

THE FALL OF THE OLD GODS

A Chthonian Prehistory Serial

Anthony Hadley

CHAPTER THREE: ELEVEN-THREE-EIGHT

“Horus,” Xyr spat. The name rang through the vaulted ceiling and hung in the air, an accusation none of them could deny.

Eight of the chthonian leaders were sat together in the Colosseum council chamber. Nexus sat between Yaphet and Paternus, with Tellith at the Olympian’s other side. Karos and Thanatos were leaning against opposite walls, both glaring around the room as though expecting someone to draw arms; this was, after all, the first time they had been gathered for a formal meeting, even though it was something of an inquisition. Xyr remained on his feet, pacing back and forth before the entrance with his arms folded tight across his chest and a dark scowl across his face.

Only Horus was missing.

“Do not decide too early on Horus being the culprit,” Nexus began, his voice filling the chamber. “Well do you know how-“

“Do not imagine you can deal with this better than I!” Xyr snapped, thrusting a finger angrily in the Emperor’s direction. “I have worked for this Empire for nigh on three decades, and not for my lack of deductive reasoning!

“We open the Colosseum to outsiders for the first time in history, and mere hours later there is a theft. One of said outsiders is conspicuous by his absence. I have locked down the Colosseum already; nobody gets in or out. Those documents will not leave the building.”

Nexus felt Yaphet shift uncomfortably beside him and place a hand on his forearm. “I hope your strategist knows what he is doing,” she whispered. Xyr to turn his head in her direction for a moment, and was about to bring his anger to bear on her when Nexus’ gaze turned him away again.

“Stolen along with my notes was a small sample of biometal.” Xyr raised his left arm slightly, revealing a small silver band wrapped around it. “Not enough to be noticed by the thief, but enough for me to have detected. That sample is not within this room. You are all innocent.

“Horus is the thief.”

Nexus turned to look at the Ularian Seneschal as her grip on his arm tightened. Her brow was furrowed, her mouth beginning to turn down at the corner. Her emotions, though, were unreadable; fear, concern, or anger?

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It was quite surprising, Horus noted, that he had made it so far without being accosted. He had heard the alarms as the Colosseum was placed on high alert, and had no doubt that everybody in the building knew who he was and what he had done – at the very least, they would know they were looking for an Ularian. His people were quite obvious amongst Hadeans – whilst they were more similar than the Olympians, they had much fairer skin and their hair was nearly always straight and black. With only three of them in the entire city – and he the only male – he couldn’t hope to remain undetected for long. He had to head for the hangar.

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The Pharaoh had never trusted the Olympians or Hadeans, and it was that on which he acted now. Xyr's notes were part of an investigation into the single most powerful substance the chthonians had ever discovered. Yaphet, the infernal Arbiter that she was – a title she had been graced with by chthonians the world over – may have been willing enough to trust them with it, but Horus was a little too much a realist for that. For centuries, all the Hadeans and Olympians had known was war; hundreds upon hundreds of years of ever-lasting conflict. The spark of the conflict had long been lost, and all they knew was that if they didn't strike first, the other would attack them. If that thought alone had been enough to fuel them for centuries, no doubt this fragile peace of theirs would fracture and break as soon as someone found a way to weaponise this new material. Perhaps if Horus were able to discover its true nature before the others, he would have some way of stopping the destruction he saw rushing towards them.

The sound of heavy footsteps reached Horus' ears. The Pharaoh cursed; he had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he wasn't checking his surroundings properly and had almost run into a Hadean patrol. They were approaching from the left, where the end of the corridor met three others. He checked his surroundings and ducked into a doorway beside him. He had closed the door behind himself and flattened against it before he had time to check his surroundings.

As luck would have it – be that good or bad luck he was yet undecided – he was in what appeared to be a cross between a store room, an armoury, and a guard post. Said guard post was manned; a partly-armoured Hadean guard was staring at him, utterly dumbstruck.

Horus lashed out with his ceremonial kontos before the guard could respond, whirling it over his head and bringing the flat side of the blade to bear on the guard's wide ribcage. He crumpled, winded, and stumbled to the side, but Horus knew better than to accept the victory. Whirling the blade back up over his head, he flicked a switch embedded into the elaborate handle; the air crackled as white-hot energy arced over the blade, turning the otherwise archaic tool into a dangerous weapon. He thrust the blade downward, and it would have pierced straight through the guard's breastplate had he not been raising his arm at the same moment. The small vibrodagger was enough to deflect the energised kontos, and its blade instead embedded itself in the flagstone floor.

The Hadean apparently thought that gave him an advantage, as he had unbuckled his plasma pistol from his right thigh and had raised it towards the Ularian, a grin beginning to blossom across his ugly face. Clearly he thought he had won. As Horus was about to demonstrate, he was wrong. Uliarians may not fight often, but they certainly aren't left wanting for practice; Horus, like every other man in Ularis, had received extensive combat and self-defence training. Using the long handle of his Kontos to brace himself, he swung first one leg and then the other towards the guard. The vicious scissor kick knocked the pistol from his hand and sent it skittering across the floor, breaking the guard's wrist in the process. As the guard shouted in pain and the vibrodagger came up from the other direction, Horus' left leg made contact with that too and he pinned the guard to the floor by his left wrist. Using what was left of his momentum, he pulled the kontos from the ground and whirled it once more, this time bringing the blade in a downward arc that passed clean through the guard's throat. There was no blood; the white heat of the blade cauterised the wound almost instantly and the severed head rolled back against the floor.

Horus wasted no time in donning the guard's armour; whilst Hadeans were, on average, slightly shorter than his own people, he would be able to pass as one if he covered his face. Spotting the half-empty armour stand he pulled on the rest of the suit, donning the plastometallic greaves and attaching his cloak to the outside of the

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breastplate, stowing his collapsed kontos and the stolen documents beneath it. With the helmet over the top he would appear to the casual gaze as a Hadean captain. Retrieving the plasma pistol from the corner it had skittered into in case he had to defend himself, he stole from the room and headed for the hangar.

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“Who authorised the launch?” Xyr stormed, staring incredulously at the infolink on his wrist. “What do you mean, nobody? I ordered this building locked down and you just let fighter leave! Do you realise you have just allowed the very fugitive you are hunting to escape?”

Xyr closed the communication and turned back to the seven other assembled leaders. This was bad; immeasurably so. He drew a breath and glowered at them all. Nexus rose from his seat and walked across to his aide as Paternus began to speak. “Xyr, you must release the lockdown and allow us to leave.”

Xyr stiffened further. If he was wrong, if Horus wasn’t acting alone and he was working with an accomplice - or an accomplice himself – he could be digging his own grave. He was about to roar a response when Nexus placed a hand on his shoulder. Xyr didn’t respond until Nexus’ grip was nearly tight enough for his claws to draw blood.

“What do you propose?” he asked, deflated and his voice hoarse.

“Your dockhand said the fighter Horus left in is one of the fastest in the Hadean fleet; nobody has one faster. You will never catch him now.”

“You need not tell me what I already know, Olympian,” the strategist snapped.

“My men can catch him.” Paternus explained, giving Xyr a moment for confusion to cross his face. Since we discovered biometal Olympian scientists have been working on it around the clock, and we have been able to create engines faster than any we’ve been able to manufacture before. These engines have been implemented into scout craft; Flight 1138 pilot top-secret fighters more advanced than any we’ve seen anywhere on Icarus - even yours. If this situation is as dire as you describe, and you let me return to Olympus, I can call them into service and we can catch this fugitive before he reaches the moon.”

Xyr’s expression of confusion changed to one of incredulity. “You had these advanced fighters and thought not to tell us?” he asked.

“Wartime,” was the simple response. “I cannot give away all my people’s military secrets so readily, lest Karos have my head.” Paternus gestured to the general, still leaning silent against the wall, by way of illustration. “As to how I knew your fugitive was heading to the moon, well... if I wanted to know more about the metal, that’s where I would go.”

Xyr’s response was simple.

“Go.”

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Olympian Flight 1138 should be read before this section.

Korvin sat in the antechamber of the Council Hall, his wingman Karpath beside him. They had been recalled to Olympus from testing the Olympian Armada's new fighters, and currently neither of them knew why. They had been met by a palace guard on arrival, and now they were waiting for an audience with Councillor Paternus, the leader of the Olympian people.

Korvin had been inside the palace before, but only ever the public sections. The private sectors, which were restricted to military and council staff, were much plainer. While the outside corridors were wide and high, lined with ornamentation and art, those inside were smaller, and much more utilitarian, though somehow did not lack the feeling of importance and majesty. And the door in front of him was quite obviously important.

Korvin saw Karpath turn around out of the corner of his eye, and followed his gaze. The guard who had met them at the hangar was back. He motioned with a gloved hand for them to follow him.

"Paternus will see you now."

Korvin looked behind him, surprised that they weren't heading towards the council chambers, and heard Karpath ask the guard where they were going.

"The council isn't in session," the guard replied. "Paternus is in his private quarters."

The guard led them through the long and winding corridors of the Olympus Palace, and up so many flights of stairs Korvin imagined they would surely pass the clouds. By the time they stopped, his legs were sore; perhaps he shouldn't have eaten so much earlier.

The door they stopped before was unassuming, exactly like the dozens of others they had passed by and passed through on the way here, and yet the guard simply stood at attention beside it. Korvin looked at Karpath as though for guidance; receiving nothing but a shrug in return, Korvin reached out a hand and knocked.

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"Enter,"

Two pilots eased their way into Paternus' office and stood stiffly to attention in front of his desk. He had to hold back a sigh; he never could fully understand the rigidity Karos imprinted on the Armada. No doubt that came with being a politician.

"At ease, gentlemen," he said, waving a hand towards the seats set before his desk. The pilots looked confused for a moment, then sat down gently, as though afraid of breaking something. Paternus laughed gently.

"I imagine you are wondering why I have recalled you both?" he asked. They only nodded in reply.

"The Hadeans have brought something to my attention; something that only the best pilots and fastest fighters on the planet can deal with. That's you."

"With all due respect, Councilor," one of the pilots began, "Are the Hadeans not our enemies?"

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“A month ago, perhaps; things have changed since then, as well you know. Now, you both fought against the Titans when they arrived... you know what is at stake here.”

The pilots stared at once another, struggling to process what Paternus had just told them. After a moment, the other began to speak.

“The Titans... they aren’t coming back, are they?”

“With the help of one of our own, they might,” Paternus began. A hologram appeared on his desk. “This is Pharaon Horus, of the Ularian Conclave. The Uliarians are known for pacifism, as you know, but Horus is something of an extremist. Seneschal Yaphet accepts his presence in the Conclave as a necessity, no more.

“Four hours ago he murdered a Hadean guard and fled the Colosseum with stolen biometal research. Strategist Xyr, of the Hadean Crown, suspects he is headed to the moon; if he gets there, we daren’t imagine what might happen.

“You are being redeployed. You are to chase Horus down, preferably before he reaches the moon, and recover the stolen research. Your fighters are being prepared as we speak; you will be departing in twenty-five minutes. Until then, your time is your own. Good luck.”

As the pilots rose to leave, Paternus spoke again.

“Korvin, might I suggest you seek out Sarh? She has been awaiting your return.”

The taller of the two pilots flushed a bright red as they bowed and headed for the door.