

Part 1: Sarajevo, 1914

The Holy One kept creating worlds and destroying them, creating worlds and destroying them, and then, just before giving up, He finally came up with this one. And it could be much worse, this world and all that it holds, as I certainly know how to find some interesting stuff around here. Let's see: Lapis infernalis, Laudanum, next to it Lavender.

Pinto took the laudanum off the shelf, knocking over the lavender tin, which miraculously did not break open. He released a drop of laudanum onto a sugar lump, watched the brown stain grow, then placed it in his mouth. While the sugar and bitterness dissolved on his tongue, he picked up the lavender, dipped his nose into the tin and inhaled—vast Mediterranean fields stretched inside him, the sea lapping at the lapis-infernalis wall surrounding his soul, a turquoise sky and swallows floating above it all, the laudanum sailing on his blood all the way to his mind, and then beyond. To all the things created at twilight on the Sabbath eve, the Lord wisely added laudanum, just to help make everything more beautiful and bearable.

Now was Rafael Pinto much better prepared for the Archduke Franz Ferdinand von Österreich-Este, Heir Apparent to the Habsburg Empire and Inspector General of the Imperial Armed Forces, and for the whole spectacle he was bringing to Sarajevo just to see how we live here. We live rather well, your Highness, I must say, provided there is enough laudanum and lavender on hand, thank You much for Your concern. And since we're in the business of providing remedy for the body as much as for the soul, we're sure to have plenty of whatever we might need, long live the Emperor, the Lord be praised, and bless You too.