**Chapter 32**

**Walls and Wood**

**Magnar Ulf**

Ulf didn’t like the Wall.

It was full of crows, the human ones. But the true black birds also came on occasion when they were called by battle.

Good thing his Black Bears were far from it now.

The huge thing was visible in the distance, for sure. It was seven hundred feet tall. It was a prison to keep them away from the soft lands of the kneelers.

“I can’t take the Wall,” he grumbled to the skinchanger waiting five feet away. “Not when it’s defended like that. And not when they have this monstrous ‘dragon’.”

The clans of the Free Folk had learned this lesson hard during the last moon. Over fourteen clans had answered the call and tried to climb the Wall. The crows had been weaker than ever before last winter, and the lands south of the Wall were soft and ripe for the picking.

But the lands weren’t soft and undefended anymore now.

Secret paths and undefended castles revealed by the deserting crows were manned once more. There were armoured columns on horse with hunting dogs and long spears.

And there had been a dragon.

Ulf wanted to spit and call all the crows on the Wall cowards and thin-blood weaklings, but why descend fighting a Free Folk in the snow when arrows and barrels of stone and ice killed a raiding party?

“I lost three scores of my clan when the dragon caught us between the Wall and the Haunted Forest,” and plenty of the dead had been men. When the spearwives of the Black Bears had found the burned corpses of the Snow Hares, their spear groups had stopped attacking. It was nearly cowardly, but it had been right. “And eleven clans won’t come back.”

Eleven clans were dead. Out of fourteen sent southwards in a long-prepared raiding party.

“The King...”

“The King commands to stop the raids and wait,” the beautiful black-haired woman calling herself Driuri said, while caressing the fur of one of her two huge shadowcats. “Strength fails when the dragons fly in the skies. But dragons aren’t immortal.”

Ulf coughed. Dragons weren’t immortal...yes. But for a raider of a spearwife burnt by its fire or devoured by its big maw, was there a difference?

One of the rare points the Magnar of the Black Bears had been confident when beginning the spring raids was that thanks to his skinchangers, he could see the crows and the other enemies before the Wall defenders saw him.

His confidence had been repaid with death and flames when the five skinchangers accompanying his clan had screamed and screamed as the terrible flames burned their birds.

A dragon was too fast. A dragon saw everything from above. Maybe a dragon aged and died, but Ulf had a feeling in his guts that between him and the dragon, the dragon wasn’t going to be the last one to die of old age.

And the crows were stronger. There were hundreds of them guarding the castle, and hundreds guarding the Wall. Small raiding parties had a chance to escape their eyes, but a clan? No.

“Dragons aren’t immortal but the crows are back in strength, Four-Skins,” Ulf told the skinchanger. “We saw horses and rangers in new armours. We saw hundreds of archers they hadn’t before winter. The crows are stronger.”

“This is a good season for them,” agreed reluctantly Driuri as all her animals were gathered around her: two eagles and two shadowcats. “But they will be other moons when their strength will wane. And when it will come, the King will be ready. We have received many secrets from the green-standard kneelers. The King is going to put them to good use.”

Ulf muttered a prayer under his large beard. As one of the Magnars ordered to barter and speak with the foreigners near Storrold’s Point, the warrior leading the Black Bears knew most of these secrets would make the Free Folk stronger. He just didn’t know if this was going to make the warriors and the spearwives strong *enough* to break the crows as they were.

And if the dragon came back, they had it in the...they were going to lose. The flames of this beast were too hot for anyone to fight it on land, and for the first time Ulf had seen the rare giants who had joined them ran away in fright.

Ulf didn’t speak to Driuri of his doubts. He didn’t fear the skinchanger woman. He didn’t like her presence, but there were worse Free Folk out there. But she didn’t care about war per se, only her animals and speaking with other skinchangers.

“I’m marching back north of the Antler River,” he said, “The weather is going to be warmer and the elk season is near. I need more spears, and I need to avoid the crow-rangers.”

“I will find you when the King calls again,” the younger woman said, before standing and mounting the larger shadowcat which had crouched to help her climb on its back.

Ulf stayed immobile a little while. There was sun and wind on his skin, and it was not unpleasant. Too bad there was the Wall far away. The ice rampart of the crows was never a welcome sight. And it was worse now. Many proud warriors had been slaughtered like animals, their flesh roasted by the flames.

“There will be a reckoning for this,” he swore. “We will have our revenge.”

The crows preyed on the corpses of the Free Folk for now. But the Black Bears were alive. And for every clan fallen in the last raids, ten more had stayed home.

“We will have our revenge.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Sometimes, it was difficult to imagine why the Northern people had not named this endless forest ‘Seawood’ or ‘Northwood’. Even atop Moondancer circling above it, the green and brown of the trees went from north to south, from west to east, and her eyes were unable to see where it stopped.

Of course, the Starks having a direwolf emblem, they had named it the Wolfswood. To each their own, the Targaryen Queen supposed. Although there still was a large population of four-legged animals with grey furs hunting under the leaves of this forest, so the name wasn’t completely inappropriate.

“As you can see your Grace,” Roger Glover said, “we aren’t lacking trees to trade with our southern partners.”

“I didn’t doubt you had problems in that regard,” Baela replied politely – and honestly – the bannersmen of Winterfell.

It was absolutely true. When on the maps the Wolfswood was at least worth the domains of five large Noble Houses, cutting a few score of trees here and there wasn’t going to offend some Northern sensibilities. Well, except if they decided to cut down a venerable weirwood. There were some things which were regarded as heresy north of the Neck, and this was one of the most prominent.

“I’m more concerned how we can move the trunks and the other wood parts once the loggers have done their work.”

The stout Head of House Glover nodded vigorously.

“My builders have thought about it,” admitted the black-bearded man. “Plenty of Westerners and Reachers who travelled to our waters haven’t returned. For the moment, the ships of Seagard are the core of our trade and they want to buy our wood as much as we do if not more. But to sell oak and other shipbuilding materials, we need a bigger harbour, one which will resist the blizzards and the other wrathful deeds of winter.”

Because winter was coming. Not in one moon, not perhaps in ten – the Wolfswood she was currently visiting the paths near Deepwood Motte was warmed up by the spring’s sun. But winter would unavoidably come for the North. And when it did, snow buried everything under feet of snow, gentle winds became terrifying storms and the Bay of Ice deserved its name as icebergs and other ship-wrecking objects drifted away from the Lands of Always Winter.

As it stood, Deepwood Motte had a harbour...the sailors of Seagard might not share this opinion, however. To be sure, when winter came, the wood parts were generally disassembled before they were destroyed by the waves and the ice.

“You want a stone harbour,” it didn’t take a Master of Ships to arrive to this conclusion. Unfortunately, stone quarries were rare in that part of the North – not for nothing the ancestral home of House Glover was known as ‘Deepwood Motte’. And to transport said stones from the quarries to where they were needed...

“Above all we need roads, your Grace,” the man who had fought at Bosworth Bridge with the rest of the Northern banners remarked, supporting the thoughts inside her head. “Sea travel is faster than land travel, but only when there are harbours of note close.”

And they weren’t on the western coast of the North.

Oh, there were tales that thousands of years ago, before the era of King Brandon the Burner, the Northerners had a massive navy, plenty of galleys and carracks for war and trade.

Baela had her doubts on these stories. Did a Stark King burn several ships when one of his predecessors sailed away and was never seen again? Assuredly. Had the North been a naval power before that? No, she didn’t think so. Thanks to the numerous Targaryen messengers and agents her Council used to discover what truly existed in the realms under her rule, the silver-haired monarch had a far better knowledge of what was in the North and what was merely rumour and the invention of bards. And at no point had any agent or knight sent to survey the Sunset coast been able to discover where a royal fleet might have been built.

As the winters were abominable, permanent stone constructions were a question of life and death. But nobody had found the ruins of them. Some members working for her Council thought further researches might one day yield their discoveries. Baela, Lord Stark and several other councillors tended to believe the size of this fleet and the facilities to build it had been deliberately exaggerated and exaggerated again century after century.

Right now, the ship quays and harbours of the western coast were small and the biggest couldn’t handle the comparison with Seagard. Barrowton was better than Deepwood Motte, but alas it was in one of the rare regions of the North which had no large forests. And it was so far inland it couldn’t welcome large ships, except for the occasional longship-type hull.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, Master Glover, roads aren’t exactly cheap,” Baela spoke, “but I can’t deny a harbour of stone and roads in this region would attract more people and wealth.”

There was no denying Seagard truly needed access to the supplies of Northern timber in regular quantities, not the occasional trunk sent by a disrespectable merchant. And having a second harbour to withdraw the ships if war came again was an idea which sounded attractive.

If the Greens sent their new fleets past the Iron Islands, House Mallister and its port would quickly be fighting for their lives. In a harbour of the North, on the other hand, the carracks and all the other ships would be far safer...as long as it wasn’t winter, of course.

But a stone-built harbour was expensive, and every moon people came to her for more projects. Baela was truly flattered, yes. If one tenth of what she had read was really done before her reign’s end, she would likely receive the title of ‘Road-Builder’ or something like that – ‘Builder’ was still reserved to the legendary figure of King Brandon Stark, who dreamed and constructed the Wall and Winterfell.

“I suppose the road you want would link Deepwood Motte to Winterfell and the not-yet-existing stone quarries north-east of here?” The Master of Deepwood Motte was prompt to agree. “In this case please put some of your plans on parchment with your maester and I will return in ten days to take it with me to show to the Council. I can’t promise we will find the silver and the men for it this summer, but we will study it.”

In the Riverlands or the Vale, the purple-eyed Queen would have promised more, but Northerners weren’t the souls of the Eyrie or Riverrun. Many of the smallfolk and their lieges had not changed much since Aegon the Conqueror arrived with his Black Dread.

Baela was a bit ashamed to say it, but she was likely the Targaryen sovereign who had stayed the largest number of days in the North and visited the greatest castles and holdfasts. And it hadn’t taken very long for her to achieve this ‘exploit’.

The North would see some investments in gold and silver for this summer and the seasons coming after this. She had to do it, or in a few generations, some loud-mouthed Umbers or other hot-blooded free rider would shout the dragons had done nothing to improve the lot of the Northerners.

“So much to do,” she sighed as Moondancer manifested a desire to return to the sky now that the meeting was over. “At least the roads are popular; this is one less thing to worry about...”

**Lord Cregan Stark**

At Winterfell, this fortnight would have been called a spring snow. In the Riverlands, there was rarely any white colour falling from the skies in this season, and so smallfolk and highborn alike had taken it to call it ‘ice dawn’. Cregan believed that like in many things, the Riverlanders were prone to exaggerate every day they could. There was some frost in the morning, true. The abundant rains had turned most of the roads which had no stone into rivers of mud, and the true rivers were overflowing; several ferries near the Trident had been reported lost.

The Hand of the King was ready to recognise the weather during these days was really miserable, but it didn’t hold a candle to what the Old Gods had in store for the souls inhabiting the North right now.

The Lord Paramount threw a last disgusted look at the large amount of rain the dark clouds were pouring onto Stone Hedge and this part of the kingdom, before returning to his desk where a large amount of messages and accords waited to be read and answered to. With the temporary absence of the Queen and several members of the Council, the duties of his office weren’t any lighter.

Less than half a score of complaints from guilds and septons were dealt with, when someone knocked at his door. A quick invitation to enter and the Lord of Winterfell watched as the Master of Coin arrived in his quarters.

“I was not expecting you today, Lord Eon,” Cregan said to the Valeman, already preparing himself for bad news. His door was opened for the other members of the Council if the situation justified it, but for one to come directly to him instead of informing him at the next session – which happened to be in two days – it was rarely to inform him of an enemy had held his last breath and was now in the hands of his Gods.

“I know, I wasn’t expecting to need to speak to you today, my Lord Hand,” the Master of Coin replied. “Unfortunately, an interesting issue arrived to my ears, and I thought it could not wait the next Council. It is about the Iron Islands.”

Cregan showed no sign of his true feelings, but inside he was already grimacing. The Iron Islands. Of course, it was about these miserable pieces of rock battered by the sea and the storms.

As a proud descendant of King Rodrik Stark – sometimes nicknamed the Kraken-Wrestler for his countless exploits against the Ironborn and his reconquest of Bear Island – Cregan had long cherished the idea that if all the Greyjoys and their bannersmen were somehow sunk on their damned ships and went sleeping beneath the waves, maybe the Iron Islands would cease to be a problem.

Alas, now that the Red Kraken and tens of thousands Ironborn were dead, the Stark of Winterfell was forced to concede the elimination of the islanders didn’t prevent them from giving him headaches beyond their watery and fiery graves.

Indeed, the current situation practically guaranteed these damned islands were going to be trouble in the coming years. Three had been taken by their side, arguably the most valuable of the lot, but three out of the four others were in Green hands, and of course the last one was under Ironborn survivors’ rule.

There were nice signed treaties about how the King of the South and his Queen agreed to the claims of the others, but Cregan was intelligent enough to know parchments could be burned and ink could be used again to inflame tempers and denounce previous accords.

“The pirates?” he asked.

“No, though I am aware Lord Alyn is complaining he has not enough hulls for his navy to be everywhere.” Eon rolled his eyes, not showing a lot of sympathy for the young Lord of Driftmark.

“Let’s give the Master of Ships his due,” the Hand of the King said, “he is completely right we should have more ships on our western coast.”

With the Seven Kingdoms separated in two realms which had little reason to help each other, many problems had arisen. Problems that no one had considered in the last one hundred and thirty years, because the Conqueror and the Conciliator had given large incentives to all their subjects that the rule of the Iron Throne would last forever.

But it didn’t and it was the duty of men like Cregan on this side of the frontier to solve them.

“I know,” admitted Eon Grafton. “But as the man supposed to find a way to pay for all these ships and their crews, I am wary of the cost these efforts will cost the royal treasury. Our pockets are near-empty of gold at the moment, my Lord Hand.”

Another unpleasant fact Cregan had little need to be reminded of. The first Northern gold mine had opened a moon ago, but it would take time for the effects to be felt across the entire kingdom. Thanks the Old Gods, the realm had plenty of silver and bronze, otherwise the Greens would have been able to buy the three realms they didn’t control one by one.

“True. And indeed one of the reasons why merchant carracks and fishing boats are built in priority over war galleys.” Plus the numbers of sailors available to the Black Crown was small, and it was necessary to increase it again before thinking about new grandiose ships for brand-new Admirals. “But I doubt this is the problem you wanted to talk me about.”

“No,” replied the Valeman. “Thanks to Lady Sabitha, I have been able to exchange messages with...certain parties I was trading with before the war. Plenty of them are very unhappy at the profits lost and the goods they aren’t able to provide their clients anymore.”

“And where are these merchants living now?” Cregan questioned in a half-interested voice.

“Many have returned to Lannisport now that the previous era of unpleasantness has passed,” Eon Grafton revealed.

“Promising,” the Lord of Winterfell said. “But I suppose that with the damage the Red Kraken delivered onto the city, their purses must have great need to be refilled.”

It was worse than that, in fact. The initiative of Queen Rhaenyra to let the Ironborn raid the coasts had resulted in the sinking and the destruction or the capture of hundreds of ships, from the five feet long boat used by a father to feed his family from the large hulls regularly visiting the seacoast of Essos. Adding the ravages of the harbours and the slaughters of able seamen, and Dalton Greyjoy’s mark upon the Sunset Sea would take many seasons before fading from memory.

“What do these troubled souls of Lannisport want?”

His interlocutor chuckled.

“A more difficult question would be ‘what they don’t want’, Lord Hand.” The Master of Coin cleared his throat. “First and above all though, they want salt, and preferably a lot of it.”

“No surprise there,” since the ships operating from Seagard had claimed Saltharvest – former Saltcliffe – in the Queen’s name, the Greens of the Westerlands and beyond had painfully learned their replacement sites to exploit salt were too small and unable to cope with the rising needs of smallfolk and highborn alike. “What else?”

“Wood comes in second, with all the ships they need to replace and the dockyards lost...the forests of the Westerlands exist, but there’s a limit how much timber they can take from them. Otherwise we have the usual things. Wool, furs, silver and amber were the goods they were purchasing from the North. The Trident merchants had the grain and the food, including salt. The Iron Islands sometimes needed to exchange salt, copper and iron.”

Cregan passed his hand in his short beard.

“I don’t think we can rely on anything except salt and wood to trouble them once this spring will end, no?”

“I would not bet my position of Master of Coin on it, no,” recognised the Valeman. “We have a great advantage in silver mines, since most of them are in the North and in the Vale, but there are several in the Reach and the Westerlands too, and the Greens have other ways to obtain this metal. The grain, the fruits, the wine and every edible good, King’s Landing will obtain it from the Reach. The granaries of the Tyrells are intact, and the others will soon be rebuilt to store the spring and summer harvests. I think the demand for furs and amber as well as other precious stones not present in Lannister domains will continue...provided we don’t have a long summer coming after this spring. Therefore yes, I’m afraid that salt and wood are the only things the Western merchants are jealous of. The dilemma now is to decide if we continue starving them from these two resources, or we decide to...build some good will among certain factions west of the Golden Tooth.”

“This is a decision only the Queen has the authority to exert,” Cregan reminded him before sighing. “I suppose some of the factions the redoubtable Lady Frey managed to send agents to involved House Reyne?”

“They did.” The other member of the Council acknowledged. “But there have also been people who continue to enjoy the favours of Casterly Rock. There is of course no evidence and no writing to support that Lady Lannister is aware of these talks,” Eon added quickly, “but the distribution of salt escorted by armed soldiers in the hinterlands is a clear sign in my opinion the Lady Paramount is running short of options where salt is involved.”

“Sufficiently to trade their gold against our salt openly?”

The Master of Coin’s face grew thoughtful, but Cregan was a bit surprised the ‘no’ didn’t come immediately.

“Perhaps,” Grafton mused after a moment. “Lady Lannister is not one of our friends, but her patience towards the Iron Throne is not infinite.”

This was a good point. Lady Johanna Lannister was never going to forget her husband and hundreds of red cloaks had been slaughtered by Black blades in the Riverlands, but Casterly Rock wasn’t going to fail to remember either that the help of their allies had come incredibly late in the war, and only when the Red Kraken was dead and the Western coastline burning from north to south. And it was the gold of House Lannister which was strengthening the Green kingdom moon after moon and allowing it to rebuild after the Dance, the Iron Fever and the Dornish War. Without the wealth of the Lions, King Daeron and his bannersmen would have been ruined long ago.

“Your proposals?”

“I think one ship or two per moon. We need to keep the prices high, if we want for such a scheme to be more advantageous for us than it is for the Lannisters. Whether it would be done by some ‘smugglers’ or done openly would depend on the willingness of the lions to restore some trade between our two kingdoms.”

“I’m tempted to choose the official path,” the Hand of the King declared. “Anything that can create doubts between the Green Dragon and House Lannister are worth exploiting.”

The Lord Paramount of the North caressed his beard again.

“I suppose I will have to send a raven to the Queen again tomorrow...”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

A well-fed dragon was a happy dragon.

Seeing his Blue Queen satiate her hunger with a long series of roasted rabbits, Daeron was sure few warriors and members of his court would try to naysay the old proverb.

The blue-scaled dragon continued to fix the meat pins with non-hidden hunger. As such, Daeron felt confident he could leave his loyal mount for a while. If anything problematic happened, the two scores of guards surrounding the cooking site were more than sufficient to cut down assassins or bandits. Not that he anticipated a lot of them to appear; after the realm had learned in fire and blood how many swordsmen it took to slay a dragon, the numbers of potential martyrs was far, far smaller than it had been during the Dance.

But it was best to not leave anything to luck and the favour of the Gods. Both had proved to be prompt to abandon one side in the past.

The young King – though the ‘young’ part was more and more debatable these days, being a father, a war veteran, and a grown man who had endured a long winter – therefore walked through some abandoned ruins of a Stormlands village, escorted by fifty spearmen and his Kingsguard until he arrived to the edge of the southern Kingswood where two men and a prodigious number of siege engines waited for him.

“Your Grace, welcome to the Siege Grounds,” the first knight said as he and his companion kneeled.

“Rise, Ser Rufus, Ser Gael.” The Master of the Iron Throne answered with a short gesture. “I see you have redoubled your efforts in the last fortnights.”

“Indeed, your Grace!” Ser Rufus Darke beamed, his voice’s heavy accent revealing the man had spent years playing in some of the less-than-respectable streets of Duskendale when he was young. “The rains of the last fortnights have not allowed us to leave a good roof’s protections, but they have given us plenty of new ideas!”

The last surviving son of the deceased King Viserys contemplated the red-haired Crownlander and wondered what sort of invention the man had invented again. Ironically, the knight of Duskendale didn’t look like a savant who liked building things at all. Ser Rufus was bulky and had huge arms and legs, and when he was exasperated by something, he swore like the worst sailor of Westeros.

“We will test the new trebuchets and scorpions,” the Crownlander knight promised, “though we will make sure you stay far away to avoid any injury caused by a part breaking apart, of course.”

“I’m sure my Queen will be delighted to hear this,” Daeron affirmed with a very serious face.

“The favour of Her Grace is something every loyal subject of your Grace is after,” the experts in siege engines coughed. “But we are really confident this time we have found the correct balance between range and usefulness. It might not seem evident to your eyes, your Grace, but these two trebuchets and four scorpions were all assembled in two days once the parts had been made.”

Daeron narrowed his eyes, impressed by the gain in time it represented. The efforts of his armies to build siege engines in the Dornish Marches had fared far, far worse. Naturally the southern Kingswood was a nicer region to build trebuchets and other war things in wood, the abundance of trees helping a lot.

But if Ser Rufus had truly solved at least the assemblage problem and had satisfying plans for models of trebuchets and scorpions, the presence of siege engines to batter the walls of a castle or a fortified tower would be far easier to achieve.

“Will these new scorpions be a deterrent for the Black dragons?”

“I fear this depends on the size of the dragons you want to shoot one with, your Grace,” the red-haired man’s grin had disappeared. “Provided the reptile is young, a scorpion bolt can pierce the wings or the other vulnerable parts. But the older the dragon is, the tougher are its scales. We have made some tests with some of the scales found in King’s Landing, and mature battle-dragons past two or three decades, in my opinion, can largely shrug off anything coming from our best ballista and scorpions. A trebuchet would have still a chance, your Grace.”

Unfortunately, it would take a very idiotic dragonrider to fly right in front of a trebuchet and wait to be used as a target. The huge war engines were impossible to hide in the first place, and once the first rocks were thrown, it was incredibly easy to guess where the other rocks would roughly be thrown. In all the history of the Seven Kingdoms, no dragon had died from a trebuchet shot, and the Green monarch was confident it would stay that way for the next centuries.

Daeron wasn’t that disappointed, if he was perfectly honest with himself. The scorpions and their bigger cousins had been invented to storm citadels and slaughter on an open battlefield foot and horse-mounted warriors, not dragons. Ballista and the like were just too slow to move and to shoot their projectiles if they were not protected by mighty walls with generous supplies of water.

“And your projects, Ser Gael?” The King of the South asked to the other man who had stayed silent until now.

“I am progressing nicely in the art of rebuilding, your Grace,” Ser Gael Roxton replied, with a faint accent of the northern Reach. “My conclusions, alas, are not very pleasant to hear.”

Gael Roxton was physically the complete opposite of Rufus Darke. Where the Crownlander had short red-hairs regularly cut every two moons, the older man had a long mane of black hairs. Where the creator of the siege engines was one head smaller than Daeron and muscled, the Reacher was thin and tall. The former could have passed himself as a common servant working in the harbour of King’s Landing without difficulty. The latter was in nice green clothes and could have easily been mistaken for a Lord Paramount. Yet the two were good friends, despite for all intent and purposes having nothing in common.

Not that Daeron was going to complain, seeing those two were some of the brightest minds of his realm.

“The reality, your Grace, is that King’s Landing was built too fast, and the few rules your House tried to enforce were rarely followed. The city, I’m afraid, is a very, very ugly state right now, and the more years we wait, the more problems there will be waiting for us.”

“Continue,” the rider of Tessarion encouraged the Reacher knight.

“I have begun to draft new plans for King’s Landing. They include new walls, incidentally. The ones we have are in a sorry state due to winter and the lack of funds which followed the departure of the Rogue Prince. The system of cisterns needs to be revised. And we will need new sewers, if only to prevent a repeat of the Fever and avoiding epidemics in case of a siege.”

Daeron was handed a large book, and he had to maintain his calm to not wince at the weight and the sum of new constructions his unofficial master of buildings no doubt wanted to make.

It went without saying that his kingdom had not the money to build new walls for King’s Landing now, even assuming they could use some of the stone from the previous ones. The treasury had stopped being close to bankruptcy these days, but it would be years before it reached the sums which had been considered normal during his father’s reign.

“And the roads the Blacks are busy building?”

Gael Roxton drew a smoking pipe from a pocket and lit it.

“I build wonders, your Grace, but these kind of magical deeds are outside my domain of skills...”

**Prince Viserys Targaryen**

If he had married in Westeros, there would have been a far greater crowd to attend his marriage. But Viserys was clear-sighted enough to wonder how many Greens and Blacks would have loved to remove his head from his shoulders and put it on a pike.

To be a claimant on the Iron Throne and backed by absolutely no important Lord was bad enough. To be a Prince and marrying a foreigner would be a hundred times worse. The last child of Rhaenyra was young when he had departed Dragonstone, but he had hardly forgotten the contemptuous words and expressions most Westerosi had for the men and the women living on the other side of the Narrow Sea and beyond. The Seven Kingdoms’ highborn rarely gave nice welcome to the merchants of the Free Cities. And it wasn’t an exaggeration to say any ‘outsider’ trying to rise to a high position in a service of a Targaryen King often met a tragic and painful end.

These dismal thoughts instantly vanished as Larra appeared with her father, the patriarch of the Rogare family escorting her to the altar. In her silver and white robe, the young woman could have been mistaken for the Maiden herself. A small tiara of silver was posed on her head, like he had a golden one on his. Many diamonds shone under the sun which made the city of Lys akin to a summer paradise in this season.

Truly at this moment, Viserys felt like a very, very lucky man.

A small choir of singers began accompanying five women playing their musical instruments. Several guards advanced to form two ranks of honour, presenting exotic birds like parrots, cockatoo, toucan, and humming birds. It was a parade of red, green, yellow, blue, black and some colours which were rarely seen in the markets of Lys.

Still, the main colour dominating was silver. Larra was in silver, his hairs were silver, and about two out of three of the participants had either dyed their hairs for the occasion or presented themselves with some clothes shining with silver decorations, necklaces or rings. Perhaps it was because his cousin had sent him a few coffers of silver as his ‘dowry’? Or was it another tradition? Viserys didn’t know the answer, but he could live without one for the moment. One thing was sure, it wasn’t because his future wife worshipped Pantera; the priest of this cult was wearing a toga of onyx and gold, not silver. Children of noble and not-so-noble lineage were throwing fresh flowers over the guards and the Rogare procession, and several dancers began acrobatic moves the young Prince wasn’t going to try under any circumstances.

At last Larra arrived on the last marble steps and the old and venerable merchant-banker placed the hand of his daughter in his with an expression which promised eternal torment if he didn’t treat her like she deserved.

Viserys apprehension didn’t last long; as their hands intertwined, he lost himself quickly in the beautiful purple eyes of Larra, and the future they promised him.

Traditionally there should have been an exchange of cloaks or garments, but this would have been tantamount to acknowledge one side of this marriage was superior to the other; something the envoys of the Black Swan and his cousin had found utterly unacceptable. Viserys was of the Blood of Old Valyria; and while the Rogares could not boast of the same lineage, they were wealthier than any Targaryen at this very moment.

This would be a marriage of equals, and Viserys had found past the initial moment of surprise he liked very much the foundation of this union.

“My dear children!” the high-ranked priest of the six-breasted deity of Love began with a large and genuine smile. “We are here under the joyous gaze of our feline Goddess to witness and celebrate the union of a fair Magister-Heiress and her Prince. May their beauty and most intimate associations provide joy and prosperity to their marriage!”

Viserys tried to not blush at the reminder he had lost his virginity well before today, and without doubt completely failed in the attempt. Merciful Mother, was there someone in the assistance unaware how Larra had seduced him in the last moons?

“Love one another, and make a bond of your love. Let the winds of pleasure and heavenly feline grace dance with you. Fill each other’s cup and drink from it merrily. Experience the wonders of your love and triumph over the challenges of the flesh.”

Viserys knew he had to be very red-faced when the man officiating finished his sermon. It was...very, very different from anything a septon would have said. Fortunately, he had not to say much. He just had to say...

“I do.”

**Author’s note**: I was tempted to make sure a septon was present for the marriage if only to have more comedic relief...but I decided not to in the end. Though the idea of a Faith conservative learning the marriage was consumed before the ceremony would have been very amusing...

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History: www .alternatehistory forum /threads /asoiaf-the-dance-is-not-over.391415