Il confine invisibile

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English translation · Opening excerpt · Riccardo Edizioni

PART ONE

THE ILLUMINATI

“Great queen, the ravenous beasts
will be nothing but a bitter memory
when hope itself is plundered…”

Every morning, the same muddled swirl of memories began with those lines from a poem her father had taught her as a child, when the royal palace in the City of Light seemed as distant a mirage as the thought of becoming the most important woman in the kingdom.

“Great queen, the ravenous beasts
will be nothing but a bitter memory
when hope itself is plundered…”

The memories, imperfect but still vivid, swept her past the soft, damp contours of the woods by the river on the day before her wedding. They always ended on the night when Incubus, the first king of the Dark Bridges, had visited both her home and her sleep…

“Don’t pull, Melania!”

The maid’s clumsiness jolted her back to the present, away from the memories she now made herself revisit every morning.

“Forgive me, my lady…”

“You’ll pull all my hair out at this rate!”

In the mirror, she studied her narrow, freckled face and the pale eyes that had earned her the name Crystal Eyes. Then she caught the girl’s embarrassed glance as she went back to combing her long chestnut hair.

“Never mind. Tell me about your son instead. How is he?”

“Much better, my lady, thank you. His fever’s gone, and he’ll be back at school in a few days!”

A vague unease tightened in the queen’s chest. She hesitated.

“I’m glad.”

She smiled gently and looked at herself in the mirror again. *Don’t be rude,* she thought. *Remember what your father always taught you…*

“Great queen, the ravenous beasts
will be nothing but a bitter memory
when hope itself is plundered…”

Soon the rhythm and force of the words took over her thoughts. The lines went by so quickly, yet they weighed on her. Try as she might, she couldn’t make sense of them this time either…

“I’m finished, my lady.”

Queen Clelia sighed and looked at the girl again, puzzled.

“Thank you, Melania. You may go. And remember, you don’t have to call me ‘my lady’ every time…”

She gave her a warm, sincere smile. Melania simply bowed respectfully.

How did that damned poem go on? the queen wondered for the third time.

“Perhaps…”

She rose and glanced absently at her bed in the cold grey morning light, at the midnight-blue silk coverlet and the gold embroidery on the canopy. She shivered, and the cold had nothing to do with it. Another memory seized her, and in a flash no one else could have seen, there was Incubus again, smiling at her feet all those years ago. That was when a new body had appeared in the heavens. They called it the Second Moon, and just as the prophecies had foretold, it had begun to haunt the distant daylight sky…

Perhaps dwelling on something so seemingly trivial meant something she couldn’t yet grasp. But what?

Perhaps it was something obvious and sad, after all. Her father’s face was growing harder to remember with each passing day…

Egan, known as Little Fire, adjusted his white cloak, ran a hand through his neck-length hair and exchanged a quick glance with his uncle Edoardo.

King Jace rode behind them in a red tunic. His narrow, clean-shaven face was radiant that morning and rather proud.

“Egan, do you remember what your tutor used to say about these woods?”

The boy watched his father ride up alongside him.

“He said there could be no enlightenment without an understanding of nature,” he replied with a smile.

“Behind the life of every creature that lives here and the breath of every tree lies the secret of our own lives. Exactly, my boy! Mastering our passions and instincts is what made our people great. Tonight you’ll be prouder than ever to be one of us, you’ll see!”

He caught his brother Edoardo watching him with quiet admiration, then turned back to his son.

“How I wish I were seventeen again!” he sighed. “I’d know I had more time to devote to my studies…”

“You’ll have plenty of time now, brother. The tribes are finally united, and we can all enjoy a new era of peace. Besides, isn’t it adversity that made you who you are today?”

Jace nodded.

“Each of us looks to the light in our own way, Edoardo…”

Egan shrugged and nodded in turn, trying to avoid his father’s eye. Jace was already watching him impatiently.

“I’m glad you’re here…”

Egan gave him a genuine if slightly distracted smile. He thought of his misadventures with Alessandro and Enrico, of the nights the three of them had stayed up joking, and of the nagging dissatisfaction he still couldn’t explain, even after a year of diversions away from home.

“So am I, Father.”

Nearly four hundred days of pushing himself to the limit in the company of two brave and wise men had done much to sharpen his mind and strengthen his body. Yet nothing he had seen beyond the palace where he had grown up had filled that unbearable emptiness. Even the celebrated King Basilio, for all his knowledge of warfare, had offered him no answer. By now, Egan doubted there was one.

“Are you tired, my boy?”

He looked at his father again. For a moment, he considered telling him about his doubts and the feelings that had been weighing on him. Before he could speak, he heard a rustle and looked down towards the foot of the path, near a stream.

“Look!”

Edoardo and the king looked where the prince was looking. A patch of red lay motionless on the ground.

“Let’s go and see…”

Egan rode to the end of the path, a few yards ahead, and dismounted.

“Come on!” he called.

He tied his reins to a tree and waited for his father and uncle to do the same. When they were ready, they jumped down towards the patch of red, towards the horror.

What they hadn’t been able to see before was suddenly revealed in all its brutality. The mangled carcass of a fox made it clear…