

Candy Is Dandy Part I



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CANDY IS DANDY

Spinning...

Spinning...

Splash.

Candy's nude body crashed through icy water and into the chaotic smashing of the limbs of thousands upon thousands of swimmers. A mass of brightly colored people stretched out along the surface of the dark, choppy water as far as the eye could reach in every direction. Packed in without so much as an inch of space between them, they grabbed at Candy as she plopped into their midst and dragged her down below the surface. Cold pressed in hard on her senses, filling her mouth and choking whatever noise her subconscious was reactively trying to push out. Her own voice was impossible to sort out over the noise of it all.

The assault came on so quickly that she couldn't even begin to process what was happening until she found herself pushed out into the eerie stillness of the empty water far, far below. Above her head writhed layers of glowing bodies in every imaginable shade of a tetrachromatic electric rainbow. They pulled at one another, frantically fighting to get to the surface. Their screams produced no bubbles of air, just a terrible unified roar that spread through the freezing water without mercy or end.

Candy looked at her own arms in front of her and found that they were also glowing--bright gold with

an iridescent red outer aura. It gave the skull and flower tattoos that ran down both her arms in ornate sleeves a stained glass like beauty and she admired herself for a moment. A strand of hair floating around her shoulders caught her eye. Red hair. It moved so naturally in the water that it almost looked like the real thing. She touched her head, tracing the hair out to the tips and found that it was real, it was red, and it was hers. Candy stopped caring about the cold, wet, and curiously colored world she now found herself in and tossed her head from side to side, watching her own hair move like magic. She had always wanted to be a natural red-head but found it too much of a pain to keep up. Instead she had maintained a collection of pretty red wigs and kept her normally blonde hair under wraps.

Instinctively, she looked down at the rest of her nude frame--a thing she often avoided doing until fully clothed-- and touched her breasts. Her own breasts. New and perfect, just the way she had always imagined they would be. The piercings in her nipples were gone but that was a sacrifice she was willing to live with in exchange for this. One hand reached down, almost too afraid to check, but the goddamned extra bit was gone!

Halle-fucking-lujah!

She peered through the water to look herself over... all over. Wiggled her toes to make sure

they were hers, kicked her legs and swam around in the emptiness below the aquatic rainbow mosh-pit. Her body created its own glow, becoming more prominent the further down she swam into the increasing darkness below.

It was then that she noticed a few more things about her present environment. Namely, that she could not see the bottom. No sand. Nothing but a blackness that would give even Masalum a run for its money—not that she would have ever admitted to Raul to peeking. It was heavier down there and she felt a pull in the current leading her on deeper. Like a shady lover making too many promises, it snapped her out of her happy dreamy state and she took a more critical look around.

That looks like where color goes to die and I'm pretty damned colorful right now. Rather not, thanks.

It had been a good few decades since water last posed an issue of drowning and it took several minutes of contemplation before Candy wondered if the thousands of people above her were fighting to get to the surface for air. But then... how long could they fight it? None of them were showing any sign of slowing or asphyxiation. Those closest to the bottom, like her, were just looking around in quiet but calm confusion. Such a strange juxtaposition.

Must be tit flavored air up there,
she thought to herself.

Candy stretched out and folded her arms behind her head, looking

upwards to try her hand at puzzling out the color show.

What marvelous drug am I on now and how have I never done this one before?

She couldn't decide if Raul would love this or hate this. The corners of her mouth curled upwards slightly at the thought of Raul beside her in this weird place but it felt wrong. Am I mad at Raul? A fuzziness had fallen over her memory and when she tried to call up specifics the line just cut out completely.

Goddamn drug haze.
Am I even here?

She looked around again, blinking into the blacker-than-black abyss below and out to the sides for some hint of direction. Squinting into the distance, a large tube-shaped... thing... drifted along the bottom of the flamboyant morass of bodies. As it moved closer, she could see it extending itself out to touch some of the distant colorful shapes that had broken away from the fray. It caused those distant lights to flicker and vanish. Candy hovered in place, screwing up her face to puzzle it out. Then two things dawned on her simultaneously. Those far away colorful things were people and that vague snaking shape working its way in her direction was making them disappear. Candy glanced upward at the panicked bodies overhead and it clicked. Something else was in the water... feeding off the ones at the bottom.

Raul had barely enough time to wake from the mirror world before San Diego's Captain of the Night Watchmen roared up to the El Cajon safehouse on his loud motorbike. The cutting of the rumble had given Raul only seconds to recall where he was before jumping back through the looking glass, leaving the ash of his old body scattered where Antoine Laveau had left it.

Now Raul watched from a window in an apartment across the street. His head pounded and his heart ached as if he had been staked. He knew this sensation well by now, having lost many children and grandchildren over the years to various wars. The pain was the breaking of a legacy bond. That invisible thread linking vampire to children, genti, companions, and even spouses. Extending back through the ages and connecting every elder immortal to all the beings on this earth that they were responsible for. This pain was sharper than any he had experienced before. More of his legacy had been lost in this one act and the only person he could no longer feel a connection to was his wife.

Though he had lost half his anima in Laveau's attack, there was not a scratch on his body anywhere. Even his clothes were untouched. He was still wearing the black tactical outfit that he had on when they ambushed Laveau in Old Town. The majority of him had been in Masalum, the mirror world, leaving only a shell behind. It was not a trick that any of his

children or grandchildren had lived long enough to master and they were the only Umbrama this city had known—as enemies at that. There was a good chance that even the Captain of the Night Watchmen would not realize that he had escaped.

A short, fat man with a camera arrived in a grey sedan a few minutes after *Captain San Diego* and walked into the safehouse as if he owned it. Raul caught himself audibly grinding his teeth. Both from outrage and to brace himself from the splitting pain of the crater that had been blown in his legacy. He didn't dare watch them through the mirrors, in case they had the means to perceive him, but he couldn't walk away either. Whatever remained of Candy was still down there.

While losing his old body didn't feel too great, that pile of ash was no longer connected to his soul. Candy's death did not make her any less his wife and, as a deeply religious man, nothing else mattered more to him at this moment than getting her back and laying her to rest properly. The captain and the fat man would be busy cleaning the place of any supernatural traces for a while yet. Raul moved away from the window and crept quietly through the clearly occupied apartment. It was late enough that most of the daylight crowd would be sleeping and he was glad for it. The apartment was small and packed with furniture. The walls laden with so much Catholic iconography and so many photographs

of the resident family that it left hardly any open space. Enough light filtered in from the street lamps outside that Raul had more than enough to see by in the busy little space.

The pain in his head and chest were causing too much distraction. Blood could alleviate the symptoms of a legacy crash for a little while. He kept his footsteps close to the wall where the floors would be the strongest, shifting his weight evenly between both feet and softening his steps with help from the heavily scented dark green carpet. The buildings in this part of town were old and creaky with all their original flooring--if you could call a 60 year old building old--but Raul was a lean bodied man with centuries of experience creeping through old hallways as quietly as possible. He ran a hand over a well-sat wooden chair with an indented off-white cushion in the dining room at the main table. The table itself was a good solid wood, both polished and scuffed with use. A white lace table runner had been draped over the center and fake flowers sat in a vase upon it.

It felt good to sit down for a moment but that was not the purpose of this excursion. He closed his eyes and released his consciousness into the cloud of dreams--where all mortal sleepers go to find adventure, divination, and an escape from the mortal world of problems. Accessing the dream cloud was not one of the animations gifted to him by his Umbrama ancestors. It being a

special skill native only to the Dream Kings of the Ea family, it had been taught to him only a few decades ago by his dear friend, Duke Vincens. Though Vincens had been truly dead for a decade now, there were still vestiges of the old Duke of Baja floating in secret pockets of the dream cloud. Raul thought he saw the shadow of his ghost at the periphery of his dreams sometimes and he was thankful that they had been able to share this space together. If Vincens had never taught him to reach into the world of dreams, Raul would have nothing left of his old friend at all.

While a sleeper may only partake of their own dreams, Raul found himself in a familiar drifting current passing through all of those who were closest to his physical body. Each sleeper produced a little microburst of images. The clouds moved constantly. There was no standing still. Turning his astral head this way and that, he steered himself towards the three nearest little image storms. He spoke up into each one in turn, "Come to the dining room and pour a drink for a grieving man."

This place accepted the surreal as readily as the physical world accepted the presence of the sun and the moon. Whatever the three chosen had been dreaming of, they now found themselves dreaming their way out of their beds, down the hall, and into the dining room. A door opened somewhere in the apartment. First one and then another. Raul opened his eyes and waited patiently.

An older woman appeared first. Scooting along in her slippers and nightgown, her eyes only just barely open, and every other part of her body fully relaxed. Shoulders drooping, she shuffled first to the kitchen to fetch a tall glass for her visitor. A middle aged man and woman followed, both barefoot and wearing only shorts and t-shirts. The younger woman frowned compassionately, her body completely at rest and she spoke in a dreamy Spanish mumble, "We are so sorry for your loss."

Raul replied in kind, "Thank you, dear friends. It has been a great shock. I don't know what to do now that I have lost her."

His Spanish had become naturalized over the years, provided he remained calm. The older woman returned from the kitchen with glass in hand. She shuffled along the carpet towards him in her slippers, making heavy footed sounds.

Raul held up a hand, "Grandmother, why don't you let him pour it? The lid on the bottle is too tight and he looks strong enough to get it open for me."

The older woman dreamily replied, "Yes... yes... yes...," and handed the glass to her son.

Raul watched the man sleepily place the container on the table and then, with his empty hand, he began to pretend to open an invisible bottle. "Oh, nephew. You'll hurt yourself doing it that

way. Let me help you."

Raul took the man's wrist in his mouth and carefully made two small punctures. He wondered for a moment if he should just drink from the man and be done with it but the closer he held to the dream, the more likely they would be to sleep through it. Instead he held the glass below the man's hand and allowed it to slowly fill. "There. Please fill me a tall glass. I need all you can spare."

Raul arose from the chair and he whispered to the elderly woman, "Grandmother, could you bring me another glass? And then go back to bed. Don't trouble yourself over me." He kissed her cheek and she began scooting back to the kitchen, building up a static charge that caused her hair to rise in the dry air.

He had the middle aged man and woman fill him up a glass each, closed their wounds, and sent them back to bed to wait for the next morning. The whole thing took perhaps ten minutes in total and once they were gone, he drank down both glasses quickly to keep them from cooling and congealing. He wasn't a fan of drinking from glassware but this simple scenario was reliable at least. The trio would return their bodies to their beds and their minds to the cloud of dreams. With any luck and the magical fatigue of blood loss, they would wake after the sun had come up and there would be no evidence that he was ever here. It was not enough to replace all of what he had lost but the fresh feeding calmed the throb of his

psychological injuries. Enough for him to come up with a plan.

The big Captain of the Night Watchmen and the little camera man had not yet come out of the safehouse. Raul snuck himself out the front door, careful to leave it unlocked, and down the covered external staircase to the street below. Scanning the roof tops and giving the nearest alleyways a good scrutinizing stare, he determined there to be no look-outs--at least none that he could see. *Good.*

He moved quickly out into the open to the big man's motorbike. It was surprisingly clean, well oiled, and polished. Not at all what he expected from a man like that but it made him a bit more wary. If he cared for his equipment like this, he had more of a meticulous streak than Raul had initially given him credit for. All the more reason to be fast here. He looked into each of the motorbike's side mirrors, memorizing them and mentally adding them to his collection in Masalum. Then he quickly did the same to the grey sedan belonging to the camera man. *Now wherever you go, I go...*

Raul returned to the apartment across the street to grab a few supplies and wait for the lawmen to leave. He kept a close watch on the vehicles outside through the safety of the apartment's heavily lace-curtained windows. Glancing back to them frequently as he searched the walls for a hanging mirror. It needed to be large enough to fit his shoulders through but small enough to be easily removed and

carried.

He found one quickly enough along the densely decorated walls. It brought a none-too-innocent smile to his lips that even poor homes had fine mirrors in this night and age. The frame was painted gold and it looked somewhat expensive to Raul's eyes. He tucked his smile back into tightened lips and pulled a folded stack of green American money from a zippered pocket on his breast. Clipping a few of the higher numbered bills off the top, he carefully balanced them on a screw in the wall that once held up his reflective treasure.

A man of faith has no business taking without asking. How many things will I do that are against the faith in the name of the faith?

This line of thought brought Raul into an all too familiar mood. He placed a few more high numbered green notes on the wall and let it be. A noise from the street outside brought Raul's head up and his mind back to the task at hand. The Captain's motorbike roared to life like an obnoxious pig. Tucking his new gold framed mirror under one arm, he carefully crept back through the home to the family's bathroom. There, above the sink, a much larger mirror waited for him but this one was not for taking. The room was darker than any inside the apartment but it didn't bother Raul, he could still see well enough to do what needed to be done. Besides, the world on the other side of that reflective surface was even darker.

Raul climbed up onto the bathroom sink with both feet and pressed his free hand into the looking glass. It gave into him as it would for any mirror mage. Swallowing up his free arm, then his right foot as he stepped in to the other side. It enveloped his whole body, returning to it's innocuous normal state the moment he had passed through.

Masalum, the land on the other side, was black as pitch. No light ever shined or ever could. Neither candles nor flashlights brought along from the mortal world would make any difference in this hellishly dark place that actively swallowed light and life. No reflections or glimmers stood out to reveal the shapes of the landscape. The only way to navigate here was to know the mirrors from the mortal world and even that took a bit of supernatural ability.

Raul walked blindly through the crunch of rubble and over the wriggling creatures that still somehow called this place home. He kept his eyes and mouth shut tightly to ward away predators who might smell the fleshy liquids of his immortal body and be drawn to attack. The prayers he learned as a boy provided the only fragment of safety that could be prodded out of the dark world and he enacted their magical gestures silently, believing more than knowing for certain that they would do the job this time. Every trip to Masalum was an entirely different animal. Aged as he was, Raul had become less and less concerned with the

perils of this place. *Make the gestures, move quickly, get out.*

The tactic had worked so far. He hadn't had to fight off a major unseen predator in decades. Raul conjured the mental map that he had created from the mirrors he had memorized in the mortal world and projected his body to them. The Captain of the Night Watchmen most likely held Candy's remains. If he was a religious man he may take them to some modest place of rest wherever San Diego sent her enemy dead. If not, her ash could just as likely be dropped in a dumpster or traded to a necromancer. Raul had heard a rumor that Count Lucian was actively courting necromancers--*plural*. He would need to get his wife's remains away from the supposedly indestructible Scott Davidson before they were discarded or traded off to one of those barbarians.

Taking a chance, Raul summoned himself to the mirror on the right side of the captain's motorbike but only to see. Still standing in Masalum, he opened his eyes and looked out into the mortal world. A distant creature hissed in the blackness somewhere and Raul swallowed uncomfortably but he did not close his eyes.

The night sky whizzed by at a dizzying speed. It was impossible to identify where exactly the captain was beyond "a freeway" but within about 20 extremely uncomfortable minutes--and the occasional shooing and tossing of

slithering things attempting to climb up his legs--the street lights dropped away and mountains took the place of buildings. Raul grew hopeful. There was now a strong chance that he was being taken to Count Lucian's alpine estate in the hills looking down upon the city. No Umbrama in all of Tijuana or Mexicali had ever been given access to the mirrors in the San Diego Count's estate and survived. But none of those who had tried were as old as he...

Scott Davidson parked his heavy chopper against the side of a sprawling stone building built in a familiar *maison de maître* style that the old Duke Vincens had also preferred. Built with three distinct wings and stretching up some three stories above ground, it also happened to be covered in many glorious reflective windows. Raul could hear the crunch of the large man's boots on gravel as he walked away with what he had taken from the crime scene. When Raul could no longer see or hear the captain any longer, he curled half his face into his usual sinister side smile and pushed through the reflection of the closest window. Plopping whole body onto the gravel with a thick crunch, he at least had the forethought to protect the golden rimmed mirror that he had taken from the apartment in El Cajon.

A quick look around revealed no one nearby but the new Count of San Diego was Luperci so any passing animal would likely be on the take. He raised his eyes up the side of the building and made a mental note of the difficult path

upward. It would be a hard climb and he would have to be very careful not to break a window or drop his get-away mirror. Getting caught out here would be a death sentence without a trial, even for a baron and especially after what he had done tonight. *What I failed spectacularly to do.*

Raul backed up as far as he dared, ran, and leapt head first into the reflection of the 1st floor window--thankful that it was not a new moon. He landed in the disorienting blackness of Masalum with an unsettling crunch and the vague sensation of creatures skittering away from the area of his sudden appearance. He tried not to think about those things. Dusting himself off, he summoned his senses to the reflection of the 2nd floor window. He first looked out to make sure there was still no one in the courtyard below and, once he determined it to be safe enough, reached out one arm to catch hold of the window sill above it. He tucked his purloined gold rimmed mirror under his chin and pinned it tightly to his chest to free his other hand to follow the first one out. He pressed with all his strength to bring himself up and out. Locking his shoulders in place, he flexed every muscle in his body to hold himself long enough to look into the 3rd floor window. Then it was back the way he came to Masalum and back out of the 3rd floor window's reflection. Though slow and complicated it was the path least likely to fail. This time he didn't stop. He pushed his whole body out of the window and climbed as carefully as

he could manage to the roof of the building, constantly adjusting the mirror he carried with him to keep from dropping or scratching it. Either would render it useless and could cost him his escape if he ventured onto the roof and away from the windows--as was his intention. The courtyard remained still and empty below. *Good.*

Once on the roof, he determined there to be no guards up there either. *This count is as lax as Cipactli with his security. I should pray that it's hubris but he probably has measures I can't perceive. I should assume they already know I'm here.*

Raul was suddenly reminded of the rumored necromancers that were supposedly lurking about somewhere. Even still, he could not bring himself to convince his body to sacrifice stealth for expedience. He tucked the reflective side of his get-away mirror up against his body to reduce the moonlit shine and crept his way to the other side of the building. The Captain of the Watch had parked his motorbike away from any door and Raul had no idea which way led to the front. Luck was with him. Looking down, he could see the light of an open doorway and the half-concealed body of a guard standing within it. Thin plumes of smoke curled upward from a cigarette in the guard's mouth. No. Not a cigarette. Marijuana. *The guard is getting high? Maybe Lucian really is as lax with security as Cipactli. No sign of the big captain though.*

The roof had an access door leading into the house but Raul

dreaded the thought of trying to creep through the much older Luperci Count's home. *I brought this down on myself and worse for Candy so I'll have to do whatever I have to do.*

Looking out over the estate, he caught a glimpse of a distant gate and small stone slabs that stood out as nearly white in the dark of the mountain desert. A cemetery? *I couldn't possibly be that lucky...*

Squinting hard for a moment, he thought he could almost see a dark shape moving among the pale stones. He had to get a closer look but doing so would give up his hard-climbed rooftop vantage point, not to mention a potentially unguarded entrance up there.

Raul groaned mentally and crept around the edge of the roof, looking for a patch of dirt to jump down to. The gravel was a nice touch. Presumably the smoking guard would have extra-sensory abilities so best to avoid hitting that if at all possible. Grass would be better than dirt but out here he would be lucky to not land ass-end into a cactus. Candy would find this very amusing. He did not.

A small garden bed of herbs on the south-side of the great-house would have to do. He held his escape mirror tight, softened his knees, and jumped three stories down into a bed of basil with a soft *boof*. Ever paranoid, and honestly shocked at the lack of obvious guards, Raul hid himself behind an outcrop of large granite boulders before high-tailing it the long way

around to the possible cemetery on the north-side of the Count's property. In the tensest mirror-clutching minutes in recent memory, he crept over the gate, hiding from stone to stone, and thanked his age for the umpteenth time that night. A younger man wouldn't have had a hope of getting this deep into enemy territory. Even without robust obvious security.

Up close he could see that it was as he had suspected. Faint scuffing sounds came from an ornate mausoleum that had been built directly into the natural rock face of the hillside. Huge slabs of black granite with shiny flecks of white quartz blocked most of his view, forcing him to venture out and hide among the larger headstones. Reading a few of the names to himself, he quickly came to the conclusion that this was no small family-only plot.

Very encouraging.

Thick-booted clomps echoed up stone steps in the distance until they hit the gravel path that snaked through the graveyard. The captain perhaps? Raul didn't dare move a single muscle to look until the gate creaked open and clacked shut again. *God, I hope I'm not too late.*

Candy's ashes were likely deposited somewhere in the mausoleum. It had the outward appearance of an ancient cairn but the mortar holding it together seemed to be no more than a couple decades old. He guessed

the Count's great-house to be roughly the same age. Modern construction meant to replicate something older. The steps were roughly carved from that same quartz-veined granite that seemed to crop up all over the property, probably sourced from those very same stones. The natural look helped disguise the structure from a distance.

There was no light within. No candles or electricity. The staircase wound down in a spiral against the wall and soon it had curled away from the ambient light of the moon and stars completely. To see any further would cost him anima now. A small price to pay to move about without calling unwanted attention.

He commanded his heart to burn hotter, momentarily consuming the requisite sacrifice to increase his senses. The amber-green reflection of his natural night vision was soon replaced with the red glow of true darkvision and the subterranean world became suitably brighter and more clear. Though there hadn't been any question in his mind about it, the crypt bore all the tell-tale signs of an immortal grave. Proof that perhaps *immortal* was too rash a term. A handful of expertly carved statues rested against the walls with full sized sarcophagi that suggested this place might also be a temporary resting place for the well to-do as they aged through renecrosis. Or perhaps that was what it was intended to be before the wars and madness. Tiny stone drawers with a finger sized lip to pull them by

were carved into the greater headstones shared by whole families. Dozens of names had been etched upon them.

Raul was unaware of any such terrible event that could have cost this city so many lives. Deaths in San Diego had clearly been vastly underreported by Tijuana's spy network. A discouraging thought. As much as he was tempted to do a little reconnaissance, he had come to this crypt for one greater purpose--to honor his wife as she deserved. To love her as no one here would.

The tomb stretched on past the statues and important family headstones. The walls began to take a rougher look, suggesting that perhaps this place had never even been finished before work stopped and the project was abandoned. A large *fleur-de-lis* had been smeared on one of the nearby walls in anima, though by whom or to what purpose he could only guess. The path turned into a short sort of labyrinth with several dead ends with open spaces that had been left for something unknown. Other symbols near the back were a little more obscure, probably evidence of necromancer activity. Resting against the very furthest wall in the least glamorous part of the structure was a rather large coffee-can grave. Some of the cans bore both names and dates while others just had the dates. A grim sight. Some of those dates fit well with the loss of some of his own friends and allies and the sight slowed him down.

The Captain of the Night Watchmen was clearly not a religious man but he put in the minimum effort of propriety, for which Raul was now grateful enough. There was no can labeled with Candy's name but there were three of them marked with today's date stacked one atop the other. **They don't even know our names,** Raul realized.

He gathered up the three cans into the crook of his arm, balancing them against the gold framed mirror that he had not let go of since picking it up back in El Cajon. The implications of his last thought washed over him.

*I am no one to these people.
We are just a date. Faceless to all
for the rest of eternity.*

It did not sit well and, now that he had what he came for, he had a better idea of what to do with his escape. Raul returned to the statues and carefully read each of their names.

Vienne Capet-Anjou Al-Jaji

He looked exactly like Vincens. Raul couldn't understand why that should surprise him as he had long known that Vienne and Vincens had been twin brothers. Vincens had been too kind to his brother in recounting stories of their deeds. When Vienne came to Baja to knock Vincens off his throne, he revealed the kind of man he really was. Now Vincens was dead. His remains could have been in one of those cans for all Raul knew. Rumor had it that though Vienne had been removed from San

Diego he was still alive and still out there somewhere. Raul snorted abruptly at the thought and moved on.

Jacques Gualhard.

History and rumor had fallen silent on the man several years ago. Once the Baron of El Cajon, now vanished. Knowing Vienne... it was entirely possible Baron Gualhard was also in an unlabeled coffee can.

Michel LeBoiteux

Gone but not dead. That one had been confirmed to be back in Paris. Fled when Lucian took over. Probably a very smart move on his part. Once he had been a Marquis holding down the borderlands separating San Diego from Tijuana. To get into San Diego proper, one first had to pass through the march so everyone in Tijuana knew who this man was.

Irganos Gramateus

Also clearly gone without so much as a rumor. *Terrifying to think how little we know of our neighbors to the north*, Raul thought.

Atalwulf

THE Atalwulf. No surname but he definitely did not need one. Raul knew for certain that Atalwulf was dead. Word of his doom had spread across all of the Americas and from the tip of Portugal to the farthest reaches of the Siberian taiga—to the great relief of anyone who had ever thought they would have to meet him on the battlefield. Raul imagined there was much rejoicing in the halls of King Theodevald over that. And if

there had been any doubt that the man was dead, the pile of desiccated roses scattered across his sarcophagus was a clear give-away.

This is the one.

Raul lay the cans and mirror over the top of the cover stone beneath Atalwulf's statue and ground open the lid as quietly as he could manage. It did not go quietly. Peering inside, the sarcophagus was not empty. A fitted mattress lay within complete with pillows and blankets. Just as he had suspected. This confirmed that these tombs were once intended for re necrosis—not death. A series of unexpected tragedies must have halted the work on this place and turned it into a mass grave. Atalwulf's ashes were likely stored somewhere else. Perhaps even in a secret compartment in the statue.

Raul really did not care. He climbed into the sarcophagus and pulled the mirror and cans in with him. It was spacious inside. Atalwulf had been a very large and muscular man in life. Raul had even seen him in combat once but that was quite enough. Atalwulf was Lucian's immortal son, which explained the disproportionate amount of attention this grave had received versus all the others. His roomy coffin would now provide Raul, and thereby Tijuana, with unfettered access to Lucian's estate. He returned the heavy slab to its original position, entombing himself within but only temporarily. With Atalwulf dead no one would have any reason to open this

sarcophagus and thus no one would find the mirror he left behind. After all, he may need to return soon to collect Hotaru's ashes if Laveau got to her.

The La Jolla safehouse was dark and still when Raul stepped through the floor-to-ceiling closet mirror in his bedroom. He walked through the skyrise penthouse to Candy's bathroom. Her lipstick still sat on the counter where she had left it only hours before. He lay his head against the door frame and winced as he thought of his last words to her in this room. Threatening her very first child. He had been so desperate to get to Laveau. Sacrificing all he held dear for absolutely nothing. He picked up her lipstick and carried it with him.

Every room was now empty. Where Gunner and Lina had gone, he had no idea. He hoped they had the good sense to not return to Cipactli. He wasn't even sure that he would do so, at least not for some time. He would get Laveau first. All of this had to be worth something in the end. Raul gathered what few things he could find of Candy's and brought them into his ritual room. She had a few changes of clothes here and a

messenger bag with books, a deck of cards, and a few crossword puzzles that she frequently turned to when bored. The bulk of her things were still at their shared home in Playas-de-Tijuana—Raul's seaside barony. If only he had been able to take Laveau through the portal... but that would have been a guaranteed attack and he would have likely lost Laveau to the void before getting the information that he required. At the very least, he could have walked Candy and Hotaru through Masalum to *Playas-de-Tijuana* where they could have been safe. Everything failed at once.

There would be plenty of time for regret. Duty first. He knelt down to light the funeral candles, as cautiously as his jealous heart would allow, and placed the three coffee cans at their center. Into the ring he also placed some of the smaller items belonging to Candy—the lipstick, the deck of cards, a beloved pair of earrings. If he were at home he would have burned them and laid all the ash open to the sky. Even a nice penthouse has its limitations. He wished that he did not know the funeral prayers as well as he did but this was nowhere near his first funerary ritual and so he recited them by heart.

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To Be Continued