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Approx 1,800 words

DAEMON PROTOCOL EXTRAS – NATASHA’S STORY
by
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Natasha perched on the edge of a low stone wall at Camp Zama, her little legs swinging. She traced her fingers along the smooth shaft of her bow, oversized in her lap. The air smelled like pine and faraway rain. Cicadas hummed so loudly it almost felt like they were singing just for her.

At five years old, Natasha had already seen more than most kids ever would. She remembered hunting for shiny arrowheads in the forests of Bavaria, splashing in the blue-green water off Cebu until her teeth chattered, and touching the carved stone pictures at Petra that felt like magic. She didn’t always have the right words for those memories, but she liked telling people she’d “been lots of places.”

Her dad, Platoon Sergeant Victor Karlsen, walked toward her with his steady, long strides. Big and strong, he looked like a soldier even when he wasn’t trying. Other people sometimes got quiet when he came into a room, but Natasha only saw the teddy bear who made her laugh.

“Tater,” he called, his voice warm. “How’s my little archer today?”

She grinned. “I think I’m going to beat you this time!”

Victor chuckled and sat down beside her. “Big words from such a small kid. Let’s see if you can prove it.”

They set up the targets. Victor guided her small fingers on the string, and she let the first arrow fly. It thudded into the grass short of the target.

“Missed,” she mumbled, frowning.

He ruffled her hair. “Not missed. Practicing. Try again.”

She shot again. This time the arrow hit the haystack near the ground. She squealed and clapped.

Victor laughed. “That’s my Tater. Getting better every shot.” Archery had always been their thing. Victor’s father—Natasha’s grandfather—had been a good archer back in high school, and Victor had picked it up too. Now he was passing it down to little Tater. From the moment she was strong enough to pull a bowstring, even just a little, he made sure they always spent time at the range each summer.

They took turns, his arrows flying straight and hers wobbling happily toward the target. She squealed every time the arrow hit the haybale, proud as if she’d already won. Victor only shook his head, smiling at her determination.

They played until the sun dipped lower. As they packed up, Victor gave her a look—the kind of look that seemed to see right through her.

“You’re really improving, Tater,” he said, tousling her hair.

Her daddy’s kind words made her beam. Being with him always felt safe, like when he held her hand crossing the street. She wished she didn’t have to wait until summers and holidays to be with him. As they packed up their things, she noticed him watching her the way he did when he knew something was bothering her.

“You’re awful quiet tonight,” he said gently. “What’s spinning around in that head?”

Natasha fiddled with the end of her shirt. “Mommy’s friend. Daniel.”

Victor’s face stilled. “What about him?”

She swallowed hard. “I think... I think he wants to marry Mommy.”

Victor crouched so he was eye-level with her. “Why do you think that, Tater?”

“‘Cause he’s always there. He sits too close. I don’t like it. I don’t want Mommy to be with him. And what if they want a baby one day? I might have to take care of it!”

Victor placed a hand on her tiny shoulder. “I hear you. Change can be scary.”

Her lip trembled. “What if Mommy doesn’t have time for me anymore?”

“You’ll always be her number one,” he said firmly. “That never changes.”

“But... what if she loves him more?”

Victor thought for a moment then spoke very slowly and warmly. “You know how balloons work? When you blow it up, it doesn’t push out the air that’s already there. It just gets

bigger and bigger. That's how love works too. Your mom's heart can grow so she has room for you and Daniel. You're not losing your spot."

Natasha sniffled. "But what if he's mean?"

"If he ever was, Mommy wouldn't stay. She's stronger than anyone I know. And I'll always be here too. You don't have to like him right away. You just have to remember—you're safe, and you're loved."

That night, Natasha sat on the veranda of her dad's quarters, the stars blinking awake. She held the phone in both hands and called her mom.

"Hi, Natnat," Ana said, her voice tired but soft like a lullaby. "How's my girl?"

"Good. Daddy and me did archery. I almost won."

Ana laughed. "I believe it."

There was a pause. Natasha's voice wavered. "Mommy... are you gonna marry Daniel?"

Ana hesitated. "We've talked about it, Natnat. Not yet, but maybe someday."

Natasha's chest tightened. "Don't. We're a team. You and me. We don't need him."

Ana's voice gentled. "We will always be a team. That never, ever changes. But having Daniel doesn't mean I stop loving you. My love for you is like that big blanket—you know, the one you always steal from my bed. No matter who else is under it, you always get the warmest corner."

Natasha sniffled. "But I don't want things to change."

“I know, baby. Change is hard. But listen—you are my anchor, Natnat. You keep me steady. Nobody can ever take your place.”

After the call, Natasha sat in the dark, her father's words echoing in her head: You'll always be her number one. That never changes.

The next morning she marched to the practice range with her bow. She stuck out her tongue in concentration and let an arrow fly. She hit the target this time, on her first try.

She clapped her hands and grinned. Maybe she couldn't stop things from changing. But like Daddy said, she was strong, just like Mommy. And she could always keep aiming.

The next arrow struck the target with a satisfying thump. Natasha smiled. Mommy would always be hers.

The End