

Port in the Storm

By Duncan Waugh

Crammed together in the tight confines of their Repressor transport, Sirius and the rest of his Adeptus Arbites squad checked over their gear as the vehicle hammered down the city streets.

The Arbitrator held a bracing strut as he shouted to be heard above the noise of the engine. 'From what we've been told, they touched down in one of the industrial sectors. Local planetary elements are en route to set up a perimeter, but you all know how that goes.'

'Don't suppose anybody had the bright idea to shoot the thing down before it made landfall in the first place?' Yhern, one of the other enforcers, asked as he tightened the strapping on his carapace armour.

Sirius smiled wryly. 'Our esteemed planetary governor was likely too busy wringing his hands to actually make a decision before it was too late. So here we are.'

'Wonderful,' one of the others grunted derisively.

'Yes, well,' Sirius continued, 'everyone look lively, because we need to keep this contained.'

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As they cleared the boarding hatch, Sirius and his squad looked over the scene laid out before them. The refugees' lander had come down amongst some partially cleared industrial wasteland where Mesmoch's planet-wide jungle had already started to reassert itself. The ship's dishevelled Human cargo had already started to disperse, angling away from the landing craft's hull.

A second Repressor skidded to a halt alongside them, the team of his counterpart, Lere, disembarking from the vehicle in a matter of moments.

The other squad leader approached, his movements swift and tight as he spoke. 'That's a lot of people. We're going to have to manage this situation before it becomes completely uncontrollable.'

Sirius turned and looked back at their two teams, who had already started fanning out. 'Why bother sending the numbers you need when you can just throw the Arbites in, eh?'

'That's the Emperor's own truth.' The Arbitrator clapped him on the arm. 'Apparently some of the other teams have been encountering pretty serious cult activity on board some of these things. Keep your eyes open.'

'Good to know,' Sirius replied, the Arbitrator grimacing as more and more people exited onto the open space. Many had to be supported by their peers, glassy-eyed and shell-shocked as their fellows struggled to bear their weight. But, looking along their lines, Sirius could not see any visible signs of combat amongst them.

He sniffed derisively in the hot jungle air. 'Throne, yet more of these lifeless husks. What do you think is wrong with them?'

'Who knows?' Lere responded. 'These refugee ships have been full of them. Come on, we have a job to do.'

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'Weapon!' the warning went out, followed immediately by the booming report of a shotgun being fired.

All around him, the rest of Sirius' squad reacted instantly, bringing their weapons up, training their blunt muzzles on the rest of the crowd. The Arbitrator pulled his own gun tight into his shoulder, his eyes scanning back and forth across the panicked faces of the populace before him, looking for telltale signs of moral rot or nascent heresy.

It did not take long for the wailing and screaming to begin. From the corner of his eye he could see the crumpled form of the man who had been shot, a crude stubgun laying by his corpse. Already the mob were moving in, cramming around the hapless fool's body, waves of anger and indignation rolling out across the assembled mass. Children cried, men and women screamed, a palpable mixture of fear and despair coming off of them as the stresses and frustrations of the past months' fearful flight boiled over. Voices were raised in shrill prayers for deliverance.

And then, as he continued to scan the throng in front of him, Sirius spotted what he was looking for. Standing out amongst the panicked masses was a face of pure, unbridled defiance; the muscles in the man's neck were taut and visibly pulsing as his young, dark eyes locked on the dead body. Suddenly, improvised projectiles began hammering into the Adeptus Arbites' line as the refugees grabbed anything that was not nailed down to throw.

Sirius shrugged off the rocks and debris that clattered heavily against his body armour and took one step into the no man's land between the two groups, levelling his weapon at the malcontent before him. 'You!'

The man's eyes snapped up instantaneously, a wildness to his movements.

'Get down on the ground in the Emperor's name!' the Arbitrator called out.

One of his fellow enforcers moved up beside him, using the riot shield he was carrying to cover the pair of them, and Sirius felt a pat on his other shoulder as someone else moved up on his other side. The moment seemed to drag, the two men staring at one another in the midst of the surrounding chaos.

'Don't do it,' he muttered under his breath, knowing full well what was about to happen.

As if on cue, the young man in front of him threw his long duster open, revealing a slung autopistol as he reached for the weapon. Sirius squeezed the trigger, feeling the satisfying thud of the weapon in his hands. His second shot blew out the other man's pelvis, hurling him bloodily from his feet. Sirius forced himself back out of his tunnel vision, trying to regain some degree of situational awareness.

A fist-sized rock slammed into the helmet of his comrade, staggering the man and causing the enforcer's grip on his shield to waver. Sirius managed to wrap a hand around the injured man's backplate before he fell, pulling him back into position. As Sirius checked back and forth across their line, he was finally able to take in the full chaos of the scene, their squads slowly being pushed back by the sheer weight of missiles being thrown their way.

'This is getting out of hand!' Yhern called out from behind.

Then a series of angry buzzing sounds went flying past his head, their proximity sending a cold shiver down Sirius' spine. Those had been autogun rounds!

'Where did that come from?' he shouted desperately.

'I see them...' Yhern replied.

Another series of cracks, followed by more buzzing, though less angry this time. Then a heavy weight crashed into Sirius from behind. He twisted to check behind him. Down on his knees, Yhern tried desperately to hold himself upright, propped up on one hand. The other hung limply, a darkness leaking from the armoured plates covering that side of his chest. His

fellow Arbitrator tried to say something, but all that came out of his mouth was a crackly, wheezing sound.

Sirius tightened up the sling on his shotgun, cinching it in tight to his body, and hammered the shield bearer on the man's shoulder, shouting to be heard over the screaming crowd. 'Help me!'

Groggily, the man eyed the fallen Arbitrator – Sirius was almost certain the enforcer had suffered a concussion from the earlier impact – and the two of them picked Yhern up, one either side of him as they hurriedly dragged him back to the idling form of their Repressor.

'We need to pull back and regroup,' the Arbitrator called out to the others as they hurriedly loaded Yhern into the back of the transport.

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The team's medicae worked quickly on Yhern's body, stripping off the man's armour in an attempt to get to the bullet wound as their small convoy raced down a number of small side alleys. Even here, the frontier world's voracious flora was struggling to force its way back into the manufactora district, with creeping vines and twisted, sickly-looking saplings having seeded themselves along the edge of the road.

'We're getting more reports of unauthorised landings,' the vehicle's driver shouted over his shoulder to the assembled group. 'There are conflict zones emerging all the way from the slum-habs to Penitents' Square.'

'Emperor, how is that possible?' someone shouted.

The driver swerved suddenly to avoid a toppled and shattered statue of Saint Chet before continuing. 'It would appear that our quarantine procedures were not as stringent as originally thought.'

The speaker turned to Sirius. 'You think it's related to those reports of mutant covens we've been hearing about?'

'How in the Emperor's name would I know?' the Arbitrator replied, turning back to the driver. 'Try and raise the precinct fortress, we need to know what we're doing with—'

The next thing Sirius knew he was crushed up against the inside of the APC, the weight of one of his

teammates pressing up against him, his hearing ringing from some kind of explosion.

The men around him struggled to regain their sense of balance, looks of uncomprehending shock written across many of their faces. Pushing the other soldier off of him, Sirius felt reassured to realise that their vehicle was at least still the right way up, and leaned over to look out the side viewports. The other Repressor had not fared so well; it was now little more than a burning wreck, its hull completely engulfed in flames.

With no time to dwell on what had just befallen his fellow enforcers, the Arbitrator stumbled his way up to the driver's compartment, screaming in the man's ear to try and be heard. 'Get us out of here!'

'I can't!' The driver, Denlen, struggled with the controls. 'The right track's blown, she won't move.'

Sirius swore loudly, as the sound of small arms fire rattled off their vehicle. Looking out of the cracked front hatch, it did not take him long to spot the hab-stack from which they were being fired upon.

'I don't wish to preach to the confessor here, sir,' said Denlen as he turned to Sirius and pointed at the wrecked Repressor. 'But I don't want to be in here when they reload whatever just did that.'

Sirius turned back to the rest of the team, alarm apparent in his voice. 'Everybody out, now!'

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'If we're going to repair that track, we have to clear them out first,' Sirius thought out loud.

'What about those people back there? If what we've been hearing about these rampant mutations amongst the refugees is true, we can't just let them go,' one of the other Arbites, Jovah, spoke up.

'And how are we going to do that?' the Arbitrator snapped. 'There's only a handful of us.'

'We don't even know why all these people are coming here.' Yhern struggled to speak through his injury, immediately bursting into a coughing fit after managing to get the words out.

'I heard things on the vox, fragments of intercepts from the landers' crews,' Denlen spoke up pensively, the group turning to look at him. 'Something about a vast blackness, an emptiness.' He pointed up to the sky. 'Out there.'

'You think you're going to get any sense out of those people?' Jovah smirked. 'You saw the state they were in, they barely even knew where they were. They're probably heretics.'

'There was something else too.' Denlen's tone had grown sombre. 'The other teams, they reported seeing some strange things amongst some of the escapees.'

Sirius regarded the enforcers coolly. It was no time for any of them to start cracking up under the pressure. 'Hold it together. Offer up a prayer if you have to. We're going to clear this building, fix our Repressor and then find out what in the Emperor's name is going on.'

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The able-bodied members of the team moved swiftly through the abandoned hab block, climbing the stairwell towards the floors that they had taken fire from. Along the way they encountered sporadic resistance; evidently some amongst the escaping civilians had managed to sneak a few basic weapons past the security checks before they had disappeared into the local populace.

Reaching the top story of the building, Denlen, whose nerves had been growing increasingly strained, started to mutter under his breath, drawing concerned looks from the rest of the team.

'You don't hear that?' he finally said.

'Keep noise to a minimum,' Sirius whispered back harshly.

'I can hear her voice,' Denlen continued, his eyes flicking back and forth between the other Arbites, looking for validation. 'As easily as any of yours.'

Sirius was getting increasingly frustrated with the enforcer. The trials of the day made it feel as if something was raking its way over his brain, and Denlen's ramblings were stoking the fires of superstitious dread within Sirius' chest. What if the refugees had brought some manner of witchery with them to Mesmoch?

'I swear by the Throne, Denlen, if you don't quiet down I'll knock you out myself,' he said, glaring at the man.

'She says we shouldn't be here,' was all Denlen replied, his eyes glazed over and unfocused.

Sirius shook his head with disgust, motioning to the others. 'Come on.'

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The group moved down the dilapidated corridor, their movements tight and in sync with one another. Small rooms led off to either side, which they checked and cleared as they moved, following the hallway down as it fed into a single large space.

Sitting in the middle of the room, cradling her knees into her body was a young woman. Sirius watched her as the rest of his team checked the corners. As far as he could make out, the frail, rags-covered creature was unarmed. Seeing no apparent threat, he allowed his weapon to lower.

One of the other enforcers slung his shotgun behind him and approached her, one hand held open invitingly. 'It's going to be okay, you can trust me.'

The girl looked up slowly, her wide eyes making contact with the man before taking in the rest of their group. Hesitantly she stood up, and Sirius' teammate took another step forward.

'Where's the missile launcher?' Denlen's voice trembled.

Sirius' patience was wearing thin with the man, and he cast a sidelong glance at him. 'What?'

'The missile launcher.' The man's eyes were unnervingly bright, crazed almost. 'The one that blew up Lere's whole team. We haven't found one.' Denlen's weapon was still trained on the girl, his arms visibly shaking. 'And she is all that's left.'

'Pull yourself together,' Sirius snarled, but when he returned his gaze to the woman, even he could sense that something had changed, and now his instincts were screaming of witchcraft.

Did she look as small and weak as she had before? She watched him calmly as she moved the hair out of her face. Was there something else there, behind those eyes? The Arbitrator had spent years learning to read people. Time and again he had found that listening to one's gut was the best way to stay alive, and yet things in that moment were rapidly starting to feel off to him.

Those eyes, he tried to break away from them, but they bore into him, the weight of his shotgun seeming to grow with every passing moment.

'She said not to come.' Denlen's voice sounded distant and muted.

Sirius realised, with oddly detached surprise, that the girl was not blinking. Why wasn't she blinking? The man in front of him reached out to touch her, and a smile formed across the waif's face.

The Arbitrator tried to move, tried to call out a warning, but it felt like he was bound, his body chained, his mouth gagged.

Denlen cried out. The young woman's eyes blazed with a sudden witchlight. Everything exploded in bright green flame.

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When Sirius came to, his body hurt. The Arbitrator struggled to breathe, his lungs creaking under the strain, and his left arm refused to work at all. Upon opening his eyes, his brain struggled to take in what it was seeing. The entire back wall of the building had been blown out, the city and surrounding jungle were clearly visible through the open hole. Sickly green flames burned around what remained of the structure, and all that was left of his team were a series of charred corpses.

Pulling himself to his feet with his good hand, he staggered forward, but could find no sign of the witch. He spun around at the sound of gunfire from outside, barely keeping his balance in the process. It was only then that he could take in the full turmoil that had enveloped the city below.

From his vantage point, the Arbitrator could see more of the grounded refugee ships, their aged, ravaged hulls spread out around the city and nestled in the jungle fringes. Taken in all at once, the sheer number of them was staggering, and, as gunfire and explosions rang out from the hab-blocks surrounding many of these evacuees' vessels, Sirius knew the situation had already escalated beyond any of their control.

There was no way for his forces, or those of their ineffectual governor, to keep order in the face of such a mass influx of people. No matter what he did, Mesmoch was doomed to drown under the weight of it all.

The Arbitrator sank to his knees, desperately beseeching the only source of salvation that he knew for help. 'Holy God-Emperor, I beg you, please hear your servant in this hour of need.' Sirius felt the stone in his heart begin to lighten. 'I do not know the cause of this exodus, I do not know what malign force is assailing your divine creation. But I implore you, please calm these waters, bring order to this chaos and peace to your congregation.'

As he opened his eyes and looked out at the destruction beyond, something told the Arbitrator that his prayer would not go unanswered.