**Interlude**

**Eastern Front 1**

**Prelude to Chaos**

*There were – and still are - many things to say about the War of the Ten Warlords. It was a civil war. There were many, many villains and heroes judged on the altars of public opinion, the maesters’ study desks, the bards’ songs and other methods to remember. Humanity won, by the standard at least that it was the surviving species left standing on the battlefield when final victory was announced.*

*But was it really a period to be proud of? Even the most tolerant and less critical men and women who remained to judge a generation later didn’t think so. There were too many horrible things to tarnish the memories of the armies and fleets which went to war.*

*In the Storm Sector, the grand opening saw Fawnton destroyed beyond any hope of resettlement, and over five hundred million people dead. In the Iron Sector, the acts of the Beast had resulted in hundreds of millions of dead, and the ravages of Victarion Greyjoy and the monsters of the Void resulted in tens of millions more. There weren’t any precise casualty list, but it is impossible to doubt that between the death of the self-proclaimed Iron King Balon Greyjoy and the last days of 300AAC, far more than a billion men, women and children had died.*

*The numbers of the estimated fatalities had never been so elevated. Saltcliffe alone, rendered uninhabitable and scoured by nuclear fire, accounted for two hundred and seventy million dead. Two hundred and seventy million died in less than a week. It was more than the Usurper’s War, including civilians’ riots and health-related problems. Great Wyk’s sole planet had allowed eight hundred-plus million to live on its harsh soil before Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch came.*

*And the less said about the billions killed in the Battle of King’s Landing, the better. Aegon VI’s forces, the Red Dragon’s Own, had made a slaughterhouse of the proud and arrogant capital of the Targaryen Dynasty.*

*The question, in hindsight, was not if the War of the Ten Warlords was something to be proud of south of the Moat Cailin System. The answer was a clear and resounding no, at least from all parties who still had sane commanders leading them. There was nothing to be satisfied of when one’s was clearly doing exactly what cold abominations and flame-addicted fanatics worshipping demons were benefitting from your agenda. There was nothing to be enthusiastic about when one re-read the desperate accounts of the Nightfort Battle and wondered if the presence of one or two Sector’s Navy could have made things better.*

*There was no denying that at the moment Westeros should have stood as a single realm, or at least as a coalition of realms united in humanity’s defence, the folly of the last Targaryen sovereigns had permanently soured and poisoned too many things which should have been strong and taken from granted.*

*Worse, there were other examples of realms facing existential threats as they re-emerged from the ancient pages of history to haunt the living. And as it was all evident by 350AAC, most of these nations had handled the Second Long Night far better than the Westerosi...*

Extract from *Failures of the Seven Sectors*, by Maester Theodan, 391AAC.

**General Du Bu, 31.09.300AAC, Orange Palace, Trader Town System**

When you were kilometres above the ground, the city of Ming-Hue seemed calm.

Du Bu supposed it was calm too when you walked among the streets too. Military curfew and suppressing violently the riots of the angry mob tended to restore peace. The only problem was that you didn’t know how long it was going to last before the ungrateful mobs bayed for more blood.

This didn’t please him, and not just because his favourite treatises were in common agreement that great men had to be supported by the common people, if they wanted to avoid faltering at a critical moment of their ambitions.

There were going to be consequences for what had happened today. Swords had been drawn and opponents to the Orange Dynasty had been killed, in the heart of the capital itself.

Du Bu wanted to scream his rage, insult the ancestors of these troublemakers to the ninth generation, but to be honest, he had already done that and apart from a very short moment of relief, it had not helped much.

After a few heartbeats where the capital failed to change its aspect of a sleepy, shadowy series of temples, palaces, town-sized markets, and other trade centres, the General turned around, and donned a long robe of orange silk before searching for his sandals. The hour was late, and hopefully his master the God-Emperor had calmed by now.

There were few guards patrolling in the alleys decorated with grander-than-life decorations of military triumphs, centuries-old sculptures in bronze alloys and little bridges made of cherry wood. Despite his doubts and his problems, this was a calm and a quietude he was not immune to. Certain wins were literally breathing serenity into his body, as the flora brought at great price over the last four centuries here at Trade Town looked like it was radiating under the light of the four moons. The perfect combination of ancient art and new oriental beauty, the artists called it. Many sculptors, jewellers and goldsmiths had imagined and created masterpieces inside these walls. Built by design at the crossroads of three main trade routes, the Trade Town System welcomed many splendours, and the closest you approached its heart, the more magnificent it was.

This didn’t mean he climbed the grand stone stairs leading to the Imperial apartments with anything which could be considered eagerness or a deep sense of happiness. He was the General of the Marches; his responsibility was not involved in the latest military defeat. And yet only an imbecile would not at least redoubt the prospect of an audience with the divine sovereign they had all pledged their lives to.

The Legionaries saluted by striking the lower end of their much dreaded plasma wall-spears against the ground, and Du Bu automatically returned it with a salute of his own. In times past, he had fought and bled much with these men, first in campaigns against the steppes barbarians, and then in the first provincial quarrels which would eventually culminate in their liege crowning himself God-Emperor. In the unlikely case he would have been sufficiently idiot to not respect them, their sheer numbers and their martial history had spread across the lands of the Grand Empire for decades.

Due to his exalted rank, many security measures and protocols nobles had to comply with every time were discarded for him. Therefore it took him only a mere ten minutes, not the usual half-hour to enter the inner throne room and prostrate himself before his divine liege.

And, as if Du Bu needed a proof the legitimate sovereign of the Golden-Empire had the defeat of Hai-Phong fresh in his mind, he was not authorised to leave this position of supplication.

“We are displeased, General,” said God-Emperor Pol Qo, First Divine Sovereign of the Orange Dynasty, Fist of Trade Town, Celestial-Marshal of the Yi-Tish Armies and Fleets, Light of Heaven, Heir to the Pearl Ascendancy, Prince of Yin and General of All Legions.

“Your Celestial Divine Greatness,” Dai Bu did his best not to sweat or shake, “I implore your forgiveness.”

That he certainly had done nothing wrong gave him nausea and stomach ulcers, but these days, speaking like he did five years ago would lead him straight to the execution square.

“As well you should,” the Orange God-Emperor said bitterly. “It was your advice which made me sent General Xin against the forces of the False-Emperor Bu Gai.”

What? In no less than seven public meetings, Du Bu had argued for the exact opposite!

“Your Celestial Greatness,” the ‘divine’ was omitted and he slightly raised his body in a more comfortable position. “I fear your courtiers have misled you. I argued against the appointment of General Xin to the position of-“

“Are you saying, General, that I have made a mistake?”

Suddenly, Du Bu was seized by an atrocious doubt. Had he really known the man in front of him? There were always proverbs the celestial ascension changed men, but Pol Qo surely couldn’t have changed that much in five years?

And his treacherous brain, always prompt to give him the good answers at the worst moments, told him that yes, yes people could change and end up becoming the very thing they had rebelled against.

The moment of despair lasted a couple of seconds, but firmly he put a lid on his fears and took control of himself. Whether his supreme commander was insane, the pawn of his concubines and courtiers, or something far worse wasn’t the problem. No, this ‘honour’ belonged to the monumental defeat Xin had suffered at Hai-Phong. Yu Fei the Buffoon had trounced the Orange Legions for the third time this season, and utterly destroyed four of the six Legions engaged in the battle, and the fleet which had provided transport and space superiority was so damaged it was going to be removed from active service the moment it returned in the capital system.

Strategically, the only reserves the Orange God-Emperor had left were the two Legions and the fleet defending Trade Town. This was a rapport of force of two and one against at least five and three for the Azure horde. Unless Pol Qo allowed him to really exert his command, they were going to lose, and fast.

“Yes, you have,” it was high treason, per the most ancient protocols and the new laws proclaimed last moon. It was also the truth. And when it came to it, why not add another outrage? Without warning, Du Bu stopped prostrating himself and stood.

“You dare!”

The veteran officer had expected a lot of things when he would again be honoured to watch his sovereign. He had not expected the sight which offered itself now to his astonished eyes. The orange and red robes worn by the man in front of him were night clothes, by the spirit of the Maiden-made-of-Light! And judging by his reddened tone and his weird slurring, Pol Qo was drunk, and not because he had added one drink too many. If he had doubts, there were shadows in the room behind of several empty bottles. And the odour of incense, now that his nose knew what to look for, was not sufficient to disguise the pungent smell of rice alcohol.

“You dare!”

“I dare, yes. I was here with ten other Generals when you convinced us claiming the throne was necessary to prevent Bu Gai the mad from dispending billions of Jade Yuan on a threat which didn’t exist. I supported you because I believed you could lead us to a new Age of Glory!”

“We are leading you to a new Age of Glory! It is not our fault all of your treacherous and disloyal band of carrion-eaters are unable to win us a single victory?”

Each word was slurred and the shouting was more akin to spitting on his face, or it would have been if the distance wasn’t so great.

“I...tolerated...your...insolence...long...enough. We...have...decided...to...arrest...you...for crimes of lese-majesty! Guards! Guards!”

But the last words lost themselves in a gurgle of drunkard, and fortunately or unfortunately, no battalion of the Imperial Guard came through the doors behind him to lead him to the cells.

This realisation made him raise his eyebrows. Why weren’t they guards in this room? He had written the rules to protect his liege, there should have been at least four or five men to avoid an assassination attempt.

“Guards! Guards!”

The first laser shot hit his left arm and provoked a lot of pain he had believed he would be spared from as a General. The second took him in the chest. As did the third and the fourth.

Du Bu fell. But he didn’t fall quickly enough to not see a courtesan wearing flowery robes in red and white approach his former childhood friend.

There should have been sounds of fighting. There should have been a battle, a proud duel for the ages, or something to show in the chronicles. He was a General of the Golden Empire! He deserved better! It couldn’t end like this...

“Good...you...will...be...rewarded...” There was a sound of someone serving the drinks, and seconds after the voice of Pol Qo became more lucid and coherent. Du Bu didn’t try to listen to the conversation, he was too busy trying to prevent his blood from leaving his body. But he heard the words nonetheless, and they hurt his soul deeply. “I always knew you couldn’t be trusted, General! You think I didn’t find the documents where you wanted to occupy the seat of regent for my eldest son?”

The Orange loyalist’s mind tried to understand the meaning of the words, and failed. What was Pol Qo saying? He had never tried to become a Regent of anything...

“Actually,” the courtesan intervened in a lovely voice, “he could be trusted. You were just too stupid and gullible, usurper.”

His vision was darkening, but not enough to not watch as the woman drew a dagger and her dagger struck in a location no man wanted anyone to inflict injury to. The Master of Trade Town and the Orange Palace shrieked in agony.

“Yue...why?” Pol Qo managed to gasp.

“My name is Sun San, General of the Azure dynasty.”

“GUARDS!”

“They won’t come. They ate poisoned rice and their drinks were spiked to make them sleepy. Now traitor, it’s time to die.”

The woman sliced the Imperial throat in a swift and merciless move.

And Du Bu knew for certain, as his eyes closed forever, that their ambitions to create a new Yi-Tish dynasty and restore the Golden Empire to its proud warriors were doomed.

**Sorcerer-God Chai Mu, 31.09.300AAC, Yellow Bastion, Carcosa System, Further East Expanse**

There were men, Chai Mu knew, who genuinely believed pushing forwards a claim to a political position was the first step in improving the living conditions of the vermin toiling below their palaces or above their heads in the gigantic orbital foundries and ammunition and war machines’ factories.

Others claimed it was the will of the Gods, and maybe they believed it when they were nice zealots. Thousands more reasons could be recited; thousands of excuses could be heard.

But in the end, if anyone was realistic and sincere, the reason why most people wanted to rise to a more important level of existence was simple: power.

Humanity was truly a fascinating species in this regard. A lot of animals had strict specialised caste systems, or failing that, respected the rule that the strongest was in command of the collective.

Not so the humans. Kingdoms and Empires had been built across the stars. Millions of ships went from one stellar system to another, great spaceports welcomed merchants of a hundred civilisations, and a hundred thousand people were born and died at any moment, but the eras where the strongest ruled over the vermin was long dead.

Or so he had believed a couple of years ago. The validity of this stance – his stance – wasn’t as solidly grounded in his beliefs now, much as he wanted to pretend the contrary.

And it was annoying, for a lot of reasons he wasn’t going to reveal to the first peon in the streets of Carcosa.

“Mighty Master of Magic, Celestial Light of the East, Sorcerer-God of Yellow,” saluted him his Minister of Red. “The representative of the Xiao Bank desires to meet you.”

Chai Mu muttered a curse under his breath. When he had proclaimed himself the new Yellow God-Emperor, the assumption had been that the job was fun. Seriously, the Lord-Sorcerer had bypassed the magical wards of Yin long ago, and he knew for sure the God-Emperor had thousands of concubines from the most prestigious dynasties and of carefully bred lineages ready to assuage all his pleasures, great and low. The Yin Palaces were maybe not paradise, but they were the closest thing, in his informed opinion. Gardens, musicians, the finest artwork, the finest food, the finest libraries, thousands of warriors and sorcerers to fulfil each and every one of your projects...if someone said he was not tempted, Chai Mu would have treated this man of liar.

Obviously, this sum of wealth, privileges and beauty should go to the mightiest man in the galaxy, not a lazy imbecile which spent most of his days drunk and gaining weight, leaving to an army of eunuchs the ruling of the greatest galactic empire in existence.

And Chai Mu was the mightiest man, or at least the mightiest sorcerer. Thus the title of God-Emperor and the authority which went with it should be his by right.

His victory had been all but assured, truthfully. The last crowned head of the Azure Dynasty was, according to all accounts, weak and easily manipulated; and rebellion from several figures, including several of the ‘Orange faction’, was brewing. The plan was to rally most nobles respectful of his magical prowess to his yellow banner, and to burn the rest in planet-sized pyres.

This had been the plan. It had met...setbacks...yes, he was going to call them setbacks.

“Let him enter.”

The golden doors of his ceremonial room opened to reveal an ordinary man with the usual black working clothes of their shameful profession. Mu had always been distrustful of the actions of this miserable class of upstart weaklings, who without a battle or spell, seemed always to find their ways in the confidence of the powerful whether victory or defeat was in the menu.

These feelings hadn’t been in the least diminished by the last events in the Golden Empire. And as the banker, whose name was Hung or Huang or...or something approaching, refused to do more than a short nod, Chai Mu felt an urge to transform this parasite into a frog or a rat.

“Prosperity and chance on your enterprises, Lord-Sorcerer Chai Mu,” the plain-looking banker said while arriving in front of his throne. “The Xiao Bank is pleased to have been admitted in your presence to discuss affairs of great importance.

“Yes,” the most powerful sorcerer in the galaxy gritted his teeth, “affairs of great importance, indeed. To begin with, there’s the serious matter of your betrayal of the pact we made. We had an accord, and yet my agents have found you granted loans to Bu Gai and his pathetic band of heroes. Loans of a value of...” he paused three seconds for maximum effect, “thirty trillions of Yuan.”

Whispers of the lesser sorcerers he kept nearby to serve as a court worthy of his status whispered and raised their voices to manifest their reprobation at this perfidy.

“Give me a reason why I shouldn’t transform you into a frog, impale you on a meat skewer, and send you to your superiors to show them my Godly displeasure.”

“An aggression upon a representative of the Xiao Bank would have severe consequences for you, Lord-Sorcerer,” the man looked calm to an extreme degree, but Mu wasn’t most people. His sorcery allowed him to see beyond the veil where mortal eyes stopped, and he could taste the fear and the revulsion of the financial messenger. “We are the river and the fire, the iron and the jade of the Golden Empire. A strike against an emissary of the Bank would be tantamount to ask for an immediate repayment of all the loans your new nation made before this year is over.”

“It would be certainly difficult for me,” Chai Mu smiled, observing with considerable delight the limbs of the banker twitch in worry. “But I can’t help but notice the Xiao Bank failed to respect the accords they signed in their own blood. The terms, I believed stated clearly and unambiguously that the financial institutions your masters possessed would not, for all the duration of this civil war, loan or give out any form of economic assistance to the False Emperors known as Bu Gai and Pol Qo. Listening to your voice right now makes me wonder how many of the accords have truly been respected on your side.”

“No form of economic assistance was provided to the Azure and Orange claimants!”

Chai Mu raised a finger, and the equivalent of a burning brand marked the left arm of the banker. The wretched screamed and screamed, evidently having no tolerance to pain whatsoever.

“The spirit of the treaty has been violated,” he said in the tone he supposed should be used on disobedient children. “You are giving massive loans to Sun Bin the Strategist, new Prime Minister of Yin in absence of Bu Gai. Did you think I was not going to be informed of your peasant-level manipulations?”

Honestly, it was almost insulting. He was a Lord-Sorcerer, Gods damn it! His range was hundreds of light-years-long! But like perfect imbeciles, they put lock on their doors and hid in shadowy rooms to sign forbidden accords, and they believed he wasn’t going to be informed of their betrayals.

A second magical brand found its way on the right arm.

“If...you...kill...me...you...will...lose...the...support of the...few planets...near...Yin...who wanted you to be their ruler,” the tortured man gasped with enormous difficulty.

“You mean you have not sold my supporters to the eunuch-in-chief?” Chai Mu asked conversationally, and had the satisfaction to see the visage of the man redden under the calculated insult. “Yes, I am aware of this betrayal too.”

After a long reflexion, the Lord of Carcosa had arrived to only two possible reasons the bankers had tried to manipulate him that way: they were ignorant of his real capabilities, both magical and non-magical, or they truly believed their precautions were sufficient to offset his wrath.

Maybe the military defeats of his armies and fleets against the Blue Dragoness and the Cheater had given these idiots ideas above their station? Yes, this had to be it...

“I am really disappointed by your dispirited and meaningless betrayals,” Chai Mu confessed in a tone which didn’t even try to be sorrowful.

“The Xiao Bank is sorry you feel that way,” the Huang imbecile answered. “But the fact remain you are going to lose, and the threat the God-Emperor faces at the Five Forts must be addressed.”

“In this case,” the Yellow God-Emperor explained jovially, “you and your superiors should not have signed in blood our pact.”

Chai Mu concentrated and exerted the equivalent of a sorcery grip upon the bonds sworn in blood and ink by the Xian Bank. It was exhausting, though he would never admit it. But betrayal had to be punished severely.

When it was over, all the oath-bound members of the Xiao Bank were turned into frogs, beginning with the specimen in front of him, which was croaking in surprise.

“Sorcerers! I have realised we have made a grave mistake! Bu Gai was not the problem limiting our ambitions! It was always these Yuan-counters of bankers and usurers!”

He was going to lose this civil war now. The Imperial visit to the oracle had completely upturned the situation, and the latest series of disasters and betrayals had made the situation collapse on all the theatres his forces had been involved.

“I am going to take the field in person! And this time, we will punish the traitors!”