

Disappear by Candlelight

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The small, sleepy town of Lady Magnolia seldom received visitors, making each visitor notable, no matter how fleeting their stay or how unremarkable they otherwise were. The town only had one entrance, nestled in a secluded crook of the mountain range known as the Eternal Heights, and every resident knew everyone, so when a new person arrived, there could be no mistaking them. Those rare visitors always stayed at the Saint Spring Inn, the town's only inn, but, lately, some of those visitors seemed to be disappearing.

Telos Erindora, once a Miracle Crusader, now a roaming mercenary, arrived at Lady Magnolia chasing a whisper. Rumors traveled on the lips of the visitors who did not disappear during their stay in the characteristically calm town, and to a discerning ear, the center of uncertainty was the Saint Spring Inn. Telos rode into town alone, observed by many residents, and sought out the Saint Spring Inn, looking to stay the night.

The inn was of a decent size, situated at the back left side of the town, and overlooked Reyna's Tear, a glittering lake. It shared the look of any dozen random inns. Its roof was thatched, the walls were wood, and there was a lovingly painted sign hanging out front. To anyone ignorant of the rumors surrounding Lady Magnolia, there was no reason to avoid the Saint Spring Inn. The scent of fresh bread, stew, and warm mead further enticed.

Upon entering, Telos laid eyes on Constance Clausen, the innkeeper's daughter. She was younger than him, though close to the same age, with fetching green eyes and dark, silky hair. She was unaccompanied, sipping at a tea with lemon at her table, and immediately noticed Telos' appreciative gaze. With a practiced coolness, he looked to the bar, where Mr. Martin Clausen waited with a welcoming smile. Telos approached the skinny innkeeper as he loosened his purse strings, tempted to steal another glance at the slim, beautiful woman seated behind him.

"A room, please."

The innkeeper's kindly smile was embedded in his expression, but his eyes, green like his daughter's, inspected Telos intently. He said, "It'll be fifteen riaten for the night. Are you only staying for one?"

"That's right," Telos confirmed. He withdrew a vesten from his purse and placed it on the counter. Mr. Clausen took the coin, tried to bend it, and stashed it away approvingly. He counted out five riaten in change and handed them to Telos.

“Would you like a bowl of stew or a glass of mead?” Mr. Clausen offered. “My wife made the stew this morning. The whole town swears by it.” He gestured at his wife, Mrs. Cela Clausen, and she paused her dusting to wave.

Stomach rumbling, Telos accepted a meal, returning the five riaten he had been given. Mr. Clausen poured him a bowl of stew and a glass of mead and gave him a room key for his short stay. Thanking the innkeeper, Telos found a seat at a vacant table and inspected his key – it was engraved to indicate it was for Room Three – before he began eating. As he savored his decidedly delicious meal, he watched for suspicious happenings in the inn’s common room.

To Constance Clausen, the mercenary was the latest visitor to her family’s inn and worth taking notice of. His profession was proclaimed by the scars on his face, one across his left eye, though the eye’s function was not impeded, and others on his cheeks, as well as the weapons he carried. His sword, Amaranth, hung on his belt, and there was a bow and quiver strapped across his back. He was handsome, in a roguish way, taller than her by nearly a foot, dark-haired, and blue-eyed, but she suspected, as was true of many mercenaries, his heart was black. She wanted to be certain, and though she was nervous to approach him, she would need to.

There were other residents of Lady Magnolia in the Saint Spring Inn, guests who had come for a bowl of Mrs. Clausen’s stew or a draught of Mr. Clausen’s mead, but none acted out of the ordinary. Despite the uncertain disappearances surrounding the town, most of the Clausens’ neighbors could not believe the innkeeper and his family had done anything untoward. They had been friends and neighbors their entire lives.

When he had finished his dinner, Telos stood and headed for Room Three, twirling his key around a finger. He flashed a quick smile at Constance as he past, and to his surprise, she returned it, but he did not break his stride. He walked along a candlelit corridor to his bedroom and fit the key in a well-worn lock. With a heavy click, the lock turned, and he stepped inside.

After a thorough search of the bedroom, Telos sat on the corner of the bed and waited, listening for any strange noises or signs of a disturbance. After years with the Miracle Crusaders, the most prestigious mercenary company in living memory, of which he was a founding member, he was accustomed to threats of an otherworldly nature. Once he ascertained the reason behind Lady Magnolia’s disappearances, he was confident he could handle whatever resolution was required. This was no different than his usual work, and when it was finished, he would be compensated by a man in nearby Esundale, who had contracted him to begin with.

Night fell, and as Telos waited, Mr. Clausen descended from the second-floor loft, carrying a candle holder, while Mrs. Clausen readied herself for bed. The innkeeper walked through the dark commons and adjoining corridor as his candle cast shifting shadows that swept along tables, stretched across the floor, and climbed up walls. He did not acknowledge his daughter, who sat at her table in the darkness, and continued on to Room Three.

He knocked. The door opened without a squeal, well-greased hinges showing the love that went into the Saint Spring Inn. Telos peered at the innkeeper with suspicion, scarred face menacing in the low light, and gripped the hilt of Amaranth out of sight.

“Is there a problem?” the mercenary checked.

“There may be,” Mr. Clausen worried. He could not maintain the cheery façade he had shown throughout the day. He rubbed at the base of his neck anxiously as he requested, “Would you come to the commons with me?”

Telos followed the innkeeper warily, and Constance waited for them in the dark. Revealed by candlelight, Telos did not find her profile as lovely, and he stood tensely as Mr. Clausen set the candle holder down on the table. Constance thanked her father before he retreated up the stairs. Telos absently thought that even her voice was attractive, soft but not breathy or too high-pitched, but when she spoke to him, a fearful chill ran along his spine.

“Take a seat, please.”

Pulling the chair opposite Constance, Telos regarded her consideringly. “You’re responsible for the missing guests?”

She nodded stiffly. “I’ve spoken with every visitor at the inn over the last five years. Of them, twenty have gone missing.”

Telos scoffed, crossing his arms. “They’re not missing, though, are they?”

“No, they aren’t.”

Despite the confession, Constance did not have the bearing of a killer. She sounded miserable. Telos was not sure what to make of her. Inwardly, he cursed the gods for having placed a dark heart in such a woman.

Constance had not yet decided what she thought of Telos. She did not like the situation she found herself in, one she had repeated too many times, and from which there was no escape. She could take the

measure of his soul and be done, but she could not stomach that. She needed to have some control over the outcome.

“Have you killed?” she questioned.

“Too often,” Telos answered, having stopped counting the bodies, human or otherwise, at his feet long ago. The lifestyle of a mercenary necessitated violence. “Why do you care? You’re planning to kill me, aren’t you? How will you do it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Constance. She found his honesty refreshing, so she would reciprocate. “I relinquish control when it happens. By the time I’m me again, the guest is gone. She assures me it is painless.”

A pretty thought. One Constance chose to believe. Telos could have laughed.

“How long have you been the demon’s host?”

He had encountered a few demons during his travels and had heard many stories from other Crusaders. They were loathsome spirits, killing for pleasure, and tormenting innocents. Telos was inclined to see Constance in a new light, a victim of possession, but he reserved absolution. There was agency in the routine she displayed.

“It has been a little over five years,” Constance recounted. “I didn’t know what was wrong, at first, why I was getting sick, or why I felt better the morning after the first disappearance. My parents helped me find balance.”

“Every family has their secrets,” Telos joked, though there was no humor in his tone.

Constance ignored his comment and refocused their conversation on what mattered. She asked, “Do you have any family?”

“Of a sort,” Telos responded, thinking of the Crusaders’ founding members, only one of whom remained in his life. He thought most of the bow strapped across his back and the woman who had carried it before him. “There’re people I hold dear, but we’re not blood.”

“That doesn’t make it any less real.”

Telos tipped his head in agreement, and Constance smiled. She had a warm smile, but like the delicate curve of her face, he could not enjoy it. His heart pounded, but it beat to a rhythm of fear, not desire or excitement.

“Why are you asking me these questions?” he demanded, sitting forward, placing both elbows on

the table. His motion shook the candleholder, and the light bathing them wavered. There was silence until it settled, then Constance gave her answer.

“I don’t enjoy killing, but if people must die so I can live, I try to ensure they are blackhearted. The demon can make judgements, but for the sake of my conscience, I’m trying to decide what kind of person you are.”

There was no easy way for a regular woman to plumb the depths of someone’s character in a single conversation, but it was all Constance could manage. That was the deal her family had struck with the demon. If the demon did not kill, it would seek another host, and Constance would die, so they provided a steady supply of the corrupt and cruel, sating the demon’s bloodlust and ensuring Constance survived.

“What if you’re wrong?” challenged Telos.

“The demon can tell.”

“What if it’s lying?”

There was no denying the possibility. Constance had no awareness once the demon was granted control. She would never know how just her verdicts were. She could only pray to the twin gods that she was following the best path available to her.

A bit sheepishly, she tried to ask her next question, “What good have you done in your life?”, but Telos rose to his feet, his chair scraping along the floor.

“I’m done with this farce,” he declared, drawing his bow and nocking an arrow. He had not expected to slay a demon when coming to Lady Magnolia. He was not confident he would succeed, but whatever Constance thought of him, he was resolute. It was obvious the innkeeper’s daughter was embroiled in matters beyond her control, and it was putting lives in jeopardy.

Constance stood when he did, sunflower embroidered dress brushing her ankles, but she did not remain Constance for long. Swollen, black veins bulged and crawled from her left temple to her eye. When the inky vein reached the eye, it bled into the white until there was no lingering trace of verdant beauty. Similar veins crept down her neck and along the backs of her hands.

She extended a fouled hand to Telos. “Accept my appraisal, and this will be over quickly,” she instructed, sounding no different than before.

Telos replied by pulling his bowstring taut and firing at Constance’s breast. The shot would kill

her, but it was the only mercy he could extend. He was not equipped or knowledgeable enough to banish a demon without violence.

The arrow buried into a raised hand and stopped an inch from Constance's face. She pulled it from her hand impassively, and though blood trickled to the inn's floor, its flow quickly slowed as black-veined flesh knit back together. Before Telos could loose another arrow, the blood staining Constance's hand pooled, forming a ball, and shot at the mercenary. The condensed blood struck Telos, tearing through his shoulder, and flung him off-balance.

As he was thrown back, Telos' bow clattered to the floor. Constance walked around the table and approached him. In a smooth motion, he drew Amaranth and swung at her throat, but as he brought his sword around, she reached out and laid slender fingers on his cheek. His sword stopped, and he stared down into her eyes as she stared up into his.

"So much violence and grief," the demon whispered. "You carry reminders of your losses, those bitter scars and that bow you cherish, but you press on. You try to do what is right. You are loyal and determined. You save lives."

Constance pulled her hand away. Telos held his sword under her chin, trying to read the demon's intentions, and what he saw surprised him. The danger was past. He had met whatever criteria was necessary for survival.

Uncertainly, Telos lowered Amaranth. As he did, the black veins across Constance's body receded, and the demon's blank expression was replaced by disoriented confusion, then a pleasantly surprised smile.

"I hoped your heart was worth preserving."

Grimacing, Telos sheathed his sword and prodded at the puncture wound in his shoulder. "The demon won't be able to forgo killing."

She did not make excuses. She had outlined her situation clearly. Another visitor would come, and if they were deemed wicked, they would die, placating the demon and extending Constance's life. She was surviving as best she could, only hurting those who deserved it, possibly improving the world, by some metrics. If the demon's sense of justice was to be believed.

"Sit," the innkeeper's daughter directed. "Let me clean your wound."

Telos hissed when she poured alcohol on his bared shoulder, but her touch was gentle and deft afterward. In the candlelit common room, she sewed his injury shut and bandaged him. He found himself

gazing at her features again – partly in appreciation, partly in apprehension – and let her work. When she was finished, he returned to his bedroom to dwell on his decision.

The next morning, the Clausens acted as though nothing had happened. Telos entered the common room, having barely slept a wink, and found Constance sitting at a table, sipping a cup of lemon tea while her father worked behind the counter, and her mother tidied up. Mr. Clausen tipped his head in acknowledgement as Telos walked further into the room, but he did not offer an apology or thank Telos for letting his daughter live.

It was unimportant. Telos' companions were waiting for him. He had parted with them before riding to Lady Magnolia, and they had continued east, toward the river. Had he disappeared during his stay in town, his friends would have come to discover what happened. Now, he would ride out of Lady Magnolia and head east to catch up with them.

At her table, Constance reconsidered her choices as the mercenary headed for the inn's entrance. No visitor had ever left after learning about the demon inside her. All those who had discerned the truth before had been judged guilty during examination. She was aware of the existing rumors, but would things change for her family because this man carried her secret?

The Saint Spring Inn's front door opened before Telos grabbed the handle, and a visitor stepped inside. The visitor was dressed in clothes suitable for long travel, similar to a mercenary's garb, but more threadbare than Telos'. He wore a sword across his back and a knife on his belt, and his hard eyes regarded the inn's occupants sharply.

Pausing in the entry as Mr. Clausen greeted the new arrival and ushered him over to the counter, Telos glanced back at Constance. The young woman was watching the latest visitor with interest, a smile turning the corners of her lips. Telos scowled but held his tongue, and by the time Constance's attention slid back to the entry, the door had shut behind him.

The End