

The Power of Belief

By Duncan Waugh

Renneck stared out across the glistening expanse of the Benediction skyline. The smoothly hewn sandstone edifices of the various Ecclesiarch buildings caught the dying light from the setting sun, bouncing its warm tones from one structure to the next. In spite of his wearied state, Renneck remained standing, captivated by the incredible beauty before him.

A native of the planet, like so many members of the shrine world's workforce, Renneck had been born on Benediction and had spent his entire life eking out an existence amongst the scraps of what filtered down from the Ministorum clergy above. And yet, he cherished moments like these, few as they were.

One of the multitude of vox-horns that were scattered throughout every street and intersection in the city blared its hard-edged siren, breaking his brief reverie and dragging the tired labourer back to the present. Picking up his heavy feet, Renneck trudged back towards his quarters, almost dreading the fleeting hours of sleep that would be over all too soon. As he reached the large staircase that led down into the shadows beneath, Renneck could feel the cold starting to creep its way back into his bones once more.

+++

Warm rays of sunlight beat down on their sweating forms, breaking through the light cloud cover as Renneck and the rest of his work detail hauled on their pulleys. Slowly but inexorably they lifted the pallet of thick, armoured panels up the side of the low Administratum building upon which they stood. The men grunted loudly as they struggled with the heavy load, their movements in sync with one another from years of working side by side.

A loud crackling sound emanated from the building's vox-mast as it kicked back into gear. Some kind of atmospheric disturbance had been interfering with the broadcasts for the past couple of days, or so they had been told, and the usual stream of hymnals and holy scripture that formed the ever-present background hum of the capital had been interrupted.

'On that day it was not the indomitable warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, the true embodiment of the God-Emperor's will made manifest, nor the Sisters of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, most devout of all, that proved to be the greatest strength against the heretic. No, it was the pious and the faithful themselves!' The fervent delivery from the vox-stream drifted across

the skyline, finding its way into the hearts and souls of every man that heard it.

'The Humble Saints blazed with the Emperor's glory, each willingly sacrificing themselves to act as a vessel for his might. For in the face of the darkest of evils, none can stand before the light of the truly penitent and devout.' Renneck smiled at the distant preacher's words, his resolve strengthening as he pulled harder on his ropes, relishing the burden that had been bestowed upon him. 'And it is through servitude and veneration of his will, my brothers, that you too can hope to attain such divine beneficence yourselves!'

+++

Renneck lowered himself onto one of the pallets, his heavy frame enjoying the comfort granted by the momentary reprieve. The man's fellow workers followed suit, the entire group feeling the exertion of having hauled piles of munition stores up into position all morning. They watched with uncomprehending interest as numerous soldiers hurried back and forth. No one stopped to harry them into returning to work; evidently, whatever was going on was far too pressing to worry about a few idle workers and their Munitorum quotas.

From the discussions that had been brewing around the meat carts, it appeared that the military mobilization they were seeing had been taking place across the planet, but few amongst the populace were concerned. Prayers and offerings continued to be made, the holy creed of the Ecclesiarchy was upheld religiously and both the pious and the righteous slept soundly in their beds. Nevertheless, the vox-horns had been cutting out increasingly over the preceding week, the daily sermons frequently interrupted with strange sounds and odd, screeching intonations.

The nearest mast suddenly jumped back into life, its normally calming and reassuring presence making Renneck start with surprise.

'And so they sacrificed themselves upon the pyres of devotion. For we, the wretched and unclean, can hope for little more!' the distant preacher continued. 'It is only through the giving of ourselves entirely to him that we can be sure of transcending our weaknesses and limitations. Let me ask you, what is a man without their master? What is a zealot without their god?' The voice bellowed with religious fervour, making the speaker crack and pop with the hard-edged

sound. 'Never forget it is that which destroys us that ultimately gives our being reason!'

The labourer could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and noticed a similar disquiet amongst his fellows as they cinched in their overalls and picked themselves up, returning to work. The preacher's words hung heavy over him, his mind running through the increasingly strange and enigmatic vox-sermons of late. As he rose from his seated position, the labourer could not help but feel a growing sense of concern at what was taking place across his planet.

+++

Tired and exhausted, Renneck tensed his lower back muscles, bracing his spine as he hefted the weighty sandbag into place. Sweat poured down every part of the labourer's aching body, his overworked limbs creaking beneath the strain of the seemingly endless toil. No one seemed to know what was going on anymore. Conflicting orders came down from every branch of the Administratum. Amongst the chaos and confusion, it felt like he and his people were reaching their breaking point.

Suddenly, Renneck was snapped out of his malaise by the loud, piercing sound of multiple fast-moving aircraft approaching. He looked up into the overcast sky just in time to spot two elongated, jagged-looking craft breaking through the cloud cover. Almost immediately, multiple hydra batteries stationed around the temple district opened up, lacing the sky with a criss-crossing barrage of flak. Despite the hail of deadly fire the enemy flyers broke through, leveling off before bombarding one of the nearby compounds with a barrage of explosive rounds, reducing it to little more than rubble and ash. Then, as fast as they had appeared, the two bombers were gone, disappearing back into the grey sky above.

The labourer stood stock still, numb with shock at the events before him. Several blocks over, he saw an ornate colonnade erupt in a cloud of debris as several brutish-looking invasion craft crashed down amongst the porticos and statues that lined the street. Within moments their tall doors came crashing down, disgorging fearsome warriors clad in red and black armour, their guns instantly ablaze. Renneck watched in horror as they mowed down the unprepared militia who tried desperately to mount a holding action in the face of the surprise attack.

In fear and panic he turned to the one thing that had been a constant source of reassurance in his life, the ever-present guidance of the Ecclesiarchy. Straining to hear the priest's words over the gunfire and explosions, he remembered the teachings of the Ministorum, the tale of the Humble Saints and how they had stood against the darkest of foes.

In that moment the labourer became steadfast in his conviction, for no other populace in the Imperium could claim to be as pure and faithful as his people. The God-Emperor, through the manifestation of his will, would push the hateful aggressors back, and Renneck and his fellow workers would be tools to that end. Shortly after this epiphany, Renneck became aware of a flight of dagger-like fighter jets that had appeared on the horizon. His spirit remained unbowed, however, for their weapons could do little against the armour of true piety.

It was as the impact of the craft's incendiary rounds slammed into the building around him, instantly vaporising many of his friends and bringing the structure down on himself and the rest of the survivors, that Renneck came to a stark realisation. This was not how events were supposed to unfurl. The teachings and sermons of the Ministorum priests had been clear in that.

As he lay amongst the rubble, his body slowly failing, Renneck was finally able to make out the preacher's words amongst the chaos and death that surrounded him. The priest's voice was the same one he remembered, but it had developed a sickly echo, as if a myriad of subtly different versions of the speaker were trying to talk over one another, their cadence and intonation all ever so slightly off.

'Rejoice my wretched brethren, for your deliverance is here!' All sense of sanity had left the preacher as he ranted and raved, his words almost indecipherable through the crackling distortion. 'Prostrate yourselves before your rightful deities and give forth your souls, such that you can enrich their divine beings!'

It was then that Renneck knew he was truly damned. Whatever sickness had descended upon his planet had already begun to spread its corrupting influence. His faith had been found wanting, which meant that any hope of salvation was beyond reach and, as he faded away, the labourer knew the true meaning of despair.