

Not My Daughter

Vea double checked that all of the wires were in place as she flicked the radiation filter unit on. It whirred to life, and she nodded to herself. Good, another job done, hers and Tianna's schedule was going on time today. Well, as on time as a schedule can be with a ten-year-old.

"I'm done." She said, turning to the seamstress, Rela.

"Really? That's fast." Rela said, impressed. She went behind the counter and pulled out the payment. "Here you go, 50, two balls of yarn, two containers of cornmeal porridge, oh and a candy for your daughter." She handed everything to Vea.

"Thank you." Then Vea froze. Tianna wasn't her daughter. "Um, she's not-"

"Thank you so much!" Tianna said immediately. What? What was she playing at? Vea glanced at Tianna as she took the candy from Rela's hands and smiled her precious little, "troublemaker" smile. What was she planning?

"Wait, can my mummy have one too? She always says that sharing is caring." Tianna asked innocently. Vea relaxed, she knew Tianna was just trying to convince Rela to give her more candy, nothing more. Vea had never said, "sharing is caring". In fact, she once said, "anyone who says sharing is caring is trying to rob you of something."

"Of course, sweetheart." Rela smiled and handed Vea a candy too. "Your daughter is so sweet. I know that raising a kid these days is really hard." She said sympathetically.

"Umm, thanks. Let's go, kid." Vea said and held out her hand to Tianna to take. Once she took it the two of them quickly walked down the stairs before Rela could ask any more questions like, "what was her first word" or "wasn't giving birth so hard" or whatever mothers talked about.

They went down the tunnel stairs and got to the underground streets. Veia took a moment to stuff the supplies into her pack and handed Tianna the candy.

“Thank you! Nice, two candies. Do you think these are old?” she asked, eyes shining.

“I dunno, but they don’t look like any candy I knew, so it can’t be that old, sorry.” Veia said with a shrug.

“Aww. Well at least I got two candies.” Tianna said and popped one in her mouth.

Veia knew that she was obsessed with old things. Well, anything pre-nukes, so anything 35 years or older.

“That’s good. The only thing that’s left for today is to talk to old Joe at the bookstore then head home.” Veia said. She watched people moving into the crowded street and held out her hand and Tianna grabbed. They walked through the streets close to each other since it was far too easy for a tiny ten-year-old to get lost. And she nearly did a few times, until Veia insisted that they hold hands. It was a good thing Veia was tall and brawny, people at least tried to move out of the way for her.

While they walked, Veia absentmindedly thought back to what Rela said. What made her think that Tianna was her daughter? They didn’t exactly look related. Sure, they were both black, with dark hair and eyes, but Veia was tall and had more of a square face. While Tianna was small and skinny with massive eyes that almost popped out of her head.

Veia felt a tug on her arm and saw that Tianna tripped on a sidewalk and landed on her knee. Veia quickly moved them to the side, away from the crowds. “Are you alright? Did you skin your knee?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine. Just the construction area over there is messing up the concrete. I’m alright.” Tianna said and rubbed her knee.

Vea glared at the construction site that was starting to kick up a lot of dust. What was so important that they were making the underground awful too? They already had enough uneven roads and dust on the surface.

“Vea!” Someone called. She looked up to see Joseph waving at her and starting to walk over. “Oh, and Tianna. It’s good to see the both of you again.”

Joseph was a work friend. If someone was building something that had access to the surface, they needed a radiation filter, like Rela. And if they needed a radiation filter, they called Vea to make one, or fix one. He built the things; she made the filters.

“What are you building over there?” Vea asked.

“It’s a school.” He said with a smile.

“Really!” Tianna looked over the moon.

“Yeah, but it’s for teenagers. You’re a few years off, kid, sorry. But my boys are going once it gets built. Maybe in a few years you can go.” He said and patted Tianna’s shoulder. She pouted a little but nodded in agreement.

“Oh, and if you have anything you need to get done, better make it quick. Dust storm’s kicking up and it might be rough getting back to your place, Vea.” Joseph said seriously.

Vea grimaced. The weather wasn’t predictable, but a dust storm was always hell on her bike. “Thanks. Tianna, lets hurry.”

“Okay.” They both got up and waved bye to Joseph and walked quickly to the bookstore. But it was still a bit away.

“It’d be nice to go to a school.” Tianna said quietly. “Did you ever go to one?”

“For a few years when I was younger than you. It was alright. I had to wear an annoying uniform all though.” Vea said while pushing through the crowd.

But she couldn't ignore how Tianna's eyes shined at the idea of going to school. If they did make a school for younger kids, would Tianna go to it? Would Vea be the one to pick her up like her parents used to? Would she be like her- no. Just keep walking.

They finally got to the bookstore and began to push through the crowds who were all trying to get digital copies of books for their TV's or anything that had screen.

The two of them walked up the stairs to the practically empty first floor. The lights were still on and what used to be windows were all covered up with cement, but it was still beautiful, with stacks and stacks of books around.

Made sense that it was empty though, no one, who had the money, was going to spend it on books. Digital book cartridges were cheaper and far more durable than a paper book, so no one really spent their time with paper books anymore. Except for Tianna. Vea didn't really understand her love for real books, but if it made her happy, she wasn't going to argue.

"Go have a quick look at some books while I trade with old Joe." Vea said and patted Tianna on the shoulder then started walking towards the back. She smiled to herself when she heard Tianna squeal and start rushing off to a bookshelf.

Vea knocked on the staffroom door and gave a half smile to old Joe.

"Vea. It's good to see you." Old Joe hugged her, and she sort of hugged him back. "You got the rum? And where's Roy's kid?"

Vea's heart froze and burned at Roy's name. No one had mentioned him in months.

"I got the rum. Tianna's reading. Don't talk about him." Vea said, fighting to keep her face neutral.

She pulled out the homemade rum from her bag and handed it to him. It was really shitty, more than 60% alcohol that she made in the basement. It was better suited for disinfecting wounds and lighting things on fire then drinking.

“Ha! Nice, nice.” Old Joe opened it and took a deep sniff. “Don’t know how else I’d survive this shit without it. Rum’s my greatest vice.” He said with a little laugh. He had 9 different kids from 4 different mothers, so it wasn’t his greatest vice, but she wouldn’t say that out loud, since Tianna was close by.

He handed her 75 for the rum and Vea’s gaze hardened. “We said 100.” What was he playing at? Old Joe wasn’t the type to cheat people out of an agreement.

“Yeah, but I’ll toss in a free book for the kid.” he said softly. Vea’s eyebrows shot up for a second.

“Why?” she crossed her arms. A book in decent condition was worth at least 30, and Old Joe didn’t survive this long and support his massive family from making bad deals.

“Feel bad for her.” He leaned in and lowered his voice. “And it’s not like Ro- like he’s gonna be back.” Old Joe said spitefully.

A white-hot anger at her oldest friend, used to be her oldest friend, burned in her heart. It was worse than the few radiation burns she had.

“Thanks. We gotta go. Dust storm’s picking up.” Vea said and turned to Tianna who was reading some book.

“Let’s go. Old Joe said you can have that book.” Vea said.

“Wait really?” Tianna shot up. “Thank you!” She called out to him and carefully packed her book away in her pack and held out her hand for Vea. She grabbed it and they walked down the stairs and back into the tunnels.

They quickly walked through the tunnels and got to the surface hatch. Vea got Tianna's suit on, then carefully put her's on, then checked Tianna's suit again. Then went through the hatch and walked out into the radioactive humidity.

The dust and wind was starting to pick up. Vea grabbed Tianna's hand and the two of them pushed their way through the storm and towards her motorcycle. It wasn't quite awful yet, but that would only depend on if they were driving into or out of the storm.

She jerked the bike upright and picked up Tianna and placed her on the bike, then sat on it and made sure that Tianna wrapped her arms around her as tight as she could, then revved it up.

The two of them drove out of Montego Vay and down to Cockpit country. The dust kept swirling around and Vea tried not to panic as the dust kept swirling around them. At least it wasn't getting worse, but it was harder to drive and much easier to get kicked off.

Vea grit her teeth as she felt Tianna wrap her arms around her tighter and she wished she could say or do something to comfort her.

They drove home in silence. Even if they could talk with their suits on, Vea wouldn't have much to say, even if they weren't in a dust storm. She never had much to say.

What was there to talk about? The nukes? The US and the USSR? If the States were still functional? Forget them, they got enough attention when they were pitting struggling countries like theirs against each other in the "Cold" War. Then they turned it into a boiling hot war when they launched a million nukes at each other and almost ended the world.

Vea pushed those thoughts away and just kept driving. Nothing good came out from thinking about the States.

But if it wasn't the nukes or the States, then what? How much better life was before then? Veia didn't even remember much about it. Running to school, climbing mango trees, going to the ocean, eating ox tail, buying rum for her father, and using the change to get an ice cream?

Actually, Tianna would love to hear about that. Veia made a mental note to see if anyone had any ice cream. Probably not, but it was worth looking into. Just for her.

Eventually the dust started to settle a bit and it was easier to see ahead of them. Veia kept driving up the hills and around the older buildings until she saw home. She tapped Tianna's hands around her as she stopped the bike and started walking it to the shed. Then grabbed their packs and unlocked the door and immediately locked the door behind them.

Veia pressed the button to turn on the disinfectant filter and they waited 10 minutes for most of the surface level radiation to get cleaned off. Most people only waited five to seven minutes, but Veia made and fixed the filters and knew how shit they were. They were going to wait the full ten minutes at least.

Once it beeped, Veia took off her suit, helped Tianna's with hers, then put their suits into the disinfectant liquid, where they'd be fully cleaned of any lingering radiation. Or as close to fully cleaned as they could be. Then walked into the house.

"Are you alright? I know that was a scary drive." Veia said.

"I'm fine." Tianna said, but she looked a little frazzled.

"Alright. Go and take a shower and rest before dinner. I'll check on everything."

"Okay." Veia grabbed their packs and unpacked everything then put the packs in the disinfectant liquid. Then she checked the house to make sure that none of her repairs were broken. Everything looked normal.

Vea packed away anything nonperishable into the main house, then dragged everything they needed down to the basement. Tianna was sitting on her bed and combing her hair.

She took a quick shower then rubbed castor oil into her dreadlocks and wrapped them in a scarf. Then checked on Tianna again. “You done with your hair?”

“Not- ugh yet.” Tianna combed another chunk.

Vea smiled and moved to her bed and started helping her with her hair. It was a little matted but thankfully also very, very curly. Most of the damage had been reversed from when she had first arrived, when it was mostly dead, and she didn’t know how to take care of it. When she was a scrawny little stick of a think with too many cuts and bruises who jumped at every little noise and rarely ever talked. Now, Tianna wouldn’t stop asking questions. Thank the Lord.

“You used to live in this house before the nukes, right?” Tianna asked.

“Yup. With my mom, dad, and grandma.” Vea said while combing.

“Wow I never got to meet my grandma. You knew my dad’s grandma, right?” Tianna asked. Vea pushed down the simmering rage and nodded.

“Yep. She made good curry and would hit you with a broom if you got dirt in the house.”

“Ha. She sounds a little scary.” Vea hummed in agreement. Tianna kept rambling and Vea answered any questions she had. It was their routine every night after they went out.

But something in the back of Vea’s mind whispered how much this looked like a mother doing her daughter’s hair. Then she pushed it down, down, down.

After doing her hair, Vea started getting dinner ready. Some rice and stew that Tianna liked but didn’t love because it didn’t have pounds of sugar in it. Vea made sure she ate every bite.

“What are we doing tomorrow? Are we going out to the city again? Oh, can we go to Kingston?” Tianna asked, starting to crawl into her bed.

Vea wrapped Tianna’s hair into a cap and in all the loose strands. “Nope. I have to fix a disinfectant unit at the green house. You can read your book since it’ll take a while.”

“Aw, when can we go to Kingston again?” Tianna asked.

“Why do you wanna go?”

“It’s the prettiest place I’ve ever been! It has some green outside, and the ocean can be blue sometimes. It’s amazing!” Tianna exclaimed with stars in her eyes.

Vea would argue that Kingston was a burning hell hole, even before the nukes. They’d start sweating in their suits in less than a minute, but it could be nice. On a really good day, she could almost see some plants trying to grow, or the ocean looking just a bit blue. And it really helped that it was on the opposite side from Cuba, where a lot of nukes and missiles and bullshit were stored. And away from Florida where the residual waste hit Montego Bay, badly. Most of the northwest side of the island got hit with way more residual radiation from the ocean and the wind then the southeast side.

But hey, at least Jamaica never got hit dead on by any of the nukes and that they were all doing better than the rest of the States.

“Well, I hope the greenhouse is going to be enough for you. Night.” Vea said and went to turn off the light, then lit the lantern so she could finish up some work.

“Night!” Tianna chirped and curled up and started going to sleep.

Vea went to her workstation towards the back of the room and started smoldering some wires together and sorted which ones were still working and which ones were crap. Most of them were decent, but some were dead and could only be used as scrap. She’d have to sell them, if

they could even be sold. While working, she let her mind wander for a moment about how much a goat would cost. Once of those could eat up any trash the two of them made, and goat milk and cheese was decent. And Tianna would love a goat, she always talked about she wanted a pet.

When did she start to care so much about her?

When they first met, Vea tried her best not to scowl at the wriggling little pink thing in Roy's arms. All she said was, "huh, your kid's got a lot of hair. Must've been hard for Dana." And nodded at the girl. Dana ended up getting sick, then infected, then died a few years later. Vea kept a good eye on Roy after that. He was always a sentimental bastard, even got married to Dana, found a priest and everything.

Then.

A few years passed, he didn't contact her as often, then he showed up at her place half-starved and with a ten-year-old kid who barely looked better.

Vea would have cared for both of them. She would have found a way to feed all three of them. She wouldn't have complained. She would have done anything for her best friend. But.

He left that day. Barely got some food in his stomach before running off to the docks to catch a ship to Florida. Some morons were trying to find out what happened to the States on a rickety old boat, and Roy joined, even though he wasn't needed on that damned thing. Even though he didn't need to go out and seek adventure. Even though he wouldn't really be helping by joining them.

Said it was his calling. That he needed to fulfill his life's mission. He was going to cause a massive explosion then just leave. Just burn everything to hell then never be heard from again. What a load of-

Vea put down her smoldering iron and cracked her knuckles. She took a deep breath and let that cold fury out, bit by bit. It was stupid and dangerous to be angry while holding a smoldering iron. Even if that idiot abandoned everything and everyone for a stupid job that didn't even need him.

She started packing her things up and started to count up the money from today. Anything to keep her mind off of him.

“Vea?”

She whipped around to see Tianna still awake and looking at her.

“I can turn off the lantern if it's keeping you up.” Vea said softly.

“No, it's not that. It's . . . umm.” Tianna kept looking around the room and looked anxious. “Do you think I can get braids soon?”

Vea knew she was avoiding something, but just shrugged. “Probably. I know some people who could help you get braids in if you want them.”

“Okay. Good night.” Tianna rolled over and went to sleep.

This was why Vea couldn't forgive Roy. He left, he caused an explosion and just left.

It didn't matter what he said, if it was his grief, his idealism, or even if he genuinely thought he was doing good.

He left his daughter. And Vea had to pick up the pieces. Not *for* Roy though. Never for *him*.

Vea gripped her pen and kept taking notes until she started getting tired. She got ready for sleep and crawled into bed.

Then in the blink of an eye, there was a banging on the door.

Vea shot out of bed and grabbed her matchet and turned on the lights. She glanced at Tianna who jumped out of bed too and put on her slippers. Good, she was alright.

“Wha- Who’s that?” Tianna asked, rubbing her eyes.

“Not sure. Stay behind. I’ll check.” Vea said and passed a pocketknife to Tianna and climbed the ladder to the top floor. She grabbed a jacket and looked out of the security camera she installed- and all of the air left her lungs as her blood turned to ice fire.

Roy.

He was wearing his suit, but she recognized it immediately.

He was pointed to a sign he made that said, “ITS ROY IMPORTANT INFORMATION”. Or at least she guessed it said information, it was squished and hard to see from the crappy camera quality, bits of dust, and radiation static.

She took a breath and opened the airlock. Roy walked inside and she activated the air cycle. Then grabbed a piece of paper, wrote “wait ten minutes” and taped it to the outside of the airlock. He gave her a thumbs up and she went down the ladder.

“Tianna, I- woah.” Vea almost lost her footing when she saw the kid pointing the pocketknife at her.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t know if it was you, or if you were someone who was breaking in or something.” Tianna said very quickly and put away the pocketknife.

“It’s fine, good actually. If I was a robber you’d be prepared.” Vea said, then was hit with a sense of wrongness. She shouldn’t be talking to her like this. Like she’s her- She’s Roy’s kid.

“Roy’s here. He’s in the airlock.” Vea said.

Tianna froze and nodded. “Okay.”

They spent the ten minutes in silence, just cleaning things away and getting some water for all three of them. The airlock beeped and Veia climbed the ladder, unlocked the airlock door, and let him inside.

Roy pulled off his suit and Veia took it wordlessly to the side, not in the decontamination liquid, because that had to sit for six hours and there was not a chance in hell, she was going to let him in her home for six hours.

“Thanks. Veia, it’s so good to see you.” He smiled and held out his arms, like he wanted a hug.

Veia didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Just crossed her arms and glared.

“I, umm, alright. Well, anyways, I have a lot of news for you. And Tianna! Where is she?” Roy asked, a goofy, giddy, smile on his face. His eyes sparkling the same way Tianna’s were when she was learning about old stuff.

The ice fire burned inside Veia as she nodded her head to the ladder, and she started climbing down first. She landed on the ground and carefully watched Roy climb down, then shot a glance at Tianna. She was sitting at a table and gripping a mug tightly.

“Alright. I have big news. The crew finally got back from Florida. It actually took a while because we got lost a bit, and at some point, we ended up close to Barbados, but basically, we got in contact with the States. It’s really rough there, but we can start to make actual contact with them soon enough. Probably, maybe, I’m not sure. Apparently, some of them are still talking to the commies, which is ridiculous, but we can finally start to get stuff done.”

Roy was pacing and raving like a mad man.

“What about Tianna? Your daughter?” Veia asked.

“And once we- what? Oh, Tianna, it’s good to see you. You got taller.” Roy said and started walking to her. He hugged her and Tianna just let it happen. But didn’t sink into it either.

“Anyways, the crew is going to have an entire announcement and tell everyone about the good news, plus contact the government, and then we’re going to start doing regular trips back and forth to try and develop some more of a connection. Maybe soon I’ll get an actual role because most of the trip there I was just cleaning up after everyone. Then we can-” Roy kept going on and on. Vea glanced at Tianna who was just looking at her father, gripping her arms and fighting off tears.

“Why are you here?” Vea asked loudly.

“I- right. Well, it’s partially to see you again, Vea. I mean, it’s been months.” Roy said with a smile.

Vea didn’t give him an inch.

“And to bring Tianna with me. The ship’s safer and it’s better kitted out for a child to grow up on anyways.” Roy added. He started talking about but the ship, about how much better, and happier Tianna would be on it, but Vea couldn’t hear anything. All the blood was rushing around her ears.

No. Please no.

All the air left her lungs, and the fire snuffed out. She was just cold.

Not Tianna, please.

“No!” Tianna shouted. Roy took a step back and looked offended. “Tianna, what-”

“I don’t want to go! I don’t want to live on a ship! I want to stay with Vea!” She stomped her foot on the ground.

And Vea could breathe again.

“If she doesn’t want to go, then you can’t make her.” Vea said in a low voice and stepped in front of Tianna protectively.

Roy’s face shifted. “Really, Vea?” He asked. “Can I have a word with you upstairs?” He asked through gritted teeth.

“Sure.” Vea said and turned to Tianna and gave her a pat on her shoulder and a reassuring look before climbing upstairs with him.

The moment they were alone he gave a disgusted look. “What is wrong with . . . both of you?” He threw his hands in the air. “I mean really! Tianna’s my daughter, you can’t take her!”

“I didn’t take her. You left her to me.” Tianna said calmly. Her patience was wire thin.

“I asked you to watch her for a few months while I was doing something more important.” Roy snapped.

“Nothing is more important than taking care of you kid!” Vea snapped.

Roy took a few steps back at that, then steeled his gaze. “That’s . . . you’re overreacting. Besides you have no idea what it’s like to be a parent. You’re not a mother.”

Vea felt a cold dagger go through her. But she wasn’t freezing anymore.

“Maybe I’m not. But I am a decent person, and unlike you, I don’t think abandoning your kid is ever a good thing. So, you can do what you want, but I’m to take care of Tianna.” She crossed her arms and dared him to argue, to fight, to do a single damn thing.

But he just shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll be back in ten or so months. If you change your mind, contact someone on the ship or whatever. I have more important things to do.”

He grabbed his suit, zipped it on and walked through the airlock and out of the house. Vea looked through the security cameras and watched until he was out of view.

Once he was gone Veia rushed down the ladder and landed on the ground to see a tiny little Tianna curled up on herself, sitting on Veia's bed.

"Is he going to make me go?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"No, no. He left. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, but you can stay with me for as long as you want." Veia said and gently sat on her bed as well.

Tianna leaned against her and sniffled. "He didn't try to get me back?"

"No. I'm sorry." Roy was never a fighter.

It was quiet for a long time. Then Tianna asked in a quiet voice. "Can I sleep in your bed tonight?"

"Of course."

She turned off the lights and laid down, with Tianna curled up next to her. The alarm went off too early.

"Ugh. Why is the alarm going off?" Tianna asked and tried to cover her ears.

"Because it's time to get up." Veia said and got out of bed. She pulled the blankets down, ignoring Tianna's grumbles, and started getting ready for the day.

She got breakfast for them ready, the cornmeal from yesterday, and started packing her equipment for the greenhouses.

"You got your book?" Veia asked as they packed their things.

"Yeah, umm." Tianna looked around and bounced on her feet.

"If you want to talk, we can. I know I don't talk much, but I'll try." Veia said.

Tianna gave her a look. "Huh? I don't think you're that quiet. I mean, I talk a lot, but you're not like silent or anything." Oh.

“But, well. I heard you and father talking last night . . . and.” She looked everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere that wasn’t Ve’a’s eyes.

“I think that you are a good mom. And you know, if we say that we’re related then people might be nicer to us and we can get better deals at the markets in the city and stuff. So yeah, let’s go.” Tianna said quickly and packed up her things.

A brightness grew in Ve’a’s heart. “Alright kid, let’s go.” She said with a smile to her daughter.