

FORGET ME NOT

A Novel by Erica Pensini

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I tell you these things are real...beyond is anything. – Ern Malley

I'm with you in Rockland
where you're madder than I am
I'm with you in Rockland
where you must feel very strange...
-Allen Ginsberg-

we must bring
our own light
to the
darkness.
nobody is going
to do it
for us.
-Charles Bukowski-

There are no intact men – Pete Dexter

The trial: May 15, 1966

The defender

Your honor, Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the facts and you have heard the testimony of Iris Luna Celati.

Iris Luna Celati does not perceive the world the way you and I do. She suffers from an acute mental illness which alters her spatial and temporal perceptions. Iris Luna Celati believes she belongs to another century and another continent!

If you ask Iris Luna Celati who she is, she will depict herself as a character who you might have read about in a fairy tale as a kid, or perhaps in a novel. Iris Luna Celati is unaware of her own identity! I have already interrogated Iris Luna Celati to prove this aspect, but you are more than welcome to repeat this exercise to convince yourself.

If you asked Iris Luna Celati who you are, she will portray you with vivid fantasy, and you will gasp with bewildered surprise at your own portrait. Will you recognize yourself in that portrait? I challenge you to! Iris Luna Celati's vision of those who surround her is as distorted as the vision of herself.

Of all the witnesses you have listened to, Iris Luna Celati is the one who without any doubt damaged her own reputation the most. I already highlighted the doubts, the shades and omissions, undeniably weakening the reliability of all testimonies but one. The testimony of Iris Luna Celati.

Iris Luna Celati's testimony is an unconfutable proof of her guilt.

But is it? Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, your honour, is it?

If the answer to this question is yes, then you must accept to view yourself as a lady or a gentleman from the 18th century, because this is who you are to Iris Luna Celati! Remember her testimony, all of it!

When I asked Iris Luna Celati, "Who do you see in this court?", what was her answer? "I see the same people Iryssa saw on May 15, 1866"

I see the same people Iryssa saw in 1866!

When I asked Iris Luna Celati the cause of her actions she told me that a man named Cesar Mercury is.

Is this true? Nobody knows because Cesar Mercury is nowhere to be found!

Ladies and gentleman of the jury, your honour, the only guilt Iris Celati can be accused of is mental weakness. And for this guilt she should not be punished, but rather receive compassionate help in an appropriate institution. I confide in the law and in your well-pondered judgment.

The Judge

Does the defendant have anything to add?

Iris Luna Celati

I am sinful, not crazy, and you must punish me for my sins.

Chapter 1: Iris Luna

I live in the attic of an old building built at the end of the last century, abandoned for a while and finally renovated to acquire its current appearance. The location is quite central, but my street is strangely quiet for this city.

My attic barely fits my bed, a tiny desk, a table to eat and a doll-sized bathroom, but this is really all I need. I also have a small balcony, from which I sometimes listen to the whispers of the city at night, after spending the day in the lab.

My laboratory is also in an old building, hidden in the meanders of the basement, where I spend my days unaware of the weather, the time and the flow of life outside my small world. The meager stipend I receive is barely enough to cover my monthly expenses, and yet I wouldn't imagine myself doing anything else. The thrill of the discoveries I make in my reign of neatly aligned chemical bottles, beakers, syringes is worth more than any pot full of gold. Yes, there are also the frustrating times when day after day that result you long to see eludes you, and your failures haunt your sleepless nights. But then the lucky day will come, and the idyll of that much desired result will outshine the struggle. Oh, how beautiful it all seems then!

If you look close enough, what may appear ugly to the untrained eye will begin to appear fascinating, perhaps addictive. My addiction is mercury cyanide. To you mercury cyanide might be nothing but a potent poison, one that leads to death when touched or inhaled. But do you know anything about the dark beauty of mercury cyanide when, exposed to fire, it dies and revives in new forms? Pharaoh's snake is the name of the twisted, mysteriously repulsive and yet hypnotizing being that mercury cyanide turns itself into when it is ignited. And do you know about the playful concert of sizzling bubbles mercury cyanide produces when it reacts with aluminum in liquid ammonia?

To me mercury cyanide was nothing but the malevolent encounter between one atom of mercury and two atoms of carbon and nitrogen. But my perception of mercury cyanide gained complexity, of course, the day I was assigned the task of discovering how it triggers the formation of glycosides, Janus creatures resulting from the ambiguous embrace between sugar and another type of molecule which is often not as sweet.

Today has been one of those days that leave me exhausted, and yet flaming with adrenaline. I am not there yet, that result I have been chasing for one year still eludes me, and yet I feel I am close, so close, to finding the key that will open the doors to the mystery room. Fragments of what I can experiment tomorrow race through my mind, but I am much too tired now to make a coherent plan.

And so I try to pause. I dine with a light soup in the dim light of my small room, a cozy shell surrounded by the humid dusk of this winter night, while I wait for a new dawn.

Chapter 2: Cesare Mercurio

Last week I feared I might not receive the mineral salt I had asked for, my precious cinnabar from Monte Amiata. My lustrous cinnabar, red with passion. There has been some turmoil in the cinnabar mines of Monte Amiata, the workers complain about suffering from what they call mercurialism. They are nauseous, weak, shaky and if they neglect the warning signs mercury give them, they die. And so those of them who are still half healthy have raised their voice, they refuse to work. The ignorant! In small doses mercury purifies the body from sores and contagious diseases. But mercury will kill the man who treats it like a vulgar element, because it is virile and violent.

I have a sacred respect for mercury, my beloved enemy. I seek its soul, its hidden properties, its innate purity. Yes, its purity! I have been testing ways to eliminate every molecule of impurity from mercury, days and night, and today I have finally succeeded!

Most chemists and even alchemists – the charlatans! – know how to extract mercury from cinnabar, in which sulfur, the negative pole, and mercury, the positive atom, are bound to each other as complimentary souls, as good and evil in this world. When cinnabar is crushed, then heated to temperatures as hot as the earth's devilish intestines, sulfur dioxide evaporates as a cloud of evanescent pink, which mutes itself into a foam of whiteness as soon as it meets oxygen. Such innocent colours shall not confound you! The vapour mist is toxically malodorous, and the clever chemist will ensure that it is collected in tightly endosed tubes, and diverted away from the laboratory. When the rotten fumes evaporate, mercury remains in the ampoule, drawn to it by its heavy solidity.

But purity cannot be achieved by most chemists, let alone by alchemists. In truth, no chemist, not even the most skilled one, was able to isolate mercury, distilling every atom of impurity out it. No chemist but one, and that was I! I have created a complex labyrinth of tubes, in which mercury is redistilled in multiple purification cycles till nothing but glossy drops of its noble atoms are collected in the last ampoule.

Whiffs of wind are pushing against the windows of my room, their chilled voice echoing in the house where I live alone. The flame of the candle flicker, its dim halo illuminating my words as I write, and the moon, full and mysteriously sensuous, is looking upon me with the smile of an enigmatic lover. How beautiful is nature!

My eyes are burning and my energies are fading, spent as the candle melting away at my side. I shall rest awhile now, and shall my night be populated with the inspiring and oracular dreams of the wondrous reactions that will spark in my laboratory tomorrow, now that I am the only man in this world to own pure mercury!

Chapter 3: Iris Luna

They say that night brings council, and although I don't much believe in common proverbs I found the most ingenious ideas during the fruitful lullaby of dreams and the starry blanket of the night. When I woke up this morning after a quick breakfast I walked briskly to the lab. I had *seen* the reaction during my sleep, it was all in my head, but I needed to replicate it in the daylight to celebrate the discovery.

My apparatus was waiting for me. I have built it myself, it is simple enough in principle, although it appears as a labyrinthic forest of tubes. The tubes convey each chemical in my ampoule at the right moment, one drop at a time, till I obtain that one special blend that can give birth to the glycoside I want. With my apparatus I have first recreated good-tempered glycosides, the curative glycosides of the saponine family, with a frothy appearance and an evanescent fragrance of fruit, and the cheerfully yellow flavonoids. Then I began experimenting on the evil cyanogenic glycosides, the creation of which is triggered by the colorless, odorless and deadly mercury cyanide. I thought my first cyanogenic glycoside should be the oldest glycoside known, *Prunus amygdalus* (Amygdalin), the poisonous compound found in bitter almonds and apricot kernels. Then I synthesized many others, from Lotaustralin to Taxiphyllin. I have been able to emulate nature!

But today I have gone a step further, and I have produced my own creature, the cyanogenic glycoside that may one day carry the name of its mother: *Irissa Celata*, the chimera made real!

I had seen it all: the voluptuous red, and the intense green and finally the whimsical disappearance of all colours, the birth of my infant, *Irissa Celata*. I have wanted it for months, and now...

I knew I've made it, but before celebrating I needed the last proof. In a corner of our lab we have a spectrometer, a bulky machine with a tiny mouth into which the samples are fed. I was starting my final experiment with barely steady hands and excited expectation when Otto Hermes walked in the laboratory.

"Hello Iris", I heard behind my back, and I hardly managed not to spill my precious solution, startled as I was by the unanticipated interruption

"Oh hello Otto, I didn't expect to see you", I replied

"Well, sometimes it feels good to be back in my own lab", Otto Hermes laughed

Otto Hermes is my colleague. He moved here from Germany some months ago and is working on some topic I am not too sure about. Otto often roams in different labs to conduct analyses with a number of instruments, and even when he is working right next to me he keeps to himself for the most part. He is a pleasant enough fellow though, and I really don't have any complaints about him.

"Well, welcome back", I said smiling

I hoped Otto would leave, since I was tingling with the urge to see the signature of my *Irissa Celata* in the spectrum I was about to acquire. But he didn't.

"What are you looking at?", he asked instead

"I am pretty sure I have been able to generate a new molecule, and I am just about to prove that I am right", I said, trying to contain my enthusiasm.

"Oh really? This seems exciting", he replied, out of conventional kindness I believe, since his voice had suddenly turned flat and his expression absent

How can he not find this exciting!, I wondered.

"Is something worrying you?", I inquired, thinking he might have an unsolved problem on his mind

"Ah no, I will have to run few more tests this afternoon. Lots of work to do, that's all", he replied as evasively as usual

"Well, good luck", I said, resuming my work without waiting for his reply

I don't think he was seeking sympathy anyways, and I heard him leave and close the door few seconds later.

So finally I could work without interruptions! I placed the sample in the spectrometer and watched the spectrum form on the screen, one peak after the other. Wonderful! Magnificent! There, I knew it! Irissa Celata, my poisonous and yet beautiful glycoside, is undeniably born.

And yet my work has barely begun, tomorrow I will have to sail out for the next part of my journey. I will start analyzing the personality of the molecule, its reactivity, its endurance to heat, its transition from one form to the other. I trust that my molecule will reveal itself as a fascinating and treacherous femme fatale, with a flickering and yet dominating nature, violently flamboyant. Yes, tomorrow I will investigate who is the creature I have generated, but today I shall let the feverish state I am in subside awhile.

I had in mind to go straight back to my attic, but when I crossed the Elizabeth Cross library on my way back I felt compelled to walk in. The Elizabeth Cross library is a treasure well with books of all kinds and all times, from recent to ancient. The rare book collection is located in an octagonal room, with a dim central lighting system and green lamps aligned along the thick wooden oak tables. The visitors are invariably few, usually studious men and women with thick glasses and intensely abstracted expressions. This is the room I love the most, because of its soothingly muffled atmosphere, its mysterious smell, and of course the beautiful books. I walked along the shelves, reading the titles and admiring the fine covers, some well-kept, others tattered and perhaps all the more fascinating because of that. There are times when I simply look at the covers of the books and walk away, but today I was attracted to a manuscript. It was the rich red colour of the cover that caught my eye, but it was the title that won me: "The mercurial soul: an unusual odyssey of mysteries".

Rare books cannot be taken from the library, so let me take some notes while I sit here and tell you what the book says before I forget.

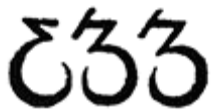
Do you know the origin of mercury's name?

Hydrargyros is the element with a multiform nature, resembling water (hydra) because of its versatile liquid body, and silver (argyros) because of its moon-like argentate reflection. Due to its water-like side, hydragyros (Hg) glides rapidly, and is thus sometimes called quicksilver, sometimes mercury, being akin to the swift messenger of the pagan deities, Mercury-Hermes, the ineffable god with winged feet, son of Zeus and of the nymph Maya celebrated during the Ides on May 15, and to the planet mercury, which moves around its orbit with unparalleled celerity.

The next page is blurred, before residing in the protective atmosphere of the library this book must have seen tempestuous moments. And yet I can still make out the words...

To the ancient people mercury was an element with healing properties, but also a deadly one for the miners working in the Italian mines of Monte Amiata to extract cinnabar, the red salt of sulfur and mercury, from which mercury was distilled. Sophic Salt, sophic sulfur and sophic mercury: the savvy German Paracelsus thus described the principles of the Prima Triade, the first triad, the origin of all things. In the first triad Sulfur is soul, Mercury is spirit and salt is Material Body.

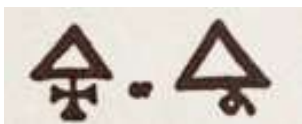
And thus are the symbols of cinnabar



mercury



And sulfur



Long ago I recall reading somewhere that the Prima Triade is the symbol of the union between man and woman, the ancestral dream of unity between the two poles of the world. When I think that cinnabar is the salt that contains sulfur and mercury, I am led to envision it as the unity of female and male, the two poles...but let's read more.

Giovanni Battista Nazari, an eminent Italian alchemist, envisioned the *Prima Triade* as a dream (so there!), a fantastic creature carrying in itself the three seeds.



The reader must be aware of the subtle meaning of the elements of the *Prima Triade*! Sophic sulfur is the male element, obtained from the purification of ordinary gold, and sophic mercury is the female element associated with *Luna*, the argentate moon, and is purified from silver. Quicksilver, or ordinary mercury, is the element that generates the sophic salt, the third principle, the material body.

When the expert alchemists blends the three principles in the exact proportions, he will obtain the *Philosopher's Stone*, the elixir of life, the treasure that will give immortality to the fortunate man who owns it!

I don't fully grasp the details of this explanation, do you? And yet there is something that touches me in these pages. Perhaps it is the atmosphere of the library, or the ancient feel of these words, their jagged edges on the yellowed background. I have grown intrigued and disquiet at once. I must leave this place immediately, don't ask me why, I cannot explain my state of mind.

Chapter 4: Cesare Mercurio

This morning I was walking to the laboratory, sizzling with ideas after a night populated by imaginific dreams, which were an exalted exaggeration of reality but which nonetheless seeded my mind with creative chemical inspiration. Adsorbed as I was in the wondrous mist of my own thoughts I did not pay much attention to the passer-byes in the streets, still dusky with the unfading night. And yet, amid the early morning crowd, one woman could not pass unnoticed with her flaming hair, bold and yet languid, falling on her back in silky curls, her fine traits and supple figure, her feminine shyness. Ah, what a splendid creature! The women gene as a whole is inferior to the virile seed, and yet as a man of science I acknowledge that each golden rule has at least one exception, the wondrous anomaly, the singularity point. I do not possess direct knowledge of the intellectual stamina of this mysterious woman with hair the enchanting colour of cinnabar, and yet the poised allure of the woman indicates that she is indeed gifted with an intelligence superior to the average of her gender.

I shall not however divert my mind from the science, which is the true language of the universe's divine soul. Today what I have found is marvellous, and it brought me unexpected joy! I knew that the distillation of mercury to its purest state would have led to unparalleled advances in my quest, but never would I have imagined seeing the spectacle that presented itself before my eyes! Today I blend different ratios of mercury and hydrogen cyanide – the somber Prussian blue coloured gentleman, subtle and treacherous. I did so out of curiosity for a strange phenomenon I observed when I accidentally dropped a bottle of hydrogen cyanide and part of the fluid spilled in the mercury I had so carefully distilled! I felt my senses weaken as the hydrogen cyanide bottle broke, and I barely succeeded in departing from the lab, swaying like a teetering drunkard! I let the fumes evacuate, and I sat in the fresh air grateful for each breath of life I received. Ah science, how much I am willing to risk for the love of you! Upon my return in the lab I found that my mercury had transformed itself into a white powder upon contact with the droplets of hydrogen cyanide. I smelled the powder but I could not detect any distinctive odour. The taste of the powder was bitterly metallic, as I detected by placing a minuscule amount of it on the tip of my tongue. To reveal the nature of a chemical compound, one must subject the compound to the four fundamental proves: the proof of water, alias its dissolution in aqueous media; the proof of air, alias its fugacity and propension to volatilize; the proof of earth, alias its attraction to earth and its heaviness; and the proof of fire, alias its resistance to the flames and its transformations upon contact with them. I began with the proof I am fondest of, the purest one: the proof of fire.

I spread the white powder on a meticulously cleaned marble surface, creating a neat stripe of my newborn compound. I recorded the time. It was almost noon, although the wintery dusk had not lifted even during that hour of the day. I lit a candle with some difficulty, but finally the wick caught fire and burned, casting a flickering halo of dimly warm light against the semi-obscurity of the laboratory. I approached the candle to the powder. The flame shivered, and then it bent, touching the powder just slightly. Oh miracle, oh marvel! Every white grain became a monstrous creature, swollen, twisted, chaotically contorted, ever-muting, and the powder evolved into a serpent, a devilish and godly creature at once! What had I created!

Once upon a time I had found a book, old and dusty, in a small shop of curiosities of all sorts. I was drawn to the book although I cannot ascertain the rationale for my attraction, perhaps it was the scarlet cover, perhaps the title, "Egyptian pharaohs: an unusual odyssey of chemical mysteries", perhaps

something else. Here, I still have it on my shelves. Let me blow the dust off it and find the words that now echo in my mind.

...As "The Books of Overthrowing Apep" describes, Apep is the malignant serpent, the deity of darkness and chaos, the great enemy of luminous Ra, the god of light, the opponent of chosmotropic Ma'at, the lord of order. The fight can never end, as chaos and order cannot exist as separate entities, like the day needs the night. Chaos, similar to ever changing water, is the cradle of life, similar to a mother's womb, filled with dark vital fluids. And yet it is fire, the purifying and luminous element, to shape the formless fluidity of life nurtured by chaos...

Do you have an intuition of how this book spoke of what I saw? Although these diary pages I am writing are meant for myself and myself only, I know you too will be there reading them one day. Reader, I am a man of science, do not mistake me for an ignorant charlatan! So listen to what I have to say.

The echo of the time flows eternally through the past and the future, and chance does not exist. The book found me and spoke to me, it impressed its message within me for a reason. Today I understood that the elements had freed their energy through me and that the message they announced was darkly perilous and vital at once, although I cannot yet fully decipher it.

I shall proceed with the proofs of water, earth and air in the next days. But for now I must concede myself a soothing rest and empty my mind of foreign thoughts, to let what I have seen slowly adsorb within me. And yet, once again, the image of the woman with flaming red hair refluxes in my memory as a marine tide inspired by the lunar force.

Chapter 5: Iris Luna

This morning stepping in the lab I found Otto Hermes crouched in front of the fridge, holding the bottle containing my Irissa Celata. He was studying the bottle with undivided attention, as if some profound truth about the compound might be revealed to him through visual observation. He was so immersed in his thoughts that he didn't even notice my presence. So he was interested in my glycoside after all! Otto Hermes is an introvert fellow and I never had the chance to observe him without him knowing, and so I could not resist taking advantage of the situation out of mischievous curiosity. I took a step back, so that I was standing in a somewhat hidden position close to the door, from where I had a full view of Otto Hermes' moves. After a while he appeared satisfied with the analysis of the bottle, and placed it back in the fridge with meticulous attention. I generally bring my lab book home with me because I sometimes re-read my annotations before going to bed when making plans for the next day, and because it is so important to me that I cannot get myself to leave it behind. Yesterday, however, I had forgotten it in the lab in my bubbly excitement. After closing the fridge, Otto Hermes turned a sidelong glance towards the part of the bench where I usually worked, and seeing my lab-book there he moved towards it. He observed the cover, with an attention almost similar to the one with which he had studied the bottle. It was hard to decipher his intentions, but his behaviour was most certainly peculiar. He traced the profile

of the lab book cover with the index, and I thought he was about to open it when he suddenly turned, as if fearing or sensing my presence, and when he saw me standing on the door he started.

“Why”, he exclaimed, “I hadn’t seen you! Have you been there long?”

“No, not really...”, I replied, accompanying the words with a vague gesture of the hand

Otto Hermes stood there in an oddly stiff position

“Are you all right?”, I asked

“Sure, why?”, he said, laughing, while straightening in a more natural posture

“Because I saw you stare at my bottle and then at my notebook and finally at me as if you had just seen three ghosts, that’s why!”, I exclaimed, laughing myself

Otto Hermes became serious and considered me for a moment, then he smiled again

“Yes, I hadn’t see that bottle in the fridge before and I was curious”, he said

I shrugged

“The bottle contains the compound I mentioned yesterday, but I had the feeling you weren’t interested”, I replied curtly, vaguely irritated by his attitude

“I am always interested, but I get often get caught in my own work and...”, he started

“Sure”, I interrupted, “but in case you ever want to know more just ask me, I will be happy to share”

“Yesterday you were taking a spectrum of the molecule, I noticed you were so excited about it. One of the labs where I work now has great equipment that could help you. Yesterday I was very much worried about my own work, I have been trying for so long and I am not getting great results. Sorry if am uncommunicative at times, it is the work that puts me in a certain state...”, Otto Hermes explained

“Ah Otto, we all go through such phases”, I said, feeling more sympathetic than a moment earlier

Otto Hermes tilted his head slightly, turning his palms upwards in a gesture of patient surrender

“But if I can ever give you a hand I would be more than glad to”, I said, meaning it

He smiled

“Thank you...well, I’d better get going now, I have some experiments to run in another lab”

“Oh sure, good luck!”, I replied

When Otto Hermes left I took a quick glance around the room, feeling a cheerful urge to start the reactions I had planned yesterday and examine the behaviour of my Irissa Celata. When I took my lab-book, flipping the pages rapidly, a small piece of folded paper slipped out of it and twirled in an airy

dance to the floor. It is not my habit to place loose papers in my lab book, so I picked up the note, intrigued. It looked somewhat yellowed, so I thought I had perhaps slipped it in the lab book very long ago, and then forgotten about it. When I unfolded it I first noticed the margins, neatly decorated with the petite blue flowers that are the first heralds of spring, the forget-me-nots. I have always loved these flowers above all others, and as a child I remember I used to decorate my assignment booklets with them at school. Then I read the note, written in blue ink, faded and blotted here and there.

Recipe for high blood pressure cure

Crack the shell of apricot kernels and extract their inner part, the almond-like soft core of the seeds. Soak them in fine liquor and bring to a boil, until a dense golden brown juice is obtained. Blend some honey in the syrup to contrast its bitterness and to please the patient's palate.

Store the syrup in amber ampoules, to impede the decay of its curative properties.

Administer an amount of syrup no greater than a pin's head daily to lower blood pressure. Never increase the dose! The extract is lethal at high doses.

Where did the note come from? It was surely not something I had written although I experienced a sense of recognition, as if I myself had composed the note in a time that now eluded my memory. The handwriting...no, it could not be mine. And yet it undeniably resembled mine, it could as a matter of fact be mine if I used a nib to write. Does this seem absurd? I know it does. I began to shiver when I realized the recipe was describing the old fashioned way of distilling amygdalin, the first cyanogenic glycoside I had synthesized, the ancestor of my *Irissa Celata*.

I wondered if this was a joke. Otto Hermes. He had been looking at my lab-book, perhaps he had placed the note in there, perhaps he would tell me in the next days and we would have a good laugh at it. And yet...how could he know about my love for the forget-me-not flowers and about amygdalin, and how could he emulate my own handwriting so closely?

I slipped the note back in the lab-book and sat awhile, fluctuating in an inexplicable altercation of emotions. At one moment I felt as if I had just set foot in an old surrounding, where I recognized each block, each pastry shop, each street sign, but the next moment I was shoved by turbid waves of uncertainty and deep sadness.

I cannot tell for how long I stood there in pensive stillness, but at a point a fan started and its sudden grumble shook me. Get to work and test the reactivity of *Irissa Celata*, that's what I had to do. I looked

at the watch on the wall: 8.30 a.m. already. Any other day at this time I would already be deep into my experiments.

In the previous months I had tested the reactivity of each cyanogenic glycoside I synthesized with water, to assess if they could spontaneously hydrolyze releasing hydrogen cyanide, the potent poisonous gas responsible for their toxicity.

I placed an amount as big as a headpin of my *Irissa Celata* in a flask and stirred, carefully collecting the gas exhaling from the mixture. Indeed, my *Irissa Celata* released hydrogen cyanide! There wasn't much in the sample, but its signature was undeniably there. I repeated the experiment, increasing the temperature by 10 °C at a time. The results were predictable up to 90 °C, but then the unexpected happened! As soon as *Irissa Celata* made contact with water it evolved into a thorny creature, swollen into a size much larger than *Irissa Celata* in its original form, almost as large as the whole flask! The fascinating monster, the lunar lizard that had formed grew with each drop added, then all of a sudden it dissolved in deep blue swirls till all that was left in the flask was still liquid, tinted with a serene light blue shade. Once again I analyzed the gas evolving from the solution, and I found hydrogen cyanide, so much of it this time! But that's not all, there was also something else, something unknown. What a wonderful joy it is when the magic of the elements surpasses one's imagination, leaving one dazzled with playful wonder and tingling curiosity!

I spent the whole day investigating the nature of the mystery compound, swaying between sudden intuitions and the disillusionment of having made an erroneous guess.

As I ran one experiment after the other, the dock spun its arms and the day melted into a rarefied sunset tinged by fine shades of orange, and finally into a dusky melange of blues. When I caught a glimpse of the imminent change in the horizon I sat awhile to admire it. This is such a unique moment in the day, how can one overlook it? And this evening it occurred so fast...or perhaps it was I to have a skewed perception of time? When the sunset faded into the impinging night, I turned heavy with the weight of tiredness, as the sky deprived of the light became heavy with darkness. I closed my lab book, wrapped myself up with my warm coat and left, happy to be heading home and yet still bubbling with thoughts of what else I could attempt to discover more about the fruit of the encounter between *Irissa Celata* and water, that compound and its elusive nature!

I was distractedly wondering what I could have for dinner while still elaborating the experimental plan for the next day when I found myself in front of the Elizabeth Cross library. I looked at its old fashioned façade and suddenly the memory of the previous day and of my visit to the rare book section refluxed in my mind, and I remembered the book that had attracted me and unsettled me so. What was the title? Yes, "The mercurial soul: an unusual odyssey of mysteries". I stood at the entrance, looking up at the blown-glass windows, the columns fashioned in the classical Greek style, the reassuring austerity of the building. And, once again, I felt compelled to enter. Don't, I told myself without knowing why, while my feet walked past the library's door despite my resistance, and brought me to the rare book collection room. I instinctively headed to where the book, that book, was. I immediately found it. I took it off the shelf and stroked its scarlet cover with the tip of my fingers. It felt good to the touch. There were but

few people in the room, and the spot where I had sat the day before was empty. I headed there, and when I opened the book the page was the last one I had read the day before. Was this a coincidence? I told myself that one can make-believe too many fantasies after spending most of one's time alone. And yet...and yet I had the distinct feeling that the book was talking to me, that it was *meant* for me. Use your own judgment to decide if I am right. Here is what the book said.

The multiform nature of mercury is best manifested through its daughter compound, its poisonous salt, engendered by the reaction with the burning chemical known as thiocyanic acid. This poisonous salt is denominated mercury thiocyanate, and it carries in its name the memory of both its acidic mother and its mercurial father. Beware, this salt differs in nature from sophic salt! Since mercury cyanide descends from thiocyanic acid it carries the burn within itself, it blisters the vital organs with abrasive violence to the point of death. It cannot give birth to the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life!

Since mercury cyanide carries the burn within itself, it is during the proof of fire that it expresses its own nature and the nature of its parent compounds. When touched by the heat of a vivid flame, mercury thiocyanate will outgrow itself, twisting with rage like an evil snake liberated by a spell, and evolve into a terrifying animal, large, monstrous and in all aspects horrendously dissimilar from the original compound. Thus, exposed to the purifying fire, mercury and cyanate will reveal their cruelty and their greatness, the masculine potency, and the chameleon's personality which inspires a dual feeling of mesmerized awe and profound revulsion.

Sitting here in my small attic I sense odd vibrations in the air, which I cannot decipher. The full moon is looking at me through the window, and I look at her in return, trying to read the reflection of the future on her eternal face. With the distinctive enigmatic imperturbability of an Egyptian sphinx she seems to know secrets spoken with so light a whisper no human ear can detect them. *Please tell me*, I beg her without words, but a silent good night wish and a poised smile is all I get for an answer.

Chapter 6: Cesare Mercurio

This morning I was making my way to the laboratory, eager to start the experiments on the powder I have serendipitously generated yesterday. And yet I was floating in a peculiar juvenile lighthearted state of mind, which made my work unusually fragmented and erratic. I incidentally asked myself the origin of this condition, and as I did I caught sight of the flaming head of the woman I had seen yesterday. I must admit – unwillingly – that a rush of mirthful warmth inundated me, uncontrollably. I understood that the carefree merriness I had felt within me few moments earlier was the result of having met this woman who can ignite me with pure happiness by her mere presence, even from a distance. Who is she?, I asked myself. I am not a foolish man, and you must know that never before I have reacted with such irrational impetus to any encounter, let alone to one with an unknown woman! And yet this woman has

the power to influence my disposition with the same strength with which the moon affects tides, and I had to discover who she was. I thus observed her from a distance, and let my steps follow hers.

She took a turn in a narrow side street, and for a moment I feared she would become aware of my presence because we were the sole passers-by in that solitary street at that early time of the day. And yet my woman – alas, why I am calling her mine? - and yet the woman who fascinated me like a hot flame in a cold winter day did not see me. After walking awhile in this narrow alley, she guided me into a graciously petite square where I hadn't been passing in a long time.

Remembrance square is its name. There is an ornate fountain in the center of the square, representing a woman playing with fishes, as the foam of the waves wraps her voluptuous body in a vigorous embrace. In a corner of the square there is an apothecary shop, which I never noticed before today, and there the red headed woman entered. I stood at the opposite side of the square, as if waiting for someone.

From there I had a full view of the shop, of which I could see the inside because of a large window on the front. There was a man in the shop, who seemed to me like the owner because of his age and behaviour. There was an exchange of phrases between them, which seemed to indicate friendly familiarity between the two, although I could not hear the conversation. Then the woman removed her coat and went behind the counter. She is an apothecary! I saw her set some jars on the bench and mount what was clearly a distillation apparatus. She proceeded in setting up the equipment necessary for her work with attentive care. Alas, how adorable her intent expression was! And how peculiar that she is also a chemist, although the application of her work is dissimilar from mine! Do you not believe that I instinctively understood the connection between us? You must recognize that such a similarity is all the more astounding because being an apothecary is by all means an uncommon profession for women. And this woman is much too well dressed, much too refined to be in need for money. Clearly she is an apothecary by choice! Oh beauty!

In spite of the pungent chill of the air I could have spent hours observing her work with loving passion, but how could I motivate my prolonged presence in the square? My precious woman should not detect my presence, not for now at least. I therefore headed to my laboratory, with the hope that my work could soothe the turmoil within me. And of course, I also had a plan for the day, and plenty of discovers awaiting me! Not a single woman in this world could be more intriguing than my science: such was the thought animating my fast-paced return to the laboratory.

Once I reached the laboratory I proceeded to arrange the flasks and the beakers for the proof of water. I was about to set up all the chemicals required for my experiment when I looked up, and my eye caught sight of a glass jar where I had stored two graceful pieces of cinnabar with a peculiar translucence and a dainty shape. And a mad thought crossed my mind. Two pieces of cinnabar...I took them and admired them from a while, holding them on my palm against the cone of light coming from the window.

Indeed, it was a mad thought, but after setting my mind on it I could not renounce it anymore. I placed the cinnabar back into the jar, I hastily donned my coat and slipped the jar in my coat's pocket. And out I was again, heading to a jeweller's shop I had seen at the corner of Berzelius Street. The shop had appealed to me because of its solitary and mysterious appearance.

Can you speculate on what my instinct was leading me to do when I decided to walk to the jeweler? If there were two pieces of cinnabar, did it not mean somehow that one should be mine, and the other one should belong to the woman whose hair was red just like the beautiful mineral from which my wondrous, manly mercury derived? There was nobody in the shop, and that was just as well because I needed calm focus to define how to valorize the precious stamina of cinnabar in jewels like nobody has seen before. I wanted the two pieces of jewelry to be unique, magnificent and refined, and worth the value of the mineral they carried within them.

After a while the jeweler came out from the back of the shop, with a slightly arched back, a whiskery face surly with focused attention and dark blue eyes that captured the jar I was holding with rapid and competent precision. The jeweler tried to disguise his astonishment as he observed the contents of the jar.

“May I suggest diamonds with better tones of red?”, he asked

“This is a mineral of unparalleled value”, I replied firmly

“Of course sir”, the jeweler conceded

I was well aware of his skepticism, but I was willing to excuse his ignorance – if not accept it – provided that the man fulfilled my request!

“I am here because you have the reputation of being the best jeweler in town. Respect the mineral I gave you, even if you do not comprehend its value!”, I began and the jeweler nodded, startled by the vehemence of my tone

“I want you to make a necklace and a ring. The necklace must have a pendant, obtained by embedding the mineral in a drop of glass, perfectly transparent, as transparent as the purest water. Mind you, the perfect transparency, the watery quality, is essential! The chain is less important, but make sure it is nothing less than excellent. For the ring, encase the mineral in a piece of gold forged into the shape of a flame. The red cinnabar I am giving you must be enveloped in virile tongues of heat! Are you able to do this by tomorrow afternoon? Work all night, do whatever it takes, but complete the work soon and flawlessly!”, I concluded

“As you wish sir”, the jeweller said

I nodded, and walked out of the shop pondering how to meet my fabulous creature again, how to speak to her and hand her the necklace which would have the same power, elegance and fascination that she herself possessed.

Alas, hours later I am still rolling the same question in my head, unable to do anything but imagine the moment I will give the necklace to the woman...can I make this moment happen? Will it be perfect? And...

The words elude me.

Alas! Alas!

Chapter 7: Iris Luna

This morning when I reached the lab I was sizzling with the hope that the experiments I had in mind could reveal the very soul of the mysterious gas that had formed from the reaction between Irissa Celata and water. And yet as soon as I began working I felt a disharmonic note in the air, I was inexplicably distracted and enchaind a number of vexing mistakes. I kept on working nonetheless, but a disquiet feeling foamed within me till I finally paused. What was happening? I suddenly realized I had the urge to go out for a walk, and for some reason I cannot define a certain old part of the town where I hadn't been in ages came to my mind. I decided that I would take the rest of the morning off and stroll for a bit in the delightfully decadent flavour of that area, perhaps have lunch outside and get back to work with a refreshed mind.

It was strange how on my way I was animated by a sort of inner tingle, the sort one feels when anticipating a special encounter, although I was not to meet anyone at all. I walked smiling to myself, letting my gaze wander distractedly on the streets as my steps were drawn to that part of the city, that street, I so longed to reach. And at last I was there. Berzelius Street, read the old plaque on a building erected a couple of centuries ago. I had been here before, and this is the place I had wanted to reach, but it seemed so different from my memories, as if it had been glazed with a breeze from the past since the last time I had been there. Ah, it was certainly me and my skewed perception! I was not quite myself today. And yet...let me tell you what happened.

As I walked along Berzelius Street I saw a solitary jeweler's shop. The shop had an antique look to it, so antique in fact that one could picture it being dormant in time following a potent spell, with the dust in the glass window concealing unimaginable mysteries. I have never seen this place before, although clearly it must be impossible that it hadn't been there before. How very strange...I hesitated at the entrance a moment, caught between an inexplicable sense of fear and an intense desire to penetrate the enigmatic door. And at last I walked in, irresistibly fascinated. I was alone in the dim light of the place for a while, barely able to orient myself at first. My eyes had just started getting adjusted to the light of the place when a man with a slightly arched back and a conspicuous mustache appeared from the back. He paused his dark blue eyes on me for a timeless moment with such undivided attention I asked myself if truly I was the first person he had seen in centuries.

"How may I help you?", he finally asked, once he appeared to satisfied with his scrutiny

I began opening my mouth but I was speechless, since I myself was unaware of what I was looking for, and if I was looking for anything at all. As I dropped my gaze in wavering shyness I caught sight of a necklace displayed on a mannequin's head behind the counter. The necklace had the most beautiful pendant, a drop of wondrous clarity, as transparent as water, with a mineral embedded in it...a red mineral...was it cinnabar or was I confounded about its nature? At once I knew that necklace was meant for me, it felt like a special object that had belonged to my past and that I had finally retrieved after believing it lost for years. Happiness was my first sensation, pure and full, but then a subtle melancholy

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