenly the same aching sensation of dread that had been haunting her since sending that cursed e-mail to Diamond Enterprise flooded through Peridot as her phone buzzed questioningly in her pocket mid-conversation. Her hands fumbled to retrieve the device, nearly dropping it not once, not twice, but three times to check the contact ID, fearing the worst.

She about buckled in on herself when she saw it was Sadie, who had texted her to tell her she’d left Peridot some extra takeout for whenever she got home from rehearsal.

“Are you still worried about your mom?”

Peridot could physically feel the moisture drain from her mouth at Lapis’ timid question. The seed of worry and doubt she’d pushed to the bottom of her heart suddenly broke out from its shell, tumbling in her chest like cold bricks. Fidgeting, she stuck her phone back into her pocket, cursing the device for starting all this in the first place. Anxiety flooded her throat, constricting, making it difficult to do so much as breathe.

She shouldn’t be anxious. Her mother was all the way in Empire City—more than a whole state away. It wasn’t like she was going to come storming down in yellow pumps to stomp all of Peridot’s hopes and dreams.

Ouch, Peridot didn’t like thinking about that possibility, because the more she ruminated the more possible and in-character it actually seemed. The only diversion she received that tore her out of that downwards spiral of thought was the gentle sensation of fingers entwining within her own. Peridot blinked, looking up through eyes that pricked with pain.

“We’ll get through this,” Lapis was whispering to her, face lined with concern. Concern for Peridot. “We’ve been through worse, so... I know we can get through this.”

“But she could ruin everything,” Peridot found the courage to utter, voice dry, cracked by apprehension. “Not just for me, but for-- for every other Crystal Gem, too!”

Lapis huffed through her nose, nostrils flaring contemptuously. “I’d really like to see her try to tear this troupe apart. This group, it... they love each other too much to let go.”
“Yeah?” Peridot elicited a watery chuckle, her sweating palms rising up to brush uneasily against the red welling beneath her eyes.

“Yeah,” Lapis nodded quietly. “You’re one of us now. We love you, too.”

That reminder never failed to make Peridot want to melt into a puddle right on the spot. She glanced up through her eyelashes at Lapis, earnest, heart racing a mile a minute at the back of her throat.

“You ready for this?” Lapis inquired, tipping her head in and resting her forehead gently over Peridot’s.

Peridot exhaled slowly, leaning in and closing the distance between them, for the first time being completely unbothered by the fact that she had to tiptoe to do so comfortably.

“Of course.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Peridot helps Lapis regain a part of her that she once lost, and the Crystal Gems prepare for their show.

Chapter Notes

Whoa! Around 8,5000 words for this chapter! And if you haven't read Ch. 22, I advise you do so as I uploaded these chapters very closely together! (7/20/18)

The trip to Delmarva’s capital OAP show was tame.

If you considered the definition of ‘tame’ to be a bus filled with college students and like chanting, amping, and otherwise preparing for the thespian’s equivalent of a social revolution. . . then sure, tame was one word to describe it.

Peridot was still reeling with astonishment that their chanting managed to surpass the maximum volume her headphones had to offer-- and she was sure she could damage both eardrums at this rate. Granted, she’d eventually joined in on the mayhem halfway through the trip, kneeling on the seat to watch the Crystal Gems jibe, laugh, and encourage one another for the fateful day to come.

Lapis was completely passed out beside her, snoring away to her heart’s content. Peridot didn’t have the heart nor will to wake her girlfriend-- the discordant clamor filling the walls of the bus was enough to drone it out anyways. A script was draped across her chest, abandoned in favor of sleeping.

It felt unrealistic to rhapsodize about tomorrow, but it still felt so right to. This is what they’d been working towards! Even if they managed to get here through a technicality, it was the thought that they were really here that amplified that achievement.

But Peridot was over the moon for more reasons than the fact that they would probably upshow any other performers on the stage tomorrow. She’d managed to push the looming threat of her mother to the back of her mind, willed forward by her partner and the confidantes she’d made within the Crystal Gems. Even Steven was empathetic for her; the boy was something like a beacon of optimism that Peridot couldn’t help but be influenced by. Daresay, even want to gravitate towards like a moth drawn to flame.

That might not be the most accurate metaphor, Peridot thought to herself, lips twisting bemusedly as she watched the back of Steven’s head from where he sat at the front with Pearl. Her mind lowered to her bag stored at the bottom of the bus, packed with appropriate attire and. . one extra thing that she was determined to try to utilize tonight. After all, they would have a few hours before the directors would make an attempt to get them to sleep for the early morning tech hour tomorrow.
Peridot let loose a deep-chested sigh, sinking back into the ratty cushion of her shared bus seat, and settled her gaze onto the snoozing actress beside her. Her blue hair was tossed this way and that, her dark roots a vibrant blue after the quick touch-up she’d made in the dressing room that morning in the Temple. Afternoon sun crept in through the window, refracting richly against Lapis’ freckled skin in a way that caused Peridot’s stomach to flutter with attraction.

Yeah. They were going to be alright tomorrow. No, better than alright! They were going to crush their competition and win the State OAP crown, once and for all! Homeworld wouldn’t know what hit them.

Delmarva wasn’t a massive state, so by the time the sun had begun to sink and the sky became a wispy canvas of vermilion followed closely by the bruised velvet of twilight, the Crystal Gems were unloading their things from the bus and heading into the hotel.

Peridot waved Steven and Greg off as the bus driver went to park their bus in the spot designated by the hotel staff before heading into the lobby after Lapis, finding the fact that there were over fifteen-something thespians milling around. She felt only a scrap of pity for the confused family of four who were sitting across from the Crystal Gems, looking too fearful to speak up, let alone move.

Naturally, the two of them got a room together. Steven had giggled the whole time he delivered them their key card from the directors, explaining that it was a single. Ruby and Sapphire were paired together, too, and winked across the room at them. Peridot waved back with a sheepish smile.

Lapis and Peridot wasted little time in hiking up to their room on the second floor (really, they rode the elevator because stairs were the devil incarnate). They emerged with Ruby, Sapphire, Sardonyx, and Opal on their floor, waving the last two off before heading towards their room. As it turned out, their room was right next to Ruby’ and Sapphire’s.

“I don’t know what Garnet’s playing at, but if I’m up all night listening to those two giggle at each other, I’m going to have a fit,” Peridot sighed dramatically as she shut the door to their own room, chucking the key card onto the nearest table and throwing her bag onto the corner of the bed, before flopping down, equally as dramatic as before.

“Sardonyx is rubbing off on you too much,” she heard Lapis laugh from behind her, shuddering when teasing fingers walked up her spine as Lapis moved across the bed. “Plus, you love Ruby and Sapphire. Don’t try to deny it.”

“I’m not denying it, I’m just complaining about it,” Peridot smirked into the sheets, yelping when she felt a pillow slamming into the side of her face. “Hey--”

“Wasn’t me,” Lapis whistled innocently, twirling a remote that had been on the nightstand in one hand and thumbing the bottom of her Mirror Gem t-shirt as she turned on the TV. Peridot scoffed and stole the pillow, clutching it protectively to her chest as Lapis flipped through channels, finally settling on one they knew played movies all night long.

“You wanna watch *Dogcopter 2 ? Really? ” Peridot asked with a raised brow, green eyes glinting with inquiry. Lapis only shrugged and tore off her shirt, throwing it on the chair across the room with messy precision and laying on the bed beside her. “I saw it in theatre with Steven when it came out. It wasn’t bad.”

“Sequels are usually the worst parts of the whole arc.”

“Says you. *Cars 2* was great.”
Peridot sucked at her teeth in despair. “You don’t mean that. You can’t.”

“Nope. Just wanted to see you get offended.” Lapis snorted, and Peridot left her to shrug off her day wear and zip open her bag to pull out whatever she’d stuffed in here last-minute to sleep in. She pulled out a pair of grey sweats, then jumped when a small bag threatened to fall out from the bag. She caught it with a hand, throat closing on itself when she remembered what it was and why she’d packed it.

She’d overheard some other Gems talking about the features of the hotel the night before they’d departed BCU. Apparently, it was a nicer hotel than they were accustomed to— but Peridot blamed that tidbit on the fact that when they were in the arts district of a capital city, things were usually a bit pricier. When in Rome, right?

But it wasn’t the gym or conference hall or even the snack bar down in the lobby that had gotten her attention. It was the fact that there was a pool. It wasn’t uncommon for hotels to have those, she knew that, but this finally gave her a chance to do what she’d been wanting to do for Lapis for a long time coming.

The small bag she’d packed into her things held a waterproof prosthesis sleeve; Peridot hadn’t been swimming in so long, she doubted she even remembered how to swim. But she thought it still warranted a try. She pinched her lips and wrapped the bundle in her arms, excusing herself to the bathroom for a second to discreetly apply the sleeve to her prosthetic leg.

It still felt weird, even if she couldn’t actually feel it. She pulled her sweatpants on over it, appreciating their bagginess as she stepped out of the bathroom, feeling that she looked just as nervous as she felt. She moved over to her bag and stuck her dirty clothes in the extra compartment in the front.

“I heard from Rainbow and Alexandrite that there’s a pool at the top of this hotel,” Peridot mentioned passively, her heart pulling taut in her chest as she awaited Lapis’ response. It wasn’t nearly as collateral as she’d anticipated: Lapis had lowered her gaze from the television, the arm that she'd curled around the back of her neck sinking slightly. “Is there?”

“Yeah!” Peridot continued, completely failing the act of playing nonchalant about the matter. “I’m kinda curious. About the pool, that is. They told me the area’s encased by glass-- you can see the whole city from up there!”

Lapis still appeared to be disillusioned. She looked more bewildered than interested in that moment, provoking Peridot to try a different approach. Maybe something more straightforward would be the best thing to do to get things going the way she was envisioning.

“Do you-- wanna go up there with me, Lapis?”

It felt silly pattering around the question, and she sounded even sillier with how timorous her voice became upon asking. But she just-- didn’t want to bring back those terrible memories Lapis had with swimming and-- being in the water in general. But she’d seen firsthand how much Lapis missed it. It had been one of the very first things Peridot had learned about Lapis, up on the lighthouse hill the night they learned they’d scored a clinic.

Peridot fidgeted as she waited for any kind of response from Lapis— visual or audible, it didn’t matter to her-- anything! She looked up nervously to find Lapis regarding her with staid, thoughtful eyes, and Peridot swore she could see her partner’s mind trying to function behind the thick head of blue hair.
Lapis’ lips parted, then shivered shut, before trying again-- but to no avail, as no sound emerged. Peridot felt her heart thud painfully. “No, no-- it’s okay, Lapis, nevermind, you don’t hav--”

“Okay.”

“Wh-- wait, what?”

“I’ll go with you,” Lapis confirmed, efficiently halting the gushing remorse Peridot could feel rebounding through her small frame. It diffused under the incoming flush of giddiness that warmed her from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair as she pounced on the bed beside Lapis, eyes huge. “Really?”

“I’m not gonna say it a third time,” Lapis mused with a quirked brow, and Peridot found herself being pushed away by a bare, freckled foot as Lapis rolled over to heave herself off the comforter. “Let me get a shirt on.”

Peridot threw a fistpump up into the air behind Lapis’ back, scrambling off of the bed and checking beneath her sweatpants that the waterproof sheath for her prosthetic was still in tact. She practically flew towards the door, snagging their room key in one hand and a towel in the other. Lapis was still giving her an odd look, but didn’t say anything as the two of them made their way to the elevator and started their way up, up, up to the very top of the hotel.

Granted, it was only four levels to the roof, but elevator rides were an otherworldly experience where the laws of time did not exist.

Peridot was immediately met by a brisk breeze the minute she stepped out of the elevator and into the corridor that led to the roof door. She grit her teeth, floundering in the sudden sensation of being madly underprepared for the pool.

She’d forgot to account for the fact that it was ten o’clock on a wintry night. And the water would probably be icy to the touch. It wouldn’t bode well for either of them if they woke up the next morning with a chill.

Why had Lapis agreed to this again?

“I, umm-- may have forgotten to remember that it’s going to be astoundingly cold the second we step foot out there,” Peridot fumbled as she lightly pressed her hand against the crashbar on the door, just enough to engage the locking but not enough to open it just yet.

Lapis looked at Peridot, then down at herself, and gave a shrug. “We’ve already made it this far.”

“That we have,” Peridot exhaled, curt, as she pried open the door and was indeed met with a wave of cold that rose all the hairs on the back of her neck. “Yikes.”

The first thing Peridot noticed was the pool. It glowed a deep shade of bright turquoise, LEDs lining the length of the rectangular body of water and casting their luminescent gleam beneath its placid surface. Steam curled up and around the length of the pool. The smell of chlorine was poignant but not overbearing, which was a relief-- she didn’t want to walk into tomorrow with hair tinged green. For whatever reason, the only lighting outside of the pool came from spotlights that shot straight into the night, emitting a soft white beam that lit up the poolchairs and wooden gazebos in the most minimalistic way.

“I hope that’s not a flying hazard,” Peridot murmured to herself, startling when she felt Lapis’ presence whisk past her, the light sound of her feet papping against the rough tiling filling the quiet between them. “Do you like it?”
Lapis paused briefly along the poolside, arms wrapped thoughtfully over her chest. “It’s... it is nice,” she admitted. Peridot could see her pointedly will her eyes away from the pool, though, instead moving out to the glass barrier that separated the rooftop from open air. “The city, too.”

Peridot followed Lapis over, peering through the glass and out towards the capital city. It reminded her a bit of Empire City, but it didn’t have the same condescending aura of majesty as the latter. Regardless, the buildings went on for miles, glass skyscrapers glinting in all of the billboards, LED advertisements, and street lamps that were only adding to the light pollution crisis.

But for aesthetic’s sake... yes, it was pretty nice up here. Now Peridot realized that Sardonyx hadn’t been exaggerating the view of the cityscape.

“Hey, I think that’s Delmarva State,” Peridot pointed out suddenly, eyes finding a large series of modernistic buildings, the geometric, cutting image of Homeworld. The fact that they were so close was a bit daunting.

“Gross,” Lapis uttered cheekily. “I can smell their contempt from here. At least we don’t have to deal with them at all tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Peridot sighed, remembering that since they were last, they were very unlikely to run into any company from the Homeworld troupe, in or out of character. Yet, something about running into them tomorrow made Peridot’s stomach turn.

Suddenly it wasn’t just the cold making her shiver.

While Lapis continued leaning against the guardrail to stare out at the expanse of the Delmarva capital, Peridot snuck around to the edge of the pool. She edged into a kneel, favoring her bad knee, and slipped her fingers into the water, fully expecting to jump back at how freaking cold it would be.

As luck would have it though, the water was warm to the touch. Peridot assumed they heated the water during the winter months; it seemed fitting for this sort of spiffy establishment. After all, she’d had her stay at a few hotels like these whenever her mother would drag her on a business trip.

Peridot let out a determined huff. Step one of her plan was complete: get Lapis up to the pool! Nice!

Now the rest of her plan had to go through. If only she knew how to properly engage it.

“The water’s warm!” Peridot called out, leaning back from the edge and flicking her hand free of the stubborn droplets clinging to her skin. Lapis turned around and gave her a funny look, brows high with the beginnings of mirth. “You know that’s usually not what you want to hear when you step into the water, right?”

Peridot took a moment to register the words, then sputtered as her skin warmed. “No, no -- ew, not like that-- I think it’s heated! After all, look at the steam coming off of it!”

Lapis followed Peridot’s gesture out to the wispy billows of steam emanating from the water’s surface. In the night’s darkness she couldn’t make out exactly what Lapis was thinking--she usually never could unless it was blatantly obvious-- but she hoped that she was thinking of something good instead of bad.

“Probably,” Lapis said at last, not helping Peridot in the slightest.

Peridot rolled her shoulders, adamant to get more than a probably out of her partner. “It’s got to be a whole lot better than shivering out in the cold air out here.”
“Mmm.”

_Ugh_. That was even worse than a _probably_! It was becoming obvious that the submissive approach wasn’t going to work in Peridot’s favor. Peridot’s nostrils flared with decision as she took a step back from the waters, and all but tore off her sweatpants. She had her alien boxers on anyways, so, it wasn’t as if she was skinny dipping.

She threw the sweats to the wind (making sure they actually weren’t carried off by the breeze but instead landing safely on a poolchair) and eyed the water with narrowed eyes and an expression too austere for the occasion. She felt the rough tile beneath her foot, heel pivoting back and forth.

Was this really the best idea she had? . . . No, it wasn’t, but it was too late to back out _and_ the water was definitely going to be warmer than the night air.

Peridot took a running start and leaped into the air, her heart jumping into her throat as the glistening waters rose up to meet her. Her hands flew up to protect her glasses as she let out a shrill squeal of surprise when the water all but clapped against her legs and thighs, and she found herself sinking rapidly beneath the surface.

She heard something from outside the pool, but all of her attention was focused on how very under-the-water she was. At first the change in temperature around her was startling and her skin tingled unpleasantly in response, but she quickly acclimated, arms throwing themselves out to propel herself back up towards the surface.

At least she hadn’t forgotten the basics that everyone had always talked about-- just kick your limbs around and hope you don’t drown.

Peridot broke the surface of the water, features twisted into something like disdain when the water seeped into her mouth.

And, as it turned out, that garbled sound she’d been hearing had been Lapis shouting from outside the pool. She was crouching over the edge, knuckles pale from how tightly they were gripping the tiles lining the edge of the water, brown eyes huge and glistening with distress. “Peridot, _oh my god_ - - what’re you _doing_?!”

Peridot blinked the moisture out from her eyes, looking at Lapis, then back down at herself, then back to Lapis with a twitchy half-smile. “I’m swimming.”

“But--” Lapis stopped, staring down at the water lapping at her fingertips, then back up to her partner with an exasperated pleading in her eyes. “But you can’t swim!”

“I can. . . float! And doggy-paddle!” Peridot chirped back, sounding more animated than she actually felt. In all honesty, this whole thing was sort of petrifying. But also gratifying? It was a confusing batch of feelings that Peridot didn’t feel like trying to decipher right now. What she did want to do, though, was to get Lapis in the water _with_ her.

With small huffs of exertion, Peridot kicked her way over to the edge where Lapis was still frozen, face a mixture of sickening concern and bewilderment. Peridot idly wondered, was there a primal fear hidden within the contours of her features?

She gripped the edge, her skin steaming slightly from the exposure to the chilly night air, as she looked up at Lapis, hope brightening her pale cheeks. “I got a sleeve for my leg,” she explained breathlessly, twisting around briefly to show the device beneath the rippling surface of the water. “So I could. . . _swim_! And maybe get _you_ to. . . swim, too?”
Lapis’ expression shattered, some inscrutable sentiment taking over her facial features as she regarded Peridot. Peridot gently glided in the water, voice caught somewhere in her throat, fighting to escape and say something, anything to break the silence tainted by the sound of whispering water.

She hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath until Lapis softly spoke. “You. . . did that? For me?”

“Well. . . yeah,” Peridot murmured, voice hardly audible over the sighing of the water. “I know how much you miss. . .” She looked down at the water around her chest, then out at the rest of the serene pool, a pang in her heart. “This. Swimming. And-- water.”  

Peridot turned back to Lapis. It’s not the ocean, but, maybe that’s a good thing. You know-- small steps!”

“Peridot, I don’t kno--”

“It’s okay if you don’t know,” Peridot intervened before Lapis could express her dubiety. “It pains me to admit this but I don’t know things all the time. But-- I want to keep learning! I figured. . . if I could try this, then maybe you’d be willing to try it, too.”

Peridot wanted Lapis to be better. Not for Peridot, but for herself. And. . maybe learning to swim again wasn’t the most common rehabilitation there was out there, but Peridot felt it was just perfect for her. For them. It was a massive part of Lapis that she’d never been able to get back after the toxic practices she’d undergone that ruined it for her.

Peridot reached out a damp hand, placing it comfortingly over Lapis’. She wouldn’t make Lapis do something she didn’t want to do. Hell, that’s the absolute last thing she would ever want for her. But if she didn’t try. . .

“I remember you told me once that water is a part of who you are. You can’t let one bad experience take that away from you,” Peridot coaxed, rubbing consolatory circles over Lapis’ stiff hands.

Silence befell them once more, time stilling around the two. All Peridot could hear was the thump, thump, thump of her own heartbeat in her ears.

That is until Lapis finally spoke again. “Can. . . Can I use the steps to get in?”

Peridot’s mouth split into a grin as her heart soared. “Yes!” Her chest weighed as lightly as a feather in her chest as she began making haste towards the other side of the pool, where there was a handy set of stairs leading down into the shallowest portion of the water. “Yes! Oh, definitely, yes! Hold on, let me-- just get over there!”

Peridot was able to stand in the shallows since it only reached up to the middle of her neck, watching with giddy anticipation as Lapis paused at the top of the steps. She made a move as if to enter, then took a step back.

For a fearful moment Peridot feared she’d gotten cold feet, but Lapis was only shedding her t-shirt. The actress stepped back towards the edge of the steps, a hand gripping at her forearm tentatively as she glanced out at the waiting waters. “I don’t deserve this, Peridot.”

“Yes, you do,” Peridot coerced, watching Lapis hover with uncertainty at the top of the stairway. She scrambled for the steps, climbing her way out of the pool on all fours to stand beside Lapis. “Here, let me help you!”

“I know how to walk down steps, Peridot.”
“But will you?”

Lapis grunted diffidently, only confirming Peridot’s theory. Gently, she coaxed Lapis’ hand into her own, walking with slow, methodical steps towards the edge of the steps. “Just-- one foot at a time, okay? You can take as long as you want. It’s... it’s just water.”

“A lot can happen in the water,” Lapis cautioned doubtfully but nonetheless followed Peridot’s clement lead as Peridot took the first step down into the pool.

One, two, three, they took the steps together, until the water had risen up to Lapis’ knees. Peridot worried because she could feel Lapis’ hand trembling within her own, and she doubted it was because of the cold. She reached out her free hand, taking Lapis’ other hand in it, and began to lead her in backwards, praying that she didn’t slip up and send them both flying backwards into the water.

She noticed with a loving ache that Lapis’ shivering had abated somewhat, but her eyes were still glued to the water like it was going to rise up and engulf her like some sentient beast. Peridot creased her brows, thoughtful.

“Hey, Lapis, close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Can you close for your eyes for me?”

Lapis finally took her eyes off of the water that had now ridden half-way up her thigh, focusing instead on Peridot. Now she could see that her cheeks were bright with fear, but her eyes-- they were even brighter with hope. “...I can, but, why?”

“Just trust me,” Peridot murmured, leading Lapis further in, letting the water gradually rise up around them. The water had risen up to Peridot’s chest after a few generous steps, and she could tell Lapis was beginning to fidget with her eyes shut tight as the water surrounded her abdomen.

“Peridot, I-- I can’t do it--”

“You *can*,” Peridot promised with thorough conviction. “I know that you can do this,” she added, holding Lapis’ tense hands to her heart. “I promise. I *know* that you can win. I want you to go under the surface with me, and... then open your eyes.”

“Open them... under the water?”

“Yeah,” Peridot nodded. “Under the water... Can you do that?”

Lapis bit at her lip so tightly that Peridot inwardly fretted that she’d start to well blood, but ended up frantically nodding as she wrenched her eyes even tighter. “...Yeah. I can. I will.”

Peridot could have wept with relief, but she knew the battle was still waging uphill; she had no idea what Lapis would do when submerged in the water. She’d been afraid of it for so *long*, had so many shocking things associated with that feeling of being entombed...

But they’d come this far. It always came back to that: how far they’d come, together.

“One,” Peridot whispered, voice having lost all of its courageous vigor as they neared the climax of the battle.

“Two,” Lapis breathed shakily back, her face pointing away from the water as she prepared to duck
beneath.

“Three.”

They spoke in unison as they plunged voluntarily beneath the surface, and Peridot could feel Lapis’ hands spasm within her own. She loosened her hold, eyes snapping open within the turquoise-coloured water and staring in amazement ahead of her.

Peridot made out Lapis’ shape, her profile—her hair seemed even more blue beneath the surface. She could see deep brown eyes staring back at her, lips parted in awe as a few stray bubbles crept out between her teeth.

Lapis were doing it—she was doing it! Peridot’s hands were embraced by Lapis’ own again as their minds filled with the sounds of the underwater world, of swishing and bubbling, of the pressure that pressed on their eardrums and the warmth of one another’s hands.

Peridot didn’t know if she was finally letting herself cry or if the chlorine was stinging at her eyes. Maybe it was a mixture of both. She didn’t even have time to try to figure it out herself, because suddenly Lapis was there, lips crashing against Peridot’s and sending a barrage of bubbles up towards the surface.

Peridot’s hands instinctively flew up to ghost along Lapis’ sides, the skin achingly familiar to contrast the estranged water that made each movement feel as though she was wading through lead. But stars, she didn’t want it to stop. Any of it!

Peridot didn’t know how long they were beneath, but it couldn’t have been too long, because they both surged up together in one another’s embrace, sending water scattering all around them as they gaped for fresh air.

“I can’t believe it,” Lapis was the first to utter, lips fluttering like a fish out of water, staring down at Peridot with huge, stunned eyes. Then she laughed, a light, joyous sound that made Peridot’s whole body light on fire. “I can’t believe it! I’m—a-ha! I’m in the water, I’m swimming, I--!” Lapis couldn’t even speak she was so radiant, arms swaying through the pool before wrapping tightly around herself as she dunked her head beneath the water again.

Peridot choked out a confounded gasp as she waded over to where Lapis had gone underneath, only to be captured in Lapis’ arms as the actress bounced back up, her blue fringe plastered over her eyes and her freckled skin beaded with moisture. “Peridot!”

“That’s me--!” Peridot wheezed from where she was now completely entrapped by Lapis’ arms, a spattering laugh rising out from her chest. “Lapis! You’re kinda crushing me!”

“Oh! Sorry! I just--” Lapis quickly detached from Peridot, grinning apologetically as she gave an elegant twirl in the waters. “I’m sorry, it’s just-- I-- god, Peridot, I don’t even. . I missed this so much, and. .”

She met Peridot’s eyes, and Peridot knew that the moisture collecting at the corners of her eyes wasn’t pool water. “God, I’m so happy! Th. . thank you, Peridot, I--”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Peridot smiled. “Just-- experience it!”

Lapis snorted. “Okay-- but. . really. ” She stopped and dragged a wet hand through her soaked hair to remove it from her eyes. “Thank you, Peridot. I. . you’re honestly changing my life, one thing at a time. And-- and all for the better. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”
Peridot couldn’t even feel her cheeks anymore. She was just surprised that she wasn’t creating steam herself with how hot her skin felt right then. “Wow— thanks.”

They remained staring at one another for a moment, blithe. It was like some impenetrable bubble where nothing could go wrong.

Then Lapis splashed water right up into Peridot’s face and dove beneath the surface to the other side of the pool, ignoring Peridot’s indignant shout as she doggy-paddled after her.

It didn’t matter how long they spent in the pool, sporting, pushing, and splashing one another; this night was theirs. Just for one night, they would let the worldly worries lift from off of their shoulders and evaporate like the steam rising up from the waters.

And unbeknownst to the both of them, almost every Crystal Gems were hiding in the corridor behind the door, peeking through the tiniest crack behind the exit, their faces soft with pride and with knowing.

Peridot’s loathing for waking up at any point before seven was exacerbated by the time the Crystal Gems had been bussed to their very early morning rehearsal. It didn’t make any sense, honestly. If they were the last show to go on, why were they the earliest possible time slot?

Ugh. Delmarva State was terrible and Peridot wanted no part in it anymore.

Peridot rubbed the painful remnants of sleep from her eyes, mourning the extra hours of sleep she very much wanted. She partially blamed herself for how little sleep she and Lapis had gotten; they’d been kicking around in the pool, laughing and playing and. . . well, doing other things until midnight, leaving them with less than five hours of sleep for the next day. Her only solace in this trying, sleep-deprived time was that Garnet had announced they would be returning to the hotel after the hour until the afternoon came.

The back garage door was opening in preparation for the Gems to begin setting and spiking their set pieces, and manning the chain were two tanned, copper-haired twins with matching pixie cuts. They waved cordially to the troupe as more of the stagehands came into the light to help the Crystal Gems begin their tech hour.

A tall, old woman with dense white hair emerged, her dark blue eyes amicable as she moved over to Garnet and Pearl, giving their hands a slow albeit eager shake. “It’s lovely to see you Crystal Gems here,” the woman said, her voice paced like a torpid grandmother’s. “I am Flourite, the stage manager for this state competition.”

“Oh, it’s so nice to meet you in person, Miss Fluorite! I made sure to keep in constant contact through e-mail to ensure that there were no conflicts in our timetable here.” Pearl twittered, all smiles as she clasped her hands enthusiastically over her jacketed chest.

“Mrs. Flourite,” the manager corrected slowly, her raspy voice fading into a laugh, sending the Gem directors a knowing wink from above her spectacles. “My wives are none too pleased with me for being up this early.”

“Wives,” Peridot mirrored quietly, her vision losing focus for a second as she envisioned a handful of old ladies fawning over one another. She couldn’t tell if she was intrigued, disturbed, or in awe at the
thought.

“C’mon.” Peridot felt Lapis’ hand gently wrap around her forearm as she led them into the facility and out of the cold. “We wanna get out of the way while they unload.”

“You’re not going to help them?”

“They want to get it done as quickly as they can, so they’ve got the stronger Gems working so it’s more efficient,” Lapis shrugged, speaking it like a quote. “They’ve got Bismuth commanding what goes where so we should be ready to go in a few minutes.”

Lapis was right, because within ten minutes the entire company, as well as the Delmarva State stage representatives, were circled in the middle of their set. They’d met with the stagehands—a curious group of characters that sort of reminded Peridot of the Zookeepers. Sapphire had quickly made friends with a student named Padparadscha, and the twins that Peridot had seen before were the Rutile sisters.

Peridot was standing beside a taller woman with curly hair named Rhodonite, who was apparently the intern responsible for setting up the light and sound technicians in the back. Since only Peridot used upstage technologies, the two broke off from the group and made the trek up the auditorium into the light booth.

“This is a sizable auditorium,” Peridot murmured absently as they moved up the dark rows of crimson velveteen chairs, filing into the back of the theatre where Rhodonite unlocked the door and led Peridot inside.

“Ehh, it seems bigger when it’s filled with people,” the intern shrugged, worrying her lip. “And it’s a lot of people. This whole place packs up so full that a few audience members have to stand or sit on the steps! It’s insane!”

“That many?” Peridot clamped her lips shut, trying to envision the shadowy auditorium filled to the brim with watchers. A bitter half of her wanted to just think it was the family and friends of the Homeworld troupe trying to make themselves seem superior, and they’d leave after Homeworld opened the contest and return later for the awards. The other half of her wanted them to stick around though, so the Crystal Gems could completely upstage Homeworld in every way: whether it be the lights, the sounds, the ambiance, the props, or the story itself—hell, maybe all of those together! Anything to prove to Homeworld that the Crystal Gems wouldn’t be trifled by them.

“Yes, and they all know very well what they’re doing. Or, watching, actually,” Rhodonite added next, turning on the lightboard and motioning for Peridot to take the reins. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there were more than three theatre critics at today’s showings! The State competition is a huge event, mind you—” The stagehand froze up, a hand stuck flusteredly to her heating cheeks. “At least, that’s what the school board wants to make us think it is. They’ve been advertising for months for tonight!”

Peridot couldn’t help but roll her eyes. “They were that confident that Homeworld would make it to State?”

“Unfortunately,” Rhodonite sighed, much to Peridot’s surprise. The blonde fixated on the intern, arms crossing curiously over her chest as she inquired further. “You don’t like Homeworld much, do you?”

“Oh— gosh, no, how could I? That Blue Diamond— she’s terrifying!” Rhodonite gaped, before snapping her dark eyes to Peridot in a moment of fleeting panic. “You won’t tell her I said that, will you? Oh, please don’t tell her I said that, I could lose this job—”
“Hey, I won’t tell her anything,” Peridot rose her hands up dismissively, knitting her eyebrows together behind her glasses. “Hell, I try to avoid her!” An unwitting shiver crawled up her back as she remembered the Homeworld director’s intense, penetrating stare the night of their area showing. “She gives me the chills.”

“You’re not the only one,” Rhodonite muttered before seeming to move on from the matter, checking that Peridot’s recorded cues were already implemented before leaving the Crystal Gem to her own devices.

The hour went by seamlessly. Before Peridot knew it, she was saving edits she had made to cues that she wanted to be special for the State show, and grabbing her satchel and binder and heading back down the auditorium with Rhodonite. They’d gotten the blue spike tape (fitting!) and had already spiked their props, and were beginning to disassemble them by the time Peridot marched backstage.

Lapis was placing her own individual props back into her prop box when she arrived, features lighting up slightly when Peridot came into view. “How were lights?”

“Fine,” Peridot gladly conceded. “They were already queued in, but I made adjustments wherever necessary.”

“Good,” Lapis huffed as she hoisted up her prop box, a stray bead of sweat trickling down the side of her cheek. “I’m gonna help them reload this time.”

“Why’s that?”

“The faster we reload the faster we can go back to the hotel and sleep,” Lapis winked, causing Peridot to stifle a laugh as she grabbed a smaller box of props and moved towards the Penske parked in the garage at the back of the auditorium. They managed to pack up in record timing, sending Bismuth off with the Penske to park as Fluorite chatted with the directors.

The Crystal Gems waved the Delmarva stagehands goodbye as they left the back of the theatre; they’d been very good-natured, despite that they stood for the same school that Homeworld did. Peridot gratefully collapsed into her seat beside Lapis, squinting out the bus window to see the sun barely beginning to show its face.

“Coward,” she grumbled at the rising sun, throwing her hoodie over her eyes to hide away from the golden morning light. She felt Lapis’ head press against her shoulder as Greg shifted the bus into gear, and Peridot was eighty-three percent convinced she blacked out between Delmarva State and the hotel, because far too quickly was she scrambling off with Lapis, sleepwalking their way up to the room.

It was safe to say that they both passed out until deeper into the morning. They didn’t care if they missed the continental breakfast downstairs-- sleep was more important than some half-baked bagels and scrambled eggs that probably came out of a carton.

It was the garish rapping on their door that startled Peridot awake, hissing when the white light filtering in through the curtains slurred her already bleary vision. She groped around for her glasses and blundered towards the door, swinging it open to reveal Ruby and Sapphire, beaming at her with interlocked arms. “Room for two more?”

“Uhh, sure,” Peridot yawned, not quite registering it when the couple passed her by and headed deeper into the room.

“Good morning, Lapis!” Ruby was the first to greet, and in Peridot’s sleep-muddled head she was
barely able to hear Sapphire gasp lightly and hold Ruby by the arm with a quiet laugh. “Ruby, she’s still asleep.”

“Oh.”

“Oh!” Peridot’s eyes flew open as she scrambled across the room, suddenly intensely grateful to her past self that she’d fallen asleep with her clothes on—because Lapis was very much exposed beneath that comforter. “Lapis! Lapis, wake up-- and-- put this on!”

Lapis rose sluggishly from under the blanket, just barely managing to catch the blanket before it fell too low. “What—” She was cut off as her Mirror Gem shirt was thrown over her head, choosing to chortling drowsily as the fabric muffled her voice. “Why?”

“Because Ruby and Sapphire are in the room and you’re indecent!”

Lapis paused, slowly removing the shirt from where it covered her eyes, and blinked at her troupe mates a few times with a sheepish “oh.”

“Hi,” Ruby waved gingerly, wisely deciding to avert her eyes from the bedhead and instead focus on Sapphire with a laugh. “I guess we came in at a bad time, huh?”

Peridot fixed her glasses with a grumble. “Tell me why it is you two are coming in again?”

“Oh, no reason,” Sapphire smiled. “We just wanted to. . . check in on you two.”

“I didn’t know we needed checking on,” Lapis mumbled from the bed as she pulled the shirt over her head, tousling her hair as she leaned back against the headboard and looked over at their visitors.

Peridot blinked lazily, turning towards the analog clock on the dresser as she clambered onto the bed beside Lapis, collapsing on her stomach. “It’s already 11:33,” she grumbled into the comforter. “Breakfast is over downstairs, right?”

“Yeah,” Ruby drawled. “But they’re ordering clubs to the hotel in about thirty minutes, so it’ll be okay. Right, Sapphire?”

“Mm-hmm,” Sapphire hummed. Peridot pressed her forehead thoughtfully into the comforter again, lips pursing at how weird the two of them were acting. “So—why are you here again?” She asked through the blanket, not caring for manners because damn it, she’d only just woken up a minute ago and there was already so much to think about.

“Well, Garnet wants a company meeting down in the lobby in ten minutes,” Ruby divulged at last, which caused both Lapis and Peridot to elicit moans of protest. “Everyone else is already down there, so she sent us up to fetch you two. She knows you had a late night.”

“A late night?” Peridot repeated, clueless, before realizing what that might entail. She burst up from the bed, sharing a blush with Lapis before looking back at Ruby and Sapphire-- only to find them crawling back towards the door.

“So, yeah, see you guys down there!” Ruby chimed, swinging the door open and marching out. Sapphire lingered behind for a moment though and lifted up her white bangs to wink at Peridot with her good eye. “I’m proud of you two,” she whispered in a small voice before following her partner out and shutting the door quietly behind them.

Peridot glanced back at Lapis, who looked just as helpless as Peridot felt.
“Stalkers,” Peridot finally sighed at last, moving to grab her Mirror Gem shirt and a fresh pair of pants to change into. “All of them.”

Lapis and Peridot danced around each other, throwing on clothes and cleaning up in general before managing to make it down to the hotel’s conference hall a minute shy of being late. Amethyst waved them over first, and they ended up on the floor between Amethyst and Smoky, watching the directors go over the minutes with one another.

“Well, good mornin’, sleeping beauties,” Amethyst cackled as they finally settled down. “Did you forget we had this meeting?”

“Yes, those are the words of a hypocrite and you know it,” Peridot simpered right back, crossing her arms stubbornly over her chest.

“I dunno the meaning of the word,” Amethyst yawned as she kicked out her legs and threw her arms up behind her head in a stretch. “Only reason I’m up is ‘cuz I have Opal and Sardonyx for roomies this time and god, Sardonyx has a morning routine loud enough to wake a sleeping giant!”

“I resent that!” Sardonyx sang from across the room, but Peridot could practically hear her flattered grin.

Amethyst snorted and leaned over to Peridot. “Get this, she sings her way through waking up, showering, and a whole bunch of other random stuff I’ve never seen a person do in the morning before.”

“Somehow, I’m unsurprised.”

“Now that everyone is here,” Pearl beckoned, cutting Peridot off from saying anything more, from the front of the room, fingers drumming worriedly over the white folding table the hotel had kindly lent to the theatre group, “I suppose it’s safe to begin. I hope everyone is well-rested?”

“Define well-rested, please,” Smoky snickered, but was dismissed by Pearl with a glare without any real heat as she continued on. “Do remember that we are last on the performance schedule, which I encourage you to consider a... good thing. We get to leave the impression that the other plays are unable to.”

The meeting went on like this for about ten to fifteen minutes, troupe members pitching questions that needed answering and the directors replying with their seemingly infinite knowledge of the day and every possible conflict that could besiege them.

“What time do we need to be back down here with our things?” Stevonnie asked at last, having noticed that many of them were beginning to get antsy.

“Three-forty,” Garnet nodded. “We’ll be returning to Delmarva State at four, roughly thirty minutes before Homeworld is meant to go on. That gives us roughly seven hours to prepare in our green room.”

“Only seven?” Amethyst pressed sarcastically, placing her hands over her knees and hauling herself up onto her feet. “I dunno, you guys, that seems kinda frugal, if you ask me.”

“The hours will go by faster than you give it credit for,” Garnet replied, flipping shut the pamphlet she’d been speaking from and giving the group a once-over. “You all are dismissed; Bismuth, Alexandrite, could you stay behind for a moment so I can discuss the drop-off and pick-up with you?”
The Crystal Gems all left to the rooms, many groups deciding to spend time with other groups instead of go their separate ways. At first Lapis and Peridot preferred to stick to their own dwellings, but ended up sitting, chatting, and practicing with Ruby, Sapphire, Stevonnie, and Rainbow Quartz until it was time for them to take their things down to the bus for loading.

It was odd, really. Peridot felt like she was on autopilot for the whole bus ride back to the university, ushered by more official OAP representatives into their green room (which, to Homeworld’s credit, was not a tiny closet-classroom, but rather an open black box room big enough to fit all the Gems comfortably).

Peridot spent a good portion of time discussing the lights with Pearl, even though they both knew full well that Peridot knew every flicker and every shift in the cue sheet, and knew how to improvise should things go awry against her control on-stage.

Lapis had been ushered off towards the makeup artists some hour or so ago, and the majority of the cast were already in costume, and beginning to get in-character, to top. Peridot’s eyes moved nervously to the clock on the wall to read the time: 10:45PM.

“Almost time,” Peridot sighed into her hands, rubbing circles into the space between her eyes to abate the headache she could feel threatening to crawl into her sinuses. Garnet was right: time had flown. She supposed it always did when the Gems were all gearing up; they always managed to chase the boredom away by rehearsing lines or playing silly little games to pass the time by.

Padparadscha was the one to knock on the door closer to their scheduled time, staring sweetly up at Sugilite who had opened the door, before smiling pleasantly and informing the group that they would be ready for them backstage in five minutes.

Peridot found herself following blindly behind Amethyst as crew led the group after Padparadscha, waiting in terse but determined silence until they were allowed entry into the back of the theatre. Bromwich Bay’s troupe members were removing their last set pieces out into the garage to quietly load while the Crystal Gems moved in, readying themselves at the centre of the emptied stage as Fluorite spoke the final words.

“It is the company ready?” The old woman questioned in the same delayed tone, scoring her gaze over the Gems as they fidgeted and embraced one another in preparation for the show to come.

“It is the company ready,” Pearl affirmed with a nod when she’d accounted for everyone in the tight bundle of people, and Fluorite nodded and fanned out the Rutile twins to be ready to man the curtains and Padparadscha to alert the upstage manager that the Crystal Gems were readying their set.

It suddenly weighed on Peridot that they were really here. They were really about to be the closing play to the Delmarva OAP State Competition. It made her sick, but it also made her so excited.

The instant that Flourite started her timer, controlled chaos erupted around Peridot. Technical members began to unpack and connect their devices, unraveling cords and cables. Cast members rushed to meet with the loading crew and place their props on the larger set pieces, and Peridot was left floundering to locate Rhodonite and be led to the back before their seven minutes was up.

Before she found Rhodonite, though, she found Lapis. The blue-haired actress turned to Peridot, and even through the cosmetics used to give her the character’s ghoulish semblance Peridot could see the red stain of a stressful blush on her cheeks. Her glassy contacts glistered curiously in the blue half-light, and for a moment Peridot’s heart skipped a beat at the anomalous nature of Lapis’ ghostly contour. But the moment that their hands twined together, Peridot recognized the hold, and she
narrowed her eyes, determined.

“You’ll be great,” Peridot urged, knuckles paling under Lapis’ hold. She could feel Lapis’
trepidation through her fingertips, in how there was the slightest quiver, in how cool her skin was.
She moved her other hand to grab at Lapis’ forearm comfortingly, a gesture that was swiftly met by
the closing of distance between them. The kiss was brief, but left Peridot’s entire body tingling with
exhilaration as she was torn away by a very frantic Rhodonite, ushering her to follow her up to the
booth to start the show.

Peridot was practically bouncing on her heels as she followed a now flustered Rhodonite out from
the wing, out through the hidden corridor and into the walkway moving along the edges of the
impressive auditorium. She could barely hear the humdrum chattering of the audience over the
thundering of her own heart, which was a comfort more than it was a burden.

Curious about how many people were actually present to watch the finale, considering what
Rhodonite had said earlier, Peridot stole a glance out at the audience, then regretted it immediately as
her entire world came crumbling down to bury her.

Her heart clutched painfully in her chest and a wave of cold flushed over her skin, icy beads of sweat
trickling down the back of her neck as she quavered. She stumbled forward, needing to grip onto the
railing lining the edge of the walkway to keep from falling, much to the dismay of the frustrated
intern leading her to the back booth.

No, she wasn’t terrified by the fact that this enormous auditorium was filled to the brim with people,
nor the fact that the three judges sitting at the heart of it all in all their inherent theatre grandeur
looked less than friendly, or the fact that she had less than a few minutes to get all the way up there to
start the countdown for the show . . .

She was terrified because sitting stiffly next to Homeworld’s director, just behind the central judging
booth, was Peridot’s mother.

Chapter End Notes

(yikes)
Peridot all but collapsed into the chair of the booth, paying Rhodonite little heed as she flustered over the light technician’s sudden change in disposition. Even the official supervisor present in the booth to ensure there was no foul play was eyeing Peridot in concern as she fumbled for the headset, skin flushed thirty shades paler than what was considered healthy.

“Garnet!” Peridot hissed into the microphone as soon as the connector light shone green. There was the sound of muted scuffling on the other end, and instead of the convenient voice of Garnet she heard Padparadscha on the other end.

“Hello! I didn’t realize you’d picked up already!”

“Uh-- gyuh- - Padparadscha, I need to speak to Garnet, it’s urgent!” Peridot pleaded into the headset. Garnet-- she’d know what to do! She always knew what to do! She’d know exactly what to do because Yellow Diamond was here and she did not look happy in the slightest to be here and oh my stars, why was she here?!

“Oh! You need Garnet?” Padparadscha inquired, sounding completely unphased by the evidently freaked-out tremors in Peridot’s from the other end. “One moment, please!”

“Hurry,” Peridot hissed through her teeth, the venom in her voice directed not at the sweetly Delmarva stagehand but rather for the now very dangerous predicament that Peridot had found herself entrapped in.

How did she get here? Wh-- why was she here?

Did she know? About her?

“Peridot.” Finally, Garnet’s voice buzzed in through the headset and Peridot would have wept with relief if it wasn’t for the fact that all the moisture in her body was now running down her skin in cold, sweaty bullets. “What’s wrong?”

“Yellow Diamond,” Peridot whispered rawly into the mic, dismay forcing her voice into a strained, high-pitched tenor. “She’s what’s wrong. She’s sitting-- right there -- in the audience--”

“Peridot, I need you to calm down--”
“Sitting there, menacingly! And-”

“Peridot,” Garnet’s voice cut in solemnly, the somber earnest in it giving Peridot enough time to breathe in and listen to what her director had to say.

“. . . I do see her. But you must not let this interfere with your performance running the front-stage lights. I know it’s going to be a distracti--”

“Oh, will she now?! I hadn’t even noticed her--”

“Peridot.”

Peridot swallowed the acidity threatening to spill out of her in droves. She knew it was fear that made her want to spit and snarl and throw her chair across the room because why did her clodding mother have to stick her big, presumptuous nose into her business right now? When had she ever given a damn about her interests or-- any aspect of the personal life that she had mandated and dictated for so many years?

“Peridot, listen to me.”

“Yes, yes, I’m--” Peridot pinched the bridge between her eyes with her index and thumb, pushing her glasses up as she stared with stinging eyes at the stopwatch in her free hand. Ninety seconds until the show was meant to begin. “I’m listening.”

“I’m going to put Lapis on,” Garnet told her, and Peridot hated how her first reaction was to wince, because Lapis didn’t need to be dragged into this newly developed mess. She could hear the backstage headset being handled, and the soft, lilting voice she could hear in the background made her heart throb with distress.

“Peridot?” Lapis spoke into her ears, sounding so Lapis and so unlike the phantom that it made Peridot guilty to have ripped her out of her character. “What’s wrong? Did they mess up your cues?”

“No, it--” Peridot swallowed thickly, not wanting to share this strain with Lapis. She didn’t need another thing to worry about tonight. “It’s fine. Everything’s fine. Cues are fine. It’s--” She stole a glance upwards, peering through the tinted glass panels that revealed to her the sea of audience members waiting for Mirror Gem to pull in its curtains, “it’s nothing. Tell Garnet I’m fine.”

“. . . Okay.” There was the brief sounds of a light-voiced argument on the other end, and Peridot’s heart thudded louder than the voice of Padparadscha as the stagehand took control of the backstage headset again. “Curtains will be drawn in . . . one minute! Lights, are you ready?”

“Lights are ready,” Peridot ceded through gritted teeth, and she made sure to pull up the registered cues because she’d forgotten to actually check that they were in order. Fortunately she didn’t need to manually recreate them like she’d feared for a split second-- but the primitive feeling of dread in her stomach would not abate so easily. Because if she strained as the house lights flashed to announce the commencement of the final production, she could see the outline of her mother’s head beside that of Blue Diamond’s.

Focus, Peridot, she willed herself, balling her fists and pressing them stubbornly into the sides of her head. This is State competition. You can’t mess this up-- for yourself or for the other Crystal Gems. They’re all counting on you. C’mon.

Peridot concentrated on every little detail of her actions: actions that had become almost mechanic in the past. She focused on bringing down the house lights, on ensuring that the work LEDs backstage
were properly shut down, and on communicating with the stage manager and other officials on the other end of the line. She had to concentrate on everything except for her mother right now.

But stars, it was so hard.

*Is this how Lapis felt at the area show?*

A knot of empathy swelled in Peridot’s throat as the supervisor on the other end confirmed that the company backstage was prepared, and signalled the Rutile twins to get into position to draw in the curtains.

Fluorite emerged before the grand drapes, clad in a winsome outfit stripped into powdery blue, velvet, and pinkish garments to announce and introduce *Mirror Gem*.

“Thank you all for coming to the conclusion of the Delmarva State One Act Play competition,” the manager spoke into the portable microphone, voice just as slow, methodical, and grandmother-like as Peridot recalled. “A friendly reminder, please, to turn off all cell phones as to not disturb the performance. We needn’t have what happened to our Homeworld troupe occur again.”

Peridot wanted to feel smug that a phone had gone off during *The Cluster*’s showcasing, but the fright in knowing that her mother was here squashed that cunning desire before it even became a thought.

“Our last play of the evening is, performed by the Crystal Gems from Beach City University, *Mirror Gem* by Paul Villeco.” Fluorite exited off stage left, disappearing behind the edge of the proscenium arch as the crowd proceeded to welcome the next show with a courteous round of applause.

Peridot stared pointedly at the back of where she thought she could still see her mother behind the central judging table. Was she clapping? Was she eager to see... *this? Theatre?* It seemed incredibly unlikely.

Peridot startled when a voice carried in through her headset, reminding her that they were about to start. “*Commencing Mirror Gem. Curtain in five, four...*” The voice was practically in Peridot’s mind-- she couldn’t even recognize who it was right now-- as her hands quivered over the board button to ignite the first cue as soon as it arrived.

“One, two.”

“One,” Peridot mouthed with the voice, the conviction weighted in her voice as the audience silenced and the curtains drew apart, and the show began.

The first twenty minutes went seamlessly. The extra rehearsal hours had certainly paid off, as even Peridot had begun to be invigorated by the story spun by the cast on-stage. Amethyst’s new sound cues chimed their way throughout the show, giving each musical moment a new sense of vividity and personality.

It wasn’t until they were around twenty-three minutes in that they began to elapse the recorded rehearsal times for certain scenes. Now, stretching scenes wasn’t terrible; some required those special little beats and pauses to really drive certain scores home to the audience. It was the scene between Blake and the ghost that added twenty-eight extra seconds to the timer, and the taste of dread on her tongue only worsened because those twenty-eight seconds could kill them if they carried on overtime.

And that, it did.
Those seconds stretched into two whole minutes by the time they had reached the five-minute barrier between them and forty minutes-- and they still had two whole scenes to go. If they couldn’t get that last minute in that was usually at minute thirty-eight-- Peridot feared that the audience wouldn’t see the story’s resolution. They wouldn’t see the phantom set free from the mirror, nor the family’s resolution of its internal conflict, nor any of the parts that really set *Mirror Gem* ’s story apart from every other story at the OAP State show.

Long story short, this was bad. *Really* bad. She glanced down at her timer and didn’t like what she saw ticking away on the little green screen.

“How are we looking on time back there?” Peridot mumbled into the headset, the newest onset of anxiety making her stomach drop through her body and into the floor below.

“*The curtains will close in about. . . four minutes,*” Padparadscha relayed, her kind little voice slighted with concern. “*I take it the Crystal Gems are running behind?*”

“A little,” Peridot affirmed with a sigh. “But I understand the dangers of tiptoeing too close to the cut-off time.”

“That’s good,” Padparadscha chirped helpfully, though Peridot didn’t feel helped in the slightest. Since coming up here she’d managed to obtain a headache-- whether it was from stress over the quality of their performance, their time, or the fact that she was only half an auditorium away from her mother-- she didn’t know or even *want* to know, at this point.

Two minutes passed, and they were still a whole scene away from finishing the performance. The cast on stage had caught on to the fact that they were running short on time, but months of lecturing from Pearl had taught them to not cut auxiliary lines or clip out any scenes that *needed* that time to protract.

So Peridot waited on baited breath as it was soon only Lapis and Stevonnie on-stage together, eyeing her timer warily. 38:05.

They weren’t going to finish on time. Peridot bit at the inside of her lip so ferociously that she could taste iron on her tongue, waiting for the stage manager’s instruction to cut the performance as their deadline ticked swiftly closer. But it never came.

“We’re getting *precariously* close to 39:30,” Peridot mumbled into the headset, choosing to ignore the curious look that the official OAP supervisor was sending her from the left. “We’re going to need to cut off early.”

Strangely, there was no sound from the other end, and nervously she checked the battery pack strapped to her shirt. It was on and fully functional on the outside-- so why wasn’t she getting any instructions?

“Hello?” Peridot tried again, brows furrowing as her hands quivered uneasily over the lightboard.

“This is Peridot. We’re going to need to shut down-- *hello?*”

The lack of response brought icy aggravation into Peridot as she authoritatively pinned her lips together and sent the representative beside her a serious look. “Backstage company is not responding. This show needs to be shut town in approximately twenty seconds.”

“Understood,” the man nodded, muttering something Peridot couldn’t hear into his earpiece. He waited a beat, like he was awaiting response from the other side, before nodding at the Crystal Gem.

“The show is yours to close.”
“Thank you,” Peridot breathed, wondering where the breath was coming from because she definitely was not breathing right now. She sent her timer a quick, forbearing look, and grit her teeth as she looked out upon the stage.

It was the beginning of the last scene, where Blake-- Stevonnie-- had just relayed to their family the cause of the broken household’s misery: the ghost sorrowfully trapped inside the mirror. They were three whole minutes behind.

Peridot gnashed her teeth together, tore her eyes away, and slammed the blackout button.

“Now she’s fr--” Stevonnie cut off the instant that the stage was plunged into darkness, and Peridot could have melted with relief. Two more seconds, they would have been disqualified entirely. 39:58.

A second later the audience roared with applause, none the wiser, effectively muting the sound of Peridot rushing to grab her bag, her lights binder, and thanking Rhodonite and the supervisor for their time before scrambling backstage for the strike.

Oh my stars, oh my stars, oh my stars -- I just shut down the show. I just shut down the show. They hate me, they’re all going to hate me for that-- She whisked behind the hidden entrance that led to the backstage wings, not wanting to slip behind the curtain lest someone... unpleasant see her escaping into the back.

Amethyst was the one to spot her out first, eyes huge with a distress that mirrored Peridot’s own. Before her puzzled friend could say anything though, Peridot had torn away, rushing into the shadows of the wings to avoid any sort of confrontation. Her heart was beating too fast and her head was too light-- the show was ruined, they’d gone overtime-- she’d had to stop it because no one was responding, and--

“Peridot!”

Peridot stopped where she stood, a tendril of terror running up her back as someone called out her name. The grief was fractionally minimized when she realized it was Lapis who was running up to her, features dark in the half-light as the rest of the cast and crew scrambled to strike for their seven minutes.

“I had to shut it down!” Peridot squeaked, lungs pulled too tautly for her to use even a shred of her real voice. “We only had a few seconds left, and--”

“It’s okay!” Lapis grabbed at Peridot’s shoulders, grounding her. Peridot looked up at her girlfriend in a wary, afflicted daze. “Listen-- the audience loved it! Did you hear them applauding? It’s-- remember what that critic said that one time? Quality over quantity?”

“Y-Yes--”

“We’ll be okay then,” Lapis finished before Peridot could rebut her any. They heard someone hiss Lapis’ name from the stage, and Lapis excused herself with a quick ‘sorry, gotta go’ and rushed off to pick up her props so the moving crew could move the set pieces.

Peridot was still phenomenally guilty about needing to cut it short-- let alone so close to an overtime marker that the directors had probably been ready to accept the disqualification papers prematurely. Everyone seemed to have realized how close they were to forty minutes, at least, from what Peridot could see. They all moved with a curt hastiness that made her chest ache with anguish.

They couldn’t even finish their show. Quality over quantity, her ass-- that part of the story was so
important to see; the last scene! And she’d just cut it off with the press of a button. Backstage hadn’t even known she was going to shut it down. But what could she have done! There was no communication!

And the fact that her mother was here just made things so much worse. If she felt endangered now, she worried to think what might happen when she actually had to appear to the public eye for the awards ceremony?

Oh stars. Oh stars, no, she couldn’t be seen. She had to hide-- she had to go. Anywhere, anywhere away from where Yellow Diamond might be lurking.

On jittery feet Peridot watched as the troupe finished their strike, shuffling on-stage only to be accounted for when Fluorite stopped the strike timer and bid the troupe a sweet, albeit worried, dismissal. “We’ll see you all in an hour for the awards.”

Peridot felt like every eye was on her when she turned her back. She swore she could feel heated gazes pouring into her, filling her skin with an repulsive warmth that made her feel ill. Had they wanted to continue the show? No, they knew they had to cut it off-- but she could have done it so much more eloquently. Not in the middle of one of the most important lines in the freaking play!

The rush back to their green room was a haze after loading Bismuth’s Penske. Peridot tried to close in on herself, not unlike a turtle trying to seek refuge within the confines of its own shell. The cast nabbed their classy attire first, as they needed more time to wash out the cosmetics and change out of their costuming.

Peridot couldn’t even find Lapis’ shockingly blue hair as the Crystal Gems rushed to the facilities to change and prime up. She couldn’t even find her own clothes, she was so rattled.

She was eventually left as one of the last stragglers, leaning against a desk chair and trying to contain her insides as they threatened to pour out of her in the vile form of upheaval. Smoky came by to check on her once, but Peridot had waved them off with a raspy “I’m fine, go change.”

God, she was not fine. This whole night was turning out terribly.

And she had a devilish feeling that it wasn’t over yet.

She had slouched down into the desk by the time that Garnet and Pearl entered the room, chatting closely between themselves, already in their dress wear. They stopped their quiet, quick-worded discussion as soon as they laid eyes on Peridot.

Peridot wanted to sink into the floor of the black box room as they stepped closer, their tense expressions telling of the conversation to be had.

“I do hope you have a good reason for refusing to communicate with the stage manager,” Pearl started rigidly, blue eyes narrowed skeptically as she regarded the unmoving lightsperson. “They reported a lack of communication during the last minute of the show-- the very last minute! The most important time to keep in touch with your backstage crew!”

Peridot wanted to fire back. She wanted to retort and bite that she’d been trying to get something out of backstage when they began to tread dangerously. She wanted to plead her case, to accuse Pearl of accusing her-- but all that came out was a strangled, strained cry as she borrowed her palms deep into her eyes.

She couldn’t see it, but she could hear the small gasp from Pearl and an unintelligible murmur from Garnet. She hated this. Hated it! She shouldn’t be-- breaking down, not now -- not when she was
lagging behind when the Gems were meant to be rushing to get their formal attires on and make way to the awards. Time was of the essence for the second time that night and Peridot didn’t need a reminder of that.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she finally managed to mumble, her own voice a spear to the chest as she relived the panic of that split-second choice to end the show on her own terms. “I couldn’t hear anything. I couldn’t hear them! Backstage was giving me no insight whatsoever as to what was going on, so I made my own call and stopped the show before we went overtime.”

Her head snapped up for the first time. Her eyes felt heavy, and she knew that there must be red, damp welts beneath her eyes from how badly she wanted to cry. “Are you going to lecture me for saving the show before it was too late for all of us?”

“Of course not,” Garnet assured, stepping closer to Peridot as Pearl floundered behind her, face less wrought with misgivings. It seemed softer now, but her eyes were still narrowed as if deep in thought as she watched the two.

“We understand why you did what you did, and are proud of you for doing it,” Garnet ensured further, which helped subside the gut-wrenching anxiety that stormed within Peridot. “We were worried because the show was placed into jeopardy because of a technical mishap.”

“Technical mishap,” Peridot retorted bitterly, pressing her fingers into her eyes as her glasses fell lamely onto the desk underneath her. “There’s no good reason why it should have just stopped working. It was perfectly fine up until that last minute.”

Pearl finally sighed and took a step closer, kneeling into the open seat of the desk in front of Peridot and sending the distressed technician a sharp but sympathetic look. “I suppose the most inopportune occurrences can come at the most inopportune of times,” she postulated, sounding at least agreeable for the time being. “Speaking of, you had best be getting your dress wear on and find the others. The awards are said to begin in less than thirty minutes.”

“But they wanted to finish the show so badly,” Peridot pleaded. “This was the last show for some of them.” The thought of going out and meeting with the other Crystal Gems filled her with misplaced dread. She knew it was misguided, too, which made her feel even worse.

“No Gem is going to blame you for initiating the blackout,” Garnet consoled from beside her, and Peridot could feel a placid hand rubbing comforting circles at the top of her back. She exhaled slowly, wondering wryly if Garnet could feel her rapidfire heartbeat through her skin and the fabric of her shirt. “They will understand.”

“I hope so,” Peridot quietly puled, straightening up and causing Garnet’s hand to pull away. Garnet didn’t look satisfied, however, as she remained steadfast at Peridot’s side. A glance leewards revealed that the director was studying her, and Peridot cleared her clogged throat as she fumbled to put her glasses back on their rightful place over her nose. “. . Yes?”

“How are you feeling now?” Her director inquired. Peridot’s lips twisted with confusion as she turned to face Garnet before her features sank with realization.

“I’m-- I don’t know, she--” Peridot cradled her forehead between two fingers, eyes large and vulnerable behind her glasses. “Why is she here, Garnet? Why now?”

“I’m not sure,” Pearl sighed from before her, and Peridot sent her a questioning glare. The co-director flushed and turned her eyes helplessly towards her directing companion. “Garnet told me about your mother while the show was running.”
Peridot groaned and hid her face behind her fingers again. “Great.”

Right then, the door to the green room swung open, and Steven, Amethyst, and Lapis piled in, eyes dark with searching. When they saw the directors and Peridot huddled at the edge of the room, though, they rushed over.

“Peridot?” Lapis cautioned first, quickly moving towards Peridot’s unattended side and placing a troubled hand over her sunken shoulder. “What is it? Where’s your outfit?”

“Yeah, Pear,” Amethyst chipped in next, hiking up onto an occupied desk and leaning in, looking questioning. “You’re usually so punctual about that stuff. What’s up?”

All that guilt and apprehension suddenly came rushing pack, giving her the emotional equivalent of vertigo as she groaned and dropped her forehead onto the desk. The thump was loud enough to silence all questions from everyone around her.

That is, until Peridot felt small, warm hands wrapping around her own, and glanced up to see Steven staring at her with heartfelt worry seated in his gaze. “Peridot? You okay?”

“She’s going to be out there,” she shuddered, voice muffled by the tabletop. There were collective noises of befuddlement from the three newcomers, and Peridot’s shoulders hitched in to cover as much of her face as it could as she hesitantly decided to elaborate for them.

“My mother,” she admitted, and she could feel Lapis’ hand stiffen over her shoulder at the news. “She’s out there, and she’s going to come after me the second I step foot into the open.”

“Yikes,” Amethyst leaned back, sounding superficial, but a glance at her face revealed genuine worry written across it. “What’re you gonna do?”

“Die, I guess.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” Steven insisted, dark eyebrows pitting together as she leaned in towards Peridot. “Don’t do that– um, what if she doesn’t even see you? There are so many people in the audience right now-- believe me, I was in it when you guys went on! You were awesome! But-- point is, it’ll be hard to actually find you when there’s so many people in there.”

“You don’t understand, she is a woman of utmost conviction,” Peridot argued. Steven’s words did offer. . . some consolation, though. Maybe if she hid between Bismuth and Alexandrite she could walk completely unseen into the auditorium.

But if Yellow Diamond was here for the sole purpose of hunting her daughter down and humiliate her for this extracurricular activity. . . that made things a whole lot harder, regardless of how big and buff some of her troupe mates were.

“Well. . .” Lapis’ voice was like a song in Peridot’s ear, a brief, heart-stopping solace to the turmoil engaging within herself. “She can’t do anything to you there. In the auditorium, I mean. The officials will stop her before she gets very far-- especially if she looks. . . erm, hostile .”

The thought of running across a hostile Yellow Diamond was much more terrifying than an unknowing one. Peridot swallowed, tongue dry. “I suppose she can’t,” she yielded, casting Lapis a thankful look as she covered the hand on her shoulder with her own. “But, what if--”

“We’ll handle it,” Garnet smiled, standing back up and flicking up her shades, sending Peridot a reassuring wink. “You needn’t worry about your mother right now. Right now, it’s time for the Crystal Gems to receive what’s been long overdue.”
“Yeah,” Peridot sighed, staring at Garnet then to Pearl, Amethyst, Steven, and finally Lapis. “Yeah. Yeah, I can-- We’ll be fine. Let me just . . .” She scrambled up and out of the desk, catching herself before she could stumble, and moseyed over to her things at the corner of the room, Lapis in tow. She clutched the material of her coat bag, comforted by Lapis’ quiet presence at her side.

"So this is what my daughter has been frittering her time away with."

Peridot froze, hands stopping at the zipper of her bag. That voice. All relief that she might have experienced sapped instantly, replaced by a black and surging fear that made her forget how to move her limbs as the sinister sound of expensive high heels clicked down the room towards her.

"Peridot Diamond. Turn and face your mother."

Lapis stilled beside Peridot, broad brown eyes swiveling around to glare at the impassive face hovering over them. Peridot finally turned, coming face-to-face with fair but aged skin, an acute, fitting yellow business suit and loathsome eyes fringed by dark eyeliner so sharp that it could cut skin.

The tall woman was positioned with her arms woven crossly over her chest, standing like the whole universe revolved around her and her profession. "Would you care to tell me what exactly you are doing in this place?"

"I'm. . . uh-"

"Speak up."

Peridot stiffened and straightened her spine out of instinct upon hearing that contradictory tone. She couldn't seem to find her words. Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and Steven were still at the other side of the room, standing stiffly, watching Peridot face off against the very source of all her trials, all her tribulations, all her dismay. They looked like they wanted to step in and help, but, they were rendered soundless as the scene developed on its own between mother and daughter.

"She's part of a One Act play troupe." That was Lapis, voice guarded, coming from somewhere behind Peridot that she couldn't pinpoint because her mother was suddenly there and glaring down at Peridot with all the menace of a ravenous hawk. "She's our technician."

"Is she now?"

"How did you know?" Peridot asked, surprised at her own tenacity. "I- I never told you what I was doing- where I was?"

"You didn't have to," her mother frigidly snipped. "Blue resorted to telling me your whereabouts after that crude resignation you instituted a week ago. I didn't want to believe that my daughter was in cohorts with the Crystal Gems."

Peridot could hear the others stifle with surprise. How did Yellow Diamond know about the Crystal Gems?

"How. . . How do you know about the Crystal Gems?"

"Everything there is to know," scoffed Yellow Diamond. "Any alignment with Rose Quartz is a bane to the Diamond name! I would have expected more, even out of a deceitful child such as yourself!" Peridot withered, ignoring the grievous sounds pouring out of the other Crystal Gems. Then confusion overtook her.
"What's happened with Rose Quartz?" She frowned, genuinely puzzled. "You've never been in league with theatre! She was-"

"The director, I'm well aware." Yellow Diamond narrowed her eyes. "But prior to that, she worked with us in business with myself, Blue, and Pink. A loyal and industrious worker turned rogue. But in the end she decided that our business etiquette was unfair, tyrannical. She ran off years ago to Delmarva to escape from the mistakes she made. She ran off to make the Crystal Gems at some low-life university at the edge of a tourist trap village."

Peridot risked a glance to the said theatre troupe. Steven and Amethyst were huddled together, faces wan but eyes fierce, while Garnet rested a consolatory hand on a visibly distraught Pearl's shoulder. Lapis' features were knit with light consternation. Peridot swallowed nervously and turned back to her forbidding mother. "If theatre is so... detrimental, then why is Blue Diamond directing?"

"It was apparently the only way to continue Pink's work," Yellow Diamond informed as if it were the most obvious thing on earth. "Pink, in some radical form of vengeance for ruining a once frivolous company, went against Rose Quartz by taking over Homeworld's troupe. Pursuing this chaos is the only thing that can keep Pink with us and our rivalry with Rose Quartz at large."

Peridot's face pinched. "But that... it was years ago! Surely it's unnecessary to keep this up, after they've both gone?"

"Then Pink went on and vanished and as did Rose Quartz, so there's no vengeance that can be sought other than crushing the spirits of her old troupe." Yellow Diamond gestured sourly over to Steven and the others. "This company has ensured that Homeworld wins each state show since Pink first stepped foot on this very campus. It was the only way to keep Rose Quartz' party in the dust."

Peridot heard Amethyst growl, followed by a string of muffled curses as Garnet's hand slapped over the short woman's mouth. "Shh, this is Peridot's battle. Let her win it herself."

Peridot glared up at her mother, an uncanny rage burning her throat like bile. "You mean... you're the ones who keep Homeworld at the top of the food chain! You're the ones who are bribing and conniving and-"

Yellow Diamond cut her daughter off. "We are the ones who are securing our own prosperity. We've had a reputation soiled by the likes of Rose Quartz once. We don't need another at the hands of her woebegone followers."

Anger stormed mutely through Peridot as the Crystal Gems were once again ambushed by the lips of her mother. "They're not woebegone followers! " She defended. "They're their own team! And a rather good one at that! There's so much potential and talent that-"

"I don't care about potential and talent," her mother quipped coolly, fixing Peridot with the cold, authoritative stare she had been looked down upon her whole life. "They are a waste of my time and yours. I want my company to have a Diamond as marketing coordinator, and I want you to leave these imbeciles," Yellow Diamond added, gesturing harshly to the small cluster of Crystal Gems.

Peridot rocked as her throat dried and her body flushed with aggravation. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she could feel the eyes of all those around her, all her friends, her real family, and Lapis, boring into her as they anxiously awaited her next move.

So many years of bottled desperation, all coming to a top now in the chilling presence of the very instigator. Peridot couldn't move, she couldn't see, she couldn't -
A hand reached out and grabbed her own, firm, reassuring, and so filled with love and life and warmth. So unlike the aged, indifferent hands that hung onto crossed arms before her. Peridot glanced up to see Lapis beside her, her features set with determination. **You're not alone.**

The tension in the technician's muscles faded, replaced by a fortuitous fluidity as she braced her chest and stared with defiance up at Yellow Diamond. **"No."**

Yellow Diamond's eyes narrowed. **"Are you questioning my authority?"**

"**Yes, I am!**" Peridot exclaimed. "Like I should have a long time ago!"

Yellow Diamond didn't speak. Peridot recognized her disposition: a dignified, detached stance, an uncharitable expression; because she'd been the recipient of her mother's dispassion for so long. She was waiting for submission. But instead of silencing her as it had before, it ignited the flames billowing inside. "Being a Crystal Gem- it's been the best part of my life. There's so much good about theatre, things I thought before might've been trivial, but--"

"You are **out of line,**" her mother growled.

"**Am I?** Or are you just upset that I would rather be with them than with you? I gave it a chance, something you've never done-- not once in your whole life! I got to know and understand it, and learned to- stars, I learned to **love** it. There's something incredible about it, there's-"

"You shut your mouth, you insufferable **child!**" snapped Yellow Diamond. "I don't need to hear this useless **drabble.** You have failed at everything I have planned to bestow upon you. Not only do you **slander** your chances for administering an affluent business corporation, but you throw it away for the sake of running around with some underpaid, ragtag bunch of... **them**! And **her.**" Peridot dared let her eyes roam to her friends, who flustered beneath Yellow Diamond's disparaging hazel eyes. Then she looked to Lapis, whose brown eyes were steeld fixedly on Yellow Diamond, her hand never unraveling from Peridot's. Lapis wasn't going anywhere, and she was making that very clear as she held her mother's glare.

But her mother didn't stop there. "**You are to leave these Crystal Gems,** and I will take **immense** satisfaction to see **my** daughter doing something worthwhile with her life instead of flicking switches and rehearsing the makings of dead playwrights!" Yellow Diamond now towered over Peridot, her face the very definition of terrifying. But Peridot remained in place. "Is that **clear?**"

Peridot's teeth gritted as the anger that had knotted and snarled in her chest burst from the cage she was fighting to contain it in, throwing up her shoulders and shouting, "I won't do it! I can tell you with certainty that these Crystal Gems-" She held on a little tighter to Lapis' hand, her green eyes snapping over to Garnet, Pearl, Amethyst, and Steven, "have taught me more about **family** than you ever have!"

"Oh, have they?" Yellow Diamond scoffed.

"**Yes!** And **more!** I've learned more than I ever have since I met them! **I've** - I've learned that keeping in line isn't everything. Having a directive isn't everything! They've taught me--"

She swallowed the fear rising in her stomach and raised Lapis' hand instead, holding it close to her heart while she maintained clashing eye contact with her mother. "... They've taught me **love.**"

Yellow Diamond bristled. "What do you know about **love?**"

Peridot stifled, body shocked with bitter resentment at her mother's query. "**Apparently,** more than
you!” She hollered back, chin forward as her body lurched, furious tears pricking painfully at the corners of her eyes. "You CLOD!"

Yellow Diamond's vindictive stature sharpened, highlighted by a curled lip and deeply furrowed brows. If it weren't for the fact that Peridot was seeing red and shaking from all the releasing raw emotion, her mother’s face might have been comical.

"I won't be leaving the Crystal Gems," Peridot started, freeing her hand of Lapis' and marching forward, not caring one bit for the height difference and staring hard up into the mother's confounded eyes. "I won't be returning to the Diamond enterprises," she spat. "And I will not, ever, be crawling back under your stupid control! I don't need you. I haven't for a long, long time."

Tears were streaming down Peridot's cheeks as she stood, quivering animosity up at the woman who had caused her so much grief for no reason other than to keep her child under her authority. The businesswoman loomed over her, features horrifyingly contorted into a mixture of frustration and distaste. Then Yellow Diamond placated herself, composing her semblance and glaring down at her daughter with flinty hazel eyes.

"You had better learn to fend for yourself in the years to come," she grunted. "You're going to regret this day dearly." The woman turned slowly, menacingly, making her way down the room towards the door with determined, hostile clicks of her heels before exiting.

No one spoke a word as the heavy door to the green room swung shut. Peridot couldn't move.

Steven was the one to break the quiet, looking over at Peridot with round brown eyes. "...Peridot, that was amazing!" He ran over from the others and throwing his arms around Peridot, ecstatic. The others came over too, including Lapis, whose own eyes were damp with pride for what Peridot had just done.

"You thought you could change her mind," Garnet smiled, resting a careful hand on Peridot's shoulder as her legs quaked, threatening collapse. Peridot released a weak, breathless laugh as her body leaned aimlessly forward. "Can one of you please grab my other shoulder?"

Pearl blinked. "Why?"

"Because I think I'm about to faint from overexertion."

"I've got you." Lapis came up and wrapped her arms protectively around Peridot and pulled her back up to her feet.

"I can't believe I just did that," Peridot huffed, letting herself be pulled into Lapis' nurturing embrace. "I really can't believe I just did that. I thought I could reason with her..."

"Yeah, you really made her mad," Amethyst crowed, patting Peridot's shoulder. Pearl joined in with a disbelieving laugh, wearing a pleased smile. "And then you insulted her to her face."

"...Do you know what this means?" Steven beamed, looking up at Peridot.

"That I'm about to regret the last five minutes of my life for the rest of eternity?" Peridot mumbled disconcertedly into Lapis' chest, and she could feel Lapis bobbing with laughter at the harried guess.

"No," the blue-haired girl mused, pushing the curls sticking to Peridot's shiny forehead away from her face and placing her lips between her eyes. "It means you're really a Crystal Gem now."

"Forever and ever!" Steven chirped, clinging to Peridot's side, arms curled around her in a
comforting hug.

"Yeah," Peridot exhaled, allowing the trepidation within her to translate into a mindful joy. This was a happy moment! A relieving one!

...So why was she still feeling so afraid?

“Come on,” Garnet’s voice entered her thoughts, and she found herself being blindly led out of the green room by the others. “It’s time we get to awards.”

Lapis’ hand never left her own as they traveled down the university hallways towards the auditorium. Formal wear be damned, it was better to arrive at awards than not at all. At least she had her Mirror Gem shirt on.

Peridot found herself falling behind though, Lapis in line with her as they dropped to the very back.

“. . Are you okay?” Lapis whispered in her ear, and Peridot could have shuddered at the closeness.

“That was. . . really intense, Peridot.”

“I’m. . .” Peridot pinched her lips. Was she okay? She. . . she certainly didn’t feel as dreadful as before, but there was still a dark, cold feeling of hysterical fright embedded deep within her. Despite that, her chest felt lighter. So much had just been alleviated from her heart, it was almost daunting to think that the person she’d forced it onto had been the root cause of all the stress herself.

“I’m okay,” she finally admitted in a small voice.

Lapis’ features flickered, but she didn’t try to press further. They walked a few more seconds in silence before she finally spoke again. “Why didn’t you tell me she was here? Is. . . that why Garnet put me on the headset?”

“Yes, but-- I just-- I didn’t want you to worry. You already had so much to think about, with-- acting, and--”

“You don’t have to keep the things affecting you hidden from me,” Lapis intervened before Peridot could stumble over an excuse. She brought Peridot’s hand up to her lips, giving her palm a promising squeeze as she met her partner’s watery eyes. “I don’t need you to lie to protect me. I. . I think I’ve won, Peridot.”

Peridot narrowed her eyes, bemused. “But we haven’t even gotten to the awards yet?”

Lapis blinked, then snorted into her free hand. “No, I-- I don’t mean State. I could care less about that right now. I’ve won. . over myself. My own fears, my own. . everything. Because of you, and- everything you’ve helped me overcome. And I care about. .” Lapis lowered her eyes to where their fingers were twined comfortingly together. “I care about you right now. How all this is weighing on you. I want you to be able to tell me when something’s wrong.”

Peridot threw herself at Lapis, short arms wrapping shakily around her girlfriend’s chest as she let out a shaky, tear-filled laugh. “Okay,” she sniffled, not giving a damn that the others were probably waiting for them at the end of the hall at this point. “I. . I can do that. I will.”

“You helped me more times than I can possibly count,” Lapis smiled into Peridot’s forehead, the lips soft against the flush skin. “Let me return the favor now.”

Affection inflated Peridot’s heart, chasing out the foreboding shadows that loomed over her soul as she leaned up, surprising Lapis in a grateful kiss that had both of them blushing by the time they
“God, I love you,” Peridot snuffed into Lapis’ top again, hiding her face in the fabric of the dress like an embarrassed toddler... A toddler who had just ignited a kiss that had left both wanting a little bit more.

“I love you, too,” Lapis laughed quietly, burying her nose briefly into Peridot’s hair before Amethyst’s groan of mock disgust pulled their attention away from each other.

“Will you two stop? We’ve got, like, a whole building to cover before we get there. Last I checked, walking was the most convenient way to get around-- not suckin’ face.”

“I’ll have you know we just had a very heartfelt moment, Amethyst,” Peridot smirked, twining her hand with Lapis’ again and finally hiking down the hallway with a snickering Lapis beside her.

“Yeah, yeah,” Amethyst cackled, elbowing Peridot fondly in the side as she finally caught up. “C’mon, we got awards to get to. Even if we get nothin’, at least we’re here, right?”

“Right,” Peridot huffed, picking up the pace and trading a determined look between Amethyst and Lapis. “At least we’re here.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems go to awards.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy this super-long chapter! Or, at least, I think it's long. 9500 words, give or take? help

Peridot entered the auditorium, wiping clammy palms against the sides of her dark jeans. She had run her fingers through her disheveled hair on the way in, hoping that it the last twenty minutes of emotional peril wasn’t completely obvious to any suspecting onlookers.

The house lights were dimmed into a pleasant golden glimmer. The auditorium was filled with an idling bubble of incessant chatter, between and within troupes alike. Outfits ranged from sharp suits to classy dresses, and some even choosing to sport a mix of both. Peridot didn’t have the willpower to feel underdressed. If these clods knew what she’d been through the past thirty minutes, they’d empathize for her case, too!

“We’re sat down by the front,” Pearl informed the group as they slid down the side of the aisles. Indeed, Peridot could see the back of the troupe’s heads from where she walked, and stifled a lighthearted huff. They were the most colourful cast of characters in this whole theatre.

“Hey!” Amethyst’s peal of laughter summoned Peridot’s attention, and she turned back to find her troupemate being swept up into the arms of a very familiar group of friendly faces.

“The Zookeepers,” Peridot heard Lapis note beside her, voice guarded but congenial nonetheless. “What’re they doing here?”

“We came out here to support this ‘lil relative of ours!” One of the Surf City members cackled, patting Amethyst vivaciously over the back, before receiving a curt second wind and grinning sheepishly over at Lapis and Peridot. “And-- the rest of you guys, too, definitely.”

“Does Holly Blue know you all came?” Peridot blinked.

“Oh, it’s no big deal-- honestly, a lot of us were rooting for you Gems!” 8XL announced as she
stepped up and clapped a strong hand over Peridot’s shoulder, much to the smaller woman’s surprise. “And we manage to get Holly Blue off our backs more often. That’s a bonus.”

“I suppose it is,” Peridot cleared her throat as she deftly moved out from underneath 8XL’s amenable hand with the intention of heading down to their seats with Lapis. “If you don’t mind, we’re gonna go down to our aisle.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Skinny waved from the back, easygoing as ever, as she leaned over the head of Carnelian as the group directed their attention onto a blushing Amethyst. “See ya later, light tech.”

“See ya.” Peridot returned her gaze to Lapis, who looked amused to see her partner getting along nicely with the other One Act troupe. “Making friends?”

“Sure,” the blonde scoffed, following the smiling actress down the sidelines and locating their group near the front of the auditorium. They were seated, surprisingly, directly behind Homeworld, and Peridot couldn’t help the swell of pride in her heart when Lapis was able to pass the group by without so much as a glance towards Jasper.

On the other hand, Peridot herself couldn’t help but make brief eye contact with the actress in question. It was blunt and passing, and there was little that she could decipher from it, because the second their eyes met, Jasper’s turned indifferently away and focused instead on Blue Diamond.

Seeing their director provided a painful reminder of her affiliation with Yellow Diamond, but now that that issue had been exposed and wrung out like a towel, she couldn’t find it in her to care anymore. Even if she probably should care.

She would argue with herself that she had nothing to lose now, but this just felt like the beginning of a long economical battle. For her, at least.

Peridot was led into the aisle by Lapis’ hand, discovering that Steven had saved them both seats beside him.

“Hey guys!” Steven greeted sunnily as the couple dropped in beside him, settling into the velvet seats with nothing short of a relieved sigh. “How’d it go with the Famethyst?”

“As sociable as they ever were,” Lapis sighed good-naturedly, hoisting her thin jacket over her bare shoulders as she glanced out towards the empty stage apron. “No one’s come out yet?”

“No yet,” Steven nodded. “But it should begin soon! It’s been awhile since you guys striked. Oh! And this is Connie!”

For the first time, Peridot noticed that it wasn’t another Crystal Gem seated on the other side of Steven, but instead it was a young, slim girl with rich, dark skin and puffy dark hair. Her eyes gleamed pleasantly as she waved over at them. “Hi, that’s me!”

“Hello,” Peridot blinked, glancing curiously over to Lapis through the corners of her eyes, only to find a mellow half-smirk on her girlfriend’s mouth as she regarded Steven. “Steven’s told us all about you,” Lapis smiled as she leaned slightly closer.

“Has he?” Connie gasped, a slender hand flying to cup at her cheek as the boy beside her flustered and let out a shrill laugh. “Wha -- I mean! Yeah! I do,” Steven babbled, colour blushing in his cheeks as Peridot and Lapis traded a look of knowing between them. “What’s not to tell? Connie’s awesome!”
“Aww, thanks,” the girl laughed, “right back at’cha.”

“Her parents let her come all the way up here to watch *Mirror Gem*!” Steven chirped, seeming to have forgotten his mortification as he gestured up at the stage. “Can you believe she’s never seen it before?”

“It’s... not surprising,” Lapis shrugged. “We don’t usually do public performances until after the competitive season is over.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Steven ushered, lips pursing as he gingerly steepled his fingers together in front of him.

“But I did see it earlier!” Connie smiled, dark eyes broadening with interest as she leaned on the arm of her seat and gazing laudingly up at Lapis. “You were incredible up there!”

“Oh-- really?” Lapis snorted. “Honestly, it’s kind of like blacking out when you get on-stage.”

“Well if you call that’s what you can do while moving unconsciously, that’s still pretty cool,” Connie shot back, a gentle smile pulling at her lips. “Peridot, what do you do?”

“I-- ah, run the lights,” Peridot sputtered, surprised to be drawn into the discussion as she pointed up towards the dimmed house lights. “In the booth at the back of the auditorium.”

“Oh, I see!” Connie nodded. “I really liked the lighting in that scene with the investigator and the rest of the family; the one where they first call her in and the ghost begins to shake the whole house!”

Peridot leaned deeper into her seat, a contented little smirk on her face. That was an ingenious string of cues; one of the most stressful of her cue sheet, mind you, but she always pulled it off without so much as a single error. “That is one of my more notable cues.”

“I do have a question, though.” Connie glanced at Steven, who shrugged, before returning her attention back to the lightsperson. “What happened at the end? Why did the lights cut off?”

The familiar but deeply unwelcomed gut-feeling of dread returned to Peridot with a vengeance, forcing her stomach down into her feet as she bit at the inside of her cheek. Sometimes, thespians would get lucky and audience members would blindly assume at a blackout automatically meant the resolution of the show, regardless of the cut-off point. It appeared that the premature closure of *Mirror Gem* didn’t go unnoticed by a number of audience members, if a young girl could pick up on it that easily.

“Uhh, the Gems went overtime,” Steven explained before Peridot found the willpower to. “Y’know how they can’t go over forty minutes?”

Connie looked bashful for a second. “Right, I forgot. Well-- I thought the show was great, even if you had to cut it off early!”

“Thanks,” Peridot sighed, unable to revel in Connie’s support despite wanting to be able to.

Peridot knew she had to cut the show early. Either way, the Gems would have been disqualified. If she’d let it run, the timers would have gone off and everyone would know they were goners. But that awful feeling of depriving the other Crystal Gems from finishing the story still sat uncomfortably in Peridot’s stomach.

Eventually, Lapis and Peridot delved off into their own bubble of contented quiet for a bit while Connie and Steven chatted quietly with one another. Peridot brought out her smartphone and tacked
away at the screen to check her profiles, wondering if her mother had already gone and made the efforts to deliberately remove her from whatever financial compensation her disability warranted.

When all still seemed well, Peridot breathed a little easier, deciding to use the breath while she still could. She was more alarmed to see that it was 12:48 in the morning, actually. Thank the stars she’d been able to sleep in after that star-forsaken 5am tech hour.

She was still tense over the whole blowout with her mother, admittedly. How could she not be? That wasn’t something somebody just got over-- not within weeks, let alone within a few minutes of it happening. She could hear the hawkish voice staining the back of her mind, sharp and lethal, like the cutting edge of a knife that wanted to slice and tear away at the happiness that Peridot wanted to be able to feel right now.

Peridot sighed through her nose and pocketed her phone, resorting to staring blankly overhead at the dim lights lining the top of the auditorium. How crazy was it that might be the last time she do the lights for the Crystal Gems? No, that idea was nonsense. They still had a whole spring semester to rehearse and produce new content back at home at BCU.

Peridot bit at the edge of her cheek as she pondered, unaware that Steven was gently tapping at her wrist to gain her attention. “Hey, Peri?”

“Oh-- what?” Peridot blinked, startling out of the pensive stupor as she shifted in her seat to look over at the boy. His eyes were dark with earnest, lips pulled into a line unbecoming for his typically buoyant character. Then again, Peridot had to remember just how smart this boy could be.

“I didn’t know any of that stuff,” Steven began, dark brows pulling together, prudent. “About your mom. . and my mom.”

“That makes two of us,” Peridot remarked but went quiet again when Steven looked up at her.

“I mean, I really never knew lots about her. . . and I was okay with that, sometimes. It just kinda. . makes me feel weird, when stuff like this pops up around her. Like-- how she used to run with your mom, and Blue Diamond, and. . Pink Diamond?” He pressed a hand to his forehead and blew out the air trapped in his cheeks. “Geez, she was a little deeper into the whole Homeworld versus the Crystal Gems thing than I thought.”

Peridot sank into her seat, shoulders pulled tight as Steven’s admission rung in her head. “And I didn’t know that Blue Diamond was able to reach out to my mother and cheat the Gems out for all these years,” she lamented quietly, voice low enough for only Steven to hear. “I could’ve done something to stop it before I even--”

“You didn’t know,” Steven whispered back, the warmth in his voice a comfort that chipped away at the guilt balling together in her chest. “None of us did. We thought it was just this school being. . I dunno, all high-and-mighty.”

“They are a capital school,” Peridot smirked, crossing her arms over her chest. “They tend to adopt this holier-than-thou attitude more than half the time. I should know.”

“Oh yeah,” Steven chuckled. “Empire City!”

“ECU,” Peridot confirmed, a soft glint in her green eyes as she (with some hesitance) reached over and rested her small hand on the boy’s soft shoulder.

The house lights suddenly flashed, and Peridot’s head snapped up from Steven and angled towards the apron of the stage. All at once, the auditorium fell silent as all eyes directed up at the stage as the
curtains began to drift upwards, revealing to the tense crowd what laid behind.

Fluorite and her group of stagehands were standing behind a table decorated in medallions that glittered beneath the warm LEDs that bathed the whole stage a rich shade of gold. Two plaques, one bronze and one silver, sat on either side of a trophy that must have been half of Peridot’s height. At the crown of the trophy, the old-fashioned, traditional masks of the Greek Muses of comedy and tragedy stood, carved in gold.

Peridot felt her brows crawl up towards her hairline. That monument didn’t look cheap at all.

“Hello everyone, and welcome to the official Delmarva One Act Play State Championships award ceremony!” Fluorite announced and was met with a rousing round of applause from the audience beyond her. “It has been a long and grueling day, hasn’t it?”

“That’s one word to describe it,” Peridot snarled under her breath, eliciting a voiceless huff of commiseration from Lapis.

“Tonight, six talented One Act troupes represented their schools and put on six marvelous shows. Our judges relayed to me that to limit awards to only a select few members and a select few schools was an incredibly difficult one.”

Peridot could sense the wave of tension that swept over the Gems. It invested in her, too, pricking at the top of her skin and causing it to break out in gooseflesh. Only one play could win State, and right now, their chances looked slim in comparison to how self-assured Homeworld looked in front of them.

“We’d like to commence the awards ceremony by acknowledging the hardworking crew members behind the scenes who make it possible for our casts to go on,” Fluorite began. Behind her, the Rutile twins and Rhodonite were holding a golden medal between them that Peridot hadn’t seen before, and she sent Lapis a flummoxed look, only to find that her partner’s eyes were glued to the stage manager.

“We met many crew members today, from the earliest at five in the morning to the latest as the night turned to morning,” the old woman continued. “And each and every one of them deserves their own accolade, whether they orchestrate sound and music, run lights from the front or the back, work special effects devices, or even help to set and strike the stage for every show.”

Peridot heard a low murmur of appreciation from crew members all across the auditorium.

“Unfortunately, there aren’t enough accolades in the world to reward every crew member. Tonight, the Delmarva One-Act Play Association will reward one crew member with the Outstanding Technician award.”

“They only give out one?” Peridot whispered to Lapis in a raw voice. “One? There’s no all-star crew?”

“I guess not,” Lapis murmured back, brows knit with consternation. “I bet it’s gonna be one of Homeworld’s. I heard the same techie’s got the award for the past three years.”

“Figures,” Peridot grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. Yet another hierarchical ploy that Diamond Enterprises probably had a hand in. No, make that definitely.

Bitterness crept up the back of Peridot’s mouth as Fluorite continued.

“This technician showed perseverance and tact, among other admirable feats during their time at
Delmarva State,” the woman maintained, adjusting her spectacles as she read from the card just beneath the mic. “And for that, the One Act Association would like to commemorate, from Beach City University’s Crystal Gems, Peridot Diamond !”

What?

In the previous moment, the Crystal Gems had been still and silent, the lack of noise the result of a sickening mix of apprehension and anticipation. Now they are uproarious, and for some reason, Lapis was now hugging tightly onto her, laughing and coaxing her up on stage.

“Oh my stars,” Peridot wheezed, her own throat trying to imitate the sound of an overheated kettle as she fumbled through the aisles, a shaky grin slowly coming to present itself over her features as her troupemates laughed and congratulated her beneath the throb of applause coming from the rest of the auditorium.

She didn’t even remember climbing up the steps and striding towards the others on-stage, accepting the plaque from Rhodonite who winked sheepishly at her and standing with more than a little pride as one of the Rutile sisters looped the technician’s award medal around her neck.

Fluorite beckoned Peridot to the front of the stage to stand with her for pictures, before glancing down at Peridot with a gentle, curious glint in her eye. “Did you forget something, dear?”

“What?” Peridot blanched, glancing down at her person, and with a groan immediately remembered that she was still in her Mirror Gem shirt and a pair of dark jeans. “. . . No. I just-- got sidetracked doing something more important.”

Fluorite hummed with what Peridot hoped was understanding (but could have been amusement), before gesturing out to the crowds where a whole swarm of photographers were beginning to snap pictures at such an alarming rate Peridot feared they’d start a strobe effect.

But as soon as it startled it was over with, and she was marching back down the steps and towards the Crystal Gems, feeling as light as air.

“Way to go, Peri!” Amethyst grinned up at her as she passed by, and similar congratulations were passed on down at Peridot with a gentle, curious glint in her eye. “No judgment, that’s a big honor to get at this level!”

“Wow, thanks,” Peridot smirked through her teeth, coming to and sitting up in her seat, scrutinizing her rewards with a glistening green gaze. She felt warm lips press against her cheek, and blinked over to find Lapis with a wide smile that managed to send butterflies shooting up through Peridot’s entire frame.

“And you were scared you ruined everything,” Lapis scoffed as she looped her arms around Peridot’s neck and drew her closer. “Look at you! Delmarva’s Outstanding Technician!”

“. . . Huh. I am, aren’t I?” Peridot smirked, boasting the medal on her chest. She felt a twinge of satisfaction when she heard Steven giggle opposite her.

“Onto our all-star cast awards,” Fluorite proceeded, awarding the merits of the recipients. She called four cast members up that Peridot didn’t recognize at all since they were the four schools from the
other academic regions in Delmarva. She did recognize Homeworld’s all-star cast actress, though: the slim girl with short, powder-blue hair that somewhat reminded her of Pearl.

Peridot clasped her hand around Lapis’ when it finally came time for the reveal of the Crystal Gem all-star cast member, and felt her heart sink with dejection when she felt Lapis’ hand soften with disappointment when Stevonnie was called up. Not to say that either of them were upset that their friend and troupemate was receiving the award! In fact, Lapis had on a glad, weary smile as Stevonnie stepped up to receive their reward at the end of the line, eyes large with gratitude before turning out to the rest of the Gems and beaming as the photographers snapped their picture.

“Now it’s time to recognize the Delmarva One Act Play State’s best actor and actress!” Fluorite spoke into the microphone as soon as the all-star cast award recipients trickled off-stage and back to their seats. Peridot made sure to lean forward and give Stevonnie a high-five on the downlow when they sidled by.

Lapis found Peridot’s hand again, and Peridot was concerned to find that she could feel Lapis quivering in her grip. Pointedly, Peridot began to rub delicate circles into Lapis’ knuckles, leaning in towards her partner as Fluorite began to read the anonymous commendations designated for the lucky cast members.

“If Fluorite starts speaking any slower, I’m going to lose my collective mind,” she muttered into Lapis’ ear, unable to hide the relieved grin that stole her lips when the blue-haired actress sputtered. “But-- hey, Laz, don’t worry. I... even if you don’t get this, I know for a fact that you’re the best actress in this whole auditorium. And that should mean a lot, coming from an astute judge of character such as myself.”

“Oh my god,” Lapis snorted through her teeth, her other hand flying up to her face to muffle the sound as Fluorite announced the best actor.

It was a young man from Bromwich Bay-- who, according to the playbill, showed scenes from The Cripple of Fishmaan-- named Jamie Cordero. He bounced excitedly on-stage, eagerly shaking Fluorite’s hand and accepting his medal from the Rutile twins with no small level of enthusiasm. He sprang into place at the centre of the stage, dark hair tossing as he grinned across the auditorium at his Bromwich troupemates, who had applauded the loudest out of the whole audience.

“And The Delmarva State OAP best actress award goes to... from Beach City University’s Crystal Gem troupe,” Peridot felt Lapis’ hand tighten tensely around hers.

“Lapis Lazuli Kaile’a!”

“Oh my g-- Lapis, that’s you!” Peridot shrilled, watching elatedly as Lapis scrambled onto her feet in a daze, blue hair shimmering in the light as she traded a bewildered but utterly ecstatic look with Peridot before exiting the aisle, a smile stretching bit by bit across her face as the audience roared for her.

Peridot was up and on her feet before anybody else as Lapis sauntered up the steps to join Fluorite and Jamie, accepting the awards with placid grace and standing with the best actor. Jamie was good-natured and gestured broadly to Lapis with open arms, and Peridot (along with the rest of the attentive audience) snickered when she gave the enthused actor an agreeable thumbs-up instead of a hug.

The two of them stood at attention as photographers clambered over one another to get the best picture. The rest of the audience was getting to their feet in a standing ovation for the winning contestants, and Peridot all but raced the whole lot of them to be the first to raucously holler and clap.
Much to Pearl’s squabbling indignation somewhere behind her. Screw mannerisms, that was her girlfriend up there!

Eventually the roar of the audience tapered and Fluorite waved the recipients off with a smile, catching Lapis with a wink and a warm, old chuckle as she and Jamie walked off-stage. Lapis’ entire walk down to Peridot was filled with the other Crystal Gems cheering and congratulating her, and Peridot was no exception as she practically vibrated into the next dimension she was so excited for Lapis!

“Best actress!” Was all that Peridot managed to sputter when Lapis sheepishly settled back down, her dark eyes huge with wonder as Peridot threw her arms around her. “What did I tell you! Hah!”

Lapis snorted quietly, struggling to feign nonchalance as colour touched her cheeks. “It’s-- wow, I can’t believe it, honestly. . I don’t even-- remember being on-stage today.”

“Well it looks like the judges certainly remembered you,” Peridot grinned, glancing behind them where she could spot the three judges seated at their booths, looking pleased with their choices. “Look at us! We’re so shiny!”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re most interested in now?”

“All the more materials to blind our envious enemies with,” Peridot retorted with ease, silencing only when she heard Pearl trying to hush her from behind. She pursed her lips together, nostrils flaring as Fluorite announced that the placements were commencing.

“Our second runner-up, with scenes from Death of a Mailman, the Backstreet Thespians from Port City!”

Peridot didn’t even know it was possible to feel so relieved albeit so disappointed simultaneously, but she was pretty sure that was exactly how she was feeling right then. She was relieved they weren’t getting third place, but this also took away one more chance that the Crystal Gems earned any sort of placement at all. It was such a weird sentiment that she didn’t even have the willpower to make a comment on how odd Port City’s troupe name was.

Port City’s group moved on-stage, and per customs, received a standing ovation from the crowd as they accepted their individual bronze awards and the bronze plaque. It seemed almost comically dismissive when they were ushered off-stage by the stagehands after a few moments of posing for hungry photographers. Fluorite was back at the microphone at the bow of the apron in no time, discarding the first notecard and slipping open the second.

“Our first runner-up, with scenes from The Cluster, Homeworld from Delmarva State University!”

One could have heard a pin drop onto the carpeted floor with how utterly silent the auditorium was. It wasn’t a forced, deliberate silence out of spite (but it wouldn’t been a lot more satisfying if it was); it was one borne out of shock. Peridot could only blanch and stare ahead at the bemused heads of the Homeworld troupe members as it dawned on them, and the rest of the troupes in the auditorium, that they hadn’t won.

A shaky quiver of hope dared spark at the bottom of Peridot’s heart.

The eerie soundlessness was short-lived, however, as the first few members of Homeworld’s group started to disembark from their seats and filter on-stage to receive their awards. Out of courtesy, the Crystal Gems shared their applause with the rest of the audience as the last of Homeworld moved downstage to present their very second place plaque. Blue Diamond held it delicately between her
fingers at the centre of the line, like if she held on too tightly it might leave behind a marr.

Peridot couldn’t help the smugness that seeped into her system seeing the taut faces of the Homeworld troupe. They looked like they’d expected to win. She could see it in every frown line held just at bay, every furrowed brow as they looked out upon the audience, wondering what other school had the means, audacity, or the will to be crowned the State champions over them.

“. . . Hey, guys, do you think. . .?” Steven’s voice pulled Peridot back, and she found the boy staring behind him at where Pearl and Garnet were sitting. The former director was nervously clinging onto the latter’s arm, pale eyes huge with astonishment. And, if Peridot’s growing power of empathy was any better, there was hope there, too.

No one was readily able to supply Steven with an answer, but the question weighed heavily in all of their minds. That same ember of faith in Peridot’s chest spooled out into a thread, lacing around her heart so that every heartbeat felt strained.

Fluorite was silent after Homeworld marched off-stage, their biting faces alone the very epitome of poor sportsmanship, and Peridot didn’t know if it was because she was being Fluorite or if it was for dramatic effect. Regardless, she loathed the suspense that coloured her thoughts as her hand tightened in Lapis’, and a glance at her blue-haired partner revealed that Lapis wasn’t looking at the stage manager, but at her.

Peridot smiled a wan, mitigated smile, and settled back into her seat. Steven’s hands were shaking in hers, and she gently squeezed his in consolation, her smile only deepening when the boy sent a grateful look her way.

They were here. She was here. They’d made it this far. It didn’t matter if they didn’t win the championships. They’d already accomplished so much. Besides, being able to be a Crystal Gem was more than enough of a reward for her. And she already had material proof of her superiority over the other technicians in the auditorium in the form of a plaque and a medal. That helped abate the desire to win. A little.

She held onto Steven’s and Lapis’ hands a little tighter, glancing down the line to see that every Gem had joined hands with their neighbor, every knuckle taut with the readiness of defeat, but every set of eyes were blazing with the same promising query.

“And our One Act Play State Champions. . .” Fluorite continued, winning back Peridot’s unwavering attention as she opened the small envelope containing the winning school. She could feel Lapis’ heartbeat in her palm, and Peridot closed her eyes, waiting for the moment her heart would combust in her chest out of joy or of disappointment.

“With scenes from Mirror Gem —”

Fluorite didn’t even get to finish announcing the winners before the audience tumulted in a joyous uproar. Peridot was suddenly being crushed from both sides by Steven and Lapis as they choked on their own jubilant laughter, which was quickly escalating into tears of elation as the Crystal Gems all scrambled to their feet. Everywhere, everyone around Peridot-- they were hugging, crying into one another’s embrace, united in their tears as it their hard-won victory set in.

Muffled cries, hollers, and most importantly, laughs filled the auditorium as the group began to slowly make their way on-stage, not caring in the slightest that their cheeks were bright with tears and their faces were harried by relief that made their stomachs warm and their heads muddled.

The Crystal Gems had won. They had won the Delmarva One Act Play State show! They were the
State champions!

Peridot was wrapped in quivering arms, and she recognized the sniffling embrace as Lapis’. Rendered speechless by the daunting revelation of it all, Peridot only buried her face in the crook of Lapis’ flushed neck, listening to the blissful sound of Lapis’ ecstatic cries.

Peridot would have preferred to keep here for the rest of the night, wrapped in Lapis’ embrace as they wept with joy, with relief, with gratefulness— but they had a trophy to collect and medallions to don.

“C’mon,” Peridot laughed weakly into Lapis’ skin, pulling away and prompting Lapis to follow after the others as they filed out of the aisle and filtered onstage. Peridot followed after Lapis, and she was followed by Steven, who looked utterly starstruck as he fumbled up the steps after them.

One by one, they all received their medals. Peridot’s clinked against her technician’s award, and likewise with Lapis and her best actress award. They fell in line with the rest of the Gems as they graciously accepted their accolades and stood tall before the commending audience.

Peridot thought she could remain strong-willed under the gazes of so many people. But she took one look beside her, at Lapis, then across the line at the other Crystal Gems as they stood, golden medals glittering at their chests as photographers snapped pictures of the state-winning team.

Smoky and Stevonnie were supporting one another, arms braced over one another’s shoulders as they beamed out into the applauding audience.

Rainbow, Opal, Sardonyx, and Sugilite were all standing together, the latter trying too hard to look unphased by the sheer weight of victory, but eventually gave in when Sardonyx looped an arm around her with a laugh and pulled her into a group hug.

Bismuth and Alexandrite stood just beside Lapis, the larger of the two leaning down to give Lapis a congratulatory side hug for her best actress award. On the other side of Peridot, there was Steven who was still holding onto her hand (she didn’t even care that he wasn’t actually a Crystal Gem, he deserved to be up here as much as the rest of them did!) and then Amethyst, who like Sugilite was misty-eyed but for the most part unyielding. Peridot knew she’d probably cry later.

At the very heart of the line, Pearl was outright sobbing into Garnet’s side, cradling the arm draped comfortingly around her like a lifeline. But a closer look at the more stoical director revealed that she, too, was crying. She’d even removed her shades for the occasion.

That was it, Peridot decided, as she allowed a few rogue tears to slip from the corners of her eyes and slide down her cheek. Who was she trying to impress by trying to look unfluctuated, anyways? Definitely not Lapis, who was sniffling right beside her, hand held tight within hers.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and those who choose to identify as neither,” Fluorite smiled into her microphone as the whole line of Crystal Gems joined hands and rose them high above their heads for one last curtain call bow. “Our Delmarva State One Act Champions: The Crystal Gems of Beach City University!”

A second score of applause rose up from the audience, just as enthused as before as the Crystal Gems dipped into a collective bow, once, twice, then a third time as the excited hollering and clapping subsided. Peridot withheld a good-natured smirk when she heard Amethyst snicker when one of the Famethysts called out above the quieting crowd, “that’s my cousin!”

The Crystal Gems had risen after their final bow, and looked to be getting ready to huddle at the
centre of the stage for another round of photos for the photographers at the front, but Ruby rushed forward before anyone had the chance to even detach from one another, and beckoned for Fluorite to bend down.

The stage manager seemed more than happy to lower herself down to Ruby’s height, eyes growing wide with surprise as the small woman whispered into her ear, before handing the microphone over to her with a whisper Peridot couldn’t catch and a knowing wink.

Ruby fidgeted with the microphone for a bit, refusing to look back at the line of curious Crystal Gems as they ogled her at the front of the apron. Peridot looked over at Sapphire, who was staring at her partner in curious awe.

“Um, hi, everybody, I’m-- uh, I’m Ruby,” the Crystal Gem began, chuckling shyly as the audience settled down. It was obvious this was out of protocol for an awards ceremony, because the Rutile twins had rushed up to Fluorite and seemed to be asking her confused questions, to which Fluorite only hummed and shook her head. Peridot could only catch her saying that they should really let Ruby finish.

“Uhh-- I’ve been with the Crystal Gems for. . . four years, and, I’m graduating this year,” Ruby continued, voice growing in strength and tenor as the mustered up more courage in front of the massive crowd. “And. . . every single of the incredible people behind me deserve the medal they’re wearing tonight. Or. . this morning, I don’t actually know what time it is. Is it past one a.m. yet?”

A well-mannered spree of laughter rose up from the audience at that, helping to put the auditorium more at ease as Ruby blushed and continued speaking, palming the mic from hand to hand as she fidgeted. “But-- I wanted to say, thank you. To everyone. To Garnet, to Pearl, to all the other Crystal Gems-- to you guys, too!” She gestured out at the audience with a huge smile. “And-- to Sapphire.”

Ruby turned around, and Peridot could see a heavy, deep-set blush flushing her dusky skin.

“Sapphy, could you come up here real quick?”

“Me?” Sapphire asked, sheepishly taking a step out of the line and approaching her girlfriend at the front of the apron, a gloved hand pressing gingerly to her cheek as she fumbled for a laugh. “Okay. Um, Ruby, what’s this about?”

“Do you see her?” Ruby turned a cheeky blind eye to her partner, gesturing to her for the audience as a short spell of laughter rose up from the crowd. “I met her in grade school and I knew from the moment she stole one of my crayons that she was something special. And, hey, look! Here we are, more than a decade later, graduating from university together!”

The audience carried Ruby forward with a chorus of touched aww’s, and even Peridot felt the edge of her lip curl with amusement. So the rumors were true about the whole elementary grade romance between them.

Ruby twirled the mic between fidgety fingers and continued with a sheepish chuckle. “We always kinda balance each other out. Um-- it was Rose who joked once that we were like fire and ice. And I always liked that!” She turned around, facing Sapphire with a proud smile. “She’s always there to help me to. . . find myself, I guess. To take a moment and remember we can just talk, you know? Ha! Heck, she-- even stayed with me even when I had that cowboy phase freshman year of high school! Um--”

Ruby dragged her palm across her cheek, smudging over her lips as she hid her face behind the short fingers. “I love her so much. More than I can really-- talk about, in front of all of you. I have more to say but. . . I’d rather just do this now.”
“Oh, Ruby.” Sapphire swept a tear from her eye with her gloved thumb, face bright with colour.

“Wait a sec, I’m not done yet.” Ruby said coyly, lowering her hand, eyes rheumy as she took a quick step forward and fished around in her pocket, unearthing a small, maroon box that made Peridot’s breath hitch.

Ruby extended her left hand out to Sapphire, who of course took it, looking dumbfounded as the audience waited on bated breath for what was next.

Then Ruby got down on one knee and the audience absolutely lost it.

And so did the entire line of Crystal Gems behind them.

They didn’t need to be able to hear what she asked-- what she proposed-- or what Sapphire had laughed in response, because in less than two long, loving heartbeats they were hugging tightly, sending everyone watching into a deeper frenzy for the blossomed engagement.

“I’ve been waiting to kiss your cute face all night,” Sapphire giggled, planting a kiss on Ruby’s cheek as she was lifted up and spun around, like they were the only two in the theatre.

Peridot hadn’t even realized she’d thrown herself onto Lapis until she felt hot breath crawl on her cheek and recognized the arms bundled tightly around her middle, and stars, she laughed with gladness as she watched Ruby and Sapphire celebrate their new engagement.

With stars in her eyes, she stole her gaze back to Lapis, feeling dizzy with merriment as she tucked her face into Lapis’ shoulder. “Thank you,” she practically sniffled, not trusting her voice to range any higher than an emotionally-wrought whisper for the next few minutes.

Lapis snorted beneath her, but nonetheless ran her fingers through Peridot’s fluffy hair as the roar of the audience abated and the Crystal Gems began to ambush Ruby and Sapphire in one huge, affectionate group hug. “For what?”

“For finding me,” Peridot continued, hands reaching up to clutch at Lapis’ silky top, her own breath shaky on her lips as she continued. “For being there from the very beginning. From getting me into One Act. For helping me escape Yellow Diamond’s control, once and for all. For… for making me a Crystal Gem.”

Now it was Lapis’ turn to grow taut with sentiment, hands freezing as they pawed through Peridot’s locks and pressing her cheek against Peridot’s forehead. “Oh, Peri,” she murmured, the words warm against Peridot’s scorching skin, “you did that all by yourself.”

Peridot shakily laughed into Lapis’ collar bone, gladly being guided over to the big, hugging mess of Crystal Gems as Bismuth hoisted Ruby and Sapphire up on her shoulders like they weighed nothing, her boisterous, contagious laugh filling the stage as the audience cheered them on.

Peridot felt a hand on her shoulder and was confused as to how Lapis had sprouted a third hand when her other two were already wrapped around her side. She glanced over her shoulder and spotted Garnet beside them, a prompting smile on her lips as she gestured towards the group of exultant Crystal Gems. “We’re waiting for you two.”

Lapis and Peridot blinked, finding that half of the gems had opened up the massive hug, arms outstretched and coaxing the two of them over with expectant grins. Peridot laughed, dragging Lapis along until they, too, were enclosed in the big tangle of arms and smiles.
The overwhelming high of victory didn’t last forever, but Peridot could still feel it buzzing beneath her fingertips as the Crystal Gems entered their designated critique hall. Peridot recognized it as the third judge, a woman with curly dark hair that reached just past her ears and darker tortoiseshell glasses.

“Oh, I didn’t know they were already sending you all in,” the judge gasped as her eyes widened fractionally behind her glasses, setting down a notepad covered in scribbles and little doodles as she moved over to welcome the Crystal Gems into the room.

Admittedly, Peridot hadn’t given the judge more than a few glances. She’d seen her once while marching up to the booth with Rhodonite (and consequently seen her own mother in the same glance) and the second time during awards. Up close, she didn’t look as menacing as Peridot had previously thought! In fact, she had a pleasantly clement air about her as she greeted Pearl and Garnet.

Peridot took the seat between Lapis and Opal near the front, wondering exactly what they would be critiqued on. They had won, and... Peridot’s heart dropped a bit when she remembered that this was the last level of One Act Play. At least, for the competitive league, that is.

No matter! She reminded herself, steeling and bracing herself in the seat as the judge moved to the centre of the hall, gathering her things and looking ready to proceed with the critique. Through the shadows of her blurry peripheral vision, Peridot swore she saw Pearl stealing a second glance at the judge. Peridot looked back at the judge, and noticed that embedded into the sleek black fabric of her jacket was the insignia for a rose.

Rose Quartz, Peridot’s mind absently connected, pegging it as a little coincidence. But then again, maybe not. Flowery prints and emblems seemed to be making a comeback in the fashion world.

“So this is the prestigious Crystal Gem team!” The judge entertained, offering the group an affable smile as the lot of them sat a bit taller. “I’ve heard a lot about you all.”

“You have?” Steven blinked, and everyone turned to the young boy as he swung his legs curiously back and forth beneath the desktop. “What?”

“I have,” the judge laughed, leaning back in her seat. “For those who might not know, my name is Rebecca Sugar and I was your third panelist judge for the competition. I was so excited to hear that I would be responsible for your critique this afternoon. Or, should I say morning, actually?”

“Morning,” Steven nodded with a chuckle, eyes drawing towards the plain white clock on the wall that read just past two in the morning. Peridot was glad she was tired enough to be able to withhold the groan that wanted to slip out. No wonder her bad knee had that little ache, it was hours past what was a reasonable hour to keep awake.

Regardless, Rebecca was unphased by the matter, only offering a solitary hum as she crossed one leg over the other, features bright with pensiveness. “So, first off, congratulations on winning the Delmarva State One Act Play competition! It’s no small feat to behold. And if I’m not mistaken, a good number of individual award recipients are in this group too?”

Peridot practically preened in her seat, minding the Outstanding Technician medal she sported. Beside her, Lapis acted similarly, rolling her slim shoulders in a shrug as she smiled wanly at the panel critic. And Peridot was sure the others were smiling somewhere behind her, too; she could feel their gratification filling the space.

“All well-deserved accolades!” Rebecca continued on, tugging at the lapels of her jacket as she
scanned the room. “Pearl, Garnet-- were you surprised to find yourselves winning this competition?”

The directors in question jolted upright upon being reeled into the spotlight, faces blanched of thought before Pearl picked up only a heartbeat too late. “W-Well -- if you want my brutal honesty, Rebecca--”

“Oh, please, I’d ask for nothing less.”

Pearl nodded, features setting, determined. “I’m. . . not surprised. I’m elated! This troupe has worked hard, and then even harder, since the beginning of the season! I’d say it’s a reward that’s. . . been a long time coming. For everyone here, and. . . all the Crystal Gems who came before them.”

Somewhere in the room, Peridot heard Amethyst give a sardonic ‘awwh’ and inwardly smirked.

“I agree,” Garnet entered next, opaque glasses flashing in the fluorescent lighting. “We’ve overcome many obstacles to reach this point. There is no better way to celebrate every Gem’s hard work than to accept this lauding; everyone here has been through a journey to be where they are now.” Peridot swore Garnet glanced at her, even if she couldn’t see it through the shades. “Curiosity turned into appreciation, and appreciation into fondness. Then that fondness turned into love, for themselves and for the people around them.”

“It’s been more than a drive for victory,” Rebecca smiled, nodding. “I can’t say the same goes for a handful of other competitors I’ve seen pass through those backstage doorways. Though they try to discourage me from admitting it, as soon as I read about the rocky road that led you all here, I wanted to root for you.”

Pearl flustered, unable to withhold her flattered smile as she tried to hide it behind a fist. A number of other Gems reacted in like fashion.

Rebecca glanced down at her notebook again, this time raising her head, searching. “Where is-- oh! Of course, the shocking blue hair! Congratulations, Ms. Kaile’a, on best actress!”

Lapis jolted up from where she’d supposedly been zoning out, eyes dark with weariness but contour pulled soft with attentiveness as the judge focused on her. Peridot smiled for her as she fumbled out a meek little ‘thank you’. “Lapis is fine.”

“Okay then, Lapis,” Rebecca leaned back, setting her notepad aside, looking speculative. “It’s a little odd seeing you out of costume! But something odd is always something special, regardless of what it is. What I want to know from you is how you found that connection to the character of the ghost?”

Lapis blinked. “What do you mean?”

Rebecca tilted her head curiously, her dark eyes sparkling with knowing. “You couldn’t have achieved what you did on that stage without letting yourself be swept away in your character. You didn’t only portray her, but you became her. Someone once told me that you can’t wait for someone to give you a show, and in this case, a character. That should never be the first time you’re exploring and acting out a character. It’s so important to be able to experience and feel those marvelously real feelings, beyond what the script tells you. And I think you relayed them phenomenally.”

Lapis’ face was beet-red as she nodded, lips parted slightly with wonder as the words sank over the whole troupe.

“And the same critique goes to the rest of the talented cast, as well,” Rebecca added afterwards, benign as she took her eyes and swiveled them around the room, giving each cast member a comfortable smile. “There wasn’t a single moment during this production of Mirror Gem that I saw
the cast behind leak through. When speaking with my board of directors at the OAP Association meeting last week, we discussed how Paul Villeco’s work can, at times, be very difficult to fully grasp and accurately picture.” She looked thoughtful. “But I only saw his story for just what it was: a story of fear turned into understand the meaning of freedom, for all parties involved. I think most of all, it’s a story about love, even if it’s very subliminal. And I can’t help but think the connections made behind the scenes helped to forge your interpretations of Mirror Gem.”

Rebecca’s words weighed heavily on Peridot’s heart. Even if she never had an active hand in the upfront enactment of their show, something within her strung pleasantly at the praise. Dare she admit, she shared a sense of accomplishment with her acting troupemates. A glance around her revealed that the other crew members felt similarly, each donning a grateful smile as they nudged and whispered fondly to their cast neighbors.

Rebecca seemed to take notice of the newfound regard blossoming within the troupe, as well, smiling to herself as she clipped her notepad shut. “I would go into specifics and critique individuals and their scenes, but I don’t know about you all, but by the time it’s two in the morning I’m willing to let your directors simply read them to you on their own accord. Preferably at a less unpleasant hour.”

“Oh thank god,” Smoky wheezed from the back, earning a round of lighthearted laughter from the Gems around them. Rebecca chuckled and dismissed them, only drawing the directors off to the side to trade paperwork and take stock of the performance privately.

Peridot shouldered on her satchel bag and made haste to peel out of the room and into the safety and warmth of the bus for the ride back to the hotel, but before she could do any of that, she felt a mild hand on her shoulder. She blinked, first at the hand, then up at Rebecca, who had stopped her on her way out. Garnet and Pearl watched on knowingly from opposite her.

“I understand that it must have been a stressful situation, shutting the show down before you could reach its conclusion,” the judge empathized. “But I think you impressed our representative up in the booth with how coolly you handled it. Rhodonite, as well. Besides, there’s a popular phrase gone around the thespian community, about--”

“If you’re going to say quality over quantity, so help me,” Peridot couldn’t help but sigh. Despite the weariness in her voice, she was touched that the judge had stopped to remark on the strain that choice had blighted her with.

Rebecca laughed, ceding. “Yes, that. But I wouldn’t worry, Peridot. I don’t think that any of them are going to hold it against you. Especially not after being named Delmarva champions.” The judge gestured to the rest of the Gems, who were all cheerfully elbowing, nudging, and looping arms around one another as they made way out of the hall. “I don’t see a single unhappy face. But I do see one who looks like she’s waiting for someone.”

“What?” Peridot blinked, following Rebecca’s gesture to the side wall, where Lapis was waiting, coat folded over her arms with a warm, wearied smile. Peridot felt her heart skip a beat just at the sight, even if it was nothing objectively special.

Oh, who was she kidding, this was Lapis Lazuli Kaile’a she was looking at. She had every clodding right to have her heart palpitate every once in a while around her.

“Erm -- thanks,” bumbled Peridot, stepping away from Rebecca and giving the judge a small little wave of further gratitude before scurrying over to her waiting partner. She felt her smile deepen when Lapis leaned up from the wall and extended her hand out to Peridot, and wordlessly they clasped their fingers together and walked out of the critique hall together at the tail-end of the troupe.
“Never thought I’d say this,” Peridot mumbled, “but I’d rather deal with Pearl’s squawking tomorrow morning on the bus back to Beach City than stay up here any longer in this estranged university hall.”

“You and me both,” Lapis huffed as the group turned a corner, entered their green room and cleaned their belongings and made it look at least somewhat presentable before making way towards a side entrance where Greg had said he would park the bus while the critique was ongoing.

Everyone made some sort of mad dash together to the bus doors because stars, it was cold in Delmarva at night, rushing in and sighing with relief when the heaters (which had been running for about ten minutes, Greg had offhandedly mentioned) chased away the coolness clinging to their skin.

Lapis reached their seat first, tongue stuck out between her lips as she clung to the window, before abruptly jumping away with a startled hiss. “The glass is cold!"

“Glass does tend to retain colder temperatures,” Peridot smirked, sidling in beside her partner and shrugging on the hoodie she’d dragged out of the bag she’d stowed her fancy clothes away in. “It’ll be a little while until it warms up.”

“By the time that little while’s up we’ll already be at the hotel,” Lapis snorted, throwing her jacket back over herself and stretching her arms high above her head. “Stars-- tonight doesn’t even feel real anymore.”

“I think it has something to do with the fact that it’s two a.m.,” Peridot sniffed, sinking into the seat and thinking of the familiarized weight of the medallion around her neck. “At this point at night, it’s like we’re in an alternate dimension. We’ve surpassed this plane of existence and entered the next.”

“Peridot, that’s just your tired talking.”

“Damn right.”

Peridot blinked and narrowed her eyes when, through the dimness within the bus, she saw Ruby and Sapphire clambering down the aisle, dropping down into the seats directly across from Lapis and Peridot. They were giggling so gaily to one another that Peridot wondered if they’d snuck some alcohol between the awards, the critique, and the race to the bus.

“Hope you two don’t mind us sitting back here with you,” Sapphire managed to smile over, a hearty but controlled laugh spilling out of her when Ruby pulled her closer. “Pearl said we should-- take it to the back if we’re going to be like this all night.”

“The gall of her,” Lapis smirked. “You’ve just gotten engaged. It’s fine by me.”

Peridot shrugged dismissively, because if it was fine by Lapis then it was fine by her, too. Fortunately, Ruby and Sapphire mostly kept to themselves, whispering only to each other as Peridot focused her attention back on Lapis as the bus pulled out of Delmarva State University.

“Hey,” she murmured. “I really meant what I said back there, on the stage.”

“I know,” Lapis uttered back, eyes moving from the lights twinkling by in the frosted window and onto Peridot. “I meant what I said, too. Just wish I said what I wanted to in the heat of the moment.”

“Oh?” Peridot’s brow quirked. “And what’s that?”

Lapis leaned in close, freckled cheeks flushed as the distance between the two of them thinned and thinned, until their lips were but a breath’s depth away from grazing. Peridot felt her heart rise up into
her throat when Lapis spoke.

“That you looked like a big dork in a t-shirt.”

“Lapis, oh my god!” Peridot threw her arms out and sent Lapis careening away with a snort-filled laugh, crossing them stubbornly over her chest as she gave the most petulant of scoffs. “And here I thought you were the one to console me about my lack of appropriate wear for the awards.”

“Console? Sure. If that’s what you want to call it,” Lapis snickered, before leaning back over and draping an arm across the back of Peridot’s shoulders, effectively causing her to turn back in the actress’ direction. “But what I really wanted to do was this.”

Peridot was reeled towards Lapis, lips caught between hers. While her mind was not a whirlwind, her heart ricocheted and rattled like a caged bird, thumping vivaciously against the confines of her ribs as she dizzily leaned in. By the day’s standards, it could have been a chaste kiss; there was no frantic twisting of the head, no searching tongues-- but it still maintained the same depth, the same endearing, sensuous quality that made Peridot feel weightless.

It was most certainly a disappointment when they separated, but she didn’t figure it would bode well for any of the couples put away at the back of the bus to be caught doing anything scandalous. Instead, Peridot only let loose a string of abashed snickers, head diving in to rest in the crook of Lapis’ flushed neck.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Hooh, my gosh! Long chapter! 9.5K words, dang! And hey, they WON! It was so fun to look back and relive how my OAP group won our show in 2017, fjsdkfjsdfd. I even went down the Facebook rabbit hole to find the video to mirror just how CHAOTIC the whole thing felt. It’s like I blacked out, or something, because I only remember ugly-crying with a bunch of other teenagers. I got the best tech award, too! And-- I hope the little Rebecca Sugar easter egg was funny, originally the judge was going to be Jamie but I ended up laughing so hard at the idea of placing the literal SU goddess into the fic (since I’d sprinkled Crewniverse names here and there) that it ended up being the final cut!

I’m here to admit that the next chapter is the last OFFICIAL chapter of Curtain in 5, 4...! There WILL be an epilogue after it, though, so keep an eye out for that! Look for an update around next weekend-- I’m off to surgery on Tuesday and will probably be down for the count because of that for a day or two. Seeya then, and thanks so much for reading my goofy theatre story!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The Crystal Gems go home and make a choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was almost surreal to wake up later the same morning to seraphic white light pouring in through the heavy hotel curtains. Peridot was only mildly surprised to find the other side of the bed empty, pondering Lapis’ whereabouts for only a half-baked moment before she registered the telltale sounds of running water in the bathroom.

The directors had haplessly informed the Crystal Gems (as they shuffled like zombies from the bus into the hotel at the ungodly hour of past two in the morning, mind you,) that they would be departing the Delmarva capital at 11 o’clock sharp the same day. Admittedly, that was more than enough hours to recuperate after the previous day’s grueling business, but Peridot still ached for a few extra hours of rest when she noticed the analog clock on the bedside table read 10:04.

Peridot was just finishing sliding on a pair of sweatpants when Lapis emerged from behind the bathroom door, skin flushed with warmth and hair damp with moisture from the shower.

“You’re up,” she noted with a wry smile, leaning against the soft corner of the bed as Peridot glanced up from where she was going through her bag to find a clean t-shirt to wear back to Beach City. “Is that shocking?”

“Kinda. You were dead to the world when I got up,” Lapis shrugged, dragging her towel across her cheek before bringing it up to her hair to wring the blue fringe dry. “I considered just trying to wake you but I figured I’d let Ruby and Sapphire storm in like yesterday and do it for me.”

“Cheeky,” Peridot intoned with a smirk, blinking with satisfaction when she unearthed a plain lime-green shirt from the depths of her bag. She dropped it down on the mess of bedsheets and twisted the tips of her fingers around the hem of her loose-fitting pajama shirt. It was ridden halfway up her midriff when she received pause, eyes moving from the contents of their bed up towards Lapis, who was shrugging a thin sweater over her sports bra. “And, for your information, they didn’t storm in.”

“Oh?”

“I let them in.”

“Wow.”

Peridot’s manic grin was interrupted by Lapis chucking a pair of shorts at her face. With a scoff she tore them off, tossing them onto Lapis’ side by the bed as she perched off its edge, hands poised over her hips. “It feels surreal, doesn’t it?”

“What does?” Lapis asked.

“Waking up the next day-- like we weren’t all just completely conquering everybody else last night!” Peridot shrugged. “It’s weird.”
“. . It’s like that sometimes, I guess.” Lapis had risen up to her feet and strolled over to Peridot, settling beside her on the edge of the mattress, hands pressed back into the cushion of the disheveled comforter. “So much can happen, good or bad, and then the next day, you still wake up.”

Something in Peridot’s chest ached with the ghost of concern as she shared a knowing look with Lapis. “Last night was. . . good, right?”

“The winning part, or what we did after part?”

“Oh, you clod!” Peridot let out a shrill and threw a stray pillow that had been laying at her fingertips at her girlfriend, completely flushed over with bright red as she yanked herself away while Lapis laughed. “You know what I meant!”

“Yeah, I do,” Lapis sighed, a comically impudent smirk on her lips as she jumped up onto the bed and crossed her legs over one another. “It was. . . good. Better than good.”

“Good?”

“That’s what I said, yeah.”

She threw another pillow at Lapis.

The two of them managed to finish finding their belongings and stuffing them haplessly into their bags, trying to do right by the hotel cleaners and left the comforter and sheets folded at the foot of the bed. It was really Lapis who ended up doing it herself, since every time Peridot tried to help out she ended up tangled in sheets, completely undoing the folding, or falling to the floor. She ended up doing all three simultaneously twice before Lapis stole the sheets away with a ‘tsk’.

They met with Ruby and the Sapphire in the hallway, walking down the hall with them before being joined by Stevonnie and Smoky. They all hustled into the elevator together, dropping down into the grandeur lobby to find the entrance foyer filled with Gems. They weren’t early but they weren’t late, which was doable in Peridot’s book.

Unsurprisingly, Pearl was already speaking with Greg outside, gesturing to the undercarriage as troupe members began to spill out of the lobby, curious and with luggage.

Peridot shouldered on her satchel bag and began to move across the foyer with the others, but was stopped short when Amethyst’s voice rang out. “There’s our star o’ the hour! Yo, Peri, c’mere!”

She shared a bewildered glance with Lapis, who shrugged and gave her a quick shoulder-bump before moving after Ruby and Sapphire out to the bus. “I’ll see you in the back.”

“Yeah,” Peridot nodded, feeling like a silly middle schooler when butterflies erupted in her abdomen before she carried herself towards Amethyst and the others.

“We heard about what happened last night,” Opal was the first to admit, pale eyes large with admiration. “About your mother.”

“You all know about that?” Peridot raised a brow, dragging her gaze across the bubble of Gems gathered around her. They had the decency to look sheepish-- or, well, some of them did. Amethyst, at least, showed some sign of apologeticness as she maintained a good-natured shrug. “It just kinda. . slipped out last night. We weren’t supposed to tell ya we knew until we thought you’d be okay with it.” Amethyst shot a quick look at Opal, who offered a wary smile. “I forgot.”

“But P, it’s like some huge mystery was solved!” Amethyst decided, regardless of whether or not
Peridot wanted to be involved in this, to take over as she rattled on. “We know who’s been kickin’ in the cash for Homeworld for all these years now!”

“And the fact that you told her essentially to *piss off*,” Sugilite nodded along, broad features sharp with wry amusement as she beamed down at Peridot. “That took guts.”

*It also took ten years off my life*, the tiny blonde added silently, lips stretched into a thin line. Despite the aching weariness that the memory of telling Yellow Diamond of provided, it also brought upon her a sense of... pride. She let that sentiment billow and grow, pushing out her chest and crossing her arms proudly over it. “It did, didn’t it?”

“Sure did, dude,” Amethyst smirked as she grabbed Peridot by the shoulder and yanked her in, giving her a spirited shake of a side-hug. “That’s basically like cursing out another Homeworld director! God, did you even see Blue Diamond’s face when *we* got called up? Man, if looks could kill, *none* of us would be standin’ here right now!”

“I didn’t,” Peridot admitted, smirking when those around her exchanged knowing smirks and gave each other high five’s on the down low. “Did I miss out on an opportunity to feel complacent?”

“I wouldn’t call it *that*,” Alexandrite smirked as she bent down to grab at her case, colourful hair swinging down by her shoulders as she turned to make way towards the open foyer doors. “*Satisfied* is a much better word.”

“Says yourself,” Sugilite grinned as she gave her troupe mate a playful punch in the shoulder. “I was feelin’ all kinds of smugness up on that stage. We had Homeworld right where we wanted ‘em-- back in their seats while we were crowned the champs of Delmarva!” The two of them moved off together towards the bus, leaving Peridot with Amethyst, Opal, and Rainbow.

“In all seriousness though, I gotta give you *mad* kudos for what you did last night, Pear,” Amethyst continued, nodding as the cluster began to make way towards the bus outside. “Prolly didn’t seem that way in the heat of the moment, but, y’know, heat of the moment things suck.”

“It still doesn’t feel *real*,” Peridot remarked, thinking back to the brief discussion she had shared with Lapis earlier that morning. “Any of yesterday.”

“Competition has that effect on you,” Rainbow mused from above, breaking off from the group as she tore through the sliding doors. “You’ll want to hurry up before Pearl notices the lag behind.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Amethyst waved Rainbow off, letting Peridot go as she moved to grab her duffel. “But, really, everyone thinks what you did yesterday was *totally* cool.”

“The blackout, or the telling off my mother thing?”

“Both,” Amethyst commented after a quick moment of consideration. “Both is good.”

Peridot couldn’t help the relieved smile that stole her mouth as the three of them moved up and out towards the bus, racing up the steps after dropping their stuff in the bottom storage compartment. Peridot maneuvered through flailing, laughing bodies towards the back after saying goodbye to Amethyst and dropped in beside Lapis with a huff as she threw her bag beneath the seat. “They know about me calling Yellow Diamond a clod.”

“I’m surprised the entire championship didn’t hear,” Lapis noted bemusedly as she removed an earbud. “You weren’t exactly subtle.”

“How could I have been subtle in that situation!” Peridot flouted. “There’s *zero* subtlety when it
comes to my mother.”

Lapis smirked. “I know where you get it from then.”

Peridot was incredulous. “You’re terrible this morning!” She chaffed, playfully raking her hand across Lapis’ shoulder, only to find Lapis sportively retaliating. They ended up practically wrestling on the seat before someone further up ended up sighing and calling them out.

“Lapis, Peridot, try to withhold on the PDA until we’re at least on the road,” Pearl clipped from the front, causing the two to break up, cheeks bright with amusement as they leaned, begrudgingly, back into their seat. “She started it,” Lapis deferred as she nonchalantly pried open her book again, feigning innocence that made Peridot’s hair stand on end.

“And I’ll start it again!” Peridot shot back, heart thumping merrily at the sprightly turn of events but deciding that she could refrain until later when everyone was either asleep or too wrapped up in their own bus doings to be paying the two of them any mind.

The drive home was uneventful, and Peridot truly saw it as such this time. The stock of the previous day seemed to have finally registered with the Gems, giving them reason to take a rain check on any bus shenanigans as they sank into their seats and rested while they could. They stopped once at a rest station to let those who needed to relieve themselves inside, and Peridot decided to step off to buy a bag of chips from a vending machine to share with Lapis when she woke up later.

They were two hours into their drive, meaning there was only an hour left until they reached the outskirts of Beach City where the university laid, when Stevonnie up front barked, “it’s snowing!”

Many heads, including Peridot’s, shot up with interest as they rushed to their respective windows to stare out at the rolling Delmarva countryside. Peridot had hardly noticed the sullen overcast, since it was winter and such weather was common fare in this part of the country, so to look up and see a few wayward snowflakes jolting wildly past the windows was a curious sight to see.

“Hey,” Peridot tapped Lapis’ shoulder, interrupting her mid-snore as she blinked and startled up, dark eyes dazy with sleep. “Hey, Laz, look! Snow!”

Lapis blinked, not looking sentient quite yet, and turned her befuddled visage out towards the window as her warm breath fogged the glass. Peridot eagerly awaited the moment where Lapis would grasp what was happening, and wasn’t disappointed when the actress shifted up in her seat, shoulders pulling in together with enthralment. “Wow.”

They both perked up upon hearing Steven excitedly babble from the front, face practically glued to the cold glass as he gazed out at the fresh snowfall. “Ooh, dad, can we stop? Can we stop in- - there! There’s a field right there! So we can all watch the snow?”

“We can watch the snow from inside the bus, Steven,” Pearl was prompt to correct, and Peridot saw her short pink hair bobbing in a forward manner over the seats. “Besides, what good will it do if you catch cold out there? It’s freezing!”

“C’mon, P, we can afford to have a little fun,” Amethyst piped up next, and Peridot turned back to Lapis, eyebrows raised questioningly. “Should we join that debate?”

Lapis glanced over her shoulder, eyes large. “We definitely should.”

“What side are we taking?”

“Hmm. . .” Lapis pursed her lips. “Steven’s.”
“Deal.” The two made haste like runaway partners in crime up the bus aisle, ignoring the bemused looks from the others as they dropped down into the seat across from where Amethyst was hovering, practically draped over Pearl’s shoulder like a ragdoll. “C’mooon, P. He’s gonna do the puppy-dog eye thing at you.”

“I will!” Steven chirped (but it was really a threat), twisting around in his seat (and ignoring the squawk of alarm from Pearl as he did so) to beam over at Lapis and Peridot as they joined. “Hey guys!”

“Hey Steven,” Lapis and Peridot chorused together, exchanging a quick amused look between at the harmonious greeting.

“I say we stop the bus,” Lapis adjoined, earning a holler of praise from Amethyst across the aisle. “Yeah!” The crew member hobbled up onto her knees, throwing a fist in the air as the rest of the Gems slowly roused from the commotion that the lot up front were causing. “Who’s with us? Stop the bus!”

“Stop the bus! Stop the bus! Stop the bus!” The chanting began minimally, like a dogma celebrated by only a handful of Crystal Gems, but eventually they managed to get enough people citing the incantation to, as they eloquently demanded, stop the bus. Peridot thought of it as a force of pure chaotic good.

“Greg,” Garnet spoke for the first time since the whole charade had begun, smiling behind her visors as she leaned over the bus driver’s shoulder, “I think the crew has reached a consensus.”

Greg laughed breathily and checked his mirrors before gradually pulling the bus into the far side lane, ready to disengage from the 1A. “All right. I’m just glad there’s almost no traffic-- oh, look, there’s a byway road just past those trees. I can turn off there, can’t I?”

“You can!” Peridot affirmed with a dutiful nod. “Delmarva law states all byways are permissible, even to passenger buses!”

Pearl glanced over at Peridot with a light frown. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“You’d be shocked at the inane traffic laws some states harbor,” Peridot defended, sticking her hands up. “For example, in Keystone, you can’t use the horn in a certain county because it’ll scare all the turkeys.”

Amethyst looked confused, but intrigued. “There are turkeys in Keystone?”

“There can be for this argument,” Lapis shrugged, pressing the challenge on and leaning over the back of Steven’s seat to hover at the boy’s shoulder. “We’re making this turnoff.”

There was a unanimous murmur of consent from the Gems that had huddled around them, and Pearl looked ready to deflate as she sank back into her seat, fingers pressed into her forehead. “Just put on some coats, will you?”

“You wish,” Amethyst jibed as she bounced back into her seat, sharing a high five with Smoky as Greg digressed from the highway and pulled off on the side road, safely stopping the bus beside the field that was quickly being dappled over with cool, white snow.

Peridot did, in fact, run back to the back of the bus to retrieve a coat from her bag because she was not about to stand in the cold without any means of protecting herself against sickness. She snatched a scarf from Lapis’ bag for good measure when it looked like her blue-haired counterpart wasn’t going to grab an extra layer.
She clambered off in the last drove, watching the Gems disperse and rush off into the field as the snow began to fall more generously than before. Pearl wasn’t kidding about the nippy air, Peridot realized with a huff, as she bundled deeper into her coat as the wind bit at her skin. She couldn’t help but have her eyes drawn towards the back of the bus, where Bismuth had pulled in on the byway and parked, sticking her head out of the window with perplexion.

“Why’d we stop?” Bismuth called out, gesturing curiously to herself and to Alexandrite in the passenger seat. “We’ve still got a couple dozens of miles to go, don’t we?”

Garnet moved over, smiling and leaning up on the Penske door. “We decided to have some fun in the snow.”

“Fun, huh?” Bismuth intoned, a hint of mischief in her voice that Peridot wasn’t sure if she was excited for or afraid of. “Move outta the way, Garnet, I’m comin’ out.”

Peridot wisely decided to give Bismuth a ten-foot-radius as she rushed over to Lapis, who was knelt down beside Steven, building a tiny snowman in what snow was sticking to the earth. “Here,” Peridot gestured, digging out Lapis’ scarf and tossing it cozily around the actress’ neck. “Since you didn’t want to go to the back and get a real jacket.”

“Jackets are for cowards,” Lapis determined, which made Steven laugh and inquire, “aren’t your feet cold, Lapis?”

Peridot glanced down to find that, yes, Lapis was indeed not wearing shoes. She wasn’t sure why she was surprised anymore. “You’re going to get frostbite, you know.”

“All according to the master plan,” Lapis winked, tearing her glittering eyes away from Peridot and doing something with her hands that Peridot couldn’t see. In earnest, Peridot leaned over to try to see what she was making with the snow, before careening backwards as a small ball of snow crashed into her nose.

“Nyagh— Lapis!”

“Heh.”

“The first snowball’s been thrown! This is war!” Bismuth suddenly roared from out of nowhere, and chaos erupted around Peridot as Crystal Gems ducked low behind shoddily-built snow walls, chucking and dodging snowballs at one another. She was smacked on the shoulder by an unruly, unseen opponent, and as she whirled around she found Smoky and Stevonnie running towards her, arms full of snowballs. “Stock up!” Stevonnie panted as they dropped down beside Peridot, Lapis, and Steven, dropping the slightly melted ammunition in a graceless pile.

Peridot didn’t need to be told twice as she scrambled down onto her knees, grabbing snowballs and sharing a frantic look with Steven as the boy clamped snow into balls between his mittens.

No one was quite sure how long the Crystal Gems spent time playing in the field. From a pragmatic perspective, it was immature of them; a group of more than a dozen university students all weaponizing the snow to use against each other.

But even with snow trickling down her skin and seeping into clothes that were quickly becoming sodden with cold, Peridot had never felt warmer.
White snow was spread pleasantly over the hills encompassing Beach City University as the bus tore into campus, moving fluidly around the back of the arts district and parking near the backdoor gate to the Temple. No one was keen to hover around in the cold for long, rushing to grab their things from the carriage and hike it up to the back door, ready to rush inside and protect themselves from the biting winter breeze.

Pearl and Garnet keyed open the back door, but instructed the Gems to wait outside for Bismuth so they could unload before they lost daylight. Peridot was bemused at that, because it was only three in the afternoon.

Regardless, Peridot moved inside after Garnet while the rest of the Gems grudgingly waited for Bismuth to weave the Penske to the back alley of the Temple so they could unload. Instinctively she moved over to the backstage light box and brought the work lights to life so the others had some light to stumble around in. Just as the work lights startled to life, however, she heard the heavy doors at the front of the Temple slam shut.

Peridot startled, whipping out of the theatre wings, wondering who was fast enough to have made it all the way around the auditorium in the hot minute she’d been inside. Pearl and Garnet reacted similarly, directing their gazes to the front of the auditorium, where the silhouette of another person could be made out coming in through the front lobby.

“Superintendent Dewey?”

It was Pearl who pinned the identity of the mysterious intruder first, stepping lightly up to the bow of the stage apron and clasping her hands hopefully together. “We didn’t expect to have you with us upon our return!”

“Ahh, yes, well--” Dewey’s voice carried through the quiet auditorium, voice a bit conflicted. “We weren’t expecting you all to return so quickly.”

Peridot felt a frown twist her lips as she leaned against a side platform, watching the superintendent shuffle down the Temple aisles towards the directors.

This was uncharacteristic, she decided. She remarked inwardly on how Dewey sounded so unlike the influential, entitled mockup Peridot had come to affiliate with Beach City University’s head; after all, he tended to mosy around campus in a golf cart, wielding a microphone to boast and announce activities and other events to students. He was just like a politician, honestly.

“We had good timing with the road construction on the 1A, despite a quick detour,” Garnet supplied curtly as she sidled in beside Pearl, regarding Dewey, lips wired into a taut line. “The troupe is going to unload very soon into the Temple.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Pearl nodded frivolously, turning back to the man with a more austere expression. “Is there anything that you mean to talk about, Mr. Dewey? This stage is about to become very crowded and very loud.”

“Yes, actually,” Mr. Dewey stifled, a hand coming up to rest on the back of his neck. “If I could speak with you two, privately.”

Peridot narrowed her eyes, taking note of how flushed the superintendent’s skin had become. Was he sweating? But it was freezing in here!

The technician blanched when the superintendent’s gaze scored over her, stilling on her, lips frozen
in a part before wrenching shut. The tension in his features seemed accentuated in the shadows. “And Ms. Diamond.”

“What?” Peridot blinked, nearly falling over at her place on the wings as she rushed to steady herself, arms wrapping defensively around her chest as she sized up the newly risen situation. Why did she need to be involved in this? If it was a director's meeting, she needed no part in it; though she was flattered to be considered since it seemed like a thing of hierarchy-- but that wasn’t the point!

At this point, both Garnet and Pearl had turned towards her, as flummoxed as she was. Mr. Dewey didn’t budge, waving Peridot over, face obscure in the shadowy surroundings.

The telltale sounds of the crew members wrenching open the metal gate of the loading door clattered throughout the stage, and the superintendent seemed to shed sweat faster than an automatic weapon could bullets. “I’m going to have to ask that you stall your group from loading back into the auditorium for now, ladies. There’s administrative business that must be settled.”

“Administrative business?” Pearl scoffed, eyes quickly growing tenebrous with derision. “This is a champion, state-winning team that’s just returned to the university! I’d expect nothing short of a parade to welcome us ho--”

“Pearl.” Garnet’s staid voice intervened before her co-director could prattle any further, effectively silencing her with no rebuttal other than a frustrated sigh as she marched across the stage to let the troupe outside know of the change of instruction. Peridot’s brows only dived deeper as she decided to finally hike it over to Garnet and Dewey, green eyes fierce but questioning behind her glasses. “What’s this about?”

“Is there a place more... reclusive that we can speak in?” Dewey inquired, eyeing Peridot from the corner of his eyes with no small amount of whatever stressful emotion was causing him to act so bizarrely. Peridot pinched her lip between her teeth, traded a calculating look with Garnet, and gestured up to the shadowy box of the light booth at the back of the auditorium.

Pearl had caught back up with them by the time that Peridot was unlocking the door and sliding inside, quickly turning on the LEDs and doing the Crystal Gems the favor of turning on some front-stage lights so they didn’t have anybody taking an accidental stage-dive.

“What is it that you wanted to talk to us about, William?” Garnet was the first to inquire, leaning with stoic casualty against the wall of the light booth as all attention focused onto Dewey, who was standing stiffly at the centre of the room. His hands were busily steepling one another, a nervous antic that Peridot recognized that left some room for concern to swell in her chest.

“This morning, the head administrative office of BCU received a case forcing litigation upon the university if certain... measures weren’t met,” Dewey began, hands plowing through disheveled hairs to push them back against his clammy forehead. “Unfortunately, that measure would mean the disbandment of some of BCU’s liberal arts programs.”

The light room was quiet, save for the gentle electric churr of the lightboard. Dewey’s words weighed as heavily as lead on the hearts of the three present Crystal Gems, each face sporting a different reaction to the news.

They were trying to shut down the Crystal Gems? Again?

“What specifics did the case state?” Garnet spoke first, voice hard as she bore down upon Dewey with the stony conviction of a looming predator. “Under what obligations does the board feel inclined to cede to it?”
“An obligation worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, is what,” Dewey sighed. His voice rasped with distress that ebbed off in waves, leaking into Peridot as she honed in. What did this business have to do with her? She’d had no upfront interaction the last time the board had tried to dispel the troupe. . . Then again, she’d had no interaction with the Gems in those short weeks. That thought made her chest ache.

“The party lineates in their argument that they demand the closure of the Beach City University One Act Play program,” admitted Dewey at last, the words seeming to take the last bit of gusto right out of him as he slumped over as the directors glared down at him with the exasperation of hawks.

“What about this accusing party?” Pearl defended. “Surely the school board will fight to defend its programs against an-- an utterly unprecedented lawsuit? We’ve done nothing to warrant this legal threat!”

Peridot had remained tucked to the back of the quickly heating argument. She wanted to feign naivete as to how or why an unsolicited entity was suing Beach City University and deliberately targeting its One Act Play program. She wanted to think it was just a coincidence, but her eyes were already dark with knowing.

“It’s my mother’s doing,” Peridot growled, every fiber of her being catching flame with malevolence as she envisioned her mother’s snide face ordering her officials to file the lawsuit against the school. “This is an act of spite, nothing else! Isn’t there anything that the board can do to challenge this? Challenge her? I did!”

A strained noise escaped from the back of Dewey’s throat. “As much as I would, personally, like to defend the program-- my son frequents the fancy technology here, I know-- the board is incredibly concerned by the financial legal motions instigated by. . . err, yes, your mother, Ms. Diamond.”

“Ugh-- I– I don’t even want to have an affiliation with that surname anymore, just-- Peridot.” Peridot’s fingers found the bridge of her nose, pinching down so forcefully that the skin flushed white with force. “What is she doing? What is she actually threatening the school with?”

The official’s face paled a few shades. “A lawsuit that could cost the university much more than the board is willing to even consider. Essentially, the way that case was explicated upon reception was, in a word, blackmail. The board is hesitant to challenge this case for fear of being unable to collect a judgment, should the trial be lost.”

“But they’re unwilling to even stand up for us?” Pearl snapped. “Already once the board has tried to clip OAP out of its system. How do we know this isn’t just a ploy scheme to finish the job, once and for all? How do we even know that this lawsuit is real?”

Dewey frowned, unearthing a pair of documents from his trouser pockets and handing them to Garnet, whose face remained impassive as she perused the transcripts. “It’s real.”

“Great,” Peridot grunted.

“‘I realize the situation is unfortunate, ladies, but it’s out of my hands now! The board has already come to the decision to abide by their terms.”

“But you received the case only this morning, you said?” contested Pearl, hands poised dangerously over her hips. “Certainly the board couldn’t have made a decision so quickly. Without even contacting--” she gestured erratically to herself and to Garnet, “either of us!”

“It is out of my hands,” Dewey clipped, thick brows furrowing as he swiped said flushed hands
over the sides of his dark slacks-- like rubbing the sweat from his palms would cleanse him of this hot predicament. “In order to ensure that the board and other officials are calm and secure, I must go forward with their impromptu decision.”

“Oh, impromptu decision, my a- -” Peridot, who had been bubbling with rage behind the scenes, had stormed up to give this incompetent clod an absolute piece of her mind, only to be stopped by the austere hand of Garnet. She stopped, steadfast, glaring down at the hand hovering in front of her before glaring icy daggers up at the wielder. “Are you just going to let him shut us down? We’ve-- we’ve just won the Delmarva championships! Doesn’t that give us any sort of credibility among other programs? Favouritism, even?”

Dewey turned his dubious gaze towards her. “To insinuate that the board plays favourites with its numerous organizations is a dangerous punch to throw, Ms. Diamo--”

“Peridot.”

“Ms. Peridot. . . I can only think of one solution that does not involve direct financial litigation that might result in the preservation of the Crystal Gems.”

Peridot’s features lit up. “What is it? I’m certain that a compromise can be reached with the board-- if the Gems were to--”

“Your expulsion from Beach City University.”

Dewey’s words sent a cold, icy rod straight through Peridot’s ribs, and had it not been entirely metaphorical Peridot would’ve feared someone would need to phone an ambulance for her.

“Expelled?” Peridot spat, the very words venomous on her tongue as their daunting weight settled on her shoulders. It threatened to press in, crush and grind together her diminutive bones as she was helpless to stop it. “But-- that’s so unfair!”

“Mrs. Diamond mentioned two possible outcomes where the school would not sustain financial repercussion by her legal enterprise,” Dewey rushed to rationalize, hands flying up as Peridot whirled around, skin hot to the touch with shock. “Either the expulsion of Peridot Diamond from its academia program, or the closure of the Crystal Gems.”

Silence pressed down into the light room, boxing in the four of them as the superintendent's compromise sank in. There really was no personal win for Peridot in this situation. If she continued her studies at BCU, the Crystal Gems would be stripped of its prominence at the One Act Administration, and last night’s triumph would be rendered void. If she made the sacrifice of expulsion and in turn allowed the Crystal Gems to persist, she would be left floundering, without any financial assistance-- at least, not until an unemployment assistance agency scooped her up. No, wait, she wouldn’t be completely alone; she still had Lapis, although Lapis lived in the dormitories just like her.

This is stupid, she silently seethed, teeth grinding painfully against one another as she bore holes into the ground between her feet. This is cloddy and unfair and-- every other word I’m too furious to remember to use right now! If there had been rocks down by her shoes, she would have felt compelled to kick the nearest to next Thursday, just to try to abate the fierce indignation boiling her insides.

They shouldn’t have to give everything up because of me.

The abrupt thought sent a knowing shiver up Peridot’s spine. Her heart twanged beseechingly. It
already knew what she wanted before she did. She felt her blood crawl down from her head and surge into her heart, filling it to the brim and making her chest sag with defeat. She should have known better than to have had hope.

She couldn’t be the iceberg that tore into the sides of the Crystal Gem’s ship. She wouldn’t be.

“Mr. Dewey, I--”

“Peridot,” Garnet’s voice clipped in again, and Peridot could have screamed her frustrations had it not been for her director’s innate ability to tranquilize any fit that the small blonde wanted so badly to have. She clamped her lips shut, incensed, and stared up at Garnet as she motioned for Pearl to draw nearer. “If I could have a word with the Gems.”

Dewey regarded them drily, then shrugged. “By all means. Now, I need to go and find Barbara before we have another fiasco with the student post system; contact me once you have made your ultimatum.”

“Ultimatum,” Pearl huffed as Dewey exited through the back door and out of the Temple light box. She wore the strained contour of someone who was livid, but had the rheumy eyes of someone who was tired and desperate. “Who does he think he is? Not to mention the board! Garnet, we can’t possibly allow them to sweep us under the rug, not when we’ve fought so hard to win?”

“She’s right!” Peridot finally managed to spit out, finding her voice once Garnet’s cooling ambiance wore thin. “They can’t just-- back out on us! We’ve just won the state show! Doesn’t that mean anything to them? We even have material proof of our victory! The trophies-- the plaques!” Peridot flung her arms around to her satchel and ripped out her medals. “These! Doesn’t it mean anything?!”

Garnet glanced down, fingers sliding up to gently remove her shades and fold them between stiff fingers. “In the grand scheme of things, they are only tokens to show the work we’ve put into our show. They mean very little to those who have power over our involvement with the OAP officials. Even with the bounties and credits that the university will earn as a result of our victory last night, they will be nothing in comparison to the lawsuit that Yellow Diamond’s pledged.”

“You aren’t seriously considering this, Garnet?” Pearl debated, torrid. “After all that the Gems have been through!”

Peridot, who had been biting down on her lip and had just begun to taste iron welling on her tongue, snapped up. “No. She isn’t considering this. Because it’s not going to happen.”

Pearl turned a speculative eye to Peridot. “What do you mean?”

Peridot met her gaze, paralleling its intensity as she crossed her arms with a contrasting meekness over her chest. “Because I’d rather see myself expelled than see the Crystal Gems go down for my sake.”

Immediately Pearl coloured with an emotion that Peridot couldn’t pinpoint, a gasp escaping her lips as fists rose up to conceal her mouth. She speedily looked over to Garnet, who was regarding Peridot with despondence. Peridot had grown so used to the quiet, phlegmatic warmth that the director so easily emitted that to see her looking anything close to miserable was disheartening. Regardless, she remained steadfast, pushing her chest out and tucking her chin in. “The superintendent said that this was the only compromise. And I, personally, couldn’t live with myself knowing that I took this ship down because I rebelled against my own mother, and she’s so full of spite that she’d take the whole band that made me do it go down with me. I knew there would be a price to pay when I broke ties off with her weeks ago, and last night when I-- called her a clod, right to her face! And this is it.”
Peridot inhaled sharply. “I’ll say my goodbyes. You can have Amethyst or Ruby handle lights now that the competitive season is over; it’s a menial, non-mandatory job now. No problem.”

“Now just wait a moment.” Garnet lowered herself, kneeling before Peridot before the blonde could spit out anything else. In her pause she realized she’d shed tears, and stubbornly she reached up and swept the stupid things from her cheeks as Garnet spoke softly to her. “You don’t need to do this. And you are not expendable.”

“Right,” Pearl supplied from behind Garnet, appearing over her shoulder. She fidgeted, like she wasn’t entirely comfortable, but her face relayed proof of support despite the squirrelish stance. “This... well, yes, as was said... this ultimatum is certainly a hindrance that we would rather not need to extend to the rest of the troupe. It could have been handled much more graciously than it was.”

“And my ultimatum is deciding to go to keep the rest of them afloat,” Peridot insisted, jabbing her thumb accusingly at her heart. “I-- I don’t want to be the reason the Crystal Gems lose everything. I don’t want to be the one deliberately responsible for having thrown all our work in the garbage and then toss ourselves in after. It’s-- it’s not fair. To them.”

“What about to you?” Garnet inquired seriously. “What about you, Peridot?”

“I don’t want to have to ask ‘what about me’!” Peridot choked. “This is so much bigger than just me.”

Pearl and Garnet exchanged a swift glance before returning the intense stares onto Peridot. “Why don’t we let them decide?” Garnet proposed. “Let the Crystal Gems come to the decision themselves; this will be their future as much as it will be your own.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Peridot sniffed. “I can just let this affect me since I’m the clod who began it all.”

“But it will affect them,” Pearl murmured as she looped around, and settled a pale hand over the back of Peridot’s trembling shoulders. “They won’t have you with them anymore.”

“You forget the impact you have made on us,” Garnet nodded, going along with Pearl’s expression. “On every Crystal Gem, on Steven. On Lapis Lazuli.”

To hear her name spoken so sincerely made Peridot’s throat ache with grief. For her.

Garnet continued in earnest. “We will let them decide what will become of the Crystal Gems, and of you. We might be a team, but the decisions that we make are made as a family. You’re part of that family now.”

“Whether you like it or not,” Pearl smiled wanly from over her shoulder, striding out towards the door and prying it open for the three of them to march back down the Temple and towards the stage. Peridot had not lost the strength to surrender her fight, per se, but rather put it on standby out of curiosity.

Would the Gems rather see her gone and preserve their theatre? Or would they rather keep her in close range and forfeit their winnings? Everything that they had worked for? Honestly, both options were making her stomach ill with culpability.

“If we could have everyone’s attention!” Pearl called out upon stepping up onto the apron. Peridot could feel the expectant weight of their gazes. Some were curious, inquiring as to why they’d stopped loading in. Some were indifferent, glad to just be able to laze around instead of get to work.
But the most speculative of them all—Lapis included—were concerned. Peridot met her gaze across the stage and found herself striding over towards her, thumbs rubbing nervously at her elbows as the directors took control.

“Unfortunately,” Pearl decided to begin, already setting a dire medium for the revelation to be had, “the Crystal Gems have come under the threat of litigation.” She passed the crisis off to Garnet, who was standing with arms crossed, brows furrowed. “Superintendent Dewey was just present and revealed to us details of the case, and it appears that an organization uninvolved with the school has targeted the BCU OAP program, specifically, lest the board decide to cancel it.”

“What?” Ruby spat from her spot beside Sapphire, throwing her bulky arms up into the air. “That’s— that’s wrong! This is the second time they’ve tried to do this!”

“But last time there was no lawsuit that frightened the board directors badly enough to warrant the disbandment,” Pearl admitted, biting onto the edge of her tight fist. “Dewey has already revealed to us that the board has made the decision, without our input. It certainly goes to show how credible they find us.”

There was an unceremonious tumult among the Gems as it dawned upon them that, despite their victorious triumph the very night before— it would be rendered all for naught. The stone trapped in Peridot’s stomach dropped even lower. She glanced over at Lapis, who was watching the scene unfold with anxious brown eyes. What did she think of all this? Would she be willing to continue working as a Crystal Gem even if it meant Peridot couldn’t?

“Well, is there anything we can do about it?” Stevonnie chimed in, stepping forward. Their face was wrought with dejection. “Anything we can do to stop them from shutting us down?”

Pearl flushed and pressed her fist tighter against her lips, looking off into the shadows of the wings. Garnet remained still, lips pushed together. “There is one alternative option.”

“Oh— well, geez, what is it?” Amethyst pressed, jumping in beside Garnet and staring up at the director with huge, hopeful eyes. “Spill! C’mon, we’ll do anything to keep those uppity board people off of our tails for another year!”

Garnet glanced away, diffident. “It involves the expulsion of one of our own.”

The silence that befell the perturbed troupe weighed more than a hundred tons. At least, it did to Peridot as she gripped perilously at her elbows. She felt Lapis’ hand secure itself carefully on the small of her back, and a brief, shooting glance through the corner of her eyes told her that Lapis was regarding her. She must have realized what had happened. What her mother had done.

“Yellow Diamond filed the lawsuit this morning,” Peridot spoke up in a raspy voice, clearing her throat gingerly when all eyes turned dismally towards her. “She. . . she wants to get back. At me. If the board is full of heads too cowardly to stand up for you all, then— then I’ll do it for them. I’ll— I’ll be expelled at the hand of my mother’s spite.”

The words were immediately met with backlash. Within seconds she was surrounded by concerned and distressed faces alike, their bitterness replaced with solicitude.

“Are you crazy?” Amethyst probed first, her zeal to their one compromise forgotten in favor of defending her friend. “Like, have you actually gone crazy? For real this time?”

Like voices joined in the commotion, coming in from all around Peridot, their undertones fueled by anger -- but not for Peridot; rather, for the circumstance and peril she’d been placed under.
“She threatened to have you expelled?”

“This is insane-- this is insane, right?”

“They can’t just do that!”

“This is unfair!”

“Peridot.” Lapis’ voice was a grounding factor in the uproarious pandemonium, and Peridot found herself swimming in her own tears as Lapis stepped in beside her. Her voice was so tender, so warm, and so sensitive that Peridot was sure her heart couldn’t take any more additional stress. “Y-Yeah?”

“None of us want you to leave,” Lapis continued softly, her voice hardly above the tenor of a whisper as the others discoursed around them. “I don’t want you to leave. Is... is there really no other way we can save the Crystal Gems?”

Peridot squeezed her eyes tightly and shook her head, vehement. “No. She’s demanding one out of two dire outcomes, and I’d rather see myself crucified than-- than all of you!” She gestured broadly to the Gems around her, who had quieted down as she began to ramble. “There’s something-- great here, something I told that-- stuck-up, pretentious clod when she found me yesterday. You all-- it’s been incredible. Better than incredible, it-- I’ve learned so many things and. . . I’m sure I could have learned more. But I don’t want to see all that potential get flushed down the drain because of me.”

A pensive quiet settled over the crowd. Faces shifted from concerned to empathetic. Hands wrung, and feet shuffled on the sleek vinyl floor of the stage.

It was Steven who spoke up at last, pushing out from between Sapphire and Opal. Peridot had almost forgotten that he was in here with them. “But we don’t wanna see you get thrown out to protect us, either,” he quietly spoke. “I don’t wanna lose you, Peridot!”

“Me neither,” Amethyst chimed in next, standing beside Steven with a look of conviction. “I’m not goin’ anywhere unless we get to keep this nerd closeby.”

“Me neither,” Stevonnie stepped in next, smiling.

Up next came Sardonyx, twirling in place as she leaned against Stevonnie’s shoulder with a beaming, theatrical smile. “Me neither! The Crystal Gems aren’t the Crystal Gems without every member of its court! Isn’t that right, everybody?”

A round of pleased hollers sounded from the swarm of bodies. Peridot found herself wrapped in the middle of an enormous group hug, the pressure of over a dozen bodies closing in on her-- but she didn’t have the heart to feel claustrophobic right now. It was such a euphoric sentiment, the one that the Gems were radiating as they murmured and lauded their support for her.

They didn’t want her gone. They’d rather keep her around than keep their beloved One Act program in tact.

Peridot swallowed thickly. Garnet was right, like usual. This wasn’t just a team anymore, this...

This was a family. Her family, her real one. One that she loved. And they loved her right back, and it showed in how they weren’t going to stand idly by and let her take the brunt of the attack.

Despite just how easy it would have been to begin to cry, Peridot snickered instead within their embraces. Lapis shifted beside her, and she felt herself being drawn in towards her partner. Blue hair tickled against her flushed cheeks. “We’re not gonna let you take this fall alone,” Lapis murmured
into her ear, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “Someone once told me you don’t have to be alone,
when stuff like this happens.”

Peridot choked on her flustered laughter. “Y-Yeah? Well-- they sound like a real clod.”

She felt Lapis smile into the side of her neck. “They are. But they’re my clod.”

Of course they all eventually had to disperse because it was getting a little difficult to breathe after
being buried under so many embracing arms. Peridot wiped the moisture stuck to her lashes away
with the edge of her sweatshirt, folding her arms beneath her chest and watching the Gems around
her.

“Sounds to me like the lot of us would rather have your nerd self around than go on without it,”
Amethyst noted, stretching her arms back over her head, and giving the group around them a cocky
once-over. Then she rose her hand up high and shouted, “all in favor of disbanding the Gems to keep
Peridot in the loop, say I!”

Peridot didn’t think there was a single soul in the Temple who didn’t say it. “But-- what about the
Temple? About-- Mirror Gem?” She sputtered at last. “We’re going to lose all of that.”

“But we’re not gonna lose each other!” Steven motioned, waving his arm at the crowd of Gems
smiling down at them. “And. . . well, I’ll actually have to ask my dad about it but-- I might have an. .
idea? Why don’t we just-- take the Crystal Gems. . outside of the university?”

“Outside of BCU?” Garnet leaned in. “Tell us more, Steven.”

“Well! I mean-- we can take it to the community! Become a-- oh, what’s it called. . . a community
theatre group! We won’t have to give up theatre if we just take it into town instead of into contests!”

“Yeah!” Amethyst jumped in beside Steven, lassoing an arm around the boy’s shoulders and pulling
him close. “Who needs these dictators bossin’ us around anymore? We can just take it to the city!”

“Yeah! It’s not as filled with people as it is up here on the campus, but, it’s remote! And my dad
inherited an old building on the beach under the lighthouse that. . oh, shoot, it doesn’t have a stage
or anything.. .”

“Not a problem, little man!” Bismuth entered, clapping a hand comfortingly over the boy’s thick
head of curls. “You’ve got some of the finest set and framework builders that Beach City has to offer
right here. Garnet, is there enough funding left in the drama accounts to get some new materials?”

“It should,” Garnet nodded, looking thoughtful at the creative turn of events-- but not entirely
surprised. “We would need a permit from the city to renovate the site, however.”

“I can pitch in there!” Stevonnie jumped in, beaming as they stepped into the brainstorming circle. “I
know a few people in the council who’d be willing to help out.”

“And you’ve got all of us for the labor,” Alexandrite added next, stepping in with Sardonyx,
Sugilite, Opal, and Smoky, who all nodded with determination.

“Yeah!” Steven clapped his hands, before turning up towards Pearl and Garnet. “If-- if it’s okay with
you guys?”

“Well. . .” Pearl worried at her lip, but the jubilant glitter in her eyes revealed her excitement.
“Garnet?”
Garnet had positioned her glasses back over her eyes, giving them a thoughtful flick before her hands found her hips. She was smiling. “I like the sound of it. It’ll be a nice change in pace to get the board out of our hair and be able to do what we love without inference.”

“Exactly! Ohh, you have no idea, I’m so excited-- I even have a story I wrote that we can host a community play off of, and--”

“What do you mean?” Garnet tilted her head in query.

“Whoa, slow the roll there, Steve-o,” Amethyst grinned, hooking an arm around Steven’s neck and drawing him down into an affectionate noogie. “I’m feelin’ your vibes but we’ve gotta figure out what to do right now first.”

“Right now we’re going to call the superintendent and let him know of our decision,” Pearl nodded, bringing out her cell phone. “The Crystal Gems are not disbanded, but rather... no longer affiliated with Beach City University and its board.” Pearl paused, and gave Peridot a wink. “We just won’t tell them that last bit.”

A peal of appreciative laughter rocked the Crystal Gems as a handful of them crowded in around Steven as he explained the details of his dad’s spacious venue down on the beach, and others went to deal with the Penske with Bismuth.

Peridot was left standing alone beside Lapis, arms wrapped tightly around herself as it all dawned upon her. She was still a Crystal Gem, and she was still going to graduate from university in under a semester-- all thanks to this little loophole that the Gems had managed to construct together... for her.

She was jolted out of her reflective stupor by a hand sliding in to squeeze her own. She found Lapis delicately prying her arms away from her front, a clement smile taking residence on her cheeks.

“You’re never going to be alone,” she murmured, slender brown thumbs rubbing comforting circles into the back of Peridot’s shaky hands. “You’ve taught me that more than enough times. It’s... it’s only right that we teach you that, too.”

With how heavy the world around her had become in the past twenty-four hours, Peridot couldn’t help but feel completely weightless. A delight so fueled with relief filled her that it made her dizzy, unfolding like a flower within her soul as she laughed and leaned in, sealing the distance between herself and Lapis Lazuli with a passionate kiss. It was a hesitant break off when they split seconds later, cheeks flaming the same rosy colour as their swollen lips. The flush only deepened when they looked outward and found the other Gems forcibly tearing their eyes away, all except for Garnet, who maintained a steady eye contact with the both of them, before giving a thumbs-up and then turning a blind eye. Peridot smiled, and turned back to Lapis, and went back in for a second kiss because there was nothing that could stop her now. Not when she had Lapis and all the Crystal Gems behind her.

It was a kiss borne of fierce joy. It represented all the trials and tribulations faced by the Crystal Gems and by them, together, over the past competitive season. It represented overcoming fears, and it represented gladness for the fact that they had found one another in a vicious, painful, and deceitful world that had been moving too fast for them to keep up with alone.

And perhaps most of all, it represented love.
Holy wow. It's over, isn't it? Well, the actual story is over but an epilogue is still coming! I have a lot to say but I'll save it for the final author's note when I release the epilogue. Which shouldn't be long at all, three days, tops! Thank you for reading, and keep an eye out for that epilogue. c=
"Shh, they’ll hear you--"

“They’re going to see us anyways when we step inside.”

“But the element of surprise, Lapis! I don’t believe any of them know we’re home yet.”

“They do, you said we were back in Beach City on the group chat.”

“Well, they might think we’re still unpacking, or something?”

“Bark! Bark!”

Peridot’s plan to catch the Crystal Gems by surprise as she and Lapis crept up to the steps of the Crystal Temple was foiled by Pumpkin’s excitable yapping as the door crawled slowly open. The small dog wriggled between the frame and the heavy wooden door, sprinting inside before Lapis or Peridot could do anything to stop her.

“Pumpkin!” They hissed in unison, scrambling over each other as they stumbled right into the yawning foyer door, crashing to the ground on top of one another as all eyes within the building settled onto the two new intruders.

“Hey guys!”

Lapis and Peridot looked up to spot Steven squeezing his way out of the cast circle near the bow of the apron, pelting down the homemade auditorium and throwing himself around them. Peridot squeaked as all the air was sucked out of her lungs, once again reminded of the boy’s uncanny strength for his size and age. “Hello Steven--”

“Hi Steven,” Lapis tolled in next, smiling warmly down at the boy as he sheepishly pried himself away. “Sorry, are we late?”

“Nope!” Steven piped, gesturing to the group he had left dawdling in his wake. “Only a few of the Gems have showed up so far. Say hi, guys!”

A disorganized chorus of greetings rang out from the group of present Crystal Gems, composed of Stevonnie, Ruby and Sapphire, Opal, and Sardonyx. Peridot could make out the sounds of somebody working in the wings, but couldn’t figure out who. If she had to make a calculated guess, it was probably Bismuth working on the finicky sandbag weights again.

“How was your trip?” Steven inquired, glancing over at Peridot with a curious smile. “I saw some of the pictures you guys put in the group chat! Hawaii looked amazing!”

“It was, and continues to be!” Peridot laughed, sharing a knowing glance with Lapis as she held her left fingers close to her person. The two of them had been saving since graduation for a visit to Lapis’ home state, saving every extra penny that they could; they’d even accounted for the costs of taking their dog, Pumpkin, on vacation with them!

On that, Pumpkin had practically chosen the two of them when Steven had brought her over last
autumn. Apparently, Greg’s uncle had surprised the boy with the little ginger puppy (Peridot insisted she was a purebred corgi, but Lapis always remarked that she had a little of something other breeds in her). Pumpkin never seemed to quite connect to Steven, though, especially when Steven’s very large, very protective cat was in the same space. Usually he brought Lion with him to practice, and the pets seemed to get along fine when they weren’t forced to live together.

When Steven had showed up at their apartment doorstep with Pumpkin wriggling in his arms, the connection had been instant. Pumpkin had leaped up into Lapis’ arms, and Peridot’s first words had been, and she remembered clearly, “it loves us now!”

But, yes, Hawaii had been fantastic. Despite very much still being a part of the United States, Peridot couldn’t help but be riddled with culture shock when she stepped foot onto Lapis’ native island. Lapis had thought her bemusement was hilarious, but with her partner’s clement help she was easily able to enjoy the rich Hawaiian culture and its even richer habitat. She’d never seen so many florals!

Lapis was smiling quietly while Steven’s attention was focused on Peridot as she told him about what she’d learned and seen, and her eyes soared over to the group of other Crystal Gems. Ruby and Sapphire were exchanging little murmurs, eyeing the couple knowingly. Ruby was absolutely beaming.

“How was Hawaii, you two?” Sapphire inquired as she padded over, hands clasped warmly in front of her chest. Ruby was at her side, meeting Peridot’s gaze with a wink. “I hear you two did something pretty spectacular over there.”

“You could say that,” Lapis laughed quietly, her right fingers wrapping around her left hand. Peridot’s heart fluttered with knowing when Steven glanced between the two of them, inquisitive. “What do you mean?”

Steven shrieked with joy when they showed off the new engagement rings that now nestled comfortably on their fingers. Ruby and Sapphire had laughed together, saying that they had called it before Lapis and Peridot had even left Beach City for Hawaii. The two of them had gotten married only a month after winning the State competition two years ago, and Peridot had actually been the flower girl.

“Hey now,” Bismuth called out as she stepped out from the backstage wings, dusting her hands on her construction apron and moving over to the group of warbling Gems. “What’s goin’ on? What am I missing?”

“Our lovely Peridot and Lapis Lazuli got engaged while they were off jaunting in the Aloha State!” Sardonyx chirped, grabbing onto Bismuth’s shoulder with a grin.

“They did what now? ” Bismuth’s jaw dropped as she beamed over at the engaged couple. Then she rushed over and lifted Peridot up, tossing her familiarly and catching her with a grin. “You don’t say, huh? Which one of you popped the question?” Her eyes lowered down to Peridot, who was still trying to recover from Bismuth’s affectionate approach. The two had gotten fairly close over the past two years; Peridot would even consider Bismuth one of her closest friends within the Crystal Gems. “Was it you, Tiny? I know you’ve got some guts and you’re not one to back out!”

“Actually,” Peridot cleared her throat, colour raising into her cheeks as she thumbed through the short hairs on the back of her neck. “It was Lapis who asked.”

Steven gasped and turned to Lapis. “Really? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!”

Lapis smiled wanly. “I wanted to! But I . . . wanted it to be special, for us, first. It was . . . nice. We
were actually out in the ocean when I did.” At Steven’s confused face, she elaborated. “We were in a sandbar and... it just... kind of happened naturally. It wasn’t big or fancy, but... it was...”

“Us,” Peridot finished for her, smiling as she regarded the glistening ring on her left hand. It was an ornate silver, and instead of a blasted diamond (Peridot had once off-handedly remarked that she’d hate having a diamond ring for obvious reasons) there was a small lapis lazuli teardrop jewel that resembled the necklace she had gotten for Lapis when they’d first met. Lapis’ had a peridot cut into an inverted triangle.

Eventually the surprise wore off on the Gems, and they dispersed as more and more flooded into the Crystal Temple. Many of them stopped to talk with Lapis and Peridot to welcome them back home -- to Beach City and to the Crystal Temple. Pearl ended up crying when she finally arrived with Amethyst and Garnet when they revealed their engagement to them.

The Crystal Temple had begun renovation around the same time as Ruby and Sapphire’s marriage. Greg had allowed the Gems to work with the old, decrepit venue he had managed to inherit after an old record label he had crafted under an even older record manager had been sold for millions. He had explained to them, as he handed the contract and deed over to the directors, that he had intended to make it into a storage house for all the things he kept trapped in the facility unit uptown, but found that giving the Crystal Gems a new home to work in was much more rewarding.

It did not hold the grandeur and elegance of the original Temple back at Beach City University (that the university had since dethroned and modified into a facility used only for student assemblies and meetings), but after much hard work on behalf of the lead architect (Bismuth, who Peridot learned had earned her Bachelor’s in landscaping and architecture at BCU) and a number of other more adroit Crystal Gems, they had managed to transform the old empty venue into a formidable theatre.

It maintained a rustic, homelike chic, made from warm wood panels that stretched the walls from the beginning to the end. Their laboring Gems had worked tirelessly to expand Greg’s remote lot with new woodwork, even going as far as to steal into the face of the mountain that protected the Crystal Temple from the rest of Beach City. And it certainly wasn’t as large as the old Temple, but one could admit that it made the homespun auditorium all the more domestic.

And for the sake of keeping justice for their namesake, Steven had insisted that they incorporate a gem theme into their new home. The Crystal Gems had been all too happy to agree, so the proscenium arc of the vinyl stage was fringed with colourful crystals and glittering geode matter that glistened just enough to enrapture under a front-stage lamp, but not enough to distract from the show. The crystalline arc had been a generous donation from the Delmarva One Act Play Association upstate after hearing of the Crystal Gem’s plight with BCU; Pearl had been flustered for days after she got off the phone with the kindly official and revealed to the Gems what they had been graciously gifted.

An additional quirk about the Crystal Gem’s new theatre was its remote, albeit unique, location that resulted in a number of familiar and unfamiliar faces alike pouring into the theatre to watch the show put on at the end of every week. Many preferred to walk the beaches to reach the steps of the Crystal Temple, while others would park their vehicles outside on the sands before hiking it inside. It was always easy to tell, based on the amount of sand that they managed to trek in on their first few steps.

As for their most recent stage production, *Steven Universe* was well underway. As it turns out, quite literally everybody loved the idea that Steven himself had proposed the day the fateful day where they had elected to disaffiliate from BCU and start their own independent theatre troupe. In the same regard, the story had been warmly named after the boy (after checking with both Greg and Steven that it was all right to market it as such).
Steven himself had created the original prompt, and at first, they had tried to work off of that script alone. But it became clear very quickly that they needed to work together to raise the show to a higher tier. Many of them had sat around a table and read through Steven’s makeshift storyline together, pitching ideas to dramatize certain acts and turning antagonists into allies by the time the second and third acts rolled in.

Peridot, at least, thought that their newest play was a token of pure brilliance. Alien war refugees with stones to their names and bodies composed of manifested light? And the equivalent of a small, naive intern who evolves into a matured, albeit slightly marred protagonist by the end of the show? Not to mention the fact that it was a musical (this fact was argued heavily by the conjoined forces of both Steven and Pearl, they made an unstoppable debate team, Peridot learned).

Lapis emerges during the middle of the first act, a warm allusion to her former role in Mirror Gem as she portrayed a trapped gem soul in a mirror, cracked from the ancient Gem War that rattled the earth thousands of years before. She returns later, near the end of the act, to warn the Steven’s, Pearl’s, Amethyst’s, and Garnet’s characters of an incoming gem invasion. . . one that Peridot, herself, had been elected to star in.

Peridot smirked thinking of the development of her and Lapis’ characters, separate and together. Steven had obviously mastered the art of subtext, first foreshadowing their arrival together at the end of the first arc and then when they were placed together after Peridot’s ‘redemption’ nearer to the end of the second. Skip a few scenes, and find them living a rustic, carefree life in an old barn in the countryside.

“What’s not to adore about the two of us, honestly?” Peridot had said to Lapis once after they finished their time on-stage for a scene, flicking at a chip of dried green paint on her cheeks as Lapis collapsed into a chair with a wheeze. “We had the audience aww’ing! Aww ’ing, Lapis!”

“I blame your bowtie, dork,” Lapis huffed, smoothing her arms back over her head in a luxurious stretch. “I wonder if we’re going to have someone come up to us again after the show to ask if they’re a couple?”

“We obviously are.”

“I know we are, but are they?”

“I’ve found numerous parallels between our characters and Ruby’ and Sapphire’s characters-- which is, in fact, the most obvious couple in the play.” Peridot huffed, grunting as she hobbled down to the ground to get a moment of respite and sip at her water bottle. “And not to mention those looks you’re giving me up there, even while in-character. And more; it’s called subtext, Lapis.”

Lapis snorted, but quickly quieted when she saw Sapphire silently shushing them from her place across the wing, a knowing smile on her lips. “Yeah, okay. I mean, I do sing a song that could be tailored for you in the fifth act.”

Peridot smirked. “Just like a jilted lover.”

“Steven wasn’t too far off when he says she’s spying,” Lapis grinned, swung herself off of her chair, and joined Peridot on the floor. “But I still think we’re still setting up the frames for a future controversial fanbase.”

“Oh, don’t be so pessimistic, Lazuli. For every bad fan there’ll be ten good ones.”

Peridot putting herself on-stage had been a curious process. At first she had tried too hard to maintain
her alien counterpart’s character, and ended up either coming across as too blatantly faux or missing the directive altogether. A night sitting with Garnet and discussing her character had helped tremendously, as well as the admission that Steven had supposedly based the character on her. That thought made her warm, even if the audience’s first impression of her was some aloof gem engineer. But the next day, it was almost as if she wasn’t acting at all; she was just following the script as she would, not as her character would.

Now that she thought about it, every Crystal Gem had a turn on-stage in this production, from Ruby to Bismuth to even Sugilite. That being said, many had learned to be both cast and crew to assist the wings whenever they were not required on-stage. This little fact set them apart from other troupes now; there was no division between cast or crew. Everyone had the chance to be onstage, if they so desired.

And now? Garnet and Pearl had surprised the Crystal Gems three months into production with a client from a Broadway official from Empire State, and were scheduled to begin performing in Broadway theatres before the start of the next year. They put on numerous Steven Universe performances in local Delmarva theatres, but most commonly in the Crystal Temple; it was a special, ever-expanding story meant for the family they had built in Beach City.

It was during one of the first rehearsals of their new production that Peridot revealed her prosthesis to the Crystal Gems, but was surprised to find that a good lot of them nodded their heads along with knowing, some trading sly smirks and others looking unaffected by the news. When Peridot asked how they’d managed to find out, it was Amethyst who busted out cackling. “Dude, it was in your paperwork-- plus, we all saw when you and Lapis had that little party up on the pool the night before State.”

Peridot knew they were all stalkers.

It took around an hour for all the Crystal Gems to finally arrive and become costumed; they reserved their body paint for actual shows, since it was too expensive to waste for every rehearsal. Peridot was glad for this since she always had bizarre reactions to the brand of skin paint she was usually stuck with until they could find another brand that had the same tone of green.

Since she really wasn’t needed for the majority of the first act, Peridot moved over to the backstage lightbox -- personally blueprinted for her by her during the earliest renovations. She’d found a new tech partner in Stevonnie, she learned, who would help run sound beside her now that Amethyst had a primary casting role.

They both wrestled on their headsets when they heard Pearl calling the first cues from on-stage, sending everyone into the wings until further notice. The telltale static of another headset being charged on the radio line filled Peridot’s ears, and she smiled to hear Garnet’s content voice on the other end. “Are you two ready?”

“Yes ma’am,” Stevonnie reported with a thorough nod, and Peridot went to flip open her lights binder to read the newest string of cues she’d been meaning to experiment with on the plane ride home.

“Good,” Garnet affirmed on the other end. “We’ll be going all the way to the intermission tonight, so make yourselves comfortable until you’re required on-stage. Stevonnie, did you bring your jacket?”

“Yes! I’m sorry that I forgot it last time; I wasn’t expecting to get to my scenes the other day.”

“Not a problem. Peridot, do you have your costume?”
Peridot hummed her assent into the mic. “My limb attachments will be attached the scene before my own. It’s too difficult to run the board with those digits sticking to my fingers.”

“Understandable.” There was a brief rustling on the other line, presumably as Garnet spoke over to Pearl, before returning. “We will be beginning on my curtain call.”

“Affirmative!” Peridot nodded.

“Got it!” Stevonnie chimed.

“Curtain in five.”

She could feel Stevonnie prepare the sounds next to her, waiting for their cue to begin.

“Four.”

The door to the light booth swung open, and Peridot glanced over to find Lapis sliding in, a smile on her face as she dropped a water bottle for her partner down next to her. Pumpkin followed her in, but sat quietly by Lapis’ foot, seeming to recognize that this place called for silence instead of happy dog yips.

“Three.”

Peridot blinked warmly over at Lapis, who was watching the stage beyond them with a serene, beatific look in her eyes.

“Two.”

Peridot blinked warmly over at Lapis, who was watching the stage beyond them with a serene, beatific look in her eyes. Her heart swelled happily before she glanced back up to focus on beginning the show.

“One.”

Chapter End Notes

That ‘eventual happy ending’ tag tells no lies, huh? Or, I hope it doesn’t. I know this epilogue seemed pretty spotty & sporadic (not to mention a few thousand words shy of my usual chapter length) but it was just my way of trying to tie up loose ends I forgot/didn’t address directly in the story and give some insight as to how the Gems are doing!

To any and all who read this message, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for reading this story. Whether you’re a new reader who binged this whole thing in a night (as one does) or someone who’s been around since I began it in early 2017, it’s astounding to me you’ve stuck around to read some thespian’s tale about theatre, overcoming one’s fears, and of course, love. I pulled heavily from my own experience in OAP (Texas OAP! We won our State competition and I got the best technician at the 2017 state show!) -- minus the romance-y parts, and it was high school rather than college. I was the light tech for 2 years before acting my senior HS year, which was like, my 2018 spring semester. It was a magical experience that I’ll look back on fondly for what I hope is many, many years-- hell, I hope I’ll be getting side theatre and acting
As for you guys, thank you again-- so much-- for reading. I remember I put a lot of heart into this story-- headcanons, theories, and canonical references that I know some of you really liked to read. I don’t know if I’ll ever write a fic this long or in-depth again, but I sure damn hope I will if I find time as I take this next step into beginning college and being on my own. Hell, I’m still seventeen and beginning my sophomore year in college becuzza all my dual credit stuff! I’m in for a rocky beginning and a wake-up call from reality, I think.

But, time for me to pull this in because I ramble when I’m deeply humbled/honored/whatever it is I’m feeling that you’re taking the time to actually read what I’ve written and, whether if in love or in hate, reading this author’s note. This isn’t the "end" of the AU-- because I'm still VERY MUCH gonna keep drawing and thinking about it for a long time, honestly. My tumblr is rileys-universe if anyone wants to drop in and see if I doodle anything!

Never betray who you are, because that’s just it: it’s who you are, you know? You don’t have to be what the world wants you to be. You can just be you and love every part of being you. I learned to do just that in theatre, and hope you can find a way to do just that, too, in your own special, unique way. Maybe you’ll give theatre a try one day? Who knows! I did, and I loved it more than anything else in the world! (Except for Lapidot, maybe, but, that’s debatable. For another day!)

Good night, Curtain in 5, 4…, and g’night to all of you awesome readers.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!