

INNOCENCE PROVES NOTHING

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Sandy Mitchell

With Kyrlock and Elyra infiltrating the network of rogue psykers, the rest of the team start investigating the xenos artefact smuggling ring. As the operatives work their way deeper into the two criminal organisations, they unravel clues that suggest they might both be part of one greater evil. With danger at every turn, and paranoia running rife, can the Inquisition figure out what is going on before the Scintilla system is overrun by heretics?



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 around on the family allotment.

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The following is an excerpt from *Innocence Proves Nothing* by Sandy Mitchell.

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‘Any idea what it is yet?’ Drake asked, pausing on his way to the breakfast table to converse briefly with Vex. The former Guardsman was ravenously hungry, a circumstance which had driven him from his bed shortly after dawn, and he’d been vaguely surprised to find any of the other Angelae up and about at this hour. Nevertheless, the tech-priest was sitting in his usual corner of the villa’s living room, gazing thoughtfully at the sliver of strange, ivory-like material he and Horst had recovered from the depths of the Fathomsound mine. Perhaps, Drake thought, he hadn’t been to bed at all: acolytes of the Adeptus Mechanicus tended not to bother with mere human weaknesses like sleep, if they could wire themselves up to avoid them.

‘None at all,’ Vex replied politely, his tone so even that Drake wasn’t sure if he appreciated the courtesy of being spoken to, or resented the interruption. ‘If it’s as ancient as it appears, however, it’s quite likely to predate any archives on Sepheris Secundus.’

‘Perhaps you’ll have better luck on Scintilla, then,’ Drake said, hoping he’d managed to sound sufficiently matter-of-fact about the disturbing notion that he’d shortly be treading the soil of another world. Well, that was what he’d joined the Imperial Guard for, he reminded himself, to get off the planet of his birth and carve a new

destiny among the stars, untrammelled by the petty snobberies and rigid social hierarchy of his home world. He was undoubtedly doing that, though hardly in the manner he'd expected when he'd thumbprinted the enlistment papers.

‘Perhaps.’ Vex nodded thoughtfully. ‘The archives at the Tricorn are an unrivalled depository of arcane information, at least within the Calixis Sector. Not to mention the Adeptus Mechanicus shrines in the main hives, which also boast extensive technotheological libraries.’

‘Best of luck, then,’ Drake said, moving on to the side table. Despite the hour, the servants had done their job with their usual unobtrusive efficiency, and an array of chafing dishes was already laid out, leaking appetising aromas. He lifted a couple of lids, his mouth flooding with saliva, and considered their contents. ‘Would you care for some breakfast?’

‘Just a little recaf,’ Vex said, ‘if you’d be so kind.’

Drake suspected the tech-priest had simply accepted the offer out of politeness, but poured the bitter drink anyway, then a second one for himself. The sun wasn’t visible yet, glowing wanly through the perpetually overcast skies, but the reflectors in the surrounding mountain range were already concentrating what little radiance they could collect onto the glittering city of glass suspended between the peaks. The effect was breathtaking, like a spider’s web encrusted with frost, enlarged and folded over on itself as intricately as the steel of a master-crafted swordblade, and Drake moved towards the terrace, determined to enjoy the sights of his home world while he still had the chance. For a moment, moved by

idle curiosity, he glanced down towards the squalor of the Gorgonid mine, kilometres below, hoping to catch a glimpse of the orange glow which marked the site of the mansion he and the others had raided a few hours before, but could see no sign of it; either the conflagration had burned itself out by now, which hardly seemed likely, or the bulk of the city's superstructure hid the smouldering ruins from view.

'Couldn't sleep either?' A fresh voice broke into his reverie, feminine, and uncharacteristically cheerful. Keira joined him on the terrace, her yellow silk robe clinging tightly to her well-muscled body as the wind pressed the fabric against her, as oblivious to the early morning chill as the native Secundan. Her purple hair was untidy, still swept back from her forehead with the scarlet bandana she'd worn the previous night.

For a moment Drake considered reminding her that the servants would be scandalised to see her wearing red, the colour reserved for royalty on Sepheris Secundus, then decided against it. She'd undoubtedly take offence, and annoying her wasn't a particularly safe thing to do. Besides, the sight of a cheerful Keira was an unexpected novelty, and one he felt like enjoying for a while longer. So he shook his head instead.

'Still a bit keyed up after last night, I suppose.'

'That's the grace of the Emperor,' Keira said, her face preternaturally flushed, and a faraway look in her eye. 'We're still suffused with it, after sending so many heretics to His judgement.'

Drake nodded slowly, and sipped at his recaf. It sounded more like the residual adrenaline sloshing around their systems to

him, but he'd gathered that Keira's Redemptionist faith was important to her, and that slaughtering the Emperor's enemies played a large part in her devotions. Another reason not to give the young assassin a reason to dislike him: if she took it into her head that he was just another sinner to be purged, even his status as a provisional member of the Angelae Carolus might not be enough to deflect her wrath. 'That must be why I'm so hungry,' he said, regretting the remark as soon as he'd said it.

Keira seemed to think the point a reasonable one, though, as she simply nodded, joining Drake at a small table in a corner of the terrace, out of the prevailing wind, its surface inlaid with a mosaic of coloured glass forming the crest of the minor noble house from which the villa had been rented. She nodded at the former Guardsman's heaped plate. 'If you've got any favourite local dishes, you'd better enjoy them while you can.'

'We're leaving soon, then,' Drake said, trying to ignore the shiver of apprehension which accompanied the thought.

The young assassin nodded. 'This evening. No point in letting the trail grow cold.'

'Quite,' Drake agreed, trying to hide his unease at the sudden realisation that he'd be transiting the warp before nightfall, and he might never see the city of his birth again. 'If Vos and Elyra need backup when they get to Scintilla...'

'They'll have it,' Keira told him, with quiet assurance. 'The inquisitor will be there well before their ship arrives, and he'll make all the necessary arrangements. They'll be as safe as if the Emperor Himself was walking beside them.'

‘That’s reassuring,’ Drake said. Keira knew their patron far better than he did, and her confidence in him was heartening, but his best friend and the sanctioned psyker he was guarding had a long way to go before they arrived in the Scintilla System, and a lot could still go wrong before they made it somewhere. Inquisitor Finurbi could provide some discreet assistance if they ran into trouble.

‘When do we leave?’

‘You’ll have time to pack, if that’s what’s worrying you,’ Keira said. ‘Our ship won’t be leaving orbit for hours yet.’

‘That seems a long time to wait,’ Drake said, warming his hands round the recaf mug. ‘If we’re going to beat the Ursus Innare to Scintilla, shouldn’t we leave as soon as possible?’

‘Don’t worry, we will,’ a new voice chimed in. Drake turned in his seat to see Mordechai Horst, the leader of the Angelae cell, leaning against the doorframe. As ever, it seemed, only Drake, who had grown up in Icenholm, and Keira, born and raised on the belly of Ambulon, the fabled walking city on Scintilla, were completely comfortable out here on the terrace, so close to the vertiginous drop on the other side of the balustrade. ‘It’s just an ore scow, so they’ll need to drop back into real space more often than we will to correct their course. And every time they do that, they’ll lose a little more of their lead.’

Keira glanced up, colouring slightly as she registered Horst’s presence, before relaxing into an elaborately casual pose, while Horst fixed his gaze about a centimetre above her left shoulder. So, they were both still trying to pretend they didn’t feel the way they obviously did about one another; Drake suppressed a

wry smile, and did his best to keep his mind on the business at hand, instead of the unintended entertainment.

Keira nodded in agreement. 'Charter vessels take far fewer hops, so we'll be there in half the time.'

'Something of an exaggeration,' Vex put in, glancing up from the sheaf of handwritten papers he'd recovered from the heretic cell they'd raided the previous night. The recaf he'd requested was cooling untouched beside him, Drake noticed, which hardly came as a surprise. 'But we should still arrive ahead of them, if the warp currents are favourable.'

'You've booked us on a Chartist ship?' Drake asked, his apprehension growing by the minute. There was only one such vessel in orbit he knew about, its arrival heralded by rumour and gossip as always.

Horst nodded. 'The Misericord.' He glanced at Drake, visibly surprised by the Guardsman's reaction. 'Is something the matter?'

'It's a jinx ship,' Drake said. 'Brings bad luck wherever she goes.'

Horst and Keira glanced at one another, finally making eye contact, then turned back to Drake with almost identical expressions of tolerant amusement.

'It's just a ship,' Keira said.

'It's more than that,' Drake insisted. 'The last time she put in here we had the serf riots, and the time before that there was the mirepox outbreak, and back in 989 two ore barges collided in low orbit just after she came out of warp; they both went down, and one

of them took out a whole village when it hit. The Misericord's a jinx all right.'

'And bad stuff never happens when she's not in-system, does it?' Keira asked, sceptically.

Drake shook his head. 'Of course it does. But it's always worse when she's here. Look what happened this time, daemons and everything.'

'He might just have a point,' Keira said slowly, her assurance beginning to waver a little.

Horst shrugged. 'Even if he does, we're still boarding her. It's our duty.' He smiled, a little thinly. 'Besides, we're on a mission for the Emperor. I can't see Him letting a bit of bad luck get in our way.'

'No, of course not,' Keira agreed, looking a great deal happier.

Drake took another slug of his recaf, which had begun to grow tepid, and wished he could share her confidence.

The Ursus Innare, the Warp,

Date and Time Meaningless

Vos Kyrlock stirred, and woke in hell. Quite literally, he thought fleetingly; beyond the walls of the cargo hold lay the realm of daemons and worse, the Dark Gods themselves, with nothing but the psychic shields and the sigils of warding etched into the battered hull to protect the fragile bubble of reality which cocooned them all. Every now and again the metal groaned, responding to the subtle

stresses of the engines and the megatonnes of ore contained within the storage bins; every time it did so he started involuntarily, picturing some malign horror scrabbling at the hull, intent on devouring the souls inside.

‘You’ll drive yourself mad, thinking like that,’ Elyra said, her pale face and blonde hair tinted orange by the flickering fires which lit the vast, shadowed space of the hold they occupied, supplementing the wan and erratic glow of the handful of luminators suspended from the ceiling, between the mouths of the chutes down which the ore had been dumped from the hangar bays above. At least the group of fugitives they’d joined had been allowed to disembark before the hatches in the floors of the shuttles had been opened, pitching their contents down into the darkness below; knowing the kind of people behind the smuggling racket, Kyrlock wouldn’t have been all that surprised if their human cargoes had been dispatched the same way. Beneath each chute the surrounding rock rose in ragged hillocks, obscuring the metal horizon of the bulkhead walls, but he could still see around a dozen other fires from here, each one marking the location of a different group of ragged and desperate refugees, united by little more than a greater distrust of all the rest. It was like a miniature version of the Tumble, the lawless sprawl of slag heaps where the underworlds of Icenholm and the Gorgonid transacted their business, he thought, gangers and all, just scooped up and swallowed whole by the starship.

Then the import of Elyra’s words hit him, and he felt a shiver of pure dread rattle his bones. Elyra was a firestarter, not a telepath: if she could suddenly read his mind, the influence of the

warp must be leaking in here somehow, changing her, changing them all...

Elyra grinned, although in a manner Kyrlock found far from reassuring. 'All I'm reading is your body language,' she said, a faint air of disdain suffusing the words. The persona she'd assumed in order to infiltrate the Shadow Franchise's people-smuggling ring, and the rogue psyker underground which was using it for purposes of their own, was that of a self-centred sociopath; after years of service to the Inquisition, she wasn't about to break that cover now with an inappropriate show of concern for someone else. This was the best she could do, given their chances of being overheard, and Kyrlock appreciated the subtle gesture. 'I've seen it before in first-time warp hoppers, fretting about where they are and what's out there.' She picked up a lump of shale, and threw it with sudden vigour, and surprising accuracy; its trajectory terminated with a rattle and a rodentine squeal, followed by panic-stricken scurrying in the surrounding darkness. 'This is solid, and this is real, Vos. You'd do better worrying about the rockrats snacking on your toes while you're asleep.'

'Ew. Thanks for that cheerful thought.' Zusen, one of the trio of juvie wyrds travelling with them, sat up, and huddled her bedroll a little more tightly around herself. As usual she'd settled down to sleep close to Kyrlock, seeming to find his presence reassuring, and, as usual, the Guardsman tried to hide his unease at her proximity with a friendly smile. Elyra had made it perfectly clear that they needed to keep on the right side of the juvies to follow them through the next link in the chain, and find out who was

offering rogue psykers a refuge; not just on Sepheris Secundus, but, potentially, across the entire sector.

‘You’re welcome,’ Elyra said flatly.

‘It’s good advice,’ Kyrlock said, grateful to have something else to focus on, even if it was just the skinny little wyrd who followed him around like a lost puppy. Not that he wouldn’t normally have enjoyed a young woman paying him so much attention, even if he did prefer them with a bit more meat on their bones; but he couldn’t shake the knowledge of what she was, even for a moment, and she flat out gave him the creeps. Elyra was a psyker too, of course, but she was sanctioned, her powers in the service of the Emperor, and he’d learned to trust her during the earlier stages of their mission together. ‘Better make sure you sleep with your boots on; although that won’t help against a pack of them. If you get swarmed, they can strip you to the bone in a matter of minutes.’ He threw another chip of greasy shale on the fire, watching carefully until the heat sweated the pitch out, and it ignited, hissing gently. The fire was their lifeline. If it ever went out, the rockrats would move in, and he didn’t want to think about what that would mean.

‘I’m keeping my boots on anyway,’ Zusen told him, appearing like a wan little ghost in the flickering half-light. ‘Put anything down around here and it’ll grow legs.’ She turned her head, scanning the other fires suspiciously. A fight had just broken out near one of them, terminating abruptly as one of the participants grabbed a rock seconds before the other did, felling his opponent with a single blow. No one else in the group reacted at all as the

victor resumed his place next to the flames, after a cursory rummage through his enemy's pockets.

'Very likely,' Elyra agreed, ostentatiously ignoring the spectacle. 'Which is why Vos and I never sleep at the same time, and I keep my little friend here handy.' She lifted her backpack, which was resting on her lap, just enough to reveal a glimpse of the laspistol inside, ready to be drawn in a heartbeat.

'Me too,' Kyrlock agreed, with a nod towards the chainaxe and shotgun lying next to his own pack, which he'd been using as a pillow. He didn't think any of the other refugees would dare attempt to rob them, after seeing how well armed and proficient at violence both he and Elyra were, but it would be foolish to take that for granted. Desperation could drive people to pretty much anything, in his experience.

'Then I'll turn in for a while,' Elyra said, unrolling her own blanket. Trosk and Ven, the other two members of their party, were still snoring faintly, to Kyrlock's unspoken relief; it was bad enough having to look after one of the wyrds on his own, never mind all three of them. 'Wake me if anything interesting happens.'

'You can count on it,' Kyrlock assured her. After a while the psyker's breathing became more regular.

'Vos,' Zusen said quietly, moving a little closer, 'it's all right to be scared. Everyone is. Even her.' The young wyrd stared at Elyra, her expression unreadable. 'She just hides it well, like you do.'

'I'll just have to take your word for that,' Kyrlock said. Zusen was an empath, able to sense people's emotions. He forced

himself to smile, fighting the impulse to move as far away from her as possible. ‘But I don’t think you need your gift to know how I feel about being here.’

‘You’d be surprised.’ A faint, fleeting smile appeared on the girl’s face, then vanished like clearing mist. ‘You hide how you’re feeling very well.’ Then, to Kyrlock’s heartfelt relief, she turned away, and began rummaging in her rucksack for a compressed protein bar. ‘We’re getting short of these.’

‘Then we’ll have to eat less.’ Kyrlock took a length of twine from his pocket, and began to knot it deftly. ‘Unless I get lucky with this.’

‘What is it?’ Zusen asked, tilting her head for a better view.

‘A snare.’ Kyrlock turned his head a little, pinpointing the nearest source of scrabbling in the rocks surrounding them. It was growing louder even as they spoke. ‘Rockrats’ll be out in droves soon.’

‘You can’t eat rats,’ Zusen said, smiling shyly, then her face twisted with revulsion as she realised he was perfectly serious. ‘That’s disgusting!’

‘So’s starving,’ Kyrlock said. ‘I’ve tried both, and believe me, rat stew’s preferable.’ He stood, before honesty compelled him to add, ‘Just about.’

‘What do you mean they’ll be out soon?’ Zusen asked after a moment, and Kyrlock shrugged, glancing at the motionless body in the distance.

‘They’ll be after the bait,’ he said, not waiting to hear her reaction to that.

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