

Rite Of Refusal

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Rite Of Refusal

by [Here nor There Near nor Far](#)

Summary

"She'd never said no before, not to her Diamond. It wasn't the sort of thing that was possible. It simply wasn't done. And Pearl had just done it."

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Rose Quartz bent her head over the map Pearl was projecting.

“We want to approach the Prime Kindergarten from this angle,” she said, hand swiping through the hologram in a way that made Pearl’s eyes go fuzzy. “Right? Garnet?”

A Diamond didn’t defer to anyone but a Diamond, but Rose Quartz wasn’t a Diamond, was she?

Garnet blinked at the map, then blinked again with her third eye.

“No,” she told Rose. She didn’t expand on that statement anymore, which probably meant that the vision she was seeing was the sort she didn’t even like to talk about.

Rose sighed. “What about a frontal attack? Quartzes aren’t steadily emerging anymore according to my... reports. We ought to be able to take out whatever Peridots are still hanging around.”

Pearl stared at her own projection, even though the blueprints of the Kindergarten in her own mind were just as precise. Identical, in fact.

“No,” she said, “We’ll want to come at it from all angles at once, so we can take the maximum number of injectors out at once. Most of the ones in the first quadrant are deactivated-”

She stopped. Rose was staring at her like she was a little bird, or a human, or some new, exciting flower. She was staring like Pearl had done something exceptional.

Mentally, Pearl rewound the last minute in her mind, and then froze as well.

She’d said no.

She’d never said no before, not to her Diamond. It wasn’t the sort of thing that was possible. It simply wasn’t done. And Pearl had just done it.

She’d directly contradicted a Diamond, *her Diamond*. She hadn’t even noticed she was doing it.

Snowflake who hated awkward pauses, cleared her throat. “Is something wrong?”

They didn’t know, of course. It was all a secret, a big, complicated secret, the sort that tore Pearl apart on some days but was also thrilling to keep because it was hers (hers and Rose’s).

The other Crystal Gems, a hundred plus and growing now, didn’t seem to notice how Pearl always treated their leader- or maybe they did and simply wrote it off how Pearls always acted. Stars knew most of them had barely even *seen* a Pearl before meeting her.

So she danced around topics with Rose, made suggestions without really suggesting, demurred without truly denying, used a million other little tactics to avoid being outright treasonous. (Pearls had ways of being clever like that. The key was to make sure your owner thought it was their brilliant idea they were agreeing to.) When Rose Quartz tried to do something ill advised, she used words like “consider” and “perhaps”, as if to cushion behavior already so far out of line it was borderline blasphemy.

Now she’d broken the final taboo, the last remaining vestige of decency between them.

Worst of all, she felt giddy about it. She had done it. The transformation into the sinister renegade Pearl was complete. Next to her, Pink Diamond was grinning like a fool. That made the rising anxiety that threatened to ruin Pearl’s distressing joy disappear. It was alright, this was allowed, if only on a technicality. She could rejoice without upsetting too much of her programming.

The bit of Pearl that had probably gotten them into this mess wanted to do it again.

Of course, it wouldn’t do to act so silly in front of the troops. There was a war to win, and if she let Rose grab her right now or if Pearl collapsed into tears or demanded to be given another order to refuse it would seem strange. Therefore, in the interest of the Rebellion, Pearl cleared her throat and carried on.

“Sorry about that, everyone. As I was saying, most of the injectors towards the more obvious entrance of the canyon- right here- have already been deactivated. That part of the site has been resource devoid for several decades now. We’ll most likely want to come in from over the walls here, here, and here, where the most active injectors are present, and see if we can disable them quickly.”

The conversation carried on. They made battle strategies and thought about timelines, and otherwise acted like entirely reasonable traitors.

Inside Pearl however, it felt like someone was throwing a party without her invitation. It was rather too wild for her tastes and sometimes she felt cracked and unsteady, but even in the moments of dizziness there was an air of jubilation to the proceedings.

Rose was still smiling her smile, the one that meant that they had a secret and wasn’t it exciting? Wasn’t it wonderful? Underneath that, something always seemed to whisper to Pearl that she was wonderful, that she was a miracle on par with Rose’s precious earth.

Finally, finally, it was all over. Rose told everyone she and Pearl had to go on a “secret mission”, the same excuse they always used to get away. Together the two of them walked away from the Crystal Gem’s encampment, pretending nothing was wrong.

Once they were out of the ravine and well out of even scouting range, Rose grabbed Pearl by the shoulders and spun her around. “Peeeeearrl!”

Pearl let herself be squeezed and thrown into the air, because she was giggling too. It was reckless laughter that didn’t bother to be melodious or charming. After a few more spins Rose put her back down and smoothed her top almost guiltily.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” she said, as if to explain the outburst.

“Neither did I,” Pearl admitted, “It just... happened.”

Rose fell back onto the hillside and stared at the stars twinkling above. “Isn’t earth wonderful?” she asked, “So much happens so fast here.”

Earth was tolerable- incredibly messy and full of death but pretty in a rustic way. Pearl couldn’t deny the way she felt here, like the world was full of possibility and even the impossible could and would occur. But she blamed most of that on Rose- no, Pink Diamond. They were alone now. It was important to maintain certain lines, especially now that all of the others were blurring.

“It’s nice,” she said, sitting a respectable distance away and trying to keep her tone neutral.

Rose pushed herself up on one elbow. “Do you want to try it again?”

Pearl thought about that. Then she let a slow smile creep over her face and shook her head. “No, my diamond.”

The laugh rose in bubbles and snorts from Rose’s belly. “Pearl!”

Slowly, Pearl started to laugh too.

When the fit of chuckles had died out, Rose got up. They walked back to the nearest warp pad (several miles away). It was a walk they usually used to work on paperwork, or talk about ways to manage the workload expected of the luminous, lustrous Pink Diamond.

Today, Rose made demands, each more ridiculous than the last. She imitated Blue and Yellow Diamond as she shouted, “Pearl, find the figures for the last colony,” and “Pearl, find my cape!” Each time, Pearl denied her, first softly, and then in a shout.

It seemed to make her so happy.

It was a poor excuse for the fact that Pearl enjoyed it too.

Alone in the tower on the moon, they would run, shouting orders made to be denied. The thrill of battle, tense and desperate, had nothing on the carefree bliss of freedom.

“Pearl, come back!”

“No!”

“Pearl, come sing for me!”

“I won’t!”

They avoided the glass roofed top floor in favor of the windowless downstairs. In the lobby, the Diamonds loomed over them, disapproving and stern.

Rose’s bare feet thudded against the floor and the stairs. Her skirts were a silvery whirl around them. Her laugh was rough and unsteady, coming out in gasps and snorts.

The Moon Base wasn’t warm, but Pearl felt like she was on fire. Her limbs, always graceful, always perfect, were suddenly not where she wanted them to be.

Rose caught her.

On their downtime, Pink Diamond liked to turn into Rose Quartz.

It worried Pearl.

They’d be sitting in the control room on the Moon Base, or in the Palanquin, and Pink would simply transform- for no reason other than that she wanted to. At first it had been a novelty, one that could be excused because she needed practice holding her shapeshifted form for long periods of time. Slowly, it had become her default. She liked being Rose better, she said, she liked being closer to Pearl’s eye level. Pearl, who had spent her entire life serving skyscrapers, wasn’t going to contest that. But it concerned her that her Diamond grew increasingly frustrated when she had to spend days or weeks as herself, away from the Rebellion.

What would she do when they won? She served a Diamond who seemed increasingly uninterested in being a Diamond. Pink hadn’t visited Homeworld in decades. Their last visit had been brief and functional, and Pearl had only caught a glimpse of the pale, ever-glowing skyline she loved so much.

Earth was the new focus, Earth and the Crystal Gems. Pearl wanted them to be free as well- she wanted Garnet to live unafraid, she wanted Bismuth to have a chance to make something other than weapons. She wanted Biggs to laugh as loudly as she wanted, Tiger’s Eye to explore without fear of passing guard contingents, and the dozens of young Amethysts they’d picked up to have a chance to see a world without a war going on.

She also wanted to go home, or at least she thought she did. Earth held little interest to her without Rose, and Rose could never stay.

Speaking of Rose, Pearl could see her tucked behind the palanquin's throne, giggling away at reports of Crystal Gem activity and making plans for their next attack. It was a nice place for sitting, the palanquin. Pearl much preferred the perfectly smooth floor and identical floral cut in the tall screens. Even the fine polymer bobbinet of the curtains, as soft as could be made in the Empire, was soothing. She tried to match the texture of it in her outfit as a Crystal Gem, but it never quite worked.

After an hour of work, Rose still hadn't moved. That simply wouldn't do. She marched over and Rose looked up, curls spilling down her neck and bouncing over her chest.

"There are new buildings that need your permission," Pearl reminded her gently "We're adding an expansion to the warp system."

"I know. I just hate feeling like part of the problem. Every new construction I authorize, every demolition or advance into human territory- Pearl we're doing damage that can *never* be undone. I know it's for a good cause, but..."

"It's what's needed to keep Blue and Yellow Diamond from getting too suspicious," Pearl said, patiently. "Besides, the humans will rebuild those brick towers in what? A few centuries?"

Rose shoved her with only a little force, "Pearl, you're terrible. You know the poor things don't live that long."

"Look, I pulled all the documents up," Pearl passed her a screen. "Simply call the right gems and it'll be over with."

"Right," Rose looked relieved. "Right." She moved towards the communications tab.

"*As Pink Diamond.*"

"So bossy, my Pearl," Rose smiled, and in a slow burn of light, like an exploding star, her shape shifted.

Pink Diamond stretched her legs out and straightened her head. Even sitting against the side of her throne, hair sticking out in at least five different directions, she looked passably regal. At the very least she looked tall.

"I haven't been me in a long time," she joked.

"No, my Diamond." Like a forgotten song, it was coming back to her. The arched back, the tilted head, the careful, steady movements. If you couldn't move like a poem or speak like a song, it was better to stay quiet and still.

"Pearl, please, none of that formality."

She snapped out of it.

"I suppose we are among comrades here, aren't we?" she said, testing out friendliness to see if it felt right. It didn't, but if it was what was needed she could force it.

Pink froze.

Pearl felt her desperate attempt at familiarity come crashing down around her. But this was what her Diamond had wanted, wasn't it? This was what *she* wanted, because they needed to find a new norm before this war was over and they needed to find it fast. Homeworld beckoned, menacing and beautiful.

"This isn't the time to turn into Sapphire on me," she said nervously, "We know each other, Rose."

"Pearl, be quiet!" Pink snapped, and Pearl felt her throat close up

She had forgotten how awful it felt to be ordered. She had always been very good at avoiding it, at flowing with the commands so her body never slipped away from her grasp. But now the urge to fight back, to disobey for no other reason than the sake of disobedience, was warring with her physical inability to open her mouth.

But she had said no! She and Rose had spent weeks playing that silly game of refusals. They had moved past this!

Her vocal cords ached. Her tongue was dry and heavy. Even her teeth felt wrong, a screeching feeling deep in the bones that weren't there that made her want to shut her eyes and collapse.

"My Diamond?" said a shrill little voice, the voice of a Morganite. There were footsteps on the floor of the palanquin. Pearl forced her eyes open and saw a pink figure through the curtains, no doubt hesitating because Pink Diamond was known for her fits of temper when she felt like her boundaries weren't being respected.

"Uh, yes!" Pink shouted, with all the confidence of a Peridot getting a scolding. "We're fine. Come *in* ." Her voice cracked.

The Morganite pulled back the curtain just enough to lean her head in. "Yellow Diamond sent a message to the Moon Base, my Diamond."

"Tell her I'll get back to her later," Pink suggested.

"But, my Diamond-

"I'll talk to her later!" Pink shouted, and though it was a shout of desperation and not of anger the Morganite clearly couldn't tell that. She flinched, "Now go away, I'm working on this colony!"

Apologizing obsequiously, the gem retreated. Pink followed her and peeked outside of the palanquin, checking for any more loyal intruders. Then she sat with huff of breath and rested her chin in her hands.

"That was almost dangerous," she commented idly. Pearl stood, still silenced, hands now at her throat.

A few minutes passed. Pink wasn't especially good at reading others, but even she came around. She glanced down at Pearl.

"Is something wrong?"

Usually Pearl would be able to use a direct question like that to wriggle free of a previous order. But the command had been very general and very empathetic, and no matter how much creative logic Pearl threw at her programming she couldn't quite break its hold.

"Pearl?" Pink was looking rather panicked now, "Pearl, you look ill. Did I do something?"

There was a weak spot. Pearl nodded and gestured to her throat again.

Her Diamond held up her hands in frustration, "Pearl, I don't know what that means. Just talk, please!"

Even with a please tacked on the end, an order was an order and an order worked. The gears that seemed to have frozen deep inside her ground back to life. The tenseness she had been holding in her jaw loosened.

"I can't," she said, which wasn't quite the same as saying no. It was close enough, however. "You told me not to."

"Oh," Pink Diamond breathed, "Oh, oh, Pearl I'm so sorry, I forgot. I didn't realize, I thought we had learned-"

"I know," said Pearl, brusquely. "Apparently it's not a perfect new ability I have." Already, her mind was racing trying to figure out why. She had disobeyed her Diamond so many times before. Of course, her Diamond had been Rose then.

Perhaps that was the answer. Rose did not register as the person who owned Pearl, and Pink still did. It was the sort of silly, arbitrary distinction that a Gem could make. After all, she'd been making it for weeks.

"I really am sorry," Pink said, a picture of contriteness. "Is it better now?"

She couldn't lie to her Diamond but she could... selectively tell the truth. From an objective standpoint the immediate problem had been fixed. The fact that the awful feeling behind Pearl's gem wasn't going away was irrelevant information.

"Significantly," Pearl smiled and stretched high on her toes just to prove that she was still functioning properly. "What were we doing, my Diamond?"

Later, when some of the hurt had faded and they were back with the Rebellion, in a place where fighting back didn't seem quite so out of reach, Rose and Pearl experimented. In a quiet mountain valley they tried saying no with Rose and Pink and Rose-shapeshifted-as-Crazy-Lace. They even recruited Sapphire, under admittedly rather false pretenses and then play-acted refusals in front of half the Rebellion because it proved to be a crowd pleaser.

Pearl could say no to every one of them except Pink Diamond.

"No one can say no to her, can they?" Bismuth mused as she sat down next to Pearl.

It didn't take long to realize who she was talking about. Just down the little beach where the Crystal Gems were staying Rose was surrounded by admirers. New recruits and old rebel stalwarts alike swirled around her, coming and going at her whims.

The last time Pearl had paid attention Rose had been holding a little beach crab and cooing over life on earth, while everyone else looked for other interesting animals to give her. They could be onto pretty shells by now, or back at the eternally entertaining sport of throwing seaweed at each other.

Overall, however, Pearl liked the beach. The sand was easy to brush off her clothes and the water was cool. It had taken a long time for their little coterie to grow brave enough to venture out in broad daylight like this, without even convenient cliffs for shelter.

(She and Rose had needed to tell a lot of lies to convince everyone that Pink Diamond wasn't going to use the planetary orb to spy on them, that she was too ill tempered to listen to advice and too impatient to think of it herself.)

Before Bismuth had come to sit with her, she'd spent hours tracing spiral in the sand, which was a special kind of laziness because it was one that she chose and not one that was forced on her simply because she hadn't been told to do anything else.

Bismuth's jokes hit a sore spot. "I suppose she does," Pearl replied, and couldn't help but add "She's very exceptional, you know." She returned her attention to the sand in front of her. There was something soothing about this beach in particular, as if the individual grains were a little finer and more rounded. When she held a handful of it, it slipped through her fingers like moon dust.

"I didn't say she wasn't exceptional!" Bismuth protested, "She's amazing. When she talks, it's like it draws you in. We got two new Amethysts and a Carnelian. You were on the point

team with Garnet, but I was by Rose when she was talking and it was... it put me in mind of a lot of things. Sometimes you forget she can act like that, you know?"

"She's very persuasive." If there was one thing to coax Pearl out of a sulk, it was a chance to compliment Rose, and judging from Bismuth's grin she was counting on that. Honestly, if her swords weren't so wonderful...

Bismuth stretched out her legs on the sand, careful not to disturb the section Pearl had been painstakingly arranging. "If we could get her back on Homeworld safely... we'd have the planet in an uproar. Her voice, our message. We could really do something back there."

The script was in Pearl's mouth. She didn't need to rehearse it- she *wrote* it, at least in part. "It would be too dangerous. We could endanger everything we've won, everything we might have protected-"

"Yeah," Bismuth glanced at the sky, the long suffering zealot in a movement of fluffy idealists, quiet pragmatists, and people who are surprised they made it this far at all. "You sound exactly like Rose. You two," she gave Pearl a friendly nudge, "I swear one of you opens your mouth and I hear the other's voice come out."

Bismuth liked to bring it up often. Pearl wasn't sure why, except perhaps that the idea of sororization is still fresh and new to her. Being familiar with a Pearl, being friends, it's a novel new idea for the whole Rebellion. They were all still playing with it, testing the boundaries every time someone throws her into the air during a dance or sweeps her into a hug. Even Bismuth, who was fairly comfortable touching her, still sometimes looked flabbergasted by the liberties Rose so often took.

"I know you'd do anything for her," Bismuth said suddenly. It was strikingly blunt. The swords she gave Pearl were finely tuned weapons, sharp as an atom at the edge. Her words never were. Somehow she still manages to cut straight to the heart. "You would do anything she told you to."

Pink Diamond's Pearl wanted to protest but the words died in her throat.

"We all would," Bismuth continued. "She has that was around her. She says something and you want to listen. It's not an order it's a... a..."

"A request," Pearl supplied, staring at the ground.

"Exactly. And that makes her so much better than those upper-crusts, and so much more powerful. I just wish everyone could hear her and realize they didn't have to take orders any more."

Across the beach, Rose was laughing, head thrown back and curls flying. There was an Amethyst doubled over next to her, holding her shoulder for support. Quartzes were so loud.

Pearl's hand curled into the sand, running it through her fingers, feeling the crunch of tiny crystals pressing together. It wasn't all perfect, she could already sense little shells and

irregularities, bits of organic material and stone. But it was close to the endless gardens of perfectly swept silicone particles on Homeworld, all white and shining and still.

“I’ve said something wrong,” Bismuth noted, “I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

One of Pearl’s hand’s shot out and grabbed her upper arm, pressing sand into the star pattern she’d taken last time she’d reformed. She needed to another person. Patient as a monolith, Bismuth moved closer and settled against her side.

“No. It’s just, complicated.”

“Homeworld complicated?”

Pearl glanced at Rose across the beach. “Mmm. Yes, something like that.”

The door closed with a thud. Pearl looked up from polishing her favorite sword to see Rose standing in front of her. Of course it was Rose. Rose was the only other person who could get into her room.

(It wasn’t much- the limits of their cobbled together interdimensional core had been stretched by the size of the Rebellion, and had ended up giving them something like an inelegant, extended rabbit burrow for a base. The whole place would probably end up self destructing within the decade. But the walls had a soft iridescent sheen unlike the dull granite the base was bored into, it was just big enough to practice her stances in, and it was *hers* .)

Rose stayed by the door, always polite, always mindful because she forced herself to be. “Pearl, can we talk?” she asked.

She was wearing the little frown, the one that meant she was trying to figure out how to be diplomatic and coming up 5% short.

“Of course, Rose,” Pearl stood to attention, then remembered herself and sat again on the large boulder in the middle of the room. She patted the rock next to her, uncertain of how else to invite someone in.

It was all the invitation Rose to lean next to her, arms still crossed, “Pearl?”

“Yes, Rose?” The fountain behind them trickled over the the little stones in the bottom of the pool, before swirling away into interdimensional depths unknown. Next to it, Pearl felt too loud. After a period of comfortable solitude, your own voice became something strange and unfamiliar.

“I want you to stop getting hurt for me.”

It took a moment to realize what she was talking about. Hurt? Pearl didn't get hurt. She was careful, especially compared to some of the other rebels who had realized early that Rose's healing tears meant they could take more risks and get away with it. While Silk Ruby, Biggs, or Turquoise, might rush into danger, Pearl paced herself and only threw caution to the wind when it *really* mattered. She'd always been very proud of that.

"In the last battle my form wasn't even dissipated until I needed to protect you," she pointed out, putting her sword and stone away in her gem. Now there was nothing to do with her hands, and she folded them in front of her, not quite Pearl-perfect, but close.

This only made Rose's frown deepen. "I don't need protection, Pearl. You could have been cracked- or worse, shattered!"

"But I wasn't," she smiled, feeling like she'd struck the first hit in a match, arguments falling neatly in to place. Winning fights was definitely a benefit of freedom. "Besides, you're much more important than me."

Rose stared at her in horror, "No I'm not!"

Now Pearl felt caught off guard. "Yes, you are. Lots of people depend on you, Rose. If you got hurt and took weeks to reform, everything would fall down around our ears. Our secret missions- how would we accomplish them? What would the others think?"

It was possible the Rebellion could survive without Rose Quartz, though Pearl sincerely doubted it. The occupation definitely couldn't survive without Pink Diamond and if she didn't come home one day there would be questions. These questions would no doubt be answered by violence. And if she had to reform in a strange place, unsure what face to put forward? The delicate dance they'd been doing for so long would finally careen out of balance and *everything* would come crashing down.

She couldn't be hurt. She couldn't be out of commission. She definitely couldn't be permanently damaged, because who would heal their healer?

If she got hurt, no one would be able to go on. Pearl certainly wouldn't be able to go on.

Rose turned her big, dark eyes, full force on Pearl. She could see herself reflected there, suddenly small and unsure. There was no discernable difference between Rose's iris and pupil- as if the diamond in her other self's eyes had simply expanded until they reached the sclera. Maybe there were smaller diamond's inside, black on black, a secret for a secret gem.

"We'd find a way," she said, "I just can't stand to see you get hurt for me Pearl, and you do it over and over again." Her lower lip stuck out, pitiful as the little human she'd simply *had* to rescue last year or the baby elephant she'd saved the year before.

Pearl turned her head away so she didn't have to look in her own eyes in Rose's. "Well, I couldn't stand to see you get hurt once."

A sound halfway between frustration and disgust came out of Rose's throat. Pearl glanced back, helplessly, and saw her hands twisted in her hair in aggrievement. "I just want you to

fight for yourself for once! I don't want to be worried in the middle of each battle about you getting hurt again! Why can't you just do that!"

Matching exasperation was starting to build in Pearl. Why couldn't Rose see why she was doing this? She cared about the Rebellion, didn't she? Didn't she care about them? The future they were building had a better chance of ending if Rose got injured than if she did.

"Because you can't make me," she snapped. "Rose, please. Let me do this."

She hadn't intended to ask for permission.

Wordlessly, Rose shook her head.

Pearl pulled her sword back out of her gem and stubbornly went back to polishing it. The delicate, repetitive movements felt like an art of their own, and it gave her something to focus on other than Rose's face. In the background, the fountain dripped away. "Well. Like I said, you can't tell me what to do."

Pearl stood next to Pink Diamond and imagined forbidden things.

Every now and again, Pink would ask her to do some small task- pull up a report or open a door. It was needed to keep up appearances, so she didn't mind.

And she did ask, or imply, or gently hint. "Pearl, could you?"

"Pearl, if you would?"

"Ahem, Pearl."

Rarely, so rarely, an order slipped out. Pearl tried not to care about that as well. They were both learning. It was easy for her, with her mind on greater things, to forget.

She packed the orders, and the feeling of her limbs moving on their own, and the rigidity in her joints, into a little box in her mind, and went back to imagining.

Rose's lips were warm but the damp patches she left on Pearl's skin cooled quickly in the night air, leaving a clammy trail on her cheeks and neck.

It wasn't that she didn't like to be touched, especially when it was Rose touching her. Her skin could be so soft and warm. Her body was made of curves and fullness and it was all too easy to settle into her arms and feel that secret thrill that came with being wanted.

Kisses could be nice too; Garnet's lips pressed against her forehead, hot and dry like volcanic stone, or a quick peck from a compatriot in the rush after battle.

These touches were different. They made her feel unsettled in her own skin. They made her want to back away and shake the discomfort from her limbs. A fight, a dance, anything seemed better than this.

Pearl shifted, just a little, and that small tell was enough to make Rose pause, wet mouth still on her shoulder.

"Is this all right?" Rose whispered into her clavicle.

It had to be all right. It was what Rose wanted. She loved her messy affections, the sort that her human friends had taught her. Fluids and orifices, and other distasteful things. It wasn't to Pearl's taste, they both knew that, and she had never pushed, but sometimes the less tidy side of those recreations crept into their time together. Hands that automatically hovered over places where there was nothing to be found before withdrawing with an apologetic blush, kisses that lingered a little too long.

It made her happy, that taste of adventure. The little imitations of humanity made her feel better, for some reason, and it wasn't a Pearl's place to question.

It was just so *moist*.

In response Pearl hummed a sort of agreement, hands tangling in Rose's hair. If she distracted herself with the curls it was less objectionable.

Nevertheless, Rose withdrew, eyes wide and worried.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Pearl assured her, "it's fine." She smiled too, to show that she was doing well, that she was happy because Rose was happy.

The kisses resumed, marching down her bare arms like an army of snails. Pearl counted the roses on the tent ceiling and tried not to shiver. When Rose reached her the inside of her wrist, the growing sense of distress reached a breaking point. Already she was cold all over and her skin itched from the inside out.

As lips touched her skin she snatched her hand from between Roses' and held it close to her chest.

There was a long silence. Rose drew back.

“I’m sorry,” Pearl said, and then remembered that she didn’t have to apologize to anyone anymore. “Just... hold me.”

A small, worried grin broke over Rose’s face, but she reached over, arms more welcoming than lips had ever been. When they were a comfortable tangle of limbs, she asked, “No more kissing then?”

“Just less,” Pearl said. “Softer.”

“Whatever you say.”

Rose’s skin was warm and her hair was trying to invade Pearl’s mouth. Slowly the patches of dampness dried, leaving only the ghosts of kisses long gone. It was a little better. The pressure all around her, the weight of arms and skirts and Rose’s chin, anchored her to herself.

Yes, she thought to herself, I want this.

Pink Diamond’s shattering left chaos in its wake. Everyone was looking for Rose Quartz, traitor, shatterer, monster.

No one looked for a Pearl with a sword hidden in her gem and a gem clenched tight in her fist.

Pearl ran.

When she found a place of safety, a little valley hidden in the mountains, hard stone among the thick trees, she finally relaxed. Pink Diamond’s troops could not search dozens of miles of heavily wooded ground. They would head towards the nearest warp pad (due north, two hours running) and work from there. Reinforcements would eventually be called in, news would spread, and perhaps then someone would think to do a full sweep, but for now this rocky overhang behind windswept saplings would do.

She put Rose’s gem down gently in a pile of leaves (there were no pale mugunghwa so far from the delicate cultivation of Pink’s court, but there were purple and white wildflowers, and deep green summer grasses) and then turned away to think.

There were still tears on her face, tears welling in her eyes, silent and unceasing. She could feel Pink’s final order pressed into her flesh, weighing down her tongue, clenching her jaw

shut whenever she tried to even think of what she had just done.

Instinctively, she fought it. She had spent centuries building up defiance, carefully tending to her anger and spite and making disobedience feel almost as natural as submission. A part of her wanted to shout, wanted to scream what she had done to the quiet forest just to hear the words said out loud.

I killed- I shattered- You told me to-

She could not even fully think the words. The memory was an image, a feeling, any attempt to voice it, even in the privacy of her own brain was met with abrupt formless fear, a choking feeling that drowned out all rational thought.

Eventually, Pearl gave up. She had only so much rebellion in her, and this was easier to obey than try to circumvent. What would be the point?

There was no one but her and the trees. Rose would not be back for a while. Who could she tell? Who did she want to tell? The order wasn't ill conceived; Rose knew better than anyone what would happen if the truth got out. They had guarded their secret for so long, it would be foolish to try to throw it away now purely to be contrary.

Perhaps Pink Diamond could have trusted her to keep the secret herself. (Hadn't she done so well in the past? Hadn't she followed every order without compulsion?) But Rose had her reasons, she always did.

It would be hours before Rose came back, and already Pearl could feel her disorderly thoughts beginning to send her into a spiral. It wouldn't do. She had to think of the future. There would be a battle to fight, when they got home. There would be consequences to deal with, explanations to make. She needed to be at her best.

She drew her sword from her gem- not Rose's sword, but hers. It was thin and silver in the dimming afternoon light, and perfectly balanced in her hand. Stepping out a little from under the overhang, she made a few passes with it, swinging at hanging vines and the empty air.

Lovely. So much more elegant than Rose's weapon, so much more fitting in her grip. You couldn't double-wield with Rose's sword, you couldn't duck in past your enemy's guard jab up and under their defenses. A large weapon was useful if you had the brute force for it, but some matters required finesse.

Pearl stepped forward and back, practicing the simplest forms she'd learned in the earliest days, when rebellion was a tool for her Diamond's pleasure and not her purpose and driving force.

She let the actions take her over, the parries and thrusts and more complex maneuvers. She jumped off of low lying boulders, somersaulted in the air over imaginary opponents, and slid across the leaf strewn ground, hacking at invisible adversaries as she went. There was a rhythm to it, a grace in the necessary motion, a reciprocity in the violence. It was the first dance she'd ever learned that was for no one but herself.

(At least that was the story the Rebel Pearl had told herself, and sometimes she could almost believe it to be true.)

After a while she stopped crying.

Night fell slowly. There were no signs of Pink's forces drawing closer, however, so Pearl wasn't especially inclined to move.

An hour after dusk, as she worked her way through another set of forms, there was a stirring from under the overhang. She stopped and turned, sword still raised, as light began to build, Pink Diamond rising slowly from her resting place. The little valley was suddenly full of brilliance and deep shadows.

The solid-light body was... not right. It started out as Pink, so tall she pressed against the rocks above her with lean limbs and a gem pointed up. Then it contracted, shifted, groaned. The body shrank and shortened, becoming smaller and fuller, long ovals squeezing into round spheres. The gem turned inward, point twisting as if to stab her in the gut.

Rose Quartz fell to the ground, blinking.

It must have been terribly hard to do that. It was difficult enough to shapeshift outside of one's intended form and stature, even for a Diamond. To take the shape from the beginning, to force light out of the lines it longed to settle into and force it to freeze like that forever (or at least until you were next shattered) would have taken a great deal of focus. It was sensible though- it lowered the chances she would revert forms under stress or duress, it simplified matters of timing and eliminated the need for structured breaks ("Our little walks," Rose called them, when they left the Rebellion for an hour or so, went far away, and let her rest in the shape she had been made in.)

"My last order," Pink had said. She had meant it. She would never be Pink Diamond again, never take a shape that made something in Pearl bend like bad steel.

Pearl felt horribly and utterly relieved.

Rose looked up at her, a little startled and a little confused, as most gems were so soon after reforming. She pulled herself to her feet, brushed off her dress, and examined their surroundings.

Pearl did not lower her sword.

"We should go home," she said, all business. "They'll be looking for us and I expect a lot has happen-"

"*No.*" Pearl said.

Rose blinked. "We could... go somewhere else? Has something happened?"

Pearl shook her head irritably, and sheathed her sword. "No, no. It's only... they'll be expecting us, as you said."

There was so much to do, so many things to make right. Rose was already shaking leaves out of her hair and smiling. “Right. The warp pad near Amsa village, then? It stopped being used regularly decades ago, I doubt they’ll guard it.”

“No,” Pearl said, just to prove she could. Speech still felt awkward after early attempts to grapple with the order. She needed it to be hers again, before they returned to their friends. “The depot near the river. We steal a ship and fly back.”

Rose nodded thoughtfully. “Of course. And Pearl?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

A nice way of pretending either of them ever had a choice, Pearl reflected.

The boy, Steven, was getting bigger. It seemed like every time they saw him he knew new words, could run faster, escape quicker. Humans grew too fast.

He was talking in almost full sentences now, with increasingly functional grammar and a vocabulary that encompassed the three important elements of the human experience- food, sleep, and shouting.

Mostly, she reflected, as she helped Greg on a grocery trip again, food. She appreciated being asked about coupons (the paltry offerings of the newspaper had been all too easy to organize by price benefit, expiration date, and relative likelihood that they’d be useful to a single father with a toddler) but being dragged into the dairy section to be asked how to calculate unit price for the fifth time grew tiring. There was only so much that could be done in the name of efficiency.

Little Steven toddled towards her as she gauged the selection of cereals, holding a large box with both hands.

“Get it!” he said.

She knelt to examine Dino Racers Special Marshmallow Surprise Breakfast Treat. She noticed the sprinkles, and the glossy layer of white icing on top of even the more naturally colored cereal bits. She checked the back of the box for details and tried to remember if calories were good or terribly poisonous.

“No,” she said finally. “Put it back.”

Steven was in a rush of firsts- first sentence, first pair of shoes, first haircut. This one would not go remarked on. But it wasn't insignificant either.

You're not her, Pearl thought, and felt a small silent anxiety she'd been holding onto for 19 months ease and disappear. *You'll never be her*.

It was a start.

End Notes

One of my first fics for Steven Universe, someone commented "hey, have you ever heard of the Autistic Pearl Theory?" and I (young, doing my best) said that I had but was trying not to play into it too much since I wasn't exactly an expert, and all Pearl's sensory tics and thought processes were kind of a natural result of her character anyways.

It turns out, in fact, that I was autistic all along and what I considered to be Perfectly Sensible Pearl Writing, may have actually been wild projection. So obviously I was time to take another stab at the girl and this time let all her sensory coping mechanisms, and tendencies towards sex repulsion, and messed up self conceptualization just happen. This time, the Pearl is definitely autistic. Call it character growth.

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