

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE EMBER WOLVES

Rob Sanders



As the Titans of Terra and Horus clash, a traitor Warhound pack lays an insidious trap.

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The void rumbled at the arrival of the Dark Mechanicum. Monstrous coffin-ships thundered into the backwater systems of the Gorgonopsii Maestrals, glimmering with the fell light of corruption. Each transported tainted constructs – tech-pledged to the Warmaster. They were packed with traitor cyborgs of the Thallaxii cohorts. They carried the fallen god-machines of the Legio Audax.

The Ember Wolves. Death, by any other name.

At the heart of the Maestrals lay the shabby little hive world of Absolom. It was here, in the shadow of ancient hives, that the towering war machines of the Legio Castigatra made their stand. Overconfident and untried, they had been drawn together with other legions as part of the newly formed Adeptus Titanicus. The loyalist Titans marched forth under the banners of the false Fabricator General of Terra and met Horus Lupercal's forces, god-machine to god-machine.

The hive world shook with landing Titans, brought down with rancid expediency from macro-carriers achieving low orbit. The dunes of the surrounding ash wastes trembled, while the crooked spires and looming accretions of the hives fell and crashed into the cityscape below. With ear-splitting horns of arrival, cybernetic shock troops spilled from landing transports. Screams spread through the shanties as Thallaxii soldiers made their maniac way through the corrugated townships, wildly gunning down the hive worlders. But the true terror came with the first steps of the god-machines, a cacophonous thunder that shook such structures to scrap and crushed families underfoot.

Colossal weaponry boomed to life – power converters filled the air with the hum of static, while the heavy metal clunk of loading mechanism echoed through the canyons between the hives.

By the time the Emperor-class Titans of the Legio Castigatra arrived to intercept the traitor machines and retake the landing sites, the Ember Wolves had long been lying in wait.

Balthus Voltemand glowered in his command throne. His battle-scarred face looked like a topographical map in the red of the canopy lighting. As well as being commander of *Canis Ulteriix*, he was the ranking princeps amongst the Warhound Scout Titans of Battle-Pack Karnassia. Like others of the pack, Voltemand's machine had once borne another name: a proto-Gothic moniker, little more now than a lousy, Terran curse word, that no longer had any meaning for the Warmaster's battle-pledged.

The pack had taken position amongst the hyperstacks and fat chimneys of Hive Septus. The billowing, metallic clouds of industry cloaked the area, hiding even the towering forms of the battle-pack's six Warhounds. They listened to hives in uproar, and the thunderous weaponry of loyalist machines and the Warmaster's finest exchanging distant fire.

While they lay in wait, much had happened. Mechanicum-allied Thunderbolts on a bombing run ran afoul of barrage balloons surrounding Karnassia's landers. The hive spire, with its palaces and grand ballrooms, suffered the quake of passing god-machines before toppling down the side of the monstrous city. With aircraft plummeting through the chemical smog and colossal chunks of masonry raining down after them, the Ember Wolves held their nerve and position.

When *Tantorus Magnificat* rounded the hive, the Warmonger's stride taking it through the decimated shanties, Voltemand knew that he had acquired a target worthy of his battle-pack.

He stared through the cockpit eyes of *Canis Ulteriix*. He scanned for heat signatures, for echolocational feedback and movement among the cycling visual spectra. He didn't need them. Overhead, between chimney-spumes of rancid smoke, Voltemand had thought he saw the jagged cityscape of the hive itself moving, but it was not. It was the fortress towers of the *Tantorus Magnificat*'s hunched carapace emerging from the crooked confusion of accretions and spires. The princeps knew the mighty Titan of old. He had fought both alongside the veteran machine at Vorda Corona and against it at Belisarr Alpha and Phendrick's World. But he had never had the opportunity to actually *engage* the

Warmonger, and wasn't going to waste this one, now.

A grating ping reverberated across the cockpit enclosure.

'I have an auspex contact,' Moderati Shenk reported from his forward throne, his voice a monotonous drone.

'You have more than that,' Volemand said with a wolfish smile.

'Is that...?' Kordella began, leaning over from her station.

'It is,' the princeps told her with relish. '*Tantorus Magnificat*. The False Mechanicum of Terra wishes to test us, and we welcome the challenge. The Ember Wolves do not shirk from the fight. For we are ferocity made metal. The doom of mightier machines. We bring gods to their armoured knees.'

'Powering up,' Shenk said, re-routing automotive energies to the Warhound's dormant magna-hydraulics and legs. 'Waking the engineer.'

Voltemand banged his fist against the runebank wall behind his throne, hoping to rouse the cantankerous construct and his malformed servitors in the compartment beyond. 'Tell that malingering priest to be ready. We stride into battle. Dark destiny awaits us in the thunder to come.'

'Weapon systems online,' Kordella reported as the clunk of the vulcan megabolter's autofeeds rumbled through the superstructure. 'Awaiting your command. Ursus claw ready, harpoon primed.'

'Very good, moderati,' Voltemand said. While the Warhound Titans of the Ember Wolves carried different primary weapons for tactical variety, the right arm of each was mounted with spear-and-cable weapons system, designed to ensnare and bring down greater prey. 'Shenk, open a channel. All Warhounds of Karnassia.'

'Affirmative,' the moderati said. 'You are patched through, princeps.'

'Harken, my brothers,' Balthus Voltemand called across the crackling channel. 'Berate your crew and stir the monstrous spirit of your machines. The wait is over. The time has come. Prey worthy of our efforts draws near.'

'*Tantorus Magnificat?*' a voice like churned gravel ventured back across the channel. '*Then the honour shall be mine.*'

It was Grental Thrax, princeps of *Rubella Mortem*. His Warhound, 'the Red Death', had the greatest number of god-kills in the pack and, but for the fact that he was a disagreeable maniac, would have led the six machines of Karnassia in the hunt. In appointing a princeps primus, more tactical cogitators had prevailed and Balthus Voltemand and *Canis Ulteriix* had been given the honour instead. Across the open channel, Voltemand could hear Thrax threatening his moderati crew with the sceptre that he always carried, and the sound of the Red Death's

plasma blastgun priming.

‘There is no honour without victory,’ Balthus Voltemand growled back, ‘and there is no victory without the pack. You will take your place, princeps, amongst the Ember Wolves. As it has been. As it is. As it will always be.’

As the voices of other commanding officers resounded through the vox, Voltemand heard Thrax grunt an acknowledgement.

‘Form up, you Warhounds of Horus,’ Voltemand ordered. ‘Ready your weapons and call upon the savagery of your machine-spirits.’

The princeps primus thrust his arms forward and sat bolt upright in his throne. Through the Titan manifold, *Canis Ulterix* answered. Skulking like some low beast of the plain, the Warhound held its armoured head at a hunch, while its ursus claw and mega-bolter were raised up and ready to fire. The Scout Titan’s clawed feet pounded through the shanties, flattening ramshackle structures and turning dunes to clouds of pounded ash. The clunk of heavy metal servos and pistoning pump of magna-hydraulics echoed through the acidic smoke clouds of brute industry. The hunters of Karnassia followed, picking their way through the destruction after *Canis Ulterix* – *Vulpium Nox* and *Lupa Laudator* following Voltemand’s lead, while the Warhounds *Pugnax Principio* and *Rapacia Rex* fell into flanking positions either side of the Red Death.

‘Moderati Shenk,’ Voltemand called. ‘My compliments to the magos reductor. Inform him that the blessed ruin of his Thallaxii shock-troops are needed, fourth quadrant, delta-east peripheral. Tell him that the Ember Wolves are about to make a kill, and both his siege-craft and armoured cohorts are required to extract the marrow from metal bones.’

‘Aye, princeps.’

Beyond, the hive shook with the arrival of the loyalist Warmonger. Structures crumbled and sub-spires toppled. The colossal Titan simply stepped *through* factory complexes, the detonations of uranic works and power stations flashing about the god-machine’s armoured feet. Mushroom clouds billowed around *Tantorus Magnificat*’s monstrous form, while energy unleashed from ruptured power cores felt its way up armoured plate the thickness of a battle cruiser’s hull.

‘Attack pattern umbilicus,’ Voltemand said, as the Warhounds stalked into position. Through the rust-stained smoke and ruined architecture of the hive, the Titans took their places. Ordinarily, the movements of such mighty war machines would easily attract attention, but amongst the cascading destruction of Hive Septus and the booming advance of the Warmonger, such movements were all but lost.

‘Come on,’ the princeps primus quietly urged the loyalist Titan. ‘Come and get us.’

He keyed the comm-channel on the arm of his throne.

‘Tunstall, the duty is yours. Draw him on.’

Voltemand heard both the displeasure of Tunstall Haulk and Grental Thrax across the channel. The princeps primus had offered the glory to one of Thrax’s close allies: Haulk’s *Rapacia Rex* was about to become bait in the trap the Ember Wolves had set for *Tantorus Magnificat*. From its position amongst the vent-scrappers of a manufactorum stack, *Rapacia Rex* levelled its turbo lasers at the oncoming Warmonger. A well-placed beam from *Rapacia Rex* would be barely enough to wound the mighty god machine, but it would be more than enough to get the Titan crew’s attention and draw *Tantorus Magnificat* on.

‘Wait,’ Voltemand ordered. Something was wrong.

Moments before the air had been thick with the metallic boom of the giant’s advance. *Tantorus Magnificat*’s steps had crunched through structures and the unseen hivers crowding within. Explosions rippled through the path of decimation that marked its progress. Now, however, the air was still.

‘Auspex!’

‘The enemy Titan has come to a halt,’ Shenk told his princeps. Voltemand knew that could mean only one thing. He had underestimated the Warmonger’s long-range scanners.

Kordella spat. ‘*Tantorus Magnificat* is arming missiles.’

‘Intensify forward void shields,’ the princeps barked, his scarred features wrapped around a snarl. Then into the open channel he added: ‘Brothers, brace yourselves.’

‘Incoming!’ Kordella called. A missile suddenly punched through the lead-coloured clouds. *Tantorus Magnificat* was revealed, towering above them. Its towers and hunched fortresses twinkled with lights while its right arm, bearing a multi-racked launcher, was pointed down at the Karnassia pack.

Canis Ulterix had been facing *Lupa Laudator* when it was hit. One moment it was four hundred tonnes of armoured pugnacity, the next it was a rocketing explosion of shattered scrap. The dull thunk of shrapnel hitting *Canis Ulterix*’s outer hull could be heard through the cockpit, and through the manifold Voltemand could feel the destruction wash over his Titan. The princeps primus knew he had to act.

‘Shenk, backtrack,’ Voltemand called out. The princeps thrust his left arm out. ‘Kordella, answer!’

As the Warhound backed through blazing shanty dwellings, its vulcan mega-bolter roared to life, sending a magnificent stream of magna-bore bolt shells at the loyalist Warmonger. The huge rounds plucked at the Titan's overlapping void shields, sparking sizzling ripples through the fields like stones in a lake.

The dank hive world air trembled with the blare of war-horns: *Tantorus Magnificat* would answer the challenge.

With huge steps it crashed through the shanties. The Titan moved with all the territorial urgency its colossal frame was capable of mustering. Giant weapons, ancient and bedecked with banners, were presented. Its ponderous movements swept like a gale through the smog drifting down from the chimneys of the industrial districts, clearing the filth away.

'Come on, you glorious abomination,' the princeps said, as *Canis Ulterix* backed through a nest of flimsy smokestacks. 'Again!'

As the mega-bolter gave account of itself once more, Voltemand could feel the rhythmic tremble through the Warhound's superstructure and his command throne.

'That's it,' he seethed. 'Keep your attention on me... On me, damn it!'

As *Tantorus Magnificat* waded on, its great, racked launcher rotated with an echoing clunk.

'Princeps,' Shenk said, but Voltemand ignored the moderati. As the Warmonger primed a second missile for launch, Kordella turned in her throne.

'Princeps,' she echoed, her voice tinged with something more than just dutiful concern.

'Hold your tongues,' Voltemand shot back. 'I'll give the order when I'm ready.'

Kordella turned back, staring through the Titan's cockpit eyes and up at the advancing mountain of plasteel and adamantium. Voltemand watched. He waited. The timing had to be right, as did the positions and angles. Upon these factors, everything depended. Engagements such as these were won or lost in seconds.

Seconds of excitement and horror, where a Titan princeps had to hold his nerve.

'Balthus!' Kordella called out.

'Now, brothers of iron and fury,' the princeps commanded, 'brandish your claws and let slip your harpoons. This god-machine is ours for the taking.'

The first shot came from *Vulpium Nox*. Over the vox-channel, Voltemand heard Haximilian Bettanquor roar from the command throne as his Warhound loosed its arm-mounted spear. Initially designed as grappling and boarding devices for

World Eaters legionary vessels, the ursus claws were powerful Titan-hunters. *Vulpium Nox* stumbled back as the harpoon tore away on its cable. Able to punch through the heaviest armour plating, it had little problem with the racks and tubes of the Warmonger's missile launcher.

Skewering through with an appalling screech and a ringing that hung in the air about the loyalist Titan, the impact of the claw knocked the launcher off its aim; the next missile streaked wide on a trail of rocket propellant smoke. As it struck the rust-stained rockcrete of a cooling tower, the structure was transformed into an inferno of flame and showering grit. *Canis Ulteriix* was knocked to one side by the blast but, under Moderati Shenk's control, managed to keep its footing.

Like a giant herbivore surrounded by death world predators, *Tantorus Magnificat* was trapped. Spears shot up through the thinning smoke, burying themselves in the target with a shearing prang. Cable spools ran. Lines dragged to tautness.

The shanties shook with the tremble of gears and automotive engines. Power cores roared and magna-hydraulics struggled. The splayed-claw feet of Battle-Pack Karnassia's Warhounds scraped across the ground, shearing through corrugated complexes as the Warmonger tried to escape their clutches. Trapped in a web of taut cables, *Tantorus Magnificat* tried to heave its way free.

'Hold it!' Balthus Voltemand called across the open channel. 'Call upon everything your machines have! The Warmonger is ours now. Don't let it move. Don't let it breathe...'

The Ember Wolves hauled back at the behemoth, bracing it between them. Titanic weaponry mounted upon the Warmonger's arms and carapace fired off wildly, attempting to blast its tormenters to oblivion. Instead, all it achieved was turning the settlement and surrounding industrial zone into a mess of smouldering craters, into which the Warhounds almost slipped.

'Heave!' Voltemand called to his brothers, as *Canis Ulteriix* stalked back in to join the fight. Harpoon heads worried at armour plating and cables sang their high-pitched song. The hunched backs of the Karnassia machines steamed with the effort. Giant servos whined and hydraulics hissed as the Warhound Scout Titans scabbled ever backwards through the ash dunes and wreckage.

Tantorus Magnificat's great, bellowing war-horn sounded once again. This time it seemed almost panicked. This time it was almost in rage. Voltemand could believe that it might be calling out for aid.

'Auspex sweep,' he commanded. 'Long range.'

He didn't need it, however. Through the cockpit eyes of the Warhound, he saw

the forward void shields flash and ripple with kinetic impacts. Squinting, the princeps primus could see the heat signatures of tank formations out on the ash wastes. Lurching across the dunes towards them, he could make out Baneblades and armoured personnel carriers.

‘Hivers,’ Kordella informed her princeps. ‘Planetary defence contingents.’

Voltemand thrust out his arm to the side. The contempt was clear on his face. Shenk and Kordella were busy at their stations as the great Warhound heaved around. With a grunt of brute satisfaction, the princeps watched as *Canis Ulterix*’s mega-bolter unleashed its firepower. Bolts tore up through the wasteland, turning Chimera transports and their hive soldiers to chopped wreckage. Even super-heavy tanks were turned back or aside by the relentless storm of shells, skidding this way and that through the ash as their tracks thrashed for better traction. Several mauled vehicles exploded as the bolt streams hit critical systems, fuel lines and the like, while others were knocked down the sides of the dunes and rolled onto their backs to present their vulnerable underbellies. As hive world soldiers and tank crews, bloody and broken, abandoned their smashed vehicles, they were met by Legio Audax-allied Dark Mechanicum transports. Cybernetic shock-troops poured from troop bays. Thallaxii warriors, impassive and indomitable, moved through the swirling ash, blasting hivers to splattered shreds with streams of energy from their lightning guns.

‘Princeps,’ Kordella warned, drawing Voltemand’s attention to the besieged Warmonger Titan.

‘*The honour will be mine,*’ Grental Thrax announced, as the Red Death hauled at *Tantorus Magnificat*. His harpoon had found a high target and the Warhounds’ relentless efforts had almost managed to topple the Titan. *Pugnax Principio*’s plasma blastgun hammered brightly blazing spheres into the Warmonger’s void shields. Each blast was like a small sun and the fusillade swiftly overpowered the generators, and the shields began to collapse in a riot of colour and spent energies.

‘Forward!’ Voltemand ordered. ‘Enough of these trifles.’

‘But, princeps...’ Shenk said, his monotonous voice like a sedative in the confines of the cockpit.

‘Do as I say,’ Voltemand snarled.

As *Canis Ulterix* stalked forth at a belligerent hunch, the loyalist Warmonger lifted one mighty armoured foot. Kicking out, the foot knocked the Warhound back into an unsteady stumble. Voltemand was almost tipped from his throne and

the cables torn from his temples. Cockpit runebanks flashed and sparked. The princeps felt the pain of the Titan's wounded spirit through the manifold but, crashing back through the shanties and into the side of a cooling tower, the Warhound managed to regain its composure. Supported by the colossal rockcrete chimney, *Canis Ulteri* shook off dust, shattered masonry and embarrassment.

'Damage report,' the princeps primus demanded. As Shenk and Kordella struggled with their sparking stations, Voltemand smacked his fist against the back wall of the cockpit. 'Wake up, priest!'

As the two moderati read off a list detailing minor damage to locomotion drivers and some superficial malfunctions in the weapons systems, Voltemand watched *Tantorus Magnificat* fight for its life, and the lives of all those within its armoured shell. Heaving around, the Warmonger lifted *Vulpium Nox* up by the cable and off its scrambling feet, before whirling it back into the ground. As the Warhound came crashing down, it too stumbled into surrounding structures before being righted again by the tautness of its connecting cable.

The Warmonger brought its foot crashing down again, managing to connect with *Pugnax Principio*. Unlike Voltemand's Warhound, the *Pugnax Principio* was not merely knocked back. It was stamped down into the earth, the colossal *Tantorus Magnificat* bringing its full, city-block weight down on the Scout Titan. Like his brothers, Voltemand heard Princeps Phestalag and his crew die across the open channel, as *Pugnax Principio* was pulverised by the much larger god-machine. Detonating beneath the armoured foot, the breached plasma reactor turned the ash and sand for a hundred metres about it to glass.

At this, the Ember Wolves found their fury once more. Held firm between *Vulpium Nox*, *Rapacia Rex* and the Red Death, the Warmonger wasn't going anywhere. Its great weaponry had been reduced to wild thunder and its automotive systems were straining. It was difficult for even a god-machine's crew to orchestrate a counter attack when their mighty Titan was straining hard not to topple over.

As the moderati finished their damage report, Voltemand spat.

'We can fight without those secondary systems,' he said, lifting his arms to present *Canis Ulteri*'s weaponry to the ensnared enemy. 'Engage!'

The Warhound loped forward, its vulcan mega-bolters unleashing a continuous stream of mass-reactive fire. The remaining void shields about the Warmonger soaked up the damage, their surfaces rippling with the impacts. Voltemand roared. The Warhound charged. The torrent of magna-bore bolt shells found its way in through the collapsing shields and widening holes in *Tantorus*

Magnificat's ablative defences.

'Ammunition low,' Kordella warned. 'Seventy-five per cent depletion.'

It did not stop the princeps primus.

The plan had been his. The kill would be his. Honour was at stake.

As the Red Death continued to haul on its spear cable, Voltemand's incessant bolt stream pounded its way into a magazine compartment attached to one of *Tantorus Magnificat's* ancient battlecannon emplacements in a lower bastion.

The blast was blinding. Twisted struts and pieces of shattered adamantium plating flew high through the air. The gunnery system to which the magazine was attached went up in a smaller, secondary explosion. Voltemand could only imagine the flame-rolling havoc that the crew of the afflicted section must have been experiencing.

'Yes...' the princeps hissed. The cockpit eyes had further delights for him, however. The detonation had rocked the already unbalanced Titan. With servos and magna-hydraulics in the connecting sections compromised, *Tantorus Magnificat* reluctantly gave up its fight against the Ember Wolves, and gravity itself.

'Heads up!' Grental Thrax warned, as the Red Death heaved the Warmonger over. Both *Rapacia Rex* and *Vulpium Nox* backed up, letting their cables run. Voltemand watched as the Titan wavered and then began to fall.

It seemed to take an eternity. Great, weaponised limbs reached out uselessly, seemingly in slow motion. Armoured bastion-feet attempted to find their balance. The buried harpoons had done their work, however, and the fall was inevitable. Once a prize of gargantuan grace and indomitability, *Tantorus Magnificat* now looked like a snapshot of some cataclysmic accident in progress. Its slow movements appeared clumsy and ridiculous.

When the god-machine finally met the ground, it levelled the landscape beneath it.

Several more explosions rippled through the Titan's superstructure as it buckled, its ancient frame never intended to support the colossal weight of the carapace at ninety degrees from true. Buttresses shattered, stanchions sheared through. Broken statuary and ruined glassaic rained down from the ramparts, while power generators in the industrial complexes crushed beneath its bulk flashed blinding white. Shanties were blasted away in the backwash and ash was thrown up into the air, covering the area with poisonous clouds of particulate matter.

The Warmonger's skull-like head lolled to one side. The internal lights of its

left eye went dead. With a final, mournful blast of its war-horns that kicked up dust from the ground beneath its chin, *Tantorus Magnificat* fell silent.

‘Yes...’ Voltemand said again. Nothing was more fitting or beautiful in his Warhound’s sight. ‘Kordella.’

‘Princeps?’

‘Send word to the magos reductor. The carcass is his to strip. Tell him to unleash his Thallaxii.’

‘And our orders, princeps primus?’ Shenk asked.

‘Power down weapons and void shields,’ Voltemand said. ‘Then onwards, to claim my prize.’

*Canis Ulteri*ax found the ugly shapes of the Red Death and *Rapacia Rex* waiting. The Warhounds had disconnected their spear cables and were standing over the fallen *Tantorus Magnificat* like it was a hunter’s trophy. The *Vulpium Nox*, meanwhile, had become tangled in surrounding wreckage and its own ursus claw.

‘*This time, I think not,*’ Grental Thrax called across the vox-channel. As the dust settled and *Canis Ulteri*ax approached, there seemed something savage and threatening about the way the Warhounds were carrying themselves.

‘Kordella?’

‘They’re both running with shields up and weapons primed, my princeps.’

Voltemand stared through the cockpit eyes of his Warhound at the Karnassia Titans. He turned his head to one side, presenting the grizzled scars of his face.

‘What’s on your mind, Grental?’ the princeps primus said. As the Warhounds stood facing one another, cohorts of Thallaxii shock-troops descended upon *Tantorus Magnificat*, laying siege to the tech-guard positions within downed Warmonger. They could have little notion that a greater battle still loomed over their heads.

‘*You and your godless Titan,*’ Grental Thrax came back. ‘*Both of you afflicted with a cowardly soul. Neither worthy to lead this battle-pack. It is time, Balthus. Time to step aside and let worthier men and machines lead.*’

‘Princeps?’ Kordella asked, her voice hushed.

Voltemand’s lip curled. ‘Do it.’

As the Warhounds stared each other down, the moderati activated *Canis Ulteri*ax’s forward void shields and re-engaged their weapons systems.

‘You’ve spent too long with the World Eaters,’ Voltemand said. ‘We’re all still sons and daughters of Mars, here. We’re all still pledged to the Warmaster, are

we not?’

‘*Horus,*’ Grental Thrax told him, ‘*like his brother Angron, is served best by strength – a quality that you lack, Balthus. You would use your brothers as bait, while standing idly by. I lead from the front. I lead by example. My victories are my own.*’

‘And yet,’ Voltemand shot back, ‘you stand over *my* prize.’

‘*Myself and my brothers dragged the wounded beast to the ground.*’

‘And who was it that wounded the god-machine?’ Voltemand demanded. ‘Who delivered the killing shot that brought this monster down? The honour is mine – as it is for all Titans felled by this battle-pack, for Karnassia is mine also. Do you hear me, Thrax? I am primus. I am the first, by right. Now, enough of our number have fallen today. Don’t add your mongrel machine to the tally. Stand your Warhound down. That goes for you too, Haulk.’

Voltemand waited. The Red Death and Haulk’s *Rapacia Rex* were unmoved, however.

Precious seconds passed.

‘Ready mega-bolter,’ the princeps primus whispered, slowly lifting his left arm.

‘Ready, princeps,’ Kordella told him.

Few were expecting what happened next. *Rapacia Rex* was suddenly knocked forward and then disappeared in a blaze of flame. Engulfed in a blinding inferno, the Warhound burned. Its reinforced shell was doused in promethium jelly that burned as hot as an armoury furnace. Inside, Tunstall Haulk and his crew roasted. *Vulpium Nox* had disentangled itself. Listening to the interchange, the Warhound had stalked up behind *Rapacia Rex* and hit it at point blank range in the back.

Voltemand heard Grental Thrax roar over Haulk’s final screams. In the silhouette of the eye-searing flame, the Red Death turned, aiming its arm-mounted turbo laser straight at its new attacker. As the pulsing beam of energy raged into the hunched body of *Vulpium Nox*, it hit something that went supercritical within the Warhound Titan’s body. As the chassis violently exploded, the cockpit followed suit – but both were engulfed in the promethium blast of the Titan’s inferno cannon reservoirs.

As both the demolished *Vulpium Nox* and the Red Death vanished behind a curtain of flame, Voltemand squinted. Echolocation and visual spectra were useless. The entire area was one *big* heat signature.

‘Target?’ Voltemand demanded. Like her princeps, Kordella searched for the enemy Warhound.

‘I’ve got nothing,’ she told him.

‘Fire anyway!’ Voltemand growled, lifting his arm.

The vulcan mega-bolter hammered a stream of rounds into the fire. As the flames died away, they could see the Red Death. Its armoured shell was black and smouldering, while its turbo laser was pointed directly back at *Canis Ulteri*ax. Its void shields had collapsed with the backwash of the explosion, and its armour plating was perforated in a hundred places.

‘I have you now,’ Voltemand said, aiming the mega-bolter squarely at his foe.

With a doom-laden clunk that reverberated through the Titan superstructure, the mega-bolters ammunition belt ran dry.

Shenk, Kordella and their princeps primus couldn’t tear their eyes from the spectacle of the smouldering Red Death. Voltemand bit back a curse, and gripped the arms of his throne. ‘Brace—’

The turbo laser fired. When it did, all Voltemand knew was light and heat. For a moment, everything was cacophonous and unbearable. He tried to blink the intensity from his eyes. His nostrils stung with the chemical brume of the hive world atmosphere. All he could do was experience the agony of *Canis Ulteri*ax through the manifold as its machine-spirit suffered.

As his sight returned, the princeps realised that the cockpit was open to the air. The turbo laser beam had carved a path straight through the left-hand side of the cockpit. Shenk was gone. So too was his throne and command station.

Voltemand looked upon the Red Death with his own eyes, unaided, unclouded. He knew that Grental Thrax would be staring back from within his own, roasted cockpit.

‘Kordella,’ Voltemand said, reaching forwards for the moderati’s shoulder. ‘Are you still with me?’

‘To the last, princeps,’ she managed through raw, blackened lips.

‘Then let us show Grental Thrax our claws,’ Voltemand said, ‘and grapple with our brother.’

Thrusting his right arm forward, he fired the ursus claw. The harpoon rocketed forth. Unswerving. Unstoppable. Balthus Voltemand punched the spear straight into the cockpit of the Red Death. As it was buried there – in and *through* the Warhound’s ugly bridge compartment – Voltemand could plainly hear the sounds of human suffering over the open channel.

Something was still alive in the cockpit, at least. The princeps hoped that it was Grental Thrax.

Tearing his arm back, Voltemand violently tore the head from the Red Death,

and Thrax's ruined body from the shattered cockpit. The whole Titan lurched forwards, the decapitated body crashing onto the stump of its neck and the muzzle of its turbo laser, crushing whatever remains lay before it.

Settling back into his throne, Balthus Voltemand glowered at the dead Warhound.

'I got you,' the princeps mouthed. 'The prize and the honour is mine.'

'No,' Kordella told him. It took the princeps a moment to register what she had said.

'What?'

The moderati looked from her runebanks to her princeps before standing up from her throne. Voltemand did likewise. The pair of them looked down from their smashed cockpit. Thallaxii shock-troops were no longer attacking the corpse of *Tantorus Magnificat*. They were fleeing the downed Titan, while armoured personnel carriers were thrashing their tracks back through the ash and sand.

As a princeps, Voltemand understood. 'The reactor core?'

Kordella confirmed what her runescreen had told her with a slow nod. In a final act of defiance, the crew of the Warmonger hoped to deny the traitors the ancient god-machine. They had overloaded the power systems, sending the reactor into a critical meltdown.

Nothing would escape a blast of that size.

Not the fleeing Thallaxii. Not *Canis Ulteri*ax.

Balthus Voltemand slumped back down. The Warhounds of Karnassia were no more. His command was ended. He had been beaten.

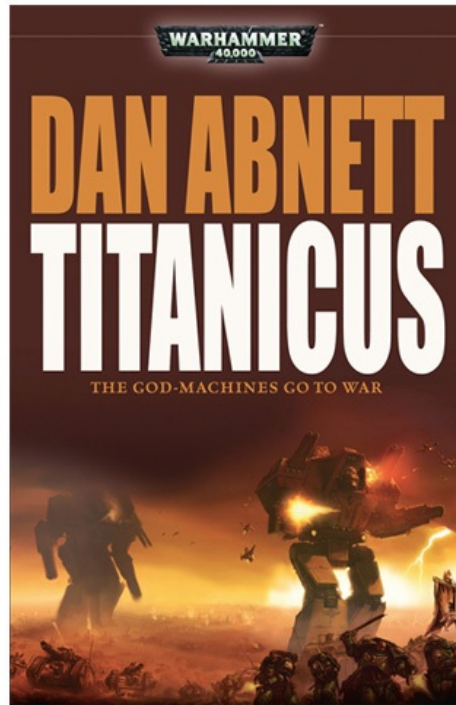
Gripping the arms of his command throne, the princeps primus watched as oblivion came for him in the unbearable light of a miniature star.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Sanders is the author of *The Serpent Beneath*, a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*.

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