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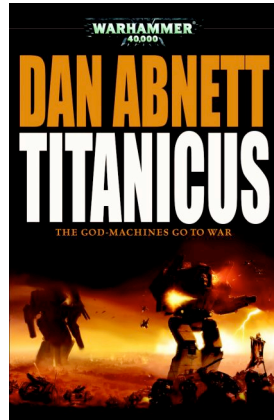
TITANICUS

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Dan Abnett

When the vital forge world of Orestes comes under attack by a legion of Chaos Titans, the planet is forced to appeal for help. Titan Legio Invicta, although fresh from combat and in desperate need of refit and repair, responds, committing its own force of war engines to the battle. As the god-machines stride to war, the world trembles, for the devastation they unleash could destroy the very world they have pledged to save.

Savage Titan action on an apocalyptic scale and dark political intrigue meet head-on in this Warhammer 40,000 epic.



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, the Inquisitor Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, the Horus Heresy novel Horus Rising. Together with author Mike Lee, he has also worked on the Malus Darkblade series.

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The following is an excerpt from *Titanicus* by Dan Abnett.
Published by the Black Library, Games Workshop, Willow Road,
Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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COMING INTO JEROMIAH Subsidiary from the east at full stride, the rain
on their skin, watching the haze for spoor, Max Orfuls called out for
a dead stop.

‘Dead stop, aye,’ his moderati, Strakhov, echoed, and the engine
slowed to a shuddering halt. Hydraulics hissed under them as the
beast settled back on its hips, its body-bulk swaying slightly. The
idling power plant grumbled behind them in its steel safe like a
fretful ogre. Some portion of the chassis subframe creaked as it took
weight. The only other sounds were the thin patter of rain on the
armour plate and the cockpit ports, and an occasional ping or chime
from the consoles.

Strakhov turned in his chin-seat and looked back at Orfuls in the
main chair. ‘Anything wrong, princeps?’ he asked. It was Strakhov’s
duty to ask, even though he knew full well that nothing was amiss.
This was one of Orfuls’s regular combat rituals. Most princeps
began their execution logs the moment they plugged in and linked to
their MIUs at drive-start. Orfuls preferred to wait until he was about
to step into the shooting zone.

‘Everything’s fine, Strak,’ said Orfuls. ‘Indulge me a moment, if
you will.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Strakhov replied, and returned to his station. He and
Orfuls had served together for a long time, and their relationship
was good enough to be classed as a friendship, but once Orfuls was

plugged in, Strakhov knew to treat him with cautious respect. Once Orfuls was plugged in, he wasn't quite Orfuls any more.

Max Orfuls looked down at his hands, resting on the arms of the main chair. The leather sleeves of his jacket lay against the cracked leather upholstery. His pale fingers twitched slightly to the beat-pulse of the plant.

He closed his eyes.

His left hand became a Vulcan mega-bolter. His right hand became a plasma blastgun. His sleeves, his leather jacket, became dense ceramite armour, twenty centi-measures thick, the rain tapping off it. His legs became back-hinged limbs with vast, metal toes splayed in the Orestean mire. His heart became a furnace that throbbled unpleasantly like a chained sun. In his mind, another intellect, invasive and alien, bristled and growled like a hunting dog, an angry, barely trained attack dog ready to snap its choke-chain and—

Restraint!

Orfuls opened his eyes. He was back in the small, sloping cockpit, his steersman and moderati waiting for his orders in the chin-seats in front of him. The air smelled of heated plastics, of circulating lubricant and damp sweat, of the unguents and sacred oils that the tech-priests had used to propitiate the machine spirits at drive-start.

The feral thing growled again in the back of his skull, like a predator lying in wait at the darkest part of a lightless cave.

Be calm! Wait a moment longer!

There were no subtle haptic options on a battle engine, no noospheric links. Such nuances perished in the grind of combat, or were too easily compromised. In a battle engine, everything was hard-plugged and hard-switched. Orfuls pulled a brass lever on his left hand arm-console.

<active...>

‘Maximillian Filius Orfuls, princeps, Legio Invicta. I am linked to the mind impulse unit of the Warhound *Morbius Sire*. Is my authority recognised?’

<recognised...>

Orfuls manually entered the date, time and location using the punch-keys. 'We are now commencing Execution K494103. Begin log recording.'

<recording...>

Orfuls felt bilious and uncomfortable. He was still getting his engine legs. He'd been away from the plugs and the MIU for too long, and his head ached from the sting of reconnection. The princeps of the mighty Warlords remained in their amniotics at all times, soothed and pampered by permanent remote congress with their MIUs. No such luxury for hard-plugged Warhound commanders. Away from active duties, in transit, it was their lot to have their links disconnected, and they struggled with withdrawal shakes, limb cramps and night terrors, all the while longing for the joy of re-plugging.

It was never a joy when it came. The ancient mind impulse units of the veteran engines were surly and cantankerous, resentful at being woken, forwards in their response to instruction. It always took a while to regain trust and re-establish cooperation. It was like breaking in the same, rebellious steed every time you saddled it, or bringing to heel a ferocious dog.

Morbius Sire was an obdurate creature. Orfuls had guided its MIU through seventeen execution campaigns, during which they had made six hundred and eight confirmed kills on targets classified as heavy armour (various) or above. Even so, it still fought him. It still tested him, despite the tally they had chalked up together, tonne for tonne the best kill ratio in Invicta. *Morbius Sire*, like all Warhounds, was a tough princepture. Orfuls reassured himself that this was what made *Morbius Sire* such a murderously effective engine.

He cleared his throat and the power plant automatically revved in response. 'Moderati?'

'Princeps?'

'Do I have the Manifold?'

‘The Manifold is yours, princeps,’ Strakhov confirmed: another ritual, for the benefit of the recorded log. Orfuls had possessed the Manifold since drive-start on the Field of Mars. This exchange marked his formal acceptance of that fact.

The Manifold was the hard-plug equivalent of the noosphere, an immersive and interactive sensory space through which a princeps comprehended his engine and realised his environment. Orfuls settled back and let the Manifold flood him properly for the first time since plugging, until it felt as though it was seeping in behind his eyes and soaking into his brain. *Morbius Sire’s* truculence ebbed away, as if the Warhound knew that the bloody game was on at last.

Orfuls breathed gently. He could see and sense everything to a minute degree of sparkling clarity that had an almost lysergic quality: the loose weight of the munitions in the autoloaders, the ping of raindrops on the hull, the pulse rates of his moderati, calm and steady, and his steersman, eager and tense. He could feel the obedient low-brain murmur of the two weapon-servitors wired into his shoulders, and the steady, meditative vigilance of the tech-priest, Magos Zemplin, in the armoured engineeer cabin aft of the cockpit. He could feel the dull throb of the power plant in his belly, the ache from one leg where a piston needed to be re-set, the dirty heat of the plasma weapon’s reservoirs.

He could feel the bestial needs of *Morbius Sire*, attack dog, the thick, wet purr of a carnivorous predator.

Enough! Be patient!

‘Ahead, walk pace,’ Orfuls signalled.

The power plant snorted. Zemplin uttered a benediction to god-in-the-machine. The engine began to walk, its body rocking with each heavy pace.

‘Arm primary left,’ ordered Orfuls.

‘Arming primary left, aye,’ Strakhov and the port weapon-servitor responded in unison. The autoloaders rattled, and the megabolter cycled out to ready. Orfuls felt the tendons in his left wrist twitch, like a neurotic tic.

‘Arm primary right,’ he ordered.

‘Arming primary right,’ Strakhov and the starboard servitor chorused. Exhaust wash vented from a thermal exchanger as plasma levels built. Orfuls felt his right wrist prickle with heat-rash and bead with sweat.

‘Low stride advance,’ Orfuls ordered.

‘Low stride, aye,’ replied Strakhov. The Warhound began to pick up speed, the cockpit rocking ever more steadily.

‘Light auspex.’

‘Auspex alive,’ Strakhov answered.

Data plots began to slide and drift across Orfuls’s Manifold vision. Data, almost an overload of data, bombarded him visually and acoustically. Using his sub-links, he intuitively blanked off the clutter, and refined the auspex feed down to the four essential combat principals: heat, motion, mass and code activity.

Spoor.

The Manifold field cleaned up rapidly. Data streams eroded and vanished. The core essentials remained fixed and bright in the middle of his field of vision.

‘Begin data streaming,’ he instructed.

A sub-mechanism chattered, and a coloured pattern started to blink in the lower left-hand periphery of Orfuls’s view. *Morbius Sire* had begun transmitting its inload directly back to the rest of the pack, ten kilometres behind them, in a continuous, live feed.

The vox crackled. ‘Sire, sire, this is Bohrman. We are receiving your feed signal. Clean transmission. How does it look, eyes on?’

‘Pretty murky, sir. Jeromihah Subsidiary is a shambles.’

‘That much was a given. Scout the ground.’

‘My purpose in life, sir,’ Orfuls responded. ‘Anything from Lupus Lux?’

‘Negative at this time, Max. Good hunting.’

‘And to you, sir.’

The vox went dark. Orfuls expanded his view to three-sixty, taking in the monolithic bulk of Orestes Principal one-fifty-six point three-five kilometres behind him, the delicate peak of Mount Sigilite one-twenty-six point two-four kilometres to the south, and the heat-

bleed of Argentum Hive eighty point two-two kilometres ahead. There was a lot of fire smoke coming from Argentum. The peak of Mount Sigilite was as cold and hard as ice.

Orfuls switched to a tactical appreciation. He'd reviewed tactical data of the surface dozens of times on his way in-planet, immersing himself in the topography, learning it, but he called it up again anyway: suburb plan, block plan, street plan, overlay, pinpoint. Jeromihah Subsid was a vast outer-urban worker sprawl that almost but not quite connected the edge of Argentum Hive to the skirts of Orestes Principal. It was typical of the populous outspread found on many hive worlds, where low-grade worker domiciles erupted like plague pustules or virile weeds around key labour sites. The population of Jeromihah, little more than an authorised shanty town at best, worked the vast refineries at Shalter and Gox. Maglevs had been laid to allow the workforce to commute. Templums had been constructed, scholams, commercias. In ages to come, Jeromihah would become a hive and then it would join Orestes Principal and Argentum Hive together. Then all three would meld into a true super-hive spread.

If they survived this war...

Orfuls was able to determine their precise position. They were moving at low stride along Pax Divisible, a ten-kilometre avenue that ran through the heart of Jeromihah Subsid.

The hab-town was dead. Many of the street rows and sinks had been knocked flat or razed, others were on fire. Morbius Sire trod upon spilled rubble as often as it did open rockcrete. Via the Manifold, Orfuls was privy to a Munitorum inload that listed every hab, every registered identity, every family no longer living in the demolished dwellings.

Everywhere he looked, he could read the names of workers, their wives and children, people who would never return, families that hadn't made it out alive, the dead, the missing, the unidentified.

'Cancel population census manifest,' Orfuls instructed.

The tiny, painful script of the overlay vanished.

'Ommissiah grant me a target today,' he muttered.

The thing in his head snarled in sympathetic agreement.

THE WARHOUND RAN like a flightless bird.

It was heavy and hunched, snout down, weapon limbs held out at its sides like the stubs of vestigial wings. Its footfalls, like drum beats, shook water up out of shell holes as it passed by. It ran through the ruins of habs, sinks and manufactories, along shattered streets, down road cuttings, under shot-pocked viaducts, pausing to listen, to sniff.

From his chin-seat, Strakhov glanced back at his princeps. Orfuls was alert, focused, engaged. He was hunched over in his seat, unconsciously aping the posture of the Warhound. *Morbis Sire* was inside him, snuffling, growling.

They passed weed-littered empty lots, the roasted shells of once-fine buildings. In the Manifold, Orfuls switched his gaze left and right: a tangle of razor wire, the hull of a burned-out tank, and a row of iron street lamps bent over by the passage of some vast weight, twisted back like trees in a typhoon.

The heavy rain lent the Manifold a quality like smoked glass. Orfuls kept blinking away raindrops that weren't actually beading his eyelashes. He smelled wet rockcrete, leaking promethium and dank brick.

He heard sounds.

Distantly, hauntingly, the wild soar and squeal of sensor patterns and the strange whoops and wails of electromagnetic activity sang out. They came and went, like anguished voices, moaning for a moment, then silent, high-pitched and musical, then low and guttural. Interference, audio artefacts, bits of corrupted data and sensor noise were loose on the wind like lost souls.

Along with little harsh blurts of scrapcode.

'Dead stop.'

'Dead stop, aye,' Strakhov returned. *Morbis Sire* came to a halt inside the cavernous wreck of a municipal templum.

'Orders, sir?'

'Wait,' hissed Orfuls.

Pale, furtive beams of daylight poked in through shell holes high overhead. Echoes surrounded them. The rain dripped from the burst roof. Charred walls, three times the height of the crouching Warhound, loomed above them.

‘What are we doing, princeps?’ Strakhov asked.

‘Listening,’ Orfuls replied. ‘Hush.’

At the hush command, they killed the main drive and systems, almost asphyxiating the power plant. *Morbius Sire* was running at its most basic levels, a simple tick-over, just alive. Anything less, and they’d go dormant and have to restart. Outside, silence and the plip of water.

‘I can taste something,’ Orfuls muttered.

Ripples pulsed across the sheet pools around the Warhound’s feet, as if a wind had picked up and flurried. There was a distant boom and then the chug of rapid fire.

‘I think we have a contact,’ Strakhov agreed.

Orfuls nodded. ‘Three and a half kilometres east, heavy weapon discharge.’

He listened, his head craned to the right. Vox transmits and little squirts of scrapcode came and went.

He could indeed taste it: something dark, something made of black metal and rage, something that stank of aggression and filthy oil.

‘Orders?’

‘Boost the auspex,’ said Orfuls.

Hard return. The bastard was big. Three thousand and six hundred metres away to the east, an engine was in motion. It was betrayed by its heat signature, the wash of its weapons and its metallic bulk.

‘A Reaver,’ said Strakhov, consulting his console. ‘A Reaver, at least. Has to be.’

Orfuls nodded.

‘It’s firing again. Throne, that was a main weapon discharge!’

Orfuls nodded again. ‘Walk us on, left, left, to the edge of the structure. I’ll task the weapon systems for a firing solution.’

Re-igniting, *Morbius Sire* began to walk, creeping along the length of the bombed-out templum. Rainwater drooled off its heavy carapace.

Orfuls sat back in his chair, trying to clear his head. He had the taste in his mouth, the noxious taste of the foe. All he could see was screaming black metal, steel teeth and flames. The image scorched his mind. Orfuls knew he was gathering the raw ingredients of unplugged nightmares yet to come.

Vox bursts suddenly lit off, back and forth, bright and urgent across the Manifold. Orfuls was hearing the transmissions of an armoured artillery company, Pride Eighty-Eight: Thunderers, Bombards and Manticores, the crews screaming at each other for a target solution, for instruction, for a way out. Transmissions kept going dark, in gritty blizzards of white noise, as the tanks died, one by one.

Orfuls didn't communicate. There was no point identifying himself and his location, but as each tank shrieked its last, he was able to add relative positions to his target plot.

'They're dying out there, princeps,' Strakhov said.

'I know, Strak, I know,' Orfuls replied, concentrating on his complex vector maths.

'We should move in. Help them,' said the steersman.

Strakhov slapped him hard. 'Keep to your place and shut your mouth!' he hissed.

'Of course, moderati,' the steersman replied.

'The princeps will move us when the time is right.'

'Yes, moderati.'

Move us now, Max, move us now, Strakhov willed. They're dying, one after another.

The target pipper suddenly chimed, fixed on the source of heat and light.

'Left, left, forwards,' said Orfuls.

'It hasn't seen us,' said Strakhov.

'It's too busy murdering,' Orfuls replied. 'Come around point two-one.'

The steersman obliged.

‘That’s it. Just as we are, on the creep, steady, steady.’

Broken brickwork crunched under the Warhound’s feet. The east wall of the ruined templum lay directly ahead of them.

‘Full stride, now!’ Orfuls cried.

‘We’ve got a wall in our face!’ Strakhov replied, dismayed.

‘Since when did that stop us? Full stride! Full stride!’

The Warhound took off, moving from idle to sprint in less than twenty seconds. Snout down, it crashed through the wall, bursting the bricks asunder like a ram. As it came through, the entire wall collapsed, and brought what was left of the templum’s roof down after it.

Morbius Sire was already clear and running, hungry, malicious. Behind it, the fabric of the templum spilled to the ground in an avalanche of bricks and tiles. The plasma blastgun was going to be his best bet. Orfuls channelled the solution to his right hand.

<target now fixed.>

‘Thank you,’ said Orfuls.

The Warhound stormed forwards, past the burning wrecks of Hellhounds and Basilisks.

The enemy engine, a haggard Reaver, was standing at the junction of Pax Divisible and Compromise, surveying the blazing ruins, sporadically belting out gunfire across the subsid at the retreating components of the armoured artillery company. It was an ugly thing, twisted and deformed, blackened and rusted. Lube oil wept from its joints and it seemed, to Orfuls, to be breathing hard.

Just his imagination.

The Reaver swung its head around as it sensed *Morbius Sire’s* rapid intercept.

‘Raise shields,’ Orfuls ordered.

‘Void shields, aye,’ replied Strakhov.

Orfuls accessed the pre-set target. Throne, it was a big, ugly beast, twice the height and mass of *Morbius Sire*. The Reaver turned to engage them, its limb weapons stiffening to power.

Orfuls could feel the heat of them as they built.

They crashed heedlessly through several rows of dwellings, splintering walls and shingles around their steel shins.

‘Stay on target,’ Orfuls cried out. ‘Aim primary right!’

‘Primary right, aye!’ Strakhov yelled back.

Final target overlays swung down across Orfuls’s Manifold vision.

The enemy engine fired its turbo. Hard-light bolts lacerated the air, missing *Morbius Sire* by less than five spans. The enemy fired again, locking its auspex down onto the charging Warhound.

‘Voids hit!’ cried Strakhov. ‘Void shields holding!’

<Fire!> Orfuls told *Morbius Sire*.

The blastgun retched. Burst after sizzling burst struck the archenemy Reaver.

It reeled. It wavered. It rocked back a step or two, rank oil spraying from its loose seams.

‘Again!’ Orfuls yelled. His voice had become a growl, a carnivore’s purr.

The blastgun fired again. They were sixty metres away from the enemy Reaver, and it was swinging up its morning star to greet them, hand-to-hand.

Then it died.

The enemy Reaver suffered catastrophic shield failure. It exploded from the waist up. The light blast overwhelmed the Manifold for a second.

‘Full reverse! Pull us back!’ Orfuls cried out, momentarily blinded.

‘Aye,’ replied Strakhov, wincing.

Orfuls felt broken pieces of ceramite casing rattling off his skin. Ablaze, the Reaver toppled over in a welter of flames and sparks. As it went down, a ruined manufactory died along with it, crushed by the falling weight.

Orfuls realised he was growling and mewling. He damped down the feral intellect at the back of his brain. Synthetic hormones were rapidly attempting to negate the massive testosterone levels in his bloodstream.

‘Princeps?’

‘I’m all right. That was a damn fine kill. Thank you, all crew.’

‘Princeps?’

‘Signal Bohrman,’ Orfuls ordered, shaking his head and trying to collect his thoughts.

‘What signal should I send, princeps?’ asked Strakhov.

‘SIGNAL RECEIVED FROM *Morbius Sire*, princeps,’ Bohrman’s moderati announced.

Bohrman swung around in his amniotics. ‘Relay it to me at once.’

‘Yes, sir. Signal reads “First blood, Invicta”,’ the moderati replied.

Bohrman smiled.

TITANICUS can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £18.99 (UK) / \$24.99 (US) / \$28.99 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978-1-84416-661-9 (UK)

978-1-84416-586-5 (US)

- **Bookshops:** Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
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