

Protecting Illya

by Christy Noel

“Where were you last night?” asked Demetrius. “I’ve been worried sick.”

She leaned over and dabbled her fingers in the fountain. “I had things to do,” she said, avoiding eye contact. “I can’t always do everything you want, you know.”

He reached out and touched her slender arm. “You are selfish, Illya. You must learn to think of others.”

Pulling away, she pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I do think of others. I don’t have to spend every minute with family. My friends need me more than they do.”

“You’re friends!” He snorted. “What can that lot know of friendship? Worthless rabble!”

Illya narrowed her eyes. “They know a lot more than you do.”

“Pah!” He tossed his hands in a gesture of futility. “Just remember: your family takes first priority. Don’t forget that,” he warned, glowering.

“Yes, yes,” she replied, folding her arms.

As he turned to go, he added, “We’ll be expecting you for lunch. Don’t be late.” He marched off with his usual militarily precise manner, acquired from mimicking their father, a meticulous and rigid man, and reinforced by his two years’ service as a royal officer.

As soon as he had gone, Illya rose and stretched, a natural reaction to his stiff demeanor. Dismissing the conversation, she strolled through the front gate.

The warmth from the spring sun soaked into her arms and face. The fragrance of cut grass and cherry blossoms filled the air, and new leaves, just unfolding, sparkled in the trees. The breeze carried salty air in from the ocean, only a mile away.

Musing on her family dynamics, Illya wondered how she had turned out so unlike her brother. Her physical features portrayed the same aristocratic traits inherited from their parents: the porcelain complexion of their mother; the high cheek bones of their father. However, she fancied that her expressions softened where his tensed; her eyes sparkled while his glinted; her smile lurked playfully while his rarely graced his stern visage. She moved gracefully, like a dancer, while Demetrius seemed perpetually ready to stand at attention.

Admittedly, she sometimes envied his strengths—his unwavering sense of duty and his deep concern for the family—but he invariably annoyed her. She wished he would relax. She thought he took life too seriously.

Finishing a leisurely walk around town and disregarding the expectations that she would return home for lunch, Illya entered her favorite restaurant, *Lina's*. Her friends gravitated to the establishment, a popular gathering place located in the island's single town. Lina, the jovial and rather rotund widow who ran the place, waved at her briefly before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Illya!" cried her friends, clustered around their usual table.

She greeted Andrea, Hector, and Galen and settled into her seat.

"Did you hear the latest news?" asked Hector, a young man with wavy, fair hair and inquisitive blue eyes who seemed to be Demetrius' opposite.

"Negotiations collapsing?" she asked, guessing the topic. The proverbial war drums had been beating for weeks. The threat came, not from their peaceful island, but from the kingdoms to the north and south.

Hector nodded.

Illya's gaze lingered on his handsome face. She had a crush on him, though she had never acted upon it. Did he observe the way she blushed when he gazed at her?

“Can’t they just sort this out once and for all?” asked Andrea, Hector’s sister. She shared his fair looks, though she lacked his patience.

Their recent conversations had focused on the growing tensions. The kingdoms of Turjen and Baska had been bouncing between war and peace for centuries. National ownership of their island, Carselle, flip-flopped back and forth, resulting in periodic turmoil. Neither Illya nor her friends had ever experienced such a crisis; the last one had taken place over twenty years ago. Thus, they took the situation for granted—an abstract subject from their schooling.

Illya briefly thought of her brother. He had been four when the last war ended, so he had some faint, childhood memories of the situation. She wondered if that was the reason he viewed life with such gravity.

She recalled her history lessons. The wars usually involved maritime dominance and national disputes.

During the previous war, twenty years earlier, Turjeni rulers claimed that Baskans were abusing minority groups of Turjenis who lived in Baskan lands. This time around, the Baska government accused the Turjenis of hindering trade with unreasonable duties and improper cargo seizures.

In between the wars, trade flourished and Carselle prospered. People of both backgrounds populated the island, integrating with each other, and they never seemed to be bothered by the national animosities that flared up like twenty year flu on the nearby continents. However, because of its strategic location, Carselle usually got caught up in the argument.

“The war is bound to start within a few weeks,” added Galen, the final member of the group. The sort of young man who tended to physically blend in, Galen made up for his bland features with a sharp wit. A lopsided smile never strayed far from his slightly asymmetrical face, accentuated by a peculiar bend in his nose, a souvenir from a childhood accident. “Maybe as soon as this weekend.” His uncle, a diplomat, lived in Turjen and sent regular letters. “The talks aren’t going at all well.” He spoke lightly, using the same tone that he might have used for talking about the weather.

Illya thought he sounded very worldly when he related news from the old diplomat. “Demetrius mentioned things were getting tense,” she added, trying to compete. Her brother had served in the Baskan royal guard and still kept in touch with his former commander. Her family also still had many ties with Baska. It helped that Baska currently controlled Carselle, but her own grandfather had come from the mainland following a previous conflict and stayed on the island when he married a Turjeni woman.

“My uncle says it will be the ‘war to end all wars,’” said Galen. “Of course, I’m sure they say that every time they go through this song and dance.” He chuckled and gave one of his usual crooked grins before drinking the last of his wine.

The friends laughed. For all its seriousness, the topic did not cast much gloom over the table. The danger seemed too unreal.

“I think we should simply declare war on everyone else,” joked Galen. “I’m sure we could pull it off. We could set up a fake navy in the harbor.”

Andrea rolled her eyes.

“Maybe it’ll blow over,” said Hector, rubbing his cleanly-shaven chin. “After all, nothing has happened yet.”

“True,” agreed Illya.

Hector smiled at her, and she felt her cheeks grow warm.

“Oh, so now you return,” muttered Demetrius. “Mother was disappointed when you missed lunch.” The newspaper rustled as he folded it closed.

Illya didn’t grace him with an excuse. “Did I miss anything interesting?”

His eyes seemed to turn a shade darker. “Have you been following the news?”

“Yes,” she replied. “In fact, we discussed it over lunch.”

“There are reports of blockades forming,” he explained, fingering the imported Baskan newspaper. “It’s going to start impacting us here. We’re lucky they haven’t sealed off all of the trade routes yet.”

“Really?” she asked, trying to sound interested but only intending to glean some useful trivia.

Demetrius set the paper aside. “I might be recalled to active duty,” he added. “I’m preparing for the orders to come in at any time.”

“I had guessed that might happen. When...”

He cut her off. “We talked about it at lunch today. We’ve decided to evacuate until this is all over. This won’t be a good place to stay if hostilities flare up. During the last war, people had trouble getting food and supplies, soldiers occupied town, and the enemy launched occasional attacks against the island.”

“Enemy? Who exactly is the enemy?” Given the original nationalities of their grandparents and the general merging of peoples on Carselle, choosing sides made no sense to her.

He sighed. “I know it sounds like civil war, especially with our grandmother being a Turjeni. But my service is in the Baskan royal guard, and we can find haven in Grandfather’s home town, away from the violence.” Their eyes involuntarily flicked over to the couple in the antique portrait hanging over the mantelpiece—the man in an old-fashioned Baskan army uniform and the woman in a traditional Turjeni gown. “At least neither of them is around to see this state of affairs,” he murmured.

“I don’t like it.” Her brow furrowed. “Who’s going to look after *our* home?” Her delicate eyebrows scrunched closer. “Who will tend our garden? What about my friends?” Hector and Andrea came from a Turjeni family. Would they evacuate, too? It would be dreadful not to see them each day, particularly Hector’s gentle face.

“Everyone will have to make some tough decisions in the days ahead.”

“Mother and Father are already settled in their cabin,” explained Demetrius. They stood on the dock, surrounded by crates and parcels. Seamen hurried up and down the gangplank, swarming over the ship in preparation for the voyage. “You’re to board by 2 o’clock,” he warned, fixing her with a stern gaze, his authority augmented by his blue

uniform. His commander had arrived the previous week and re-activated his commission, assigning him with the duty of evacuating Carselle's civilians.

Illya gazed mournfully back towards the road. "Can I at least say good-bye to my friends?"

"If you hurry. Don't be late. I don't know how much longer we'll be able to continue the evacuation. The Turjeni navy is tightening its blockade like a noose."

"I promise, I'll be back as fast as I can!"

Illya approached *Lina's*, flushed from her haste, and paused to catch her breath. She smoothed her dress and checked the hairpins to make sure her curls had stayed in place before opening the door.

"Would you like some more wine, Commander?" Lina stood near the only occupied table in her restaurant, her stout form looming benignly as she waited on group of Baskan soldiers.

Illya recognized the leader, Sergei Solenski. Demetrius had introduced them.

Her breath caught. It dismayed her to find the restaurant otherwise empty. Normally, locals swarmed the restaurant at lunchtime, but today the small group of soldiers monopolized Lina's attention.

She could have kicked herself for assuming her friends would be at their normal haunt. Like her, they were probably preparing to leave. However, she hadn't seen any of them for the last few days, so she felt completely out of touch. She desperately wanted to bid them farewell, since it might be months or more before they reunited. Especially Hector. She knew she couldn't leave without seeing him one more time.

She paused a moment too long. Solenski spotted her and said, "Well, if it isn't the lovely Illya. Have you come to join us for lunch?"

He rose from his seat. A polite smile settled on his lips, but thick, bushy eyebrows cast deep shadows over his eyes.

"Good afternoon, Commander." She apologized for disturbing them. "I was just looking for someone."

“And alas, not for me, I see,” said Solenski. “Can we help you find someone?”

“No, thank you. I’d better go—I have to hurry.”

She exited and rushed down the street, thinking of Hector. He’d been paying her more attention lately. A week ago he had stopped by the house. “I was wondering if you’d like to go for a walk,” he’d asked. It had seemed so innocent, yet so full of promise.

Remembering this, she took no notice of the pink petals that snowed down over her from the cherry trees, shaken down by the gusty winds that blew from the north.

Someone had nailed boards over the windows of Hector’s house. Illya halted in her tracks, full of foreboding. She reluctantly approached the door and knocked.

The hollow sound echoed through the house, and no one answered.

“They left yesterday, miss.”

Startled, she turned to see their old gardener pushing a wheelbarrow of rich, black soil, carrying on with his duties as normal. “They did?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the elderly man. “I decided to stay, to look after things. I’m too old to run away every time we have one of these foolish wars.” In spite of his complaints of age, he seemed to get around okay. He had a wiry frame, a little stooped in the back, but otherwise undamaged by the ravages of time.

“Did they leave any letters, or an address?”

He shook his head and apologized.

Thoroughly frustrated, she thanked him for his help and trudged back down the lane. As if sensing her disappointment, the breeze faded a little.

“You almost missed the boat!” scolded Demetrius. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you go off like that. The captain finally gave orders to cast off in five minutes, with or without you. He’s afraid he’s going to lose the wind.”

He practically dragged her up the gangplank, depositing her on the deck.

“I’m sorry. I tried to say good-bye to my friends. I just wanted...”

The captain appeared from below deck, and an instant look of relief settled on his face. He made a hasty sign with his hands, as if to say “Well?”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it next time we see each other. You’re sailing now, and I have to get back to work!” Demetrius bounded down the gangplank.

Illya’s expression fell a degree as she watched him hurry down the wooden dock, shouting out orders. The sailors hauled up the gangplank, and in no time they began to pull away.

Rather than going down to her family’s cabin, she stayed up on the deck, watching the land recede. The salt spray cooled her cheeks, and the wind tousled her hair. Seagulls occasionally squawked as they glided around the ship. Her mind wandered. Images of her friends’ faces waltzed through her brain, and conversations with Hector danced in her ears.

A commotion on the forecastle stirred her from her lonely reminiscences. The captain and first mate were conversing in an animated fashion, gesturing at the slack sails. The winds had subsided.

The sailor in the crow’s nest called out, “Ship ahoy!” This inflamed the debate further.

When it became clear the ship belonged to the Turjeni blockade and they realized they couldn’t outrun her without the sails, the captain ordered them back to the island under rowing power.

A sly smile flickered on Illya’s face. “That will be better,” she murmured to herself. Thoughts of home comforted her. “Then I can greet my friends when they return.”

“Why couldn’t we have made it to the mainland?” groaned Illya. Over a year had passed, and a summer heat wave baked the island. Sweat dripped down her temples as she stood in *Lina’s*—now as an employee rather than a patron. She cleared up the remains of lunch and set out fresh silverware. The stale, beer-tainted air turned her stomach.

Her family's trade-based fortune had declined during the long blockade. To make ends meet, she'd taken a job, filling a vacancy left by one of the waiters who had been drafted. *Lina's* wasn't a bad choice. None of Lina's girls ever had to worry about getting dragged upstairs for something other than table waiting. The widow stood up to the men like a brick wall when it came to that.

Though Illya was thankful, she still hated the job. Day in and day out she served the rowdy men, dodging their overly-friendly gestures and ignoring their raunchy remarks. A few of the soldiers who knew her brother treated her well, but most seemed careless of the dignity of the locals. The war climate had eroded their good behavior.

Part of her mind remained permanently fixed on the past. The daily grind wore down her youthful naïveté, but she clutched at hopes that the war would soon end and her friends would return, that the hundreds of soldiers would go home and life would return to normal.

A boy burst through the door and cried, "We're under attack!" A sudden, loud boom from the harbor emphasized his warning.

Illya feared for Demetrius, now a captain at the coastal fort.

The widow emerged from the kitchen and ordered everyone out. Her heart beating in her throat, Illya rushed out with the rest of the waitresses and scurried home.

As the setting sun painted the sky crimson, Illya emerged from the cellar, telling her parents she couldn't stand the stifling atmosphere any longer. She thought she would just visit the garden momentarily to enjoy the sunset.

The air still simmered with heat. The birds called their last songs for the evening, and stillness settled over everything.

She lingered, watching the first stars appear. Daydreaming, she didn't notice a figure appear at the gate.

"Hello... What a pretty thing we have here."

She jumped. The speaker, a stranger, wore the green uniform of Turjen, marking him as an enemy to the island's current Baskan rule. His presence suggested that the earlier attack had not gone well for Baskan forces.

His expression brimmed with lust. On instinct, she edged away.

Snickering, the man continued to approach.

She bolted, but he caught her at the greenhouse entrance.

"Just give me one kiss," he implored, pinning her and pressing his rough lips against her cheek.

Her sleeve tore. She screamed.

Another Turjeni soldier appeared, his chin covered in stubble and his fair hair catching the last of the light. "Stop!" he shouted. She instantly recognized his voice—the sound she'd longed for.

"Hector! Help me!"

Her rescuer rushed forward and yanked the other man back. They scuffled.

A loud report made her ears ring. Her attacker slumped.

She cried out and ran to her friend.

"I'm okay," he breathed, smiling down at her. "Are you?"

Illya nodded and embraced him, barely noticing the blood splattered over his uniform. She started to reply when another voice interrupted them.

"What the..." murmured someone from the path.

Fearing the worst, Hector pushed her away and turned to face the new intruder.

"How dare you!" Demetrius appeared in the dusky light.

Another shot rang out, and Hector gasped.

"It's okay!" cried Illya. "It's Hector!"

Hector turned towards her, his face blanched and etched with pain. He clutched at his chest. "Illy..." His voice trailed off.

She spotted the pistol in her brother's hand. Alarmed, she rushed forward to support her friend. "Hector!" He grew heavy in her arms, sagging to the earth. "No! Not like this! Not like this!"

Demetrius hurried forward and pulled her away as Hector collapsed. “Are you all right? I thought he was...”

“Hector! Hector!” Illya trembled, and she reached towards the dead man, though her brother wouldn’t release her.

Demetrius hoarsely whispered, “I was only protecting my family.”

“He saved me,” she sobbed. “He *saved* me! I wanted him to marry me, and you killed him.” She turned reddened eyes on her brother. “*You* killed him.”

Illya forced herself from his arms and dropped down, clutching the still form, feeling the last of her hopes drain away with Hector’s blood that seeped out darkly over the brittle grass.