



A Test of Faith

By Jon Flindall

'The first tenet of pain is fear.'

Dhoraël stared at his torturer through misted eyes. The Haemonculus wore a patient expression, like a teacher waiting for a sluggish student to catch on.

'The first tenet of pain—'

'Is fear,' said Dhoraël. His tongue felt alien in his mouth.

'Just so,' said Karzarvash with an indulgent leer.

Dhoraël wondered how he could read his torturer's face so clearly. The Haemonculus had six eyes, arranged in three lateral pairs. Its mouth was framed by a pair of tiny limbs, which plucked at its lips to form expressions. Nonetheless, Dhoraël was sure it was smiling.

'Fear, as the ancients taught us, is the closest consort of pain. Without fear, pain is simply... a bodily function, a condition of life. And so easily evaded. Pain without fear is hardly pain at all – an insipid, tasteless draft, compared to the rich nectar on which I sup.'

Karzarvash loomed over the device that held Dhoraël and reached out a bladed finger to scratch a mark into the chair's bone arm.

The Asuryani noticed a sour smell around the torturer, like stagnant water.

'And what do you fear, son of Alaitoc?' it continued. The Haemonculus had the voice of a sickly child. 'What horrors stride through your dreams? What is most precious to you? What do you wish to keep from me?' The mouth-limbs pulled Karzarvash's face into a taut rictus grin, revealing rows of polished metal teeth. 'We will discover the answers together, of course. We have much to teach each other, you and I. The ninth tenet of pain...'

'Is understanding.'

'Good, Dhoraël – understanding. And we do understand one another, don't we?'

Dhoraël glared at his captor. Focussing upon the towering figure made his eyes burn with pain, but he could not bring himself to look away.

The Haemonculus stood against a wall of cluttered shelves. At this end of the chamber, there were no implements of torture. Instead, these shelves were

heavy with jars, alembics and lock boxes. Pipes trailed from some, running to complex machines which Karzarvash monitored and tended. The devices gurgled and wheezed, breaking the chamber's silence.

'I have told you of my library, have I not? And you have spoken of your world-ship. Of your path. Of your family.' Karzarvash reached up to lay a blade-fingered hand upon one of the frosted jars. The torturer's eyes closed. 'I have shared my greatest treasures with you, Dhorael. My collection includes morsels from many of Commorrhagh's luminaries. Each is a security against the benefactor's... misfortune. If the slave-taker Lord Equathex should be brought low by one of his many rivals, for example, I have a fingerbone here that holds a little of his essence. It would take some time, but I could grow the slave-lord anew, that he might take revenge upon his assassin.'

The Haemonculus shook, grafted ribs rippling along its back with peristaltic motion. Somehow, Dhorael knew Karzarvash was laughing. But how? Had he seen this before? The craftworlder realised he could not recall how long he had been held captive.

'Equathex might come to regret the ambiguity of our agreement,' the torturer continued, 'were he to awaken here... but I digress.' The Haemonculus straightened, its eyes opening as it focussed upon its victim once more. 'There is also a little of you in my collection, and a little of me.'

Dhorael strained to check his own fingers, but his hands were bound in black synth gloves, studded with pain receptors. What had Karzarvash taken?

'Through my art, life and death are mine to command,' the Haemonculus said. 'My guests never escape my attentions unless I will it. They may die a thousand times, but they are still mine. That is why I speak of understanding, Dhorael. Understand – I have shared much with you, but you have kept something from me. I will not let this pass. The seventeenth tenet of pain—'

'Hope! The seventeenth tenet is hope!' Dhorael sobbed. His words were slurred. His tongue seemed to shape syllables before his mind could form them.

'Yes! Yes. And what hope is it you cling to?'

Dhorael ached to look away, but the Haemonculus had long since removed his eyelids, and the restraint kept him from turning his head.

'Your faith? You think yourself clever, but I know you inside and out. You have given yourself to Ynnead, the great uniter.' The scorn in Karzarvash's voice stung Dhorael's ears. Blood ran down his jaw and dripped onto his chest.

Dhorael stared at his captor, saying nothing. The sutures in the torturer's forehead strained as its primary brows raised in surprise.

'You do! You think your spirit is his. You believe he will steal you away, will take your being into himself when your time here is done.' The Haemonculus laughed once more, acids dribbling from its slack mouth as it shook its head. 'Such fragile hope! You are certainly dying, Ynnari, but you are mine now and always.'

'No,' said Dhorael, around the ruin of his teeth. 'I have sworn my soul to him. In death, I will join the unity, the infinite spirit, and what remains of my body will become so much dust. Whatever grisly trophy you have taken from me will be naught but ashes. I will have escaped you, flesh-merchant, and I will serve Ynnead in death.'

The torturer stepped forward, its head tilted to one side. Karzarvash's eyes blinked in sequence as it raised a venom-laced blade, and its child-voice was tight with anger. 'Let us see, then. Your life ends here, Dhorael – your pain will not.'

'You free me, torturer! Great Ynnead, take me—'

'The first tenet of pain is fear.'

Dhorael looked at his torturer, blinking raw eyelids to clear his misted eyes. The creature was smiling, though he could not say how he was able to read its expression. How long had he been here? Surely he must die soon. Ynnead would claim his soul, and he would know no more pain.

Karzarvash leaned forward and added one more nick to the arm of Dhorael's chair, a surface scarred by scores of shallow cuts. By contrast, the craftworlder noticed his own arm was whole once more, the skin flushed and free of marks.

'The first tenet of pain...'

'Is fear,' said Dhorael.