

# AUN'SHI



A TAU EMPIRE STORY BY  
BRADEN CAMPBELL

**WARHAMMER**<sup>®</sup>  
40,000

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Braden Campbell

It was not the sound of the door opening that roused him from his meditative trance. Nor was it the muffled cheers from the stadium below, or the sharp clacking of Cerraine's stiletto boot heels as she approached his hexcage. It was the rumbling of his stomach. He chastised himself and kept his eyes closed, his back perfectly straight. His hands rested on his knees, palms turned upwards. She had food with her. He could smell it. A stew of some kind. Rich broth. Soft vegetables. A delicious spice he could not place. Greater Good, he was hungry.

'I brought you something special today. Not the usual fare.' Even through the translator device, her voice was the essence of cordiality.

No! He would not break down. Not now. He remained perfectly still and focused on his breathing. With each exhalation, he knew, rescue was one second closer. Someone would come for him soon. Then he could eat.

After some moments, she started tapping her foot. 'Don't you think this has gone on quite long enough? I mean, starving yourself in protest – it's ridiculous.' She laughed a little.

He gave no reply, made no movement. At his unresponsiveness, the friendliness in her voice bled away. 'What does this prove? Who gains? You think this somehow impresses me?'

Inwardly, he smiled at her frustration. Her true self was showing. His passive resistance was finally having an effect. His hope grew.

'Well, it doesn't. Hunger pains are quite out of fashion, not fit even for the groundlings. Now eat, Aun'shi.' He could hear a clattering as she passed the bowl through the bars of the hexcage. 'You have a matinée performance shortly. You'll need your strength.'

At last, he opened his eyes. Certain other species in the galaxy would have described her as coldly beautiful, he supposed. Like all Var Sin'da, she was tall and lithe. Her skin was like alabaster, with high cheek bones, and dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her ears were delicate and pointed. She was elaborately costumed

in multiple layers of glossy, bladed armour and silken robes. A belt made of entwined barbed wire hugged her slim hips. Her blonde hair fanned out behind her like the plumage of some fantastic bird and her translator was fashioned as a golden brooch engraved with lascivious silhouettes. Beneath her heavy makeup, her lips were tight. Her eyes burned with anger. All pretences of concern had been dropped. *At last, he thought, we have come to a place where we can deal plainly with one another. Demands can be tabled. Negotiations can begin.*

‘I will no longer kill for the pleasure of your patrons,’ he said. His voice was low and rough from dehydration.

Cerraine’s painted eyebrows arched. ‘Is that so?’

‘It is so.’

‘Then what will you do?’ she gave a slight smirk. ‘Bait the clawed fiends? Dance like a Solitaire?’

He refused to be goaded or insulted. ‘I will do nothing,’ he croaked. ‘You will open the door to this cage, and you will release me. You have no other choice.’

Cerraine looked down and shook her head. It seemed a sympathetic gesture, but he knew better. Sympathy was not to be found in the Var Sin’da.

‘Aun’shi,’ she lamented, ‘how little you know me.’

He gathered saliva and cleared his throat. His voice regained some of its strength. ‘I know you very well,’ he said. ‘I know that before you acquired me, you had no independence: you were in the servitude and shadow of others. I know that you have since become wealthy because of me, and that I am quite popular with your audiences.’

Cerraine’s jaw tightened. He took it as a sign of agreement.

‘I also know,’ he continued, ‘that you dare not kill me, for it would upset said audience members, and in turn, cost you not only your fortunes, but quite possibly your life.’

A conflux of emotions raged inside of her: anger at his insolence, frustration at her inability to find a hole in his logic, fear at the possibility of losing her celebrity status. ‘I’ll have my beastmasters force-feed you,’ she said with practiced haughtiness.

Aun’shi shook his head. ‘Such a thing is incompatible with my physiology. I would choke and die.’

The corners of her ruby-stained lips twitched. ‘Then I’ll hang you from a gibbet, and charge the people to watch you starve.’

‘You have already admitted that even the most lowly patrons would consider that to be poor entertainment. *Better a good day in Shaa-dom than a bad review*

*in Commorragh*”.

She bristled upon hearing the old theatrical axiom. Mostly because it was true.

‘Therefore, since I refuse to participate in your shows any longer, and to murder me would bring about your downfall, you have no choice. You must set me free.’ His argument concluded, and he settled himself once more to wait for her reply.

Behind them, the door opened slightly and the pale, heavily-scarred face of Skelban, Cerraine’s stagemaster, peered in. ‘M-M-Mistress,’ he stammered, ‘this is the five m-m-minute call.’

Cerraine’s eyes never left the tau. ‘We may have to hold,’ she answered over her shoulder. ‘It seems there’s a slight problem with the talent.’

‘Hold?’ Skelban gasped. ‘But... But...’

Cerraine ignored his protestations and pressed up against the bars of Aun’shi’s cage. ‘You know, no one in this city is irreplaceable,’ she growled, ‘and you’re certainly not the last of a dying race. What’s to stop me from simply finding another one like you?’

‘M-M-Mistress Cerraine,’ Skelban had now hobbled into the room to stand behind her. The victim of one haemonculi flesh sculptor after another, everything about him was hunched and broken. ‘We can’t hold the show...’

‘There are no tau in the Empire who can match my martial prowess,’ Aun’shi replied. ‘My background and training make me unique amongst my people. That’s why the *Aun’t’au’retha* chose me.’

Her eyes flicked up. The little blue alien had given her an opening, and with instincts like a panther, she seized on it.

‘Chose you for what?’

‘M-m-mistress...’

‘What were you doing on that frozen, desolate ball they found you on?’ Cerraine pressed.

Realising that he had let something slip, Aun’shi did not reply, but Cerraine had hit a nerve and she was determined to tear the truth free from him.

‘Were you in exile? On a mission of some kind?’

‘Mistress!’ Skelban yelled.

Cerraine turned on him with lightning speed. A knife had appeared in her hand. ‘I said hold the curtain!’

‘But, M-M-Mistress,’ Skelban looked pained, ‘Cidik is in the house.’

Her face became frozen. ‘Master of the Revels, Cidik?’

‘Yes! If we don’t begin on time...’

Cerraine hushed him with a wave of her manicured hand. As important as it was to keep her customers happy, it was doubly so for Cidik. As a minister of Vect, the ruler of all Commorrhagh, it was his job to superintend each and every gladiatorial game and bloodletting performance. If it were found lacking, say, by starting late, he could close her down with a word.

‘A slight change,’ she said to Skelban. ‘Start the show, but have the beastmasters parade the spinebacks around the ring first. That will buy a few minutes for you to bring up the other three from storage.’

‘But M-M-Mistress, everyone is expecting to see *him*.’ Skelban pointed at Aun’shi with a bony, elongated finger.

‘And they will,’ she purred. ‘Now go, quickly.’

Skelban shuffled out with surprising speed. When he was gone, Cerraine withdrew a small device from her cleavage and turned back to face the hexcage.

‘*Aun*,’ she said slyly. ‘In your language it means “priest”, yes?’

‘It has many facets, that word.’

‘Priest being one of them?’

‘A more accurate translation might be “shepherd”.’

‘Shepherd. Even better. You have a responsibility then to protect your flock from harm. You would lay down your life in order to spare theirs.’ She pressed her palm against the bars of his cage, muttered something he couldn’t quite catch, and then stepped back.

‘You are free,’ she said.

Aun’shi remained perfectly still, sensing a trap. ‘I am free to go?’ he asked cautiously.

Cerraine shrugged. ‘Free to go. Free to stay. The door will automatically release in one minute, and then we shall see.’

‘See what?’

Cerraine smiled with wicked delight. ‘Why, see where your loyalties lie.’

She squeezed her thumb against the side of the small device. The hexcage began to descend through the floor on a lengthening chain. A moment later, Aun’shi found himself high above the darkened arena. The lights were lowered in preparation of the show. Everything was cast in gloom, but Aun’shi was quite familiar with the space by now. He had, after all, spent most of his time here since his capture. It was like being inside a tall barrel. As he had come to understand it, the architecture was considered classical among the Var Sin’da. They called it a playhouse. He knew it to be a killing floor.

The main fighting area was covered with white, hard-packed sand, the better to

show off the spilled blood and viscera of the performers. From experience, he also knew that there were trap doors hidden underneath from which trained monsters and automated killing machines would randomly burst. The walls were filled with recessed seats, stacked in multiple levels; the wealthiest patrons sat up top where they could be seen by everyone in attendance while those with less to spend had to sit closer to the ground. There was a single, large archway cut into the ground level through which slaves or monsters entered and their piecemeal remains could exit. Across from that was the gallery: an open platform decorated with lavish couches and chairs where Cerraine would seat and entertain important guests. Directly above that was a proscenium filled with musicians.

He was still descending through the darkened air when the cage jerked to a stop. An announcer's thunderous voice called out his name and lights bathed him. From somewhere out beyond the blinding haze, a crowd cheered. He had not been exaggerating when he had told Cerraine that her audiences loved him. It was true. He was unique, and therefore, he supposed, of great interest to beings who thought they had seen it all. Moreover, he was on a winning streak. They thrilled to see him pitted against ever more difficult foes, and when he survived to fight another day, their fervour grew. They filled the seats to see if this was the day it all came to an end, and if it wasn't, they were still satiated by the carnage he wrought. Throughout Commorragh he was billed as *Ainn tonesh geyse*, the 'fighting blue man'. Each battle was expected to be his last, but time and again he walked away. The Var Sin'da loved him for that in their own sick fashion.

His eyes adjusted quickly and he looked below to see what they had prepared for him this day. On the sands a trio of hulking beasts clawed at the dirt and howled in blood lust. Their backs were covered with long spines. Their eyes were wide, black saucers. Thick metal collars were fixed around their necks and lengths of barbed chain held them in place. Aun'shi had seen this many times before. The bottom of his cage would vanish momentarily, and the second his feet touched the ground the collars would pop off. After that, it was unscripted, impromptu violence. Either he would die for the audience's amusement, or kill for their pleasure.

From the orchestra came a complex drum beat, followed by the shrill bleating of horns. The spotlights twisted around and stabbed their beams down at the large entryway. Its doors had opened, and through it came a flat hovering platform. A large cube of some kind, draped entirely in purple satin, rested atop it. Four beastmasters, nearly naked save a few strategically placed pieces of

armour, escorted it into the centre of the arena. Then, with great pageantry, each of them grabbed a corner of the fabric and pulled. The purple cover came away in equal quarters to reveal a large cage underneath.

Aun'shi started. Inside the cage were three tau.

They were of the earth caste: shorter than he was and broad across the chest. Their hands were large and their limbs were thick with muscles. Their faces were covered in cuts and bruises, and their eyes were wide as they tried to take in the incomprehensible scene around them. Their clothing had degenerated into rags, but he recognised them all the same.

They were supposed to have been his rescuers.

Arthas Moloch.

The world was cold and bleak: a mottled sphere of grey rocks and white ice fields. Even the sun in the sky had long ago sloughed off its heat and light, until only a brown dwarf remained. Had he not been following in the footsteps of another, he never would have come here. It was a planet that one came to only if one had a specific reason for doing so. Aun'shi's reason was to better understand Farsight.

Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr, more commonly and simply called Commander Farsight, had been one of the greatest tau military minds to ever live. More than two centuries ago, he had led the effort to repulse gue'la invaders from the Imperium of Man. The last of that resistance was routed here, from Arthas Moloch, and the Tau Empire claimed victory. It was a fantastic moment in history, a triumph of the Greater Good over the uncivilised barbarity of the galaxy. But instead of returning home to bask in well-earned honour and glory, Commander Farsight took a cadre of his closest men and left. He turned his back on everything he had fought to protect, headed out beyond the Damocles Gulf, and established his own enclave peopled entirely by members of the fire caste. He who had so valiantly upheld the *tau'va* in battle, had in his final act, completely undermined it.

The loss of so beloved a figurehead, and the unanswered mystery of why he had turned renegade, whittled away at tau society in the years that followed. Many wondered whose example was to be followed: the ethereals who taught that individuality pales in comparison to the needs of the greater whole, or Farsight, whose final message to the Empire was that its people should seek their own paths? At last, the situation had become untenable. Farsight's influence was more widespread than ever, despite his absence. And so, the tau leadership

decided to repatriate this wayward general: to bring him back into the fold and by doing so, unite a fractured and divided people. Someone would have to travel out beyond the security of the Empire, find Commander Farsight, and extend the hand of brotherhood. That person was Aun'shi.

Aun'shi had spent his life in an obsessive struggle to understand others. He had immersed himself in the specialities of the tau castes. He had studied in depth every alien species the Empire had come into contact with. Now, he had to understand Farsight. Aun'shi was determined to go where he had gone, to experience what he had experienced. Only then could they deal plainly with one another. So, he had come to Arthas Moloch.

The tau leadership had forced upon Aun'shi everything they thought he might need. He left the Empire with a starship full of weapons, diplomats, and equipment, a bodyguard of highly decorated fire warriors, and even a young ethereal to act as his adjutant. The moment his shuttle touched down on the planet's surface however, he told them all to go home. This, he said, was a journey for himself alone. Even though they were aghast, everyone complied, save for his bodyguards, who claimed that their oath to protect him couldn't be broken under any circumstances. He nodded, instructed them to guard his ship, and left them standing ankle-deep in the snow.

He walked a short distance to Colony 23, a town established by the earth, water, and air caste members Farsight had left behind two hundred and thirty-two years previous. This was a town on the very edge of tau space, far removed from the regimented, civilized heart of the Empire. Everything had a makeshift, frontier feel to it. The space port, as such it could be called, was nothing more than a large field with a single control tower and communications dish. The streets were wide but unpaved. The buildings were low and round and obviously prefabricated. Aun'shi liked the place immediately.

The Hall of Records, when he found it, turned out to be the cargo container from an interstellar transport. It had been converted into a three story building. The exterior still bore the markings of Farsight's final expedition, faded to near illegibility. Inside, a trio of water caste tau, older even than he, were more than happy to regale him with tales of the past. The Commander had gone west, they said, a day's journey or so to a nearby ice field. There, at the bottom of a canyon, he found a cluster of ancient alien ruins. Exactly what happened next wasn't recorded, but the aftermath certainly was. Farsight returned from the ruins, gathered up only the fire caste, boarded the vessel that had brought everyone here and left.

‘Alien ruins,’ Aun’shi mused as he sipped a cup of warm fish juice offered him by one of the scholars. ‘Of what origin?’

‘That is difficult to say,’ came the reply. ‘Arthas Moloch is covered with many such sites, and not all of them built at the same time or by the same species. The ones in the northern reaches, for example, are frighteningly huge in scale, square, blocky, and many millions of years old. Others are twisted and crumbling heaps of stone. A few are smooth and aesthetically pleasing, and so pristine they might as well have been built yesterday. There are even structures on the moon. Arthas Moloch has apparently been something of a galactic crossroads for many untold ages.’

‘If that is where Farsight went,’ Aun’shi told them, ‘then that is where I must go next.’

One of the archivists laughed lightly. ‘That will make Gue’run happy.’

‘I’m sorry, who?’

‘Fio’vre Gue’run.’

‘Overseer of alien buildings?’ Aun’shi repeated. It was a title he’d never once come across.

‘A name he gave himself,’ another of the record keepers said. ‘Gue’run is of the earth caste. He fancies himself a master of xenothropology and a student of alien architecture. He spends nearly all of his time camped out at one site or another.’

‘Only returns here to Twenty-Three a few times a year,’ the third archivist said. He was blind in one eye and had lost most of his teeth. ‘Gathers supplies, has some equipment repaired, finds a few apprentices foolish and young enough join him and then goes back out into the wild.’

‘And why should my arrival make him happy?’ Aun’shi asked.

All three of the water caste tau laughed.

‘Because,’ said the toothless one, ‘he’ll finally have someone to talk to who hasn’t heard all his stories.’

The next morning, Aun’shi procured a transport and sped off across the frozen wastes. The feeble sun was setting as he approached the excavation site. He stopped the skimmer just outside the perimeter of the archaeologist’s camp, gathered his pack and began to walk. The fabric of his travelling robes retained most of his body heat, but even so he hunched his shoulders against the increasing wind. Tiny ice crystals stung his eyes.

Dark and threatening shapes began to loom around him. The tau buildings

were tiny, cream-coloured domes huddled against enormous, curving, alien structures and vertical glacier walls. He stopped when he noticed someone loping towards him. It was a tau, presumably of the earth caste, whose stoutness was comically exaggerated by the thick layers of thermal clothing he wore. He carried a portable glowglobe that bathed everything in the immediate area in pale yellow hues.

Aun'shi raised his right hand in formal greeting. '*Tau'monat*,' he shouted over the wind.

'*Tau'monat'la!*' the other replied. He ran within arm's length and then stopped panting heavily. His wore a wide and excited grin, and looked around with childlike expectation. 'You've come at last. Where are the spare parts?' he asked.

Aun'shi shook his head. 'I'm not here to deliver anything, if that's what you think.'

'You're not?' The young tau's face fell.

'Did no one at Colony Twenty-Three inform you that I was coming? The esteemed gentlemen in the Hall of Records, perhaps?'

The youth shook his head. 'We have no communications array. The overseer says that isolation sharpens one's observation skills. We requested additional equipment some time ago, and when the perimeter sensors picked up your vehicle, I assumed...' he trailed off in bitter disappointment. Then he frowned. 'Who are you then?'

For a moment, Aun'shi considered lying. Whenever other tau knew that there was an ethereal in their midst, they felt compelled to put on great shows of hospitality and compliance. All he wanted was to be left alone to explore these ruins and delve into Farsight's mind.

'My name is Aun'shi,' he sighed at last. Personal preferences, he reminded himself, rarely served the Greater Good.

The apprentice's eyes grew wide, and he bowed deeply. 'Aun,' he breathed. 'It is an honour to receive you, unworthy as I am.'

'Perhaps we could go inside?'

'Certainly!' The young tau stretched out his arms, and waited. Aun'shi sighed again, then shrugged off his pack and gave to the apprentice. Together, they walked through the gathering dusk towards the nearest building.

'What shall I call you?' Aun'shi asked.

'I have yet to choose a name, Aun.'

'Well, you are only at the beginning of your life's journey,' Aun'shi said, as paternally as he could. 'There will yet be time.'

‘Overseer Gue’run has, for the meantime, christened me as Fio’la Cha’la. You may call me that, if it pleases you.’

Aun’shi thought the name spoke more about the one who had given it than the one who bore it. *Cha’la* literally meant ‘action creature’, or in the tongues of other species, ‘go-to man’.

They came in out of the wind and cold into a dome-shaped room filled with crates and equipment. Enough space had been cleared to accommodate two computer workstations. A connective tunnel led off into spartan sleeping quarters. A ceiling-mounted heating unit struggled to make the room tolerable. Huddled over one of the workstations was a burly earth caste tau. A black visor covered his eyes. Cables ran from it to a glove on his right hand. He made a flicking motion in the air, leafing through a stack of papers that only he could see.

‘Did that courier bring us a new baryonic imaging scanner, Cha’la?’ he said absently.

‘Regrettably, no,’ Aun’shi replied.

At the sound of the unfamiliar voice, the visored tau looked up. ‘And why not?’

‘Because I am not a courier.’

Gue’run removed his visor and let it clatter to the desk. He glowered at Cha’la for letting an apparent stranger waltz into his research site, and then demanded, ‘Well, who are you, then?’

Aun’shi bowed his head. Even though he himself was of a far higher social standing, he was a visitor here. It was right for him to show deference to the head of the household. ‘I am Aun’el Viora’la Shi.’

Gue’run’s face went slack for a moment before he charged around his desk to greet Aun’shi. In his haste, he forgot to remove his interface glove, and the visor, still attached, dragged across his workstation. Pieces of white stone and electronic scraps scattered across the floor. ‘It is a great honour,’ he gasped. ‘A great honour. I am Fio’re Gue’run. Welcome, Aun’la, to my humble research outpost.’

‘Aun’shi, please.’

The Overseer paused at the invitation to address one so high above him as a familiar. ‘As you prefer,’ he said slowly. ‘To what do we owe the visit?’

Again Aun’shi hesitated, wondering exactly how he should answer. His assignment to find and repatriate Commander Farsight was not technically a secret, but neither did he want the whole Empire to be aware of it. There was a

very real possibility that it would come to nought, and he hated to raise up the people's hopes only to dash them further. 'I am on a fact-finding mission,' he said carefully. 'My search for insight has apparently led me here.'

Gue'run's face lit up, just as the three old archivists had predicted it would. 'If it is facts that you seek, then I would be only too happy to provide them.' He began pulling at the fingers of the interface glove. 'Cha'la here will prepare a meal while I take you on a tour. You will doubtless wish to see the structures I have excavated firsthand.'

Before anyone could even reply, Gue'run had grabbed a heavy coat from next to the door and charged off into the arctic night. Cha'la smiled weakly, bobbed his head, and excused himself. Aun'shi took a deep breath, and went back outside.

'I have been told, Gue'run,' Aun'shi said as he jogged to catch up to the rotund scientist, 'that this planet has played host to a wide and varied number of alien species over the centuries.'

Gue'run gave a look of pleasant surprise. He sealed up his coat and pulled a pair of thermal gloves from out of the pockets. 'The Aun has been told correctly. Arthas Moloch contains ruins from at least twelve different races. It seems everyone stopped here to visit at one time or another. Most fortuitous.'

'How so?'

The sun had vanished now, and the two of them walked beside a string of tiny glowglobes. The lighted path led away from the habitat domes and down beneath the glacier. The biting wind was stifled.

'Well,' Gue'run answered, 'we get to study the peoples of the galaxy without leaving the comfort of the Empire. Perhaps the Aun is unaware that I have spent half my life on this world. Fifteen local years. I've put names to several of this world's visitors.'

They came around a corner and entered a spacious chamber hollowed out of the ice. Large glowglobes made it as bright as noon. In the middle of the space sat an ornate machine crowned with sensors and blinking lights. Part of its side had been pulled away, and an earth caste tau sat before it, prodding it with tools. Aun'shi was more taken with what lay beyond however. The wall of ice was not a typical pale blue or white. It was red. From top to bottom, it seemed as if the glacier had been coated with melted, crimson wax. Jutting out from this was a single, curving structure the colour of pale bone. A large platform, made of the same material, emerged at the bottom. The immediate impression was that he had stumbled across the rent flesh and exposed rib of some ancient and titanic

beast.

Gue'run noted Aun'shi's shock. 'Ah, yes,' he chuckled, 'the Blood Wall can be disturbing when first seen.'

Aun'shi licked his chapped lips and recovered himself. 'The Blood Wall?'

'That's what Cha'la called it when we first discovered it. The name has regrettably stuck, even with me. Although it appears the ice is made of frozen blood, I can assure the Aun that it is not. The discolouration is natural and actually caused by iron oxides and hypersaline water flow.' He crossed his arms and looked quite pleased with himself.

Aun'shi was unable to shake a sudden and powerful sense of foreboding. He gestured up at the alien structure that emerged from the ice. 'Natural or not, who would choose such a site to build?'

'The original occupants left few records behind. This archway, and several other similar buildings, formed an outpost of sorts, I think.'

'You think?' Aun'shi knew as soon as he spoke that his voice carried too much of an edge.

Gue'run shrank back slightly. 'It's a guess, Aun, but a very educated one. I assure you. Core samples taken from the surrounding ice indicate they abandoned this place more than thirty-five thousand local years ago. Over time, this chamber froze solid, but I have been using coherent particle beams to melt the ice and map the internal circuitry of the arch. In fact,' Gue'run frowned, 'we should be doing so now. Please excuse me, Aun.'

Gue'run stormed off towards the machine, and began a hushed but furious conversation with the other earth caste tau. Aun'shi followed behind slowly. Perhaps it was the stifled atmosphere inside the ice chamber, or the disturbing wall of blood, but he felt as if he were moving through a dream. He craned his neck and looked up at the arch. The surface wasn't smooth he saw, but finely pitted. It wasn't just the colour of bone. It was bone. Or something very much like it. There were species in the galaxy that utilised such biotechnology, he knew; peoples ancient and unknowable. Contact between them and the tau was infrequent to say the least, but Aun'shi had spent a lifetime in study. His brain was filled to bursting with obscure reports and references.

Gue'run was still interrogating his fellow scientist. 'Bentu, you are supposed by running a spectrographic scan of the crystals imbedded in the platform section,' he hissed. 'Why is this not being done? Can't you see we have an important visitor?'

The seated tau struggled to his feet. His environmental suit was rimed with

frost that flaked off as he bowed. ‘Forgive me, Fio’vre. I was performing the scan. Everything was going well. Then the feedback pulse hit.’

‘Feedback? What feedback?’

‘I don’t know. An energy signature from the arch itself. It overloaded the scanner, and I’ve been trying to repair it ever since.’

‘Why didn’t you inform me of this earlier?’

‘You said not to bother you unless it was important.’

The light from the glowglobes dipped for a moment.

‘What was that?’ Gue’run sounded more annoyed than concerned.

Bentu seemed embarrassed. ‘There have also been increasing power drains. I don’t know why.’

‘Gue’run,’ Aun’shi said, ‘This archway, this entire structure, was completely encased in ice until you began thawing it.’

‘Yes, Aun.’

‘So, all of this was inaccessible during Farsight’s time?’

‘Farsight?’ Gue’run gaped. ‘Well, uh, yes. Completely cut off. If you’d like to visit the surface ruins, the same as he would have, I’d be only too happy to...’

The glowglobes went out again, and this time they did not return. For a moment, the only illumination came from the blinking error message on the scanner’s display screen. Then, the Blood Wall seemed to radiate a flickering blue light that turned everything in the ice chamber a sickly purple. The three of them turned just in time to see a swirling vortex of energy appear. It stretched from the apex of the bone arch down to the flat platform, and looked like a pool of quicksilver turned on its side.

Creatures were now standing on the platform. Aun’shi did not know how it was possible, but they had simply appeared. They were silhouetted by the flowing energy field behind them. Four of them looked like oversized canines whose skins had been removed. The other three were whip-thin, bipedal humanoids. In their hands they held a variety of nets and barbed spears. What clothing they wore was skin tight and adorned with blades and spikes. A flock of bird-like creatures broke through the silver pool, making sounds like screaming babies. They circled around the top of the chamber, pecking at one another.

Aun’shi had dedicated entire decades to the study of the races that dwelt in the dark places out beyond the Empire. These had to be the *Var Sin’da*, the ‘dark raiding ones’: piratical monsters who struck from the shadows, took what they wanted, and vanished back from whence they came. To his knowledge, they had never been seen in tau space until now.

The hounds snarled as the three lanky figures surveyed their surroundings, and noticed the tau simultaneously. They said something in their native language, and smiled wickedly.

Aun'shi shrugged off this thermal robe and walked a few steps forward. From his belt, he unclipped a heavy cylinder. With a flick of his wrist, it telescoped outwards from either end, forming a long, bladed staff. He twirled it like a windmill, and then spread his arms wide. Over his shoulder, he called out to Gue'run. 'Take my skimmer. You and your men get back to Colony Twenty-Three. Tell them what's happened.'

'What about you?' Gue'run cried.

Aun'shi squared his shoulders. 'I'll be fine,' he said, more to himself than in reply.

Gue'run and Bentu scrambled back towards the tunnel entrance. Two of the Var Sin'da moved as if to go after them, but Aun'shi matched their steps. He shook his head, sure that his posture spoke clearly across any cultural gulf.

At some unspoken command, the skinless hounds charged forwards. Aun'shi flipped himself backwards to land on top of the bulky scanning machine where he couldn't be surrounded. The monsters yelped and swiped at him. He beat their claws away with his staff. They tried to leap at him. Again he stopped them from so much as touching him. His weapon was a blur, moving left and right, blocking and sweeping. One of them launched towards him, its jaws gaping. Aun'shi stepped back, swung his staff in a wide arc, and decapitated it. The remaining three beasts paused to re-evaluate their target. He let them regroup and jumped down, putting the scanner between himself and the monsters.

One of the Var Sin'da made a piercing whistle, and the flock of birds responded. They rocketed towards the tunnel, intent on catching up with Gue'run. Aun'shi hurled his staff at them like a javelin, then broke into a sprint. The blade pierced one of the birds clean through, and dropped into Aun'shi's waiting hand. The rest raced back up to the ceiling, crying in protest.

The grins had vanished from the faces of the Var Sin'da. Instead they looked perplexed. The one standing in the middle barked out an order, and the other two charged forwards. The hounds and birds did likewise.

'I'll be fine,' Aun'shi reminded himself.

They hit him all at once with an avalanche of claws, beaks and blades. Nothing could find purchase. Aun'shi gripped his staff loosely, tucking it in close to stop a spear, sweeping it high to strike a bird, jabbing it straight forwards to knock a hound away. He was the eye in a storm of violence. Their inability to hit him, let

alone hurt him, made the two Var Sin'da boil with anger. They screamed obscenities at him. The birds wailed. The hounds roared.

Aun'shi said nothing. His face was impassive. Even when a serrated blade at last slipped past him and gouged a deep hole in his arm, he stayed silent and focused. There were too many, he realised. He was only holding them off, instead of inflicting casualties. He tried to back up into the tunnel. In the closer confines, he thought, he might be able to focus on killing his foes, rather than simply stalling them.

One of the hound creatures snapped at his ankle. He reflexively kicked it in the face. His knuckles were scratched and bleeding, torn up by the birds. The wound in his arm began to burn terribly. His vision blurred. *The spear, he thought. Something on the spear. Toxin. Very underhanded.*

He was nearly to the tunnel when he lost all feeling in his right arm. The agony was spreading across his chest now. His skin felt like it was on fire. He tried to compensate, but his defence crumbled and he dropped to one knee. Something slammed into the side of his face, twisting his head. Blood sprayed from between clenched teeth. The world swam, and he went down. They kicked him in the spine, and something was chewing on his legs, but these were distant, secondary things. The knife wound consumed his thoughts. He had never felt such agony. The ice did nothing to soothe his skin.

After a few moments, he realised dimly that he was still alive. Cold, smooth hands were holding his head, rolling it from side to side. He fought to stay awake.

'*Thenalus nen ithyn?*' a voice asked. The words had a disturbing vibrato to them. After a moment, he was slapped across the face. '*Chith'nai! Yinare theniben marj mol quaryon?*'

One of his attackers was leaning over him. Aun'shi focused his vision with all his might, and noted pointed ears, pale skin, and high cheekbones.

'I don't... I don't understand you,' he muttered.

'*Tyathe,*' the Var Sin'da replied. His fellows laughed at the shared joke.

Aun'shi was dimly aware that they were binding his hands and feet with barbed chains. They felt sharp and cold. Then he was being dragged roughly across the ground. 'What are you doing?' he slurred. 'Where are you taking me?'

Aun'shi managed to lift his head. The archway and the flowing silver portal were looming close. He managed to spit out one final word before the agony of his wounds made speech impossible. 'Why?'

The Var Sin'da leader stooped down over him once more. He patted the wound

on Aun'shi's arm in an almost sympathetic manner. Then he pulled back, and punched the tau in the jaw.

His last thought before he lost consciousness was that he hadn't failed in his duty as an Aun. He had secured Gue'run and his men enough time to get away. They would find help in Colony 23, his bodyguards perhaps, and return to save him. All he had to do was wait, and stay alive.

At the sight of the three tau huddled together and terrified in their cage, the audience laughed uproariously. The band struck a tune and the beastmasters pranced merrily back towards the entryway. Aun'shi gripped the bars of his hexcage until his knuckles turned white. Gue'run, Cha'la and Bentu hadn't evaded capture after all. They'd never made it back to Colony 23. No one was coming to save him. His life was over.

He looked towards the gallery in despair. Cerraine was playing the hostess to several other Var Sin'da nobles, passing out goblets filled with golden wine. She threw back her head and laughed. Then she walked to the front of the platform. She had something in her hand which she raised. The audience quieted down in anticipation. At Cerraine's signal, the cage containing Gue'run, Cha'la and Bentu collapsed. As they ran off the platform, the beasts were freed of their restraints. An excited cheer swept through the house. It was going to be an easy slaughter, and all Aun'shi could do was watch.

No, he realised. He didn't have to just sit up here helplessly. Cerraine had told him that his hexcage would be unlocked. Free to go or free to stay, she had said. He pressed on the bars in front of him. They swung away easily. It would be a simple matter for him to jump down to the sand below, slay the beasts, and save his fellows. He could also abstain from performing before the Var Sin'da, as he had sworn to do, but then he would be knowingly shirking his duty as an ethereal. Cerraine had surely known the impossible choice she had presented him with: to either betray himself or his people, but betray something nonetheless. No matter what he did in the next few seconds, he was beaten. Either by his actions or his inactions the crowd's thirst for blood would be satiated.

The epiphany took his breath away. Aun'shi saw that he had come to understand yet another alien species. The Var Sin'da were *co'tau*: anti-tau. Their existence was based entirely on selfishness and the misery of others, both physical and emotional. They were the absolute opposite of the Greater Good, and they had to be stopped.

They had to be destroyed.

He hit the ground and rolled. There were no weapons in the arena, he noted. Apparently, he was supposed to either fight the spinebacks hand to hand, or improvise. He chose the latter. He grasped a bar from the collapsed cage, and swung it around just in time to catch one of the monstrosities in the face. Part of its head caved in, spraying yellow ichor. It gave an ear-piercing cry and whirled. A spike-encrusted tail caught Aun'shi in the thigh, tearing out hunks of blue flesh. He brought the bar down again in a killing blow, but the beast leapt back.

'Aun'shi!' he heard Cha'la cry. 'Behind you!'

The other two monsters, attracted to the scent of his blood, were circling around him. They charged in a loping gait, but Aun'shi was ready. He leapt high into the air, and drove the bar through one of their quilled haunches. He let go of his weapon, rolled in the sand, and came up, panting. All three of the fiends were still alive. The one with half a skull gibbered horrifically. The crowd seemed delighted.

The earth caste tau had sheltered underneath the hovering dais. Aun'shi scrambled to join them, as the sole uninjured beast charged forwards. It slammed into the side of the platform, causing it to rock violently. The monster spat and hissed, but was too large to reach its targets.

'What will we do?' Gue'run sputtered. 'What will we do?'

'I'm not sure,' Aun'shi admitted. He pressed his hands down over his gushing thigh, and looked about hastily. 'I need a weapon.'

All three spinebacks were now circling the dais, trying to get at the tau. Things had come to a standstill. The audience was getting restless.

'Does this platform have controls?' Aun'shi asked.

'Yes,' Bentu replied. He seemed the most collected of the three. 'Some pedals and a manoeuvring stick.'

Aun'shi tore a strip of material from his robe and tied it tightly around his leg. He winced as he cinched it. 'Can you pilot it then?'

Bentu swallowed hard. 'I can try. But how do we get out from under here?'

The spinebacks growled. One of them was lying on its side, pawing at the tau like a cat unable to reach a mouse. Its breath was foul and hot.

'It was an honour to serve you, Aun,' Cha'la said quietly. Then he bolted out from underneath the dais and sped away across the sand. The spinebacks abandoned their efforts and bounded after him. The audience laughed to see the boy flee, and cheered joyously when the monsters pounced on him. They each grabbed a limb, and pulled Cha'la in grotesque tug of war. There were a series of

ripping, tearing sounds as his body parts flew off in several directions.

‘Go! Go!’ Aun’shi yelled.

The tau dashed out from their hiding place and climbed atop the platform. Pieces of purple material still flowed down off the sides. Aun’shi and Gue’run grabbed the bottom of the cage. Bentu took precious seconds to look over the controls and then stomped down on one of the pedals. The machine lurched forwards.

A ripple of surprised laughter went through the crowd, followed by a smattering of applause. The dais was barely more than an enlarged, floating wagon. It was certainly no escape vehicle. Yet the fighting blue man and his little friends acted as if it was their salvation. Delightful.

The monsters looked up at the sudden movement and gave chase. In a matter of seconds, they were closing on the tau. Gue’run screamed at Bentu to go faster. The platform lurched again, tilted wildly, and then rocketed forwards. The spinebacks surged to keep pace.

Up in the gallery, Cerraine spoke into the small device in her hand. ‘Skelban, let’s give them some obstacles.’

A moment later, several of the trap doors in the arena floor popped open. Short, flat-topped towers emerged, their bases ringed with blades. From nozzles near their crown, they began to spray thick green tar in long torrents. Aun’shi had seen these before. They reminded him of the sprinklers used on his arid home world to help manicure lawns. Only instead of water, the Var Sin’da were using corrosive bio acid.

Bentu saw the towers appear and veered the dais to one side. The spineback with only half a head left caught a full jet of the deadly chemicals. It dissolved into two separate halves that twitched and kicked in circles.

The platform levelled out again and Aun’shi turned to Gue’run. ‘Help me flip this!’ he yelled, indicating the bottom of the cage. Struggling to keep their balance, they dug their hands underneath the heavy frame, and lifted. Aun’shi could never have done it by himself, but Gue’run’s earth caste arms were strong. With a loud grunt, they heaved the iron framework up. It wobbled for a moment, then came crashing down on one of the spinebacks, pinning it.

A stream of acid washed across the platform. Gue’run’s right leg vanished out from under him, leaving only frothing, purple goo. He screamed and tumbled backwards into space. The final spineback, which still had Aun’shi’s improvised fighting staff protruding from its side, opened its jaws wide to snatch up this tasty treat.

Aun'shi launched himself off the back of the dais. He tackled Gue'run in midair, knocking him clear. They hit the sand together and rolled for some distance before coming to rest. Aun'shi looked up in time to see the dais crash into a wall. Acrid smoke was belching from the undercarriage. He couldn't see whether Bentu was still alive or not.

Aun'shi stood despite his shaking knees. The final spineback was circling around. Its head was low. Its tail whipped back and forth. The crowd was chanting.

*'Tonesh! Tonesh! Tonesh!'*

He had lost a significant amount of blood, despite his makeshift bandage. Colours swam at the edge of his vision. Sweat dripped from his forehead. If this was going to end, then it had to be now.

'I'll be fine,' he told himself.

His charge took the spineback by surprise. As it turned its head to the side guardedly, Aun'shi leapt through the air. He extended his hoof and drove it straight into the creature's eye. It exploded with a sharp cracking sound, covering his leg with ruptured jelly. The beast reared up and howled. Aun'shi recovered himself, planted his injured leg in the sand, and kicked again with all his might. He caught the spineback square in the stomach, driving it backwards into an acid stream. Its head and neck dissolved. What remained of the body crashed down before him, vomiting forth blood and organs. The audience cheered.

Aun'shi hobbled over to the corpse and yanked the metal bar free. The hexcage in which he had entered was being lowered from the ceiling and additional slaves were running out onto the field to begin cleaning up for the next event. He stood and watched as they gathered up Gue'run and hauled Bentu's limp body from off of the platform. When they had been taken out through the main entryway, he stepped into the hexcage. The door swung shut and he began to rise up once more, his performance finished for the time being.

It wasn't long before Cerraine came to see him again. By that time, attendants had stitched his leg wound closed and applied foul smelling salves everywhere else.

She leered at him. *'Laria sana'yijel shuthel chos nai rukal,'* she said. A moment later, her brooch translated her words as, 'I had a feeling you'd join in the fun.'

'I'm fighting for survival,' Aun'shi replied tersely, 'not entertainment.'

Cerraine pouted her lips and said, 'It's adorable that you still think there's a

difference.'

They stared at each other a moment.

'What did the Master of the Revels think?' Aun'shi asked.

Cerraine's eyes hardened. 'Cidik thought it was... fine. Let's just say he won't be closing me down any time soon.'

'So long as I do not give him a reason to, that is.'

'You must be hungry,' Cerraine said, abruptly changing the subject. 'I'll have food brought to you.'

'My friends, as well.'

Her lips twisted in a sly smirk. 'A bit of celebratory fun with your underlings, eh? I thought as much.' She snapped her fingers. Gue'run and Bentu were shoved through the door. Like Aun'shi, their wounds had also been tended to. The overseer had been fitted with a metal prosthesis.

'I'll leave you to it,' she said. Before leaving, she paused dramatically in the doorway and added, 'You two owe him your lives. Be sure to treat him well.'

No one spoke for some time. Finally, Gue'run broke the silence. 'I know I should thank you for saving us, Aun,' he said, 'but perhaps you shouldn't have. Would not death be better than a life of slavery?'

'I had thought that very thing,' Aun'shi answered. 'However, I now realise that our duty to one another doesn't end just because we're no longer in the Empire. No matter where we go, the Greater Good is our strength and shield.'

'Even here?' Bentu asked weakly.

He laid a hand on each of their shoulders. 'Especially here.'

*Someday, somehow, he told himself, I will bring the righteous fury of our people down upon the heads of the Var Sin'da. From now until then, that is all I will strive for.*

'Do not worry,' he reassured them. 'I am Aun. I will lead and protect you. Always.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Braden Campbell** is the author of *Shadowsun: The Last of Kiru's Line* for Black Library, as well as several short stories. He is a classical actor and playwright, and a freelance writer, particularly in the field of role playing games. Braden has enjoyed Warhammer 40,000 for nearly a decade, and remains fiercely dedicated to his dark eldar.

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Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.**

**Cover illustration by Paul Dainton.**

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**ISBN: 978-1-78251-739-9**

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