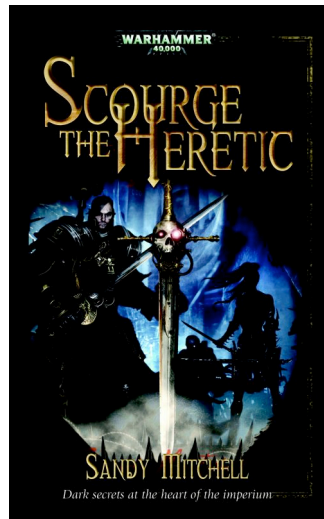


SCOURGE THE HERETIC

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Sandy Mitchell

When Inquisitor Grynner investigates a derelict Imperial trading vessel adrift in the Halo Stars, he and his operatives discover everyone aboard is dead, apparently killed by powerful psykers. As the vessel hails from the Calixis sector, he contacts his colleague Inquisitor Carolus, who runs a network of agents in that area. But there is no such thing as a straightforward Inquisition investigation, and pretty soon Inquisitor Carolus and his team find themselves up to their necks in trouble. The smuggling operation proves much more dangerous than it seems – can they root out its dark secrets before being destroyed themselves?



About the Author

Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been working as a freelance writer for the last couple of decades. He has written science fiction and fantasy in both personae, as well as television scripts, magazine articles, comics, and gaming material. Apart from both miniatures and roleplaying gaming his hobbies include the martial arts of Aikido and Iaido, and pottering about on the family allotment.

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‘JOIN THE GUARD and see the galaxy,’ Drake said bitterly, pulling his cold weather camo cape around him a little tighter. Thin flurries of snow danced through the trees surrounding him, the dark clouds scudding above the branches, which waved in the wind like questing tentacles, promising a real blizzard before morning. He shivered, the formless sense of foreboding that had been muffling his soul from the moment the platoon had been deployed here intensified by the biting cold and the constantly moving shadows.

His companion shrugged. ‘You can. It’s up there.’ He pointed to a thin strip of clear sky, beyond the trees and the ominous bulk of the snow clouds, in which a few stars twinkled in a desultory manner for a moment or two before the roiling darkness overhead obliterated them. Drake scowled at the faint pinpricks of light, as though they were somehow responsible for his frustration and slowly numbing feet.

‘Thanks, Vos. You’re a real ray of sunshine, you know that?’

Vos Kyrlock shrugged, and hefted his precious chain axe, checking once again that the mechanism was still free and unfrozen. He carried his standard issue lasgun slung over his shoulder, as dutifully as any other Guardsman, but the close combat weapon was his pride and joy. It hadn’t taken his instructors long to realise that he’d never attain anything more than basic competence with a ranged weapon of any kind, but his natural aptitude for brawling was quite exceptional. Drake, on the other hand, was quite the opposite, his instinctive affinity for las weapons already honed by years of service in Queen Lachryma’s household troops, the Royal

Scourges, the nearest thing to a properly functioning Planetary Defence Force to be found on Spheris Secundus.

The two men were completely different in most other respects too. Drake was thin, blond and wiry, his perpetual air of simmering resentment manifesting in a kind of nervous energy, which made him seem on edge even when he was relaxing, and Kyrlock was tall and barrel-chested, hair the colour of dying embers, whose sardonic manner kept most of the people he came into contact with firmly at arms length. To their mutual surprise, they'd become friends almost as soon as they'd met. Satisfied with the condition of his favourite weapon, Kyrlock shrugged. 'We'll be out there soon enough.'

'That's what the recruiter told me,' Drake said bitterly, 'six rutting months ago.' He ducked under a low branch, and almost tripped on a tree root concealed by the snow. Kyrlock followed, sure-footed in the dark woodlands, his bulk gliding between the shadowed trunks without disturbing so much as a twig. Drake swore colourfully as the branch he'd ducked under brushed against his helmet and deposited its load of snow down the back of his body armour.

'At least you had a choice,' Kyrlock reminded him. 'Most of us just got told to volunteer.' It was rare indeed for the mining world of Spheris Secundus to be tithed for an Imperial Guard regiment. The labour of its countless serfs was vitally important to the economy of the entire sector, and their poor standard of health made them, for the most part, useless as soldiers. However, the increasing number of skirmishes and raids around the Eye of Terror in the last few years had imposed its own demands.

Something big was coming, that much was clear, and the sectors closest to the bleeding wound in the fabric of reality had begun to prepare for the worst.

Drake laughed bitterly. 'Stupidest decision I ever made,' he said. 'I should have stayed in the Scourges, like my father and grandfather did.'

'Without any hope of promotion or advancement?' Kyrlock asked, having heard the story innumerable times before.

Drake's face darkened under the wan starlight. 'That's right. Just because my mother was a chambermaid: mutant rutting snobs. At least in the Guard you get promoted on merit.'

'Well, that's us guaranteed an aquila apiece,' Kyrlock said, referring to a company commander's badge of rank.

'Assuming they ignore your criminal record,' Drake retorted, tugging the barrel of his lasgun free of a bush that had far too many thorns. 'What was it you did again?'

'Smuggling firewood into the Commons,' Kyrlock said cheerfully. 'Easy for a forester. I was going in and out of the Gorgonid all the time with timber for pit props and the like. No problem sticking a few sacks of twigs and offcuts on the truck. You'd be surprised what people will pay for good kindling.' A nostalgic smile appeared on his face for a moment. 'Or barter. There were a couple of habwives who...'

'Had husbands who told the overseer,' Drake interrupted testily, catching his shins on a trailing tree root. Kyrlock nodded, unabashed.

'Rather petty minded of them, I thought. Anyhow, the Baron needed able-bodied men to meet his Guard quota, and didn't want to lose his most productive workers. So here I am, instead of hanging for tithe evasion.'

'Lucky us,' Drake said. Kyrlock's liege lord hadn't been the only one who'd seized the opportunity the Guard tithe presented for ridding himself of the most troublesome malcontents among the workers he owned, and the undisciplined rabble he'd found himself surrounded by had been a stark and unwelcome contrast to the Scourges.

'Could be worse,' Kyrlock agreed. 'Quite like home, really.' An anxious expression flitted across his face for a moment. 'Do you think they have trees on other planets too?'

'I hope not,' Drake said, neither knowing nor caring. Kyrlock looked as though he was about to take issue with that point of view, but before he could reply, the short-range vox receivers in both men's helmets hissed.

'Drake, Kyrlock, where the rut are you?'

‘Just completing our sweep, sergeant,’ Drake replied crisply, ignoring his companion’s derisory hand gestures. Neither had a particularly high opinion of Sergeant Claren, who owed his rank to his former civilian occupation as an overseer in the mines rather than any grasp of military matters, and who, both suspected, must have done something to irritate an officer in order to have been seconded to this bleak and desolate outpost. That had certainly been the case with them, and, so far as they could tell, most of the misfits and troublemakers in the fledgling Secundan 3rd had been assigned to the same platoon, and sent down here almost as soon as the regiment had been officially founded. Drake, with more experience than most of how the military mind worked, tried not to ruminate too much on the various ramifications of the word expendable, although it was hard to see what sort of enemy they might be expected to face in this desolate wilderness.

‘Good,’ Claren said, from the warmth and comfort of his command Chimera. ‘Wylers got frostbite. You can take over his sentry post.’

‘We’ll be right there,’ Drake confirmed, cutting the link abruptly before Kyrlock could comment verbally. ‘You son of a mutant,’ he added, sure the sergeant couldn’t hear him.

‘Well, it could be worse,’ Kyrlock said philosophically.

‘Could it?’ Drake turned, and led the way back towards the outpost. Stark and forbidding, it loomed against the night like a small fortified hill, studded with lights, which somehow failed to reveal anything other than an oppressive sense of greater darkness beyond them. The great metal gates hadn’t been opened since the Imperial Guard platoon had arrived and set up their camp, insulated survival bubbles for sleeping and a larger one for messing in, although he’d seen a few shuttles arrive and depart beyond the ramparts. All had been devoid of insignia.

Now and again, men would appear on the walls, their uniforms similar to his, although their armour was grey and their fatigues dark red. That had been a real shock. On Spheris Secundus, red was the colour of the royal family, and for anyone not of the bloodline, or in their direct service, to wear it was almost an act of treason. Many of

his comrades, particularly former Scourges, had been incensed by that, but Drake had found it strangely exciting, a reminder that a wider galaxy existed beyond this world, with exotic customs of its own. He had no idea who the strange soldiers were. They'd ignored all attempts to hail them, and after a few days the guardsmen had given up trying to attract their attention.

'Sure it could,' Kylock said, producing a bottle of something from beneath his camo cloak. 'Claren won't be out checking up on us on a night like this, will he?'

'I doubt it,' Drake agreed, his spirits lifting for the first time since coming on duty. He glanced up at the blank grey walls of the fortress. 'It's not as if anyone's going to break in there while our backs are turned, is it?'

BY THE TIME DRAKE had made his fate-tempting remark, and he and Kyrlock had begun trudging back through the snow towards their newly assigned sentry post, it was already far too late to prevent an intruder from gaining access in any case. The intruder had been there for some time, although none of the people who saw it, worked alongside it, or exchanged pleasantries in the corridors or over a bowl of reconstituted protein in the commissary with it knew it for what it was, seeing only the face and form of an old friend or colleague. Now, at the appointed time, it made its move.

'Having trouble?' a junior tech-priest asked, slowing his pace a little, eager as always to discuss the minutiae of the Omnissiah's bounty with a fellow initiate. The intruder shook its head, withdrawing it from the inspection panel it had opened.

'Nothing serious, Brother Polk. A faint arrhythmia in the primary heat exchangers, I fancy.' The intruder stood politely aside, making the sign of the cogwheel. 'Do you hear it too?'

'I'm not sure,' Polk admitted, stepping forward to look inside the hatch, the joints of his augmetic legs hissing slightly as they came to rest again. 'But then your hearing is greatly superior to my own, as is your understanding of the Omnissiah's infinite generosity.'

'You're too modest, my friend,' the intruder urged. 'Do you not feel the faintest of tremors in the casing?'

Polk reached out with a mechadendrite, caressing the revealed piping with its tip. A faint expression of doubt flickered across the portions of his face as yet unreplaced by metal. 'Perhaps,' he said at last. 'Do you require assistance in rectifying the anomaly?'

'I believe not,' the intruder assured him. 'The matter seems trivial enough, but it should be corrected if we are to be true to the Omnissiah, whose perfection is reflected in all things.'

'Of course.' Polk made the sign of the cogwheel again. 'Then I shall leave you to your devotions.'

'And I to yours,' the intruder replied, 'which are no doubt more pressing.'

'Perhaps they are,' Polk admitted. 'An imperfection exists in the auspex arrays.'

The intruder nodded as though unaware of the fact, in spite of having taken some time to ensure just such a state of affairs. 'Then it should be rectified forthwith.' It was mildly irritating that the subtle sabotage had been detected quite so quickly, but it had covered its tracks well, and had no doubt that Polk would be unable to complete his repairs until it was far too late. It waited until the young tech-priest had passed out of sight, and resumed working on the systems behind the panel.

'THANK YOU ALL FOR returning so promptly,' Inquisitor Carolus Finurbi said, looking from one expectant face to another. The air was cool here, high in a discreet quarter of the planetary capital favoured by the minor noble houses, but not unpleasantly so. The reflected light that bathed the suspended city struck through the stained glass wall of the villa, which his team had rented as a base of operations shortly after their arrival on Sepheris Secundus. Little puddles of colour blemished the floor and furnishings where the light had acquired the hues of the decoration it had passed through, mottling the hanging tapestries and the floor cushions on which he and his operatives sat. The use of the material for almost everything was a local custom that he hadn't expected. Even the bedrooms and balnearia were walled with the stuff, privacy ensured only by the

density of the pigment infused with the glass. ‘I gather your enquiries have had little success.’

That much was obvious from their body language. He knew this particular team of his Angelae, the informal name his network of operatives had adopted, better than most, having recruited all of them personally, and felt uncomfortable about reading their minds unless he had to. Today, there would be no need for that, though. Their disappointment hung heavy in the air, like the scent from the perfumed candles in the intricately wrought glass holders which the house servants had placed next to the open doors leading to the balcony. The gentle breeze from outside spread the perfumed smoke throughout the room. As he’d expected, Horst, the generally acknowledged leader of the group, spoke for them all.

‘I’m afraid you’re right, inquisitor.’ The former arbitrator shrugged as he spoke, his dark hair taking on a momentary tinge of yellow as the movement of his head took it through the penumbra of the halo of some minor local saint embedded in the glittering wall. ‘You can’t move on this Emperor forsaken rock without hearing rumours of some Chaos cult or other, but every time you try to chase them down they just evaporate. Either they’re incredibly well organised and connected, or...’

‘They simply don’t exist,’ a melodious voice chimed in. As it spoke, Carolus could feel its echoes, warm and intimate, caressing the surface of his mind, and smiled at the psyker across the room. Elyra Yivor returned the smile, her violet eyes meeting his gaze for a moment. Her unspoken thoughts echoed in his head. There’s something else, isn’t there?

All in good time, he returned, holding eye contact for an instant longer. The blonde woman’s smile stretched a little, and Carolus found some pleasant and intimate memories rising to the surface of his mind. The years had been kind to her, he thought, even without juvenat treatments.

Flatterer, Elyra sent, savouring the memories too. I was never that beautiful, or athletic.

You were to me. A faint haze of regret drifted over his thoughts. But you were right. It would never have worked out between us. Our duty to the Ordo Hereticus always came first.

The Emperor gave us these gifts, Elyra reminded him, just as she had in person, so painfully, all those years ago. What for, if not to use them doing His holy work?

Right as always, my love. Carolus broke the link between them, unwilling to be distracted any longer by the echoes of past regrets. As ever, the exchange had been all but instant. The echoes of Elyra's last verbal comment were still hanging in the air as his attention returned to the here and now. The derisive snort that broke in next scattered them, like the shards of broken light scintillating from every surface of the vitreous room.

'They're there, all right, believe me.' The speaker was a young woman, the green eyes beneath her purple-dyed fringe hard and unforgiving. 'I've been right down to the lower levels, several times. It's crawling with muties.' The other people in the room looked at her expectantly. Keira Sythree had been the last to arrive, and was still dressed in the skintight synsuit of an Officio Assassinorum operative, its chameleonic surface seeming to ripple in a vain attempt to match the ever-changing colours being reflected on it from the refulgent glass surrounding her. The only constant hue, apart from her pale face and purple hair, was the crimson bandana holding her fringe out of her eyes.

Horst coughed diplomatically, the sound echoed a great deal more raucously a moment later by the tech-priest in the corner. As all eyes turned to him, Brother Vex shrugged apologetically. 'Sorry. Still need to do a bit of work on the new respirator.'

'As I was about to say,' Horst went on, the merest trace of irritation entering his voice, 'Keira's just returned from another recon sweep in the Gorgonid.' He gestured beyond the open doors, and the glass-tiled patio beyond. From where he sat, Carolus could clearly see the vast pit gouged into the mountains beneath the glass city, which hung suspended above it on innumerable cables slung between the highest peaks. Watching the sunlight scintillate from a

thousand palaces and a million surfaces, he was reminded of an arachnid's web dusted with frost on a crisp winter morning.

Looking down was a vertiginous experience. Over a kilometre below, the vast opencast workings of the largest mine on the planet seemed to seethe and shimmer in the faint traces of sunlight that managed to force their way through the near constant cloud cover, thin wisps of dust and vapour rising here and there, apparently at random. For a moment, Carolus was at a loss, trying to understand how something so dark and shadowed could be obscured by heat haze. Elyra supplied the answer: it's the people.

Only then did the truly gargantuan scale of the workings impinge on his conscious mind, and he drew in his breath. The rippling motion he could see was the movement of countless serfs, too far away to discern as individual human beings, all hacking away at the mineral wealth of Sepheris Secundus with the most primitive of hand tools. The bottom of the pit was in complete darkness, too deep for the westering sun to penetrate, if it ever did, and the faint glow of innumerable flares, torches and luminators competed with the natural light, blurring his vision even more. How Keira had managed to penetrate that seething anthill of humanity undetected, and return again, he had no idea, but the girl's talents were truly exceptional. Not for the first time, he thanked the Emperor for the insight that had allowed him to discern them, and the tutors of the Collegium Assassinorum for honing them so skilfully.

'So I see,' he said dryly. He gestured towards the crimson bandana. 'I take it you haven't been wearing that in public.'

'No.' Keira reached up to touch it reflexively. Red was the holy colour of the Redemption, the violent sect in which she'd been raised, and she always wore at least a trace of it. She glanced briefly at Horst before going on. 'Mordechai explained the local dress code very carefully.'

That must have been an interesting discussion, Carolus thought, and pushed aside the temptation to lift the memories from their minds. Instead, he nodded judiciously. 'Thank you for your forbearance,' he said. 'I realise how important your faith is to you.'

‘No problem,’ Keira assured him, glancing again at Horst with what, in anyone else, Carolus would have taken for a fleeting expression of mischief. ‘I got some red underwear.’ Horst looked uncomfortable for a moment, no doubt unable to avoid picturing the effect it would have on the body that the girl’s synsuit already revealed in considerable detail. ‘Sort of a compromise.’

‘I see.’ Carolus hid his surprise. When he’d last seen Keira she wouldn’t have dreamed of making light of her Redemptionist principles, and would probably have killed anyone who did. Clearly, exposure to the wider galaxy was having unexpected effects on the girl. So long as that didn’t compromise her efficiency or her lethality, he could live with it. ‘What did you find at the bottom of the hole?’ Once again his eye was drawn to the human anthill so far below, and he suppressed a shudder.

‘The mutants seem organised,’ Keira reported, her mind recalled to business. ‘There are far more of them than anyone up here suspects, and they have the usual shrines to the Changer. I’ve pinpointed most of them for cleansing. No signs of widespread Chaos worship beyond that, though, and no sign of what you’re looking for, either.’

‘I see. Thank you.’ Carolus reached out to pick up a delicate crystal tea bowl from the low table in front of him, and sipped, ordering his thoughts. The blend was unfamiliar, but not unpleasant, a faint trace of spices behind the bitterness. Similar glass tables, their surfaces composed of interlocking panes of vibrant colour, forming abstract patterns that echoed one another without ever quite repeating, stood in front of the others, who sat or sprawled on their cushions according to their personal inclinations.

Horst was cross-legged and straight backed, his brocade jacket hanging open to reveal his holstered bolt pistol as he reached forward to pick up one of the delicate sugared cakes from the plate the servants had placed in front of him along with his tea. Keira sat, like Carolus, on her folded calves, her weight forward, poised to move in an instant if any threat presented itself, the hilt of her sword within easy reach of her hand. She sipped her tea carefully, her eyes rising from the steam from time to time to regard Horst and the

inquisitor in turn without expression. Hybris Vex simply sprawled, the plain robes of his calling and few visible augments looking utterly incongruous in this vulgarly polychromatic room, and Elyra... Elyra was simply as poised and elegant as the woman in his memories always was, her pale blue kirtle setting off her eyes to perfection. Her upright posture emphasised her faint stoop, a little more pronounced than it had been, as though the burden of her talent weighed physically upon her a little more with each passing year, but that didn't diminish her at all. If anything, it seemed to call subtle attention to the inner strength he'd always admired in her. Meeting his eyes again, the blonde woman smiled.

'Sorry, Carolus. It looks like you've come all the way from Malfi just to hear that we've hit a dead end.' She tilted her head, acknowledging her colleagues. 'We've been turning the planet upside down ever since we got here, and we haven't found a trace of the kind of operation you told us to look out for.'

'I'm afraid that's true, inquisitor.' As always, Horst looked uncomfortable with Elyra's use of their employer's given name, and emphasised his title a little as he spoke. 'There are undoubtedly heretical groups on Sepheris Secundus, which I'm sure we can root out given time, but nothing on the scale your message indicated.'

'Quite so,' Vex interjected, coughing again as he spoke. He balled his fist, and thumped something under his robe, which gave off a metallic echo. 'Ah, that's got it. I've been through the last five years worth of Arbites datafiles, and there's been no mention of any psyker activity beyond the usual stuff. Latents and rogues have been rounded up for the black ships, and that's about it.'

'You secured the cooperation of the Arbites?' Carolus asked, with a hint of surprise. Unlike most worlds of the Imperium, the Adeptus Arbites maintained a considerable presence here, maintaining law and order directly from the fortress garrison that the Secundans referred to as the Isolarium, rather than delegating the task to local enforcers as they usually did. The feudal nature of Secundan society made any conventional police force impossible to run, and the nearest equivalent, the Royal Scourges, were too martial

in outlook and too hidebound by tradition to make effective investigators.

Under most circumstances the handful of Arbitrators left to oversee the dispensation of the Emperor's justice on an Imperial world would make useful allies for a team of Inquisitorial operatives, but on Sepheris Secundus, where their main concern was to ensure an uninterrupted flow of raw materials to the hive worlds of the Calixis sector, and riot control was a higher priority than intelligence gathering, confiding in them seemed like an unnecessary security risk.

As if divining the inquisitor's doubts, Vex shook his head. 'Not as such. I just poked about a bit in their datanet.' He shrugged. 'They seem a bit busy anyway, keeping the serfs in line, so it would have been churlish to bother them unnecessarily.'

'How very considerate,' Carolus said, hiding his amusement. The tech-priest would have been able to gain unlimited access to the files he wanted simply by showing his Inquisitorial credentials, but he wouldn't have found that nearly as much fun as outwitting the arbitrators' encryption and security protocols, and his message dispatching the team had indeed emphasised the need for discretion. If his suspicions were correct, a very large and well-organised conspiracy was at work, and there was no telling how far its influence might have spread. 'I'm sure you've all done more than I could possibly have asked of you, as usual.'

'That makes it even more galling to have let you down,' Horst said, 'especially as you've just come halfway across the sector to get here.' Like all his agents, the former arbitrator knew that keeping in touch with so wide a network of operatives as the Angelae Carolus was difficult and time-consuming, and the inquisitor would normally intervene in person only if things were getting desperate. Most of the time, they received their orders and dispatched their reports by astropath, like everyone else in the far-flung organisation.

Carolus smiled reassuringly. 'I wouldn't say that, exactly,' he said, and felt a tingle of Elyra's amusement brushing against his mind.

Here it comes. Whatever he hasn't been telling us...

How right you are, he responded, and began to speak.

‘THAT’S GOOD STUFF.’ Drake took another pull at the bottle, and returned it to Kyrlock. The large man shook it, listened dolefully to the gurgling that indicated it was almost empty, and drank in turn. ‘Keeps the cold out all right.’ An unaccustomed sense of warmth and well-being suffused him, despite the bone chilling wind howling across the lip of the foxhole just above his head, driving its load of snow almost horizontally towards the barely visible fortress in the distance. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘Vorlens,’ Kyrlock told him, naming one of the Chimera drivers. ‘He’s been distilling it round the back of the maintenance shed.’

‘Good old Vorlens,’ Drake said, forgetting for a moment how much he disliked the man, and trying not to wonder what Vorlens had been distilling it from. He narrowed his eyes, raising his head for a moment, and ducked back under cover, his eyes full of snow. ‘Looks like it’s setting in for a long blow.’

‘Looks like it,’ Kyrlock agreed, draining the last of the bottle, and sending it spinning into the dark. He’d spent most of his life in a forest like this one, and could read the weather easily. ‘It’s going to be a real mess by the morning.’

Drake nodded sagely in agreement, although neither of them could possibly have predicted just how catastrophically accurate that forecast would turn out to be.

THE INTRUDER RETURNED to its quarters inside the fortress, unnoticed and unremarked, and sat at a perfectly ordinary message terminal. Working quickly, for its task behind the panel had taken a little longer than expected, it picked up a set of tools and prised the back off.

If Brother Polk could have seen what ensued, he would have been aghast at the desecration. The intruder worked rapidly and methodically, without even a hint of the proper prayers and rituals, modifying the circuitry and adding a few components that even the most senior acolytes of the Ommissiah would have been hard-pressed to recognise. At length, satisfied with its work, the intruder

activated the messenger, transmitting a single, highly focussed vox pulse, and began to return its internal workings to their original condition.

IF MUCH OF THE sky could ever be seen from the surface, and any of the ill-educated serfs were ever inclined to raise their gaze from the unremitting toil of the workface, they could have been forgiven for believing that the stars moved, or at least that a considerable number of them did. At any given time there were thousands of ore barges in orbit around the ravaged planet, their heavy lifters glutting their cargo bays with the mineral wealth wrenched from the cloud-wreathed surface below, swarming like metal flies around a choice piece of carrion.

Externally, nothing marked one particular ship as anything out of the ordinary. It moved smoothly among its fellows, taking up its station with leisurely bursts of its manoeuvring thrusters, and broadcasting all the required authorisation codes.

After a while, a shuttle departed, and fell towards the planet below, its hull plates glowing a deep, rich red as it began its long plunge through the atmosphere, following the coordinates contained in the vox pulse its carrier vessel had received a short time before. Had anyone been able to observe it, they would have been surprised by both its shape and function, but no one did. Exotic technologies shielded it against most forms of detection, and the more specialised auspexes at its intended destination had been blinded by subtle sabotage. As the landing craft penetrated deeper within the atmosphere of Sepheris Secundus, and the air began to thicken, imparting lift to its aerodynamic hull, its occupants readied their weapons.

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