

This was, perhaps, the worst trip Amethyst had been on in their life.

It had started out... okay, he supposed. Agate had come to his door and told him that she was going on a road trip and he was coming with whether he like it or not - and he *didn't* like it, because it was an unexpected deviation from schedule and those caused him great anxiety, but Agate explained that Diamond had sent her, and that everyone else was coming, too, and that was that.

Nobody could say no to Diamond. While she held no real authority over them, (and never *truly* had, all things considered) people tended to be wary of making her angry regardless.

And, well, it couldn't be *that* bad, right?

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Upon packing a modest bag and making his way over to Diamond's home, he discovered that apparently someone had rented a minibus. How they afforded *that*, he wasn't about to ask, lest he became an accessory to a bank robbery, or something. Heliotrope had been designated as the primary driver, because, quote, '*he's the only one here who doesn't either drive like either a grandma or a complete and utter maniac.*'

Topaz's words, not Amethyst's. They, personally, took offense to the prospect that they drove like a grandma. Their driving was fine! They were just being safe.

Nobody backed them up on that statement. Traitors.

Despite all of this, the first *real* pitfall was trying to come up with the seating arrangements.

"How come Beryl gets to ride in the front?" Agate whined.

"Because he's Heliotrope's boyfriend." Garnet pointed out. "And he's reading the map. You can sit next to me though!"

"But I want to ride in the front. Maybe I could drive, and then you can sit in the passenger seat!"

"Absolutely not." Said almost everyone in unison. Amethyst shuddered at the mere concept. Agate *had* a license, sure, but she almost certainly *should not*.

"I think we should tie up Beryl and put him on the roof!" Jasper announced.

"We are *not* tying Beryl to the roof." Heliotrope groaned, looking up from where he was hauling everyone's luggage into the trunk.

Beryl took a long, conspicuously loud sip of his coffee. He seemed to be rather bemused by the whole thing, judging by the barely-hidden grin on his face.

Jasper huffed. "Spoilsport."

"Guys, if I wanna talk to Citrine I'm gonna have to lean over the back of my chair." Topaz pointed out, gesturing with one paw at the crude graph that Opal had drawn.

Heliotrope shrugged. "Just talk to Amethyst and Emerald instead."

Topaz grimaced as though she had eaten something rancid. "... No thanks."

Damn. Rude.

"You could tie me to the roof." Emerald volunteered, an odd sort of half-smile on his face. It was more than they usually got from him, and probably would have been cause for celebration if it wasn't prompted by the idea of being stuck to the roof of a moving vehicle.

"We are not tying *anyone* to the roof, it's illegal and you could fall off!" Amethyst snapped, just as Jasper said "*Hell yeah!*"

"Sounds fun."

"No, it doesn't!"

"We are *not* changing the seating arrangements." Opal interrupted. His voice was hardly louder than his usual talking voice, but he spoke in such a way as to command attention and quiet the discussion regardless. "Get in, if you don't want to be left behind."

The threat held no water, largely because the driver was not even in the vehicle at this point, but everyone did as they were told anyway. Obsidian and Diamond were already seated, in the back row discussing who-knows-what in hushed tones. Amethyst couldn't hear what they were saying, but he wasn't really trying to.

He found himself seated by a window, Emerald directly to his right and Topaz on the other side of the bus. In front of him was Garnet, Agate, and Jasper, which left Opal and Citrine to wedge themselves in the back.

It was an... odd arrangement, certainly. Amethyst wasn't really sure what Opal was thinking when ai split up the twins arbitrarily and they thought Jasper directly behind Beryl was just *asking* for trouble. But, Amethyst supposed, he was used to trouble as a direct consequence of the company he kept. If it got too bad, he could alway afford to take a bus back home.

(Nevermind what happened the *last* time they tried to take the bus. They shuddered - never again.)

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The beginning of the trip was, actually, relatively peaceful. There were a few different conversations going on at once, but they were spoken in hushed tones, for the most part. Amethyst leaned his head against the window and let the rhythmic sound of the engine lull them, only held from falling asleep by the occasional nudge on the shoulder and comment from Emerald.

They would begrudgingly admit that, even though they hadn't wanted to come, it was nice.

And then, about an hour in, Beryl produced a map from a bag by his paws. A whole, physical map - the unwieldy kind that took up entire tables and would never fold back up properly no matter how hard you tried. Surely, a sat-nav would have been easier, Amethyst thought.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Citrine asked, presumably prompted by the retrieval of the map. He and Topaz had been passing a notepad and pen back and forth for the past half an hour - if Amethyst squinted, they could see the scribbles of various simple games on the sheet. Tic-tac-toe, hangman... the two children currently seemed to be in the middle of a game of squares, but it had been put on hold in favor of Citrine's question.

"Haven't the foggiest." Heliotrope remarked nonchalantly. "Diamond wouldn't tell me. I've just been driving in a random direction."

Amethyst banged his head against the window. Of course - why hadn't he thought to ask where they were going? He never would have even come if he'd known that they were just going to drive in some random direction and get lost.

"...What's the map for, then?" Garnet asked, leaning to peer around the seats in front of her to catch a glimpse of the map.

"We're going to stop somewhere for gas and snacks." Beryl explained. He pointed at some spot on the map, although Amethyst was too far away to see what. "Nearest place should be a ten minute drive from here - take the next left."

As the sound of the turn signal filled his ears, Amethyst sighed heavily, resigning himself to his fate for at least the time being.

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Due to traffic, it actually took closer to twenty minutes for them to reach their destination - a small motorway services in the middle of absolutely nowhere. Well, even calling it a motorway

services was perhaps a bit generous. Really, it was more like a petrol station with a big car park and a fast food place next to it. Regardless, it was good enough for their purposes, and so they stopped and all piled out of the bus for a little while.

Amethyst took a good long stretch as he stepped out onto the cracked tarmac, already feeling stiff after having sat in one place for a few hours. They hadn't noticed it so much before, what with the air conditioning in their vehicle, but it was a rather hot summer day. The mid-August sun beat down on their back, and the ground beneath their paws was so warm it was almost uncomfortable to stand on.

In a vain attempt at prettying the place up a bit, the fast food place had flower beds placed outside of the storefront and a little grassy picnic area. The flowers and the grass alike, however, had appeared to have perished in the sun. The tired employees probably weren't paid enough for them to care to bother watering them.

Whilst he was busy taking in the... less than stellar scenery, the rest of Amethyst's companions had seemed to split up. Jasper took Citrine and Topaz to the store part of the petrol station, presumably to buy them snacks or something. Shortly following that, Garnet and Agate followed, with the former announcing her intention to pick up cold drinks for the lot of them. Heliotrope got to work filling up the tank on the bus, idly chatting with Beryl in the process. Diamond and Opal were occupied with their own hushed conversation, and Obsidian and Emerald were nowhere to be seen. Amethyst presumed they had opted to just wait in the bus.

"...I'm going to go sit on that bench over there while we wait on the others." Amethyst announced. Only Beryl and Heliotrope looked up to acknowledge him, with Heliotrope waving him off.

"Alright. I'll make sure to send someone to come fetch you before we leave."

The grass, while dry and prickly, was still much cooler than the tarmac, so stepping onto it was a relief regardless. There was only one picnic table and no other form of seating, presumably owing to the scale and location of the restaurant it belonged to. They had probably never seen more than perhaps two customers at once here anyway. The wooden table itself was in a rather sorry state, with one of the benches being completely unusable due to the rot and what *might* have once been a parasol now shredded and bent and barely hanging on.

...On second thought, Amethyst would much rather sit on the ground. With a heavy sigh, he flopped down into the grass, ignoring the telltale itch of hayfever in favor of people watching.

Not that there were many people to watch in the first place. There was only one other vehicle in the entire parking lot, as far as Amethyst could see. They wondered, briefly, if it belonged to an employee at either the petrol station or the fast food place.

The theory was proven wrong only a few minutes after he formed it, when a family of three emerged from the fast food place. They appeared to have eaten inside, judging by the lack of food in their possession, but rather than return to their car immediately the two children beelined for the small grassy patch. They bolted directly past Amethyst - who winced as he was nearly tripped over - to bound and hop and play with each other nearby.

Their guardian ambled along a little more slowly, coming to a full stop next to Amethyst. He observed the bench and, perhaps making the same judgements Amethyst had, sat down on the grass next to it instead.

Well. This was a little awkward, now. Amethyst shifted uncomfortably, paws kneading into the grass. They should probably return to the bus and leave this family alone, but they really didn't feel like spending more time in a vehicle than they had to and the prospect of waiting on the hot tarmac *really* did not appeal.

They hadn't realized that the older cat's eyes - three of them, he had *three* eyes - were on them until he spoke up.

"So, what brings you here?"

Amethyst gave the stranger a skeptical once-over through the corner of his eyes. He didn't *look* shady, at least. Something about him kind of reminded them of Opal, actually. He was older, gray and blue, with a halo above his head and an hourglass worn as a necklace. Amethyst supposed small talk wouldn't hurt, at least while he was waiting for his companions to be done so they could all leave.

"I'm waiting for my... friends. We're on a road trip, apparently. I didn't want to go, but I wasn't given much of a choice." They huffed.

The elderly spacecat hummed an acknowledgement, turning back to keep a closer eye on his... grandchildren, Amethyst assumed?

It was quiet for a few more minutes, the only sound being of the two children playing nearby, until Jasper emerged from the store with Citrine and Topaz on her heels. The twins darted ahead of her to meet up with the pair already playing, as Jasper called up to address Amethyst.

"Look after the kids for a few minutes, will ya?!" She didn't even bother waiting for a response before wandering off to speak to Beryl.

As Citrine and Topaz - the former *far* more enthusiastically than the latter - introduced themselves to... Aika and Tempo, if he was overhearing correctly, Amethyst heard the elderly cat speak up again.

“Are they yours?”

Amethyst huffed. “Nope. My friend Jasper looks after them. They’re her’s, I guess, if that’s how family works. I assume it does, but I don’t have one.” Or, well. He did, but they were estranged.

“Do you not? That’s a shame.” There was a level of knowing skepticism in his tone that Amethyst didn’t really know what to make of. “Say, what’s your name?”

“...Amethyst, why?”

“Well, it was lovely to meet you, Amethyst. My name is Tempus. Regrettably, I’ll have to be off now,” He said, pulling himself to his feet and stretching his wings. Amethyst snorted as a stray feather landed on his nose. “But I hope our paths cross again, someday. Farewell.”

Yeah, the odds of that were pretty low, in Amethyst’s humble opinion. They probably didn’t live anywhere near each other, and frankly they weren’t too keen on hanging out with random people who were probably three times their age that they met outside of a fast food restaurant. Still, it hadn’t been an unpleasant conversation - at least, until the longing ache that settled in their heart upon watching Tempus reunite with Aika and Tempo. He was seated too far away to hear what they were saying, but there was something distinctly paternal about the way he wrapped a wing around Tempo’s shoulders and wiped a smear from Aika’s face with one paw before they left.

Must be nice, having people care for you so much at such a young age.

They rested their head in their paws for only a fraction of a second before Citrine barrelled into his side, knocking the wind from him. Looking up with a groan, they could see him backing up sheepishly, to the point of bumping into his sister.

Citrine was usually calmer than that, but Amethyst supposed the opportunity to play with kittens his age had riled him up.

“Watch where you’re going!” Topaz scolded.

“Sorry, Amethyst. I didn’t mean to run into you.” Citrine muttered, shifting from paw to paw.

Amethyst sighed. “It’s fine. C’mon, I think we’re about ready to leave anyway.”

Sure enough, as they stood up they could see Garnet approaching from the car park. Amethyst waved to her to let her know that he’d seen her, and the three of them jogged to catch up before they returned to the bus.

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The rest of the drive for the day was pretty uneventful. They ate terrible pre-made petrol station sandwiches for lunch and had some of the most vile soda Amethyst had ever tasted. They'd had a short lived game of I Spy, at one point, until an argument arose regarding whether or not 'blade of grass' was a fair choice for 'something beginning with B'.

It totally was, by the way.

By the time the clock struck eight, everyone was getting pretty exhausted. They had been in the bus since early that morning, with only one stop along the way. Emerald had, much to Amethyst's chagrin, fallen asleep on his shoulder almost an hour ago. Jasper had just tossed a third soda can at the back of Beryl's head, this one not even entirely empty. It was a blessing, then, when Obsidian finally voiced what they all had been thinking from the back row.

"I would say now is an ideal time to rest for the night, is it not?"

Heliotrope hummed in agreement. It wasn't long before they pulled into a cheap roadside motel, and just the very sight of a place to sleep made exhaustion seep into Amethyst's bones.

In front of him, Garnet gently nudged Agate into wakefulness. Amethyst was not as polite, bodily pushing Emerald from his shoulder.

"HGRH - wh-huh??" Emerald grunted confusedly as he blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"We're stopping for tonight. Get out of the bus."

"Huh.. what time is it?"

"Quarter past eight. You slept for over an hour."

"..Huh." Emerald was starting to sound like a broken record at this point. "Thanks for letting me sleep on your shoulder, I guess. You could've woken me up."

"You would have just fallen back asleep anyway." Amethyst huffed. "I didn't *want* to."

Emerald hummed, and *why* was it that everyone today seemed so skeptical of every little thing he said?

Once they were all outside in the (thankfully cooler than before) car park, Diamond announced her intention to go inside and pay for their rooms. Obsidian accompanied her, leaving everyone else to retrieve their luggage from the bus.

"Why can't we just leave it here overnight?" Agate complained as she pulled someone's bag out and handed it to Jasper.

“That one’s Opal’s,” Heliotrope identified. Jasper handed it off to its rightful owner. “And don’t you want your things overnight? So you can freshen up properly for the morning?”

“Don’t these places usually have their own soaps and things? We don’t really need our own.” Topaz commented, rummaging through her own little bag for something. She eventually produced a cheap old music player and a pair of earbuds, passing them off to Citrine before returning to her search.

“...I didn’t bring shampoo or anything anyway.” Emerald commented, its sentence ending off in a yawn.

As the final - oddly heavy - bag was handed off to Beryl, Agate frowned. “Nevermind shampoo, I like... don’t see your bag at all?”

“I didn’t bring anything.”

“...Absolutely nothing?”

“Nope.”

“Nope as in, ‘nope, you’re wrong, I did bring something’ or as in ‘nope, nothing’?”

“Nope.”

Amethyst groaned. Why on Earth he hung out with these people, he didn’t know.

(Because they’d been together for so long that he couldn’t possibly imagine being apart from them, perhaps. Or because they were the first people he had ever known to pay him any mind at all. Or both.)

Obsidian returned shortly afterwards to gesture them all inside. Diamond sat by the front counter with a rather prideful look on her face. Amethyst wasn’t sure what there was to be proud of, here, but if she was satisfied then it didn’t really matter.

“We have three rooms for two people each.” She announced, spreading the keys out on the floor. “That was the cheapest option to suitably house us all for the night.”

Amethyst shared a look with Garnet. “...Diamond.”

“Yes, Amethyst?” When Diamond looked at him, it was with a distinctly cold look, as if daring him to challenge her. Amethyst broke eye contact, uncomfortable, but did not back down.

“There are twelve of us.”



“Yes, there are. I do believe I am quite capable of counting.”

“You got enough room for half of us.”

“We can squeeze three in a room.” She asserted stubbornly, feathery wings ruffling in agitation. “Besides, we don’t have the budget for more. If you don’t feel like sharing, I have been assured that there are couches in each room alongside the beds.”

That... was more than he was expecting from a cheap roadside hotel, honestly. “Why don’t we have the budget for more?”

“Because we don’t.” There was an air of finality to Diamond’s tone, putting the conversation to an end whether Amethyst liked it or not. (He did not.)

“I’ll take the kids.” Jasper sighed, snatching up a key and gesturing for Topaz and Citrine to follow her before anyone had the chance to protest.

That left nine of them, with two rooms left and the unaddressed fact that even if they squeezed three in a room, there still would not be enough space for all of them.

“...We aren’t going to make a decision on who rooms with who any time soon if we sit down and discuss it.” Heliotrope observed. Amethyst hated to admit that he was right.

“What do you suggest, then?” Opal challenged.

Heliotrope pulled his phone out from the side pocket of his bag and began typing something. Amethyst wasn’t sure how he managed to get the touchscreen to work through those gloves, but it was kind of impressive.

“We’re randomizing this shit.”

“Language.” Opal and Diamond scolded in unison. Like father, like daughter, huh?

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And so, that was how Amethyst found himself in a mediocre hotel room with Beryl, Agate, and Obsidian.

That... would not have been his first choice of companions to share a room with. Nor his second or third. But that was what the gods of random number generation had decided would be his fate, and apparently he wasn’t allowed to complain.

Opal, Heliotrope, Diamond, and Emerald had ended up making another group, which left Garnet to chase after Jasper and the kittens.

The arrangement from there was that Amethyst and Beryl were to share one bed, and Agate and Obsidian the other, which sounded *painfully* awkward and Amethyst was not looking forward to it. They considered, not for the first time, just sucking it up and paying for a taxi home, but it was approaching nine o'clock by this point and they wouldn't get home for probably at least another twelve hours, so they were positively stuck.

The room itself wasn't so bad, for a cheap roadside hotel. The beds didn't look especially comfortable, but there was a couch as promised, and even a small - albeit old - TV.

A CRT TV, actually. It had been a long, long time since Amethyst had seen one outside of his shop, and he perhaps would have liked to have a closer look at it had Agate not already claimed it for herself.

She'd tuned into a (live?) broadcast for some concert, or something. Three cats he didn't recognise, dressed in fancy clothes, sang and danced to a kitschy pop song on stage.

They weren't half bad, honestly, as far as pop idols went. Not really his thing, but it was tolerable enough that he could put up with it despite the garbage audio quality.

"Who are they?" Beryl asked conversationally about half an hour in, looking up from where he was messing with his bag.

"Switch! The blue one is Bluebird, the red one is Fortune, and the yellow one is Star. They're, like, musicians, but they're also *magicians*! Look, see!"

"...That is a positively amateur attempt at a demon summoning." Obsidian critiqued. Amethyst choked on his leftover crisps, looking up from his book to see that sure enough, the red pop idol cat - Fortune - was drawing a chalk circle on stage.

What the everloving fuck.

There was a heavy *thunk* from behind him as Beryl, unperturbed, placed an *entire coffee maker* on the dresser.

"What the everloving fuck." Amethyst repeated, this time out loud.

"Want a cup?" Beryl offered, ignoring Obsidian and Agate as they discussed the correct kind of chalk and candles for summoning Lucifer into the mortal realm, or whatever.

"Why did you *bring* that?"

"How else would I get decent coffee?"

“By *buying it??*”

“That’s not decent coffee.”

Amethyst planted his face into his pillow and groaned, but accepted the cup that was offered to him anyway.

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In the end, Fortune failed to summon Satan. Obviously. Amethyst suspected that the group had never actually intended to succeed in the first place, filling the space with smoke and mirror effects and going on some tangent about spreading happiness to Spacecats everywhere, or something. Amethyst had kind of stopped listening after they had referred to themselves as a *family*.

It was odd, how suddenly that had come to haunt him. Ever since the prior encounter with Tempus, the subject of family had been stuck in the back of his head like a parasite. It wasn’t like such a thing had never really bothered them *before* - their lonely childhood had certainly been a factor in their investment in the project that they had met the rest of their social circle through, and even in recent years they had to admit that their empty home was awfully lonely.

There was nothing they could really do about it. They certainly had no interest in finding a partner, or having children, and it wasn’t like they could just *obtain* parents or siblings. They were far too old for such things now.

That was just how it was. There really was no rational reason it should be bugging them so much *now*, especially not prompted by passing comments from total strangers.

“You look pretty bummed out.” Heliotrope commented, sitting next to them at the table the next morning.

Amethyst grunted in vague acknowledgement, swirling their coffee around in their cup just to watch it slosh.

Heliotrope slid a pastry across to them. “Garnet said you like these, so I grabbed you one. Care to share what’s got you so down?”

“It’s ridiculous.” Amethyst muttered, grabbing the pastry. Garnet was like, he *did* like these.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” Heliotrope said. “But for what it’s worth, I’m not going to judge you for it. Might’ve done, once, but we’ve all got our own shit to deal with. It’s not silly. N’ besides, I know we aren’t as close as some of the others, but I’d like to think we’re something of a family, and that includes you. Y’know?”

Amethyst turned to stare at Heliotrope, eyes narrowed and brows furrowed. Family? Were they a family?

They wracked their brain, toying with the idea of it. Sure, maybe they as a group lacked the traditional roles, but... maybe they *could* be a family, after all?

They'd been through thick and thin together, inseparable despite their conflicts and hardships. It wasn't... quite what he was looking for, but there was nothing saying they *couldn't* be. And for all his complaining - he really did care for them.

It wasn't until sunset that day, when they'd all stopped in a lay-by overlooking the sea to watch, that it truly occurred to him. With Agate pressed against one side, whispering to Garnet on the other, and Emerald sprawled out in front of them all - he was happy. He didn't have *everything* he wanted, and probably never would, but...

Maybe he had found a family after all. And it was certainly better than nothing.