

# THE FALL OF THE OLD GODS

A Chthonian Prehistory Serial

*Anthony Hadley*

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## CHAPTER FOUR: CERBERUS

Horus sat in the cockpit of the fighter, gathering his things. He was still dressed in the Hadean guard's armour, but had stowed his cloak and kontos and folded the documents neatly into one of the suit's many airtight containers.

When he had fled the Colosseum, Horus had set course for Ularis, intending to examine the papers he had stolen in greater detail in a laboratory. Xyr had even been thoughtful enough to include a sample of the material embedded into the papers; no doubt he thought it would go undetected. No sooner had Horus left Hadean space, however, than he had an idea. Something had told him the sample he had might not survive the tests he wanted to perform; he would need more. He adjusted his course accordingly for Cerberus, the dark and silent moon. The trip took him only a few hours more.

Horus climbed down from the cockpit of his stolen fighter, landing lightly on the moon below him. Icarus hung accusingly in the sky above, almost as though it knew what he was about to do. He glared back, stopping just short of telling the planet aloud that it was for its own good; one of the guards stationed at the Hadean outpost was approaching. He had chosen to land at the outpost to avoid arousing suspicion, but he knew he would have to explain his way out of the situation using something other than the plasma pistol strapped to his right hip.

The Pharaon stopped for a moment, and thought. He had been planning to tell the guards he was running an inspection, deflecting their intentions of checking up on him by telling them he had been authorized by Xyr himself, who was busy (which was partly true; Xyr was no doubt running himself ragged searching for Horus on the planet below). A better idea had just surfaced in his head; why pretend to be what he is not? Against his better judgment – thinking on the spur of the moment was not something he did often – he decided to run with it, and grabbed the bundle of his cloak and kontos from the cockpit before turning back to the guard.

"Your arrival is unexpected," a voice said over the radio.

"I apologise," Horus replied. "I would have responded to your hails, but my microphone is broken. A better explanation shall have to wait until we are inside."

His authoritative response set the guard on his back foot as Horus had expected, so he simply marched towards the outpost, leaving the stunned Hadean behind him.

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Flight eleven-three-eight were fifty miles out over the ocean towards Ularis when a voice crackled over the radio.

"Control to flight eleven-three-eight, do you read me? Come in, eleven-three-eight,"

Korvin smiled; it was Sahr. He and the Palace air-marshal had shared a close friendship since they had been in training.

"Control, this is eleven-three-eight," Karpath replied, a note of irritation in his voice. "Do you have a lead on the target yet?" Karpath's annoyance was understandable; it had been an hour since they had taken off from the palace, and five-and-a-half since the Pharaon had fled; more than enough for him to have reached Ularian territory.

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“Affirmative,” Sarh answered. “Please confirm that your fighters are spaceflight-capable?”

“Our fighters are airtight,” Karpath said, confused, “and ice-fusion engines should work in space. Why, where did he go?”

“You’re being redirected to Cerberus,” Sarh replied. “We’ve tracked the Pharaon’s fighter to the moon.”

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Horus left the decontamination airlock to be met by a pair of guards wielding plasma rifles. He sighed; Hadeans weren’t the most hospitable of people. The guard who had gone out to meet him stepped out of the secondary airlock and removed his helmet.

“So,” he asked. “Who are you, and why are you here?”

Plan still forming in his head, Horus pulled his helmet off. “I am Pharaon Yalan Horus of the Ularian Conclave,” he announced, throwing his cloak around himself and fastening it across his breast as he unfolded his kontos. “I am here on the orders of the Seneschal to examine your research into biometal.”

Fortunately, Horus was just about well-known enough for the Hadean guards to accept his story. All the same, it was inevitable that one of them should ask to contact the Seneschal to make sure his visit had been authorized.

“The Seneschal, I am afraid, has been in counsel with the Olympian Councillor and your own Emperor at the Colosseum for the last two days. Necropolis is currently under cover of night; if you wish to disturb either of them, you are more than welcome.” The guards seemed a little put off by the idea of bothering the Emperor personally at such an hour. “Now, unless there is anything else, I’d like to be shown to your primary laboratory. If someone could refuel the borrowed fighter, I’d be much obliged. I assume General Thanatos would like it back at some point.”

Either he’d satisfied the guards or they had simply had enough of his presence, as the two who had been pointing rifles at him left to return to their posts and his escort started off down the corridor, calling out for Horus to follow.

“We’ve been stationed here for just under three months now,” the guard began to explain. Horus was listening, but not paying much attention; the activity on the other side of the lab windows caught most of his attention. “We set up here not long after the moon arrived in orbit, and started investigating its composition. It seems to be constructed entirely of a metallic substance we call “biometal”, though even three months in we’re still not sure what biometal is. We know roughly what it can do, though; it’s an incredibly complex substance. There’s only so much I can explain. The scientists would be better at explaining it to you.”

A door slid open before them and they stepped out into a large, open room, lined with tables filled with equipment and machinery. Another Hadean, this one in more civilian dress, scurried forward to meet them.

“Greetings, Pharaon,” he said, clearly not sure whether to bow or offer a hand. “I am the head scientist on this project; I manage all of our experiments and-“

“Fantastic,” Horus cut in. “Show me all of your research notes and grant me free access to your laboratory. You and your staff are dismissed.”

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"You can't do that!" the scientist began, outraged. The guard beside him looked as though he were about to respond similarly when Horus cut in again.

"I can and am. You have already been informed I am here on authorization from the Seneschal and Emperor. All of our nations are allied now, and I have been called upon to collate all of the information we have on this material. Leave me."

The guard opened his mouth again as though he were about to say something else, then shut it and left the room. The scientist stood there with a confused expression on his face, before scurrying into an office somewhere to gather together stacks of notes.

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Two hours later, Horus sat at a desk, across which he had spread a pile of papers. In his hands there rested a small lump of metal, about twice the size of his fist; one of the samples the laboratory staff had been working on. He had only been studying it for a while, but it had already told him all he needed to know; one way or another, this metal would be the end of them all.

He knew the moment he grasped the lump that it had been a mistake. As he did so, he felt a sensation he was unable to describe, almost like something cold slipping into the back of his mind. He had shaken it off at first, but as he studied the details it began to grow slowly stronger. Moments of delirium had begun to interrupt his progress, visions of Icarus in flames, Ularis in ruins, Sakhel and Yaphet's mutilated corpses lying amongst thousands of others. All the while, the cold presence in his mind grew stronger; as he stared into the darkness, he could feel the darkness staring back into him.

Gradually, the slow burning horror of the truth began to rest upon him. This material, this strange metal that had rained down upon the chthonians from the alien destroyers, was *alive*. It lived, it thought, it seethed and churned beneath its deceptively smooth and peaceful exterior as it plotted their destruction. The metal moon was of its creation, and the monsters that had attacked them its spawn. Through the briefest snatches of sanity Horus was able to grasp amongst the ever-increasing delirium and frenzied research, it became clear that the metal he held would inevitably become the destruction of the chthonian people. Those last snatches of sanity revealed no respite or escape, no way out; if the chthonians fought the metal, their combat would only fuel its hunger. It would devour the chthonian people whole, and Icarus would soon follow. The metal would corrupt Icarus into a warped copy of itself, and the ravenous planetoids would begin anew, searching for another planet, teeming with life for them to devour. And so the chain would continue, until all life in the galaxy fell under the spell of the horrendous material. If the chthonians surrendered to the metal, allowed the metal to devour them whole, their planet would soon follow.

But as the cold fingers of insanity began to grasp the Pharaoh's genius mind, another plan began to form. If the chthonians turned upon themselves, voluntarily becoming thralls to the metal and destroying those who did not turn, the metal would be left with nothing left to feed upon. The chthonians would exist in a blazing orgy of violence and self-destruction for perhaps two generations at most, but then they would eventually war themselves into inexistence; and with them they would drag biometal to oblivion.

For a moment Horus' mind was completely clear, the obvious solution cutting through the madness clouding his mind. The chthonians had the choice between living in a constant struggle for generations only to fail and be

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devoured by a foe that would then go on to wreak the same havoc worlds over, or destroying themselves in a few short generations of war and taking their foe with them, sparing untold thousands of worlds the same pain they undoubtedly were to suffer.

*No, he thought. The chthonians don't have that choice. I have that choice. What I must do is clear.*

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“Control, this is Olympian flight eleven-three-eight; we are approaching the designated landing site.”

Korvin toggled his radio again, only to be met with the same harsh white noise.

“Control?” he asked again. There was no reply.

“Something’s jamming us, Korvin,” he heard Karpath tell him. “Probably Horus. We’ll need to land and take the jammer out before we can send a message out.”

Gradually, the landing site became visible through the dense blue fog that surrounded the surface of the cold metal moon. There, in an extraordinary regularly-shaped crater, sat the fighter they had been tracking, the objective marker around it on their head-up displays blinking slowly. About a hundred metres north was a small research station, little more than a cluster of prefabricated buildings of Hadean design. Presumably it was one of the dozen-or so outpost scattered across Cerberus dedicated to researching biometal and discovering its secrets.

“That must be where Horus went,” Korvin decided, nosing his craft down over the crater and beginning his descent.