Sister Hospitaller Verina’s chronometer told her that the sun had come up several hours earlier, as she and Colour Sergeant Allyonna Fillonova crept over the lip of their bastion’s forward observation trench to survey the road up to the Dinu Pass. Not that it mattered much, however. Above, a warp-fuelled storm, conjured to keep the sky free of aircraft, shut out much of the light and only by the ruddy glow of the burning Valken Forest away to the south could the women inspect the carnage before them through their low-light field glasses.

The ground was littered with many overlapping craters and the broken bodies of the thousands of Chaos cultists who had been hurling themselves up the slope at the chain of hurriedly built fortresses each dawn for days. An attack had petered out only half an hour before and many of the corpses still smouldered, wreathing the scene in oily smog and giving off a rancid stench which even Verina’s filter-veil could not quite shut out. However, it was not the ruin of the slope which she wished to examine, but the great pits at its base, just out of range of Imperial ordnance, where the beasts of Chaos had been slowly erecting siege guns of immense calibre. Ancient almost beyond reckoning, and once the property of some lost Imperial army, these great beasts of pipe and plate were still swarming with technical servitors, but even Verina could see that they were mere hours away from being ready to fire.

‘My lady, look to the leftmost pit. Land Raider, or might have been once. Word Bearers.’

Verina started slightly at Allyonna’s words, as if simply speaking their name would invite the dread Pain Lords among them. However, it came as no surprise to find them here. Valerius, apostle of the dread Chaplain Erebus, had landed a large contingent from the Word Bearers Legion on Hyrus Secundus a few weeks previously and it made sense that they would come, hungry for the men and women of the Guard who still waited for evacuation from the Eretov spaceport.

They might not be able to take these positions in the close assault, thanks to the automatic batteries which the Hyrusians maintained, but once those mortars had dropped a few dozen bunker busters onto the bastions they would have things their own way. She wheeled the focus of her glasses round until she could make out the corrupted transport in better detail. The blade-covered machine was clearly a close assault carrier: a ‘Black Crusader’. Her worst fears were confirmed when the front ramps opened up and a Word Bearers heavy assault Marine clambered out, moving fluidly even in the enormous Terminator suit which made his already massive frame

seem truly gargantuan.

Dropping back into the trench, Verina turned about and looked through the ruins of the Shrine to the Emperor Triumphant, into the valley where the remnants of the 7th and 21st Hyrusian Guards crowded around Eretov's launch pads. She counted six cargo shuttles still on their gantries and a steady stream of other vessels, from drop-ships to large private yachts, dashing back and forth to the fleet in orbit. She flinched a little to think of the Navy, whose cruisers had suspended bombarding the planet earlier that morning and, not for the first time, the enormity of the situation caused her to shiver. No bombardment could mean only the worst: the Navy had been withdrawn to picket duty along the ascent paths from evacuation points like Eretov, and Grand Marshal Helfrich had indeed conceded the planet to the Great Enemy. Still, this defence line had to be held for at least another twelve hours if enough troops were to get away.

Not wishing Sergeant Fillonova to see her concern, Verina jumped over to the rear of the observation trench to get a glimpse of the ruined Imperial iconography in the once beautiful building. When the 1st Company of the 7th Hyrusian Guard had been air-dropped to the remains of the shrine last week, Commissar Andrôz Jelinek had ordered the altar cleaned and repaired whilst Verina herself had restored a faceless statue of Saint Katherine to its place at the right hand of the Emperor. None in the company had much skill in such matters to be sure, but even so Verina had taken some heart from the work as it helped her address the conflicting feelings which had burst forth from her on the death of her master.

Before Inquisitor Lord Matanlé had taken her from the Order of our Martyred Lady, Verina had loved nothing so dearly as making devotion to the mistress of her order through the works of healing which had been her calling from childhood. She had, according to Canoness Sophitia, a gift for healing and hands that could nurture even the most broken soul back to health. Indeed, it was no lie that she was the most devout surgeon to come out of her order for generations and it was probably that which drew Lord Matanlé to the convent seeking her service, much to the disapproval of her mentor.

As her mind went back over that day, Verina recalled the bitter exchange between Sophitia and the ancient inquisitor clearly. 'I brought her up, and she is dear to me and gentle of spirit. She knows nothing of the world beyond these walls and is not ready for so onerous a duty'. At the time, with the arrogance that can only be found in the young, Verina actually half believed that Sophitia's words had actually been calculated to humiliate her before the inquisitor and keep her in the Convent of Saint Katherine. She had secretly been pleased when the smiling Lord Matanlé had simply waved away Sophitia's concerns and pointedly asked the canoness if the order wished to officially oppose his selection. As Verina later discovered, the lord, being possessed of the Dark Gift, not only knew of Sophitia's inherent disdain for psykers, but also that

the Sisterhood would not dare oppose the Inquisition in such a matter.

And suffer Verina did, after being torn out of her world of pure faith and being ordered to put her talents to direct use in the service of the Imperium. Though not entirely unaware of the nature of the foes of mankind, Verina found herself closer to the witches, cultists and fallen of the Imperium than few ever get. Though she was regularly able to work her healing arts on the lord's retinue, her primary task was surgically examining prisoners during interrogation and over two hundred had come under her knives in the four years before arriving in the Pyrus Reach last month. 'Cutting the truth out of them,' Lord Matanlé had called it. Of course, all but a small handful had ultimately died, with the guilty being purged by fire and those judged innocent by the good inquisitor being granted the release of the Emperor's Mercy.

There lay the heart of Verina's dilemma: no matter how the avuncular Lord Matanlé had couched it to his 'fragile little Sister' in the gloomy interior of his cruiser. She had sworn the oaths of healing to Saint Katherine before being required to break them in the name of the Emperor. Either way she had turned in her mind she faced heresy; the moral sin of disobeying oaths sworn on all she held as sacred to the Golden Throne, and the mortal sin of disobeying her lawful master's, and therefore the Emperor's, orders. She had trained to save the lives of her Sisters and the Emperor's servants, yet she had been complicit in the murder of many of them and might have murdered more had not Lord Matanlé's Valkyrie been brought down as his retinue arrived in the city of Hyrograd to investigate cult risings on Hyrus Secundus.

Coming back to herself, Verina looked upon the ruined visage of Saint Katherine and felt tears on her own cheeks. She now imagined that the statue was faceless because she was shamed and could not look upon her doubting Sister. Verina had failed the test of faith on both counts. In her heart she firmly believed that she should either have had the courage to deny Lord Matanlé, and take her own life, rather than break her oaths of healing, or accept the hard duty she had been given without the doubts which now beset her. Dropping to her knees, she opened the blister on her right bracer and let the needle of the Emperor's Mercy slide quietly down, past the boom of her surgical saw, and over the back of her hand. She had used much of her supply in the piecemeal assaults which the enemy seemingly felt obliged to throw up the pass every morning. However, several full canisters remained; enough for dozens of doses and more than enough to reconcile Verina to all the questions which plagued her mind.

She imagined the drug suffusing her system, sending her into a dreamless sleep before the pyro-chemical agents in the compound set light to her flesh and reduced her sinful remains to ash.

'Hah. You still alive?'

The voice brought Verina back to herself, and she turned to see who was addressing her.

She discovered that Sergeant Fillonova had moved down the trench a way. She appeared to be speaking to one of the corpses hanging from the wire. One of them, a young man in a tattered suit, had begun moaning and feebly clawing at an open laser burn on his chest. Sergeant Fillonova had taken out her laspistol and was adjusting the power setting.

‘Give me a moment and I’ll close that up for you.’ Sergeant Fillonova gave Verina a steel-eyed smile and shot the traitor. His chest should have exploded; superheated flesh bursting from the opened wound. However, the slash simply sizzled in the low power beam and the young man writhed in agony.

‘Sorry,’ called the sergeant, ‘but you’ve got to keep still. Wriggle around like that and I’ll have your eye out’. She fired again and this time cut a line down the cultist’s face, across his left eye, and burned a deep gash in his cheek.

‘Give him one for the commissar,’ shouted a Guardsman from a foxhole further up the hill. ‘Make him scream for his friends down there.’

Sergeant Fillonova moved forward again, acknowledging the cheers of her comrades with a jaunty flourish of her pistol, and even Verina could see that this was getting seriously out of control. These shootings were attracting attention and not all the enemy’s guns were out of range. She sprang across the trench, and hurled herself upwards to drag the sergeant down from the fire step just as a sharp crack echoed through the shrine. The back of the Guardswoman’s right shoulder ballooned under her armour and she fell backwards into Verina’s arms, dropping her pistol into the mud.

Verina rolled the gasping sergeant onto her side and cut away the cracked armour with her wrist saw. The entry wound was a black-edged star and, though the greatly distended shoulder had split in places, there was no clear exit point. The conclusion was obvious to Verina: a ripper. She had seen wounds caused by these tainted shards of obsidian before, designed to fragment on entry and send sorcerous splinters racing down the nerve tracks to cause decay in anyone unfortunate enough to survive the initial shot. She had only managed to save one person clipped by such a round before, and even then it had been at a properly staffed field centre, as well as at the cost of the Crusader’s sword arm. Here, with few tools and no assistants, the prospects were bleak indeed. Nevertheless, Verina hoisted Fillonova onto her shoulders and began carrying her back to camp with the intent of doing whatever she could for the fallen Guardsman.

‘Kill me. Please. For the love of the Emperor, just kill me.’

Verina barely registered the laser shot from the shrine which flashed over her head and silenced the young man's cries.

Reaching the main camp, Verina placed Fillonova into a cot between the ashes of Commissar Jelinek and the terribly wounded Dark Angels Librarian who had stumbled into camp at dawn and lapsed into unconsciousness without a word. The company were terrified of the Space Marine, of course. None of the Guard here, save perhaps the late commissar, had ever met a member of the Adeptus Astartes before and to see one bearing wounds that should have killed him instantly by any sane standard, blanched even these elite 1st Company fighters.

Verina had initially thought they saw in this hooded and daemon-masked Dark Angel a reflection of Valerius's Word Bearers, who hovered on the edge of all their thoughts waiting for their moment to strike. However, she also knew that to see one of the Emperor's godlike warriors so mangled had affected them all deeply. For if the mysterious Dark Angels had been scattered, as seemed to be the case, then what hope could anyone else have?

These thoughts were unimportant at the moment, and Verina put them aside as a lifetime of training came to the fore. She tracked the course of the shards in Sergeant Fillonova's shoulder as best she could. It soon became apparent that the woman would probably not last the hour, as her wounds had already begun to exude the sickly smell of decay which would end her struggle. She dosed the area with pain killers, and restrained the sergeant when she tried to rise.

'Be still Allyonna. I will ease your suffering as best I can,' Verina said, moving her bracer into place.

'That was stupid of me, my lady,' said Fillonova in a broken whisper, stirring from her shock as the drugs took hold. 'The commissar would have skinned me alive if he'd seen it'.

Verina looked over shoulder to the remains of their former commander, mortally wounded by shell fragments the day before. 'Why did you not just kill him back there Allyonna? It is not like you to be so precipitate'

'I don't know, my lady. We've been watching those guns get closer for days and since the fleet stopped shelling we all know that we're little more than a forlorn hope. I suppose I wanted to strike back myself, and I do feel better for it.'

'How so?'

'At least I've shown them down there that we are not hiding behind our machine

spirits and missiles.’

‘But to die like this?’

‘It is as good a death as any I can think of, and a better one than I’d feared. Though I might think differently if I could actually feel the wound.’ The sergeant laughed coldly and picked up one of the empty analgesic shots with which Verina had dosed her shoulder. ‘Don’t let me shame myself before the company. Don’t let me turn,’ implored Fillonova at last, grasping at the Sister’s right arm.

Verina sensed that the Guardsmen around the camp were quiet and were, whilst seemingly absorbed in many menial tasks, clearly hanging on her exchange with Sergeant Fillonova. The 1st Company respected their colour sergeant and she was speaking as much for their benefit as for any other reason. But Verina knew enough about death to know that this woman was, at the last, content with her lot and her service to the Imperial Guard. Her final act was to give her troops confidence in the one who would replace her in command and, while Verina knew that she would not long outlive the young woman, she respected Fillonova enough not to disturb her passing with the truth.

‘You have given all that you can give in His name, and in His name I acknowledge that service. Allyonna Fillonova, I grant you honourable rest from your labour,’ said Verina and, intoning the Litany for the Righteous, she introduced the needle on her bracer into Sergeant Fillonova’s neck.

Death had visited the camp many times in the past week, but as the remains of the sergeant began to smoulder on her deathbed, it seemed to Verina that the surviving Guardsmen were, though obviously cowed, resolved as never before. This was not the fanatical bravery Verina had seen in the Cadian Kasrkins, from whose ranks Lord Matanlé habitually drew his stormtroopers. Neither was it the righteous zeal of her order’s warrior Sisters, whose battle prayers pierced the heavens. Nor was it the sure, centuries tested faith of the Emperor’s own sons, for whom every act was a devotion to the Light of Man. The simple dedication of the Hyrusians shamed her own unvoiced doubts even more, and she could not bear their gaze. Once the rites had been completed, she drew herself to her feet and walked towards the restored shrine, determined to make an end of the coward which she had become.

‘A moment if you please, good Sister.’

Looking round at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, Verina saw that the Dark Angel had woken. ‘I sense that time is short, and not just for myself. Come closer. I would have words with you, and have not the strength to bawl across this camp at you for long.’ The Librarian slowly levered himself up on his elbows, blackened blood and amber fluid oozing from rents in his abdominal armour, and beckoned Verina towards

him.

Though terrified of the power which this Angel of Death, even in such a weakened state, might possess over her mind, Verina walked serenely over to the Librarian and placed her hand upon his shoulder. She pondered the possibilities and came to the conclusion that he would simply have her executed for heretical thoughts and cowardice. The Dark Angels were known to be among the most intractable of the Astartes and Verina secretly prayed for harsh judgement from this righteous warrior prince.

‘My name is Crucius, Sister. What think you of our current position? What are the enemy dispositions? What is your plan?’

‘We are a forlorn hope, my Lord Crucius. We are one of six such bastions and have been holding the enemy back to buy time for one of the evacuation centres at Eretov spaceport. The enemy have brought up their siege bombards and within hours we will be overrun by Word Bearers. I have no plan,’ Verina said quietly.

‘None save self-destruction, child?’ Crucius asked. ‘I sense the conflict within you and would urge reconsideration. You are in need of counsel and I am in need of your services. Therefore let us speak of what drives a devoted daughter of the Emperor to the brink of bodily heresy and we may each yet save the other.’

‘I am a coward, lord,’ and this was the first time Verina had confided her sins to any save her own conscience. ‘I doubt all that I am and all I have trained for. I have killed hundreds and now cannot reconcile the acts with the necessity for them. How can I command these troops when I cannot command myself?’

‘You are a Hospitaller of Saint Katherine are you not?’

‘Yes Lord Crucius, in service as an interrogator to the late Inquisitor Lord Matanlé.’

Crucius closed his eyes for a moment and then spoke in measured tones. ‘So you think that your desire to preserve life is a weakness, in that you doubt the necessity of your services to your lord?’

‘Faith is purest when it is unquestioning, my lord.’

‘The very words of the Canticle, but hardly helpful in this case. Why did your inquisitor call you to his service?’

Verina thought about this for a while before answering. ‘Because he had heard that I was the finest healer which the order had trained in recent years. The only one in a decade to have sung the oaths of healing as a novitiate.’ There was little point in lies

or false modesty.

‘So, he knew you to be a righteous and principled woman, dedicated to the salvation of the Emperor’s servants? Anyone who so diligently trains to save life is bound to have reservations about killing, are they not?’

Verina remained quiet, reflecting upon the past, thinking about the long nights of interrogation and the things which she had done in the Emperor’s name. ‘He called me a Blade of Truth and would not allow anyone else help him question sensitive subjects. He must have known how I hated it, and yet he always called on me.’

‘Were I in his place, I would certainly not want some over-eager butcher handling such matters. I would desire accurate results, not random violence. Who better to act in such a capacity than one whose faith is pure and who takes absolutely no joy in the act?’

‘But I should not have doubted him. You speak the truth my Lord, but I should have had faith in him. My oaths to the order…’

‘Cannot be cast aside,’ interrupted Crucius, ‘nor should they be so lightly discarded. You still do not see the truth before your eyes do you? Your ability to question your orders is what made your lord seek you out, of that I am certain. Doubt is an essential part of our faith and our belief in the holy Emperor’s cause.’

‘That is heresy.’

‘Not so, though you have not lived long enough to understand the nature of such doubt as I now do. I am ancient even by the reckoning of my Chapter and might have gone to the coffins soon, had this campaign not seen the end of me. I have seen the certainties of faith twisted in ways you could not even begin to contemplate. The Word Bearers and their like for example. When they originally rose in rebellion they did so not because they doubted our lord, but because they did not doubt the right of their cause. Their hearts were so full of the certainty of their path that they were snared by their own conceit and have suffered for centuries because of it.’

Crucius looked at the storm overhead and said, more to himself than to Verina, ‘And we are born out of that same rebellious stock. How can we but doubt our own strength in the face of such dreadful facts? No little Sister, the test of doubt is what keeps our faith strongest in times of crisis.’

Confused by Lord Crucius, and things which passed her understanding, Verina looked down at her hands and thought about the deaths she had perpetrated over the years. She accepted Lord Crucius’s words that she had been selected from the convent because she was of a temperate nature and mindful of her oaths to her order. Yet, the

universe was a savage place indeed if it could visit such contradictions on a person.

‘You still think yourself poorly used?’ said Crucius. ‘Now that is verging on heresy. I know you better than you think little Sister. Your heart has not been broken by work which would have driven many mad. You are that rarest of Imperial servant, in that you stubbornly refuse to be parted from your sense of compassion. Let your doubts have their reign, but do not let them consume you as they almost have.’

Verina was strangely comforted by the Librarian’s words as they peeled away her own conceits from the truth which she had evaded for so long. ‘I should still die for my transgression. That is the only just punishment.’

‘Maybe so, but that is not for me to decide. All our ends seem certain enough in any event and, as such, there seems little reason to hurry yours along a few minutes, for I sense that you still have employment here. Your own soul has been saved from self-destruction, but there are still others in need, and one of them lies before you.’

It took Verina a few moments to realise that Lord Crucius was referring to himself, and even then she could not bring herself to ask what it was he wished of her. ‘I will help in any way I can, but even had I the proper equipment, I know little of Astartes physiology. I would likely do more harm than good.’

‘That is the point though, dear little Sister. I require you to “do more harm” as you put it. My gene-seed cannot fall into the hands of the enemy, and while it is a capital crime to cut myself off from my brothers in this fashion, the greater crime here would be allowing the Ruinous Powers to seize my seed and populate their ranks with my progeny.’

Verina moved closer to the Librarian, who tilted his neck to give Verina access to his neck. Not knowing how to proceed, she fed a dose strong enough to fell over a dozen into the system of the stricken Space Marine and even then was not certain that it would be enough.

Crucius settled back onto the ground and stiffened slightly, as the Emperor’s Mercy began to take effect. Struggling visibly, he took up the Reliquary from his chest, opened its doors, and removed the fragment of armour which lay within. Handing it down to Verina he closed his eyes.

‘This is all we have from him, and it is the one regret I have that I will not live long enough to see him returned to us.’

Confused again, Verina could only look at the fragment of green plating and wait for Crucius to go on.

‘You think me mad to wish this? There are many among your master’s ranks who think our whole Chapter driven insane by our past misdeeds, but what good will his death gain for us if we cannot bring him home?’

‘My lord? I do not understand.’

‘Blessed is the Fallen come home to his brothers. Cleanse the penitent and strip away his spoiled flesh. Let his spirit go before the All Father. Let him be judged and castigated. Let that redeemed soul rejoice in His mercy.’

Verina could see that he was fading fast now, as the Emperor’s Mercy began to attack his organs and nervous system.

‘Tell me, dear little Sister. What think you now of our position? How is our foe disposed? What is your plan?’ said Crucius, and his voice was barely audible.

Verina felt her soul lift as it had not done since her days in the convent. She fell to her knees in reverent awe, and even the fearful Guardsmen circled the pair in silent tribute.

‘We are an Imperial Guard assault force, Lord Crucius. The enemy has ranged siege guns against us so that they can sweep away the defence of Eretov spaceport. It is my proposal to sally forth with this unit and disable those guns before they can be fully readied for action against our bastions.’

Verina had not entirely known what to expect from the surviving Guardsmen after Crucius finally passed away. In many ways they had every right to disregard her statement of intent to the Librarian and follow their written orders to the letter. However, she was moved to tears of joy to see them quickly and professionally gathering up ammunition, poring over tactical readouts and prepping the local gun batteries to provide cover. One of them had obviously communicated the idea down the line however, and Verina soon found herself with a vox set in hand discussing her scheme with the other base commanders in the chain.

The decisions were taken in moments and the batteries primed in minutes, and very soon the cannons and rocket turrets began firing, throwing up great gouts of mud and rock into a sight screen just beyond the defensive wire.

‘Follow the barrage closely,’ shouted Verina to the assembled troops. ‘Those with charges know where to go, and what to do. Disregard all but your targets and you will prevail’.

‘Difficult to ignore fifty Word Bearers coming at you, my lady,’ called one of the women at the back of the group, who carried Sergeant Fillonova’s standard, unfurled

and ready for the advance.

‘Unless you’ve got Sister Verina snapping at your heels,’ replied one of the veterans at the front, which drew a murmur of amused assent from many.

This was good, thought Verina as she allowed a smile to play on her young face. They were frightened and obviously knew they were marked for death, but they believed in her and that would be enough to see them through.

Hefting the ornate chainsword, once the property of Andrôz Jelinek, Verina considered what it meant. She had never wielded so mighty a blade before and knew she had not the skill for it, but this ancient device spoke more of her final understanding of the nature of her oaths and what they actually meant to her. Thus, readied for her final act of devotion, Verina mounted the fire step and looked upon the remains of the young cultist who Alyonna had tormented. She offered a silent prayer to the Golden Throne that his desire for redemption had been heartfelt, then stepped up onto no-man’s-land and began following the creeping cannon and missile barrage down the hill.

A light screen though it might have been, it covered the Guardsmen well enough and much of the fire which came their way fell short, went wide or flew over the company’s heads. However, all too soon the curtain dropped and Verina’s attack groups found themselves only yards away from the enemy, who were attempting to brace themselves for an assault.

The technical servitors, as numerous as they were, melted away before the fire coming from the sixty or so Guardsmen, and there were no Word Bearers to be found in the gun pits as the Hyrusians dropped into them to place their thermo-explosive packs. Verina knew that these small engineering charges would not destroy the guns, but she also knew that this was not necessary. Melting the elevation gears, the traverses and the breach locks would delay the enemy by at least a day and by the time the guns could be repaired, Eretov would be a burned out, and very empty place indeed. She counted off the dull crumps one by one until, with her own team at the end, all six bombards were blazing away, bathed in a blue-white glow.

The incoming fire to the rear was intensifying now and her troops were finally coming to grips with hardened foes. Verina could also hear the chilling mechanical wails of enraged Word Bearers Marines amid the tumult and prayed that her soldiers made the end they deserved.

Casting her gaze back up the hill one last time Verina’s heart leapt to behold a break in the storm above the pass. For an instant, the briefest of moments, a shaft of brilliant light played across the ruins of the Shrine to the Emperor Triumphant and, even after it had been put out by the swirling clouds, a soft glow seemed to emanate from that sacred hilltop. Commending her soul to Saint Katherine, a joyful Sister Hospitaller

Verina turned to face the towering, dead-eyed monsters that advanced upon her group with great shimmering claws attached to their befouled Terminator armour. Stepping slightly forward of the firing line she raised the commissar's chainsword above her head and called out to her force. 'In the name of the Emperor, sell yourselves dearly, and show these things how Guardsmen can fight.'