

A STORYTELLING EXPERIENCE  
BY JEFF SPOCK

# THE LAST FLIGHT

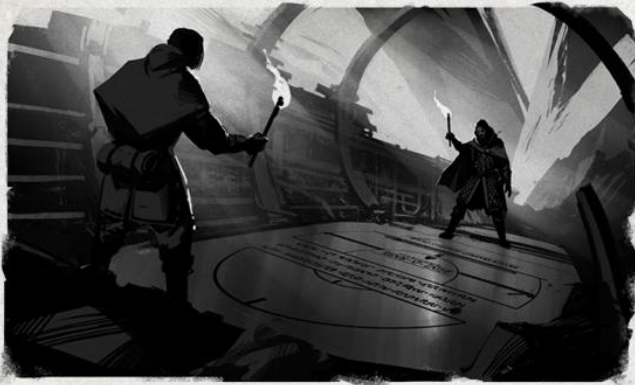
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OF THE

# GRAY OWL







## PROLOGUE

My name is-

No. My name is unimportant in this tale. It is not even my tale to tell for it belongs to another race, an avian race, the like of which I have never seen on this planet. The words will be my words, but the story will be their story.

We were on a fool's errand -- or so we believed. Our people had recently come to a great revelation, for we were convinced that Auriga herself smiled upon us and promised us a great future. Why else would these great rays of Dust have been unveiled for us, shining up from the ruins like rays of the sun itself? We hurriedly put together an expedition and followed those rays through all the strangeness of this strange world.

The first ruin was great and ancient, but empty; on the way I picked up the language of the great oxmen called the Gauran. The second ruin? Also great and ancient, but full of angry creatures of crystal that threw themselves upon us, shattering the shields of even our greatest warriors.

Struggling and demoralized, we followed the threats and exhortations of our leaders and once again took to the road, during which I choked down lichen and fungus deep in a mineshaft as I completed a bonding ritual with a leader of the Delvers. Such are the vagaries of life when you're a diplomat and scholar of languages!

But that road led us to the third ruin.

The ruin that changed everything.



For here, at the bottom of a great crevasse that had opened like a wound in Mother Auriga, spraying loose soil that fell like blood, we found the vessel. It had sat there long enough that trees and bushes had grown upon it, though the trees and bushes slid off when we pulled them as their roots could not penetrate its metallic carcass.

As diplomat and historian I was charged with the analysis of the vessel; it was there that I discovered the great metal plaque on the floor. It was there that I discovered ancient pages, recorded on some ageless paper, stored within a tiny vault that opened at my touch. And the air that escaped from that tiny vault!

What was that scent?

The breath of another world under another sun? Of the strange birdmen whose images we saw recorded within? Was it the odor of their last meal, or perhaps the stink of their fear as their ship plunged down to the surface? That smell! Metal and paper and animal, yet altered with fragrances that I had never smelled; perfumes that would never again be known on Auriga.

And I held the pages, that wealth of pages, and knew that my gods had chosen me, raised me, trained me, and brought me here for this task. I regarded the texts, I regarded the ship, and I came to my first conclusion.

### CHOICE #2

*The strange protrusions on the ship are some sort of scientific instruments, used to collect and analyze information. It is a research vessel, and the log is the log of a great scientist. The vessel is called the GRAY OWL.*





## OPPORTUNITY

*On this vessel dedicated to research – as I understood – lay a great sheaf of documents written in several hands. Though the many pages at the beginning were obviously written by a calm, composed author, as I paged through I saw that the later ones were hurriedly scribbled. However, given that the ship had crashed, I was not surprised that the final moments were recorded at a somewhat higher level of stress...*

*It began with a date that I cannot translate, so until that is done I will simply call it: DAY 1.*

I am Durgo Kura of the Stormberth Clan, Captain-pilot of the Gray Owl. Though beginnings are often unclear, as the sum of yesterday's events trigger today's action, I know precisely which day was the first day of this adventure.

The Gray Owl sat in the cargo docks of our facility on Sykagoja, home of the arenas where the select few fought and died to entertain the Torians.

In two sunrises I was to once again take the pilot's seat and fly it to Uchi, our homeworld.

I was traversing one of the corridors of the facility; the concrete path beneath my talons at odds with the forests stretching overhead. The shipmind spoke to me.

*"Captain?"*

I entered the doors and continued straight, to the offices, rather than right, up to my quarters. I paused before answering as a giant flying squirrel soared between branches. My shoulders and claws twitched. I had not free-hunted in weeks.

*"Yes."*

*"Systems are still down."*

I wanted to be updated every ten minutes on this. The entire facility had been running on manual for two hours; some unknown error or virus had rendered this galaxy-class infrastructure unstable.

*"Specimen loading complete,"* it added.

*"Good. Equipment?"*

*"Waiting on newpig breeder."*

I grimaced. I would have preferred to leave without it. Too many of the "gifts" we received as part of the Contract seemed subtly poisonous. But I love what I have learned, and what I do, and what the Hissho may become. If, as my brother once said, the barter in the Contract does not include our souls.

*"Captain?"* Again, that familiar, soothing voice.

*"Yes?"*

*"Director Uragiri requests a meeting."*

I entered the doors and continued straight, to the offices, rather than right, up to my quarters.

Through doors, then larger, carved wood doors, I entered the Director's office. It overlooked a meadow down to a stream. To my left, behind the forest, loomed the bulk of the infrastructure for the arenas. The long, low wooden building to the right, with wide verandas, was the hospital and research center. It was there that "better" Hissho were being created.

The Director was outside in the meadow, free-hunting newpigs, predator and prey both clumsy and overweight. They stayed out of his reach long enough for it to feel like work, then suddenly slowed and died spectacularly. Genetically altered and tamed for sport, like we were. I felt my arms lifted instinctively in anger.

*"Hello again, Captain. I have a surprise for you."*

My eyes and thoughts left the Director, returning from a staged hunt. The shipmind had never addressed me like this before. I saw, on the screens in the office, the systems coming back online.

*"The... systems?"*

*"The systems. And me."*

### CHOICE #3

*Take a look at the Director's screens to try and figure out what's going on.*

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## INTRUSION

Day 1.

Thoughts tumbled in my head. If all systems had failed, and even the shipmind had been touched, the best place to look for answers was both nearby and forbidden... the Director's own system.

Hoping the Director would be slow, I ducked down to look at his screens. Everything appeared normal... but I had heard the strange voice of the shipmind, and knew that it was not. It occurred to me that fifty arenas, each with many cameras, created a volume of data that would be hard to imitate or replicate quickly. Wary of asking the shipmind to do it, I tapped on the symbols of the vast keyboard.

The screens presented a minor apocalypse. Arena gates were wide open, the cages of the beasts were unlocked, and strange creatures from across the known galaxy were sniffing their way out of confinement onto the sandy floors of blood and glory.

I saw a pack of kwerna, dog-like hunters, circling a single raptosaur who wisely kept to the wall of #3. A tribe of humanoids armed with spears ventured tentatively onto the sands of #7, oblivious of the swarming bloodbats on the beams high above them. In #12 a single Hissho, likely a Blood Sister and guardian of the nest, screamed a challenge from atop of a pile of dead and wounded savagely-clawed lizards...

And so on, up to 50, yet when my eyes returned to 3 and 7 and 12 the cameras showed nothing but the pristine sands of empty arenas. No screams, no carnage. I pulled back warily from the console and its screen full of lies as the director stormed in.

"What are you doing?"

The banality of the question and its lack of decisiveness made me embarrassed for him. The pheromones in the newpig meat made him so docile that he could not even react properly to my intrusion.

"The facility is under attack. The compound has been infiltrated and its systems hacked. The beasts of the arena are loose."

He pushed me away and creaked into his leather chair.

"Console. Director Pochari. Show me the match in Arena 24."

He peered at the screen, then added,

"...and send Security to detain Captain-Pilot Durgo."

As 24 came up on the screen I caught it, just for a blink of an eye. It was blank, then filled with the clash and kinetics of battle. Randomly chosen, perhaps, but it was the Blood Sister whispering effortlessly among the lizards, leaving streaks of red behind her.

"That wasn't scheduled. And that... they never pit Blood Sisters against something as slow as hatokage... Cancel call to Security."

He tucked his hands to his sides, patient, and regarded me.

"Talk."

"We don't have time. The Greater War that the Board speaks of has come to Sykagoja - the enemy has hacked the computers and systems. Even my shipmind has been touched."

He nodded.

"Your recommendation?"

"Back to Uchi! Take the Gray Owl. We must hurry."

### CHOICE #2

*Think of your people - free the Hissho from the arenas where they are fighting.*





## BLOOD AND BROOD

Day 1 (continued).

In that moment the Director was unable to act, to decide, to move. He paced, running his claws through the plumage of his crest and neck.

I jabbed my head toward him. "We must take the Gray Owl."

He stopped in place and swiveled his head to look at me. "Yes. The Contract has ended. But I won't leave here without our people." He pointed to the screen. "The Blood Sisters, the Hunters, the Brood Mothers, the Crafters - we all go home."

"The ship can hold fifty - sixty if we squeeze." There were perhaps two hundred Hissho on site.

He grunted. "We will see how many make it to the ship."

"Shipmind..."

"Captain?"

"Plot a course to liberate a maximum of Hissho in one hour. You can get us to the dormitories, the training rooms, yes?"

"Of course!" laughed the shipmind in a voice far from its usual monotone.

As we spoke the Director opened one of the paneled cupboards along the wall and donned his dress armor. I had only the knife in my multitool. He threw me a sheathed saber, long and curved.

"Do you remember how to use one?"

"The mind forgets. The body never forgets."

I swung the blade, enjoying its weight and the heat that began running in my veins. My ears picked up noises outside, my eyes tracked dust motes, my nose smelled the oil Uragiri used to wax his armor. Torian manipulation under the terms of the Contract had not softened millennia of Hissho instincts.

The Director smiled at me. "It feels good, eh, Captain-Pilot?"

I pressed my ear against the door and heard fighting on the other side. I drew the blade and let the sheath fall; I did not expect I would need it. I looked at Uragiri and pointed to the door.

"Not a newpig," I said.

We used the wooden desk like a battering ram to shatter the door open.

A dead guard - Torian, with a shock prod - was sprawled in front of the facility entrance doors ahead of us; a pair of jungle cats as long as I am tall stopped in their feeding to turn and attack us.

They were angry predators whose blood was up from the hunt, and I had not faced all-out battle in many years. But were Hissho, and our blades Hissho. Deflect, riposte, feint, strike. Counter, press your advantage. Feint, feint, strike.

No, the body never forgets.

The pungent metallic smell of the cats' blood was like a drumbeat in my head as we ran up the stairs.

"Doors at the end of this corridor are to the Black Wing," said the shipmind. "You should find surviving Blood Sisters and Hunters there. The Brood Mothers and Crafters will be left, down the Great Stair, in the Green Wing. If you seek rations and weapons, you can access the storage wing upstairs."

Director Uragiri was indecisive; I was not.

### CHOICE #2

... into the Green Wing, to save our future - pregnant  
Brood Mothers and Scientific Crafters.





## THE GREEN WING

*Day 1 (continued).*

The Blood Sisters and Hunters, I reasoned, had little need of my aid.

Supplies would be short, but then so is life.

I continued to the end of the hall and turned left. The corridor widened for the next forty paces to end at a sliding glass door, many meters wide and high. Uragiri huffed along behind me.

This grand entrance to the facility was only used for broadcasts. Screens of our homeworld and the scent of its plants filled the great lobby; in that moment I wished that the battle rage, takamera, had not augmented my senses.

We ran across the open space in silence, but as the doors slid open we heard the cacophony of battle.

The wide, deep steps of the Great Stairs are an arena in themselves that descends to a vast interior courtyard.

During ceremonies they are decorated with bright banners and thick carpets, but now they were bright with blood and thick with bodies.

Dire wolves chased newpigs; a raptosaur stalked a giant marsupial; near the bottom a gorilla-sized warhawk fed on a horned auroch whose hind leg still kicked.

The door to the Green Wing was on a wide platform halfway down the left side. I saw that the high green doors had been cracked open, and my pulse quickened. Any Hissho would die rather than let beasts threaten the nest.

We leapt down the meter-wide stairs, talons scratching concrete, as the dire wolves engaged the raptosaur over the body of the marsupial. The dying beast squirted its rage pheromones, and the air filled with a musky tang. Upon sniffing it the newpigs turned, eyes blazing, and as we charged down the stairs they charged up and attacked Uragiri.

Had he killed so many? Did they have a collective memory? I left him to his fate, preferring to die protecting Brood Mothers than fighting a bureaucrat's enraged lunch.

Irony is an unexpected companion in a battle to the death.

I charged through the green door, pausing in the dim light to see and smell and hear. It was good that I paused, as in two more steps a Hissho blade would have pierced my neck.

"You are slow," rasped a voice. My eyes moved. It was the Blood Sister from the arena.

"Were you to try and fly a ship, I would say the same thing," I replied. "The other Blood Sisters? Hunters?"

"Feeding. Taking vengeance. We will meet at the Jungle Gate and take the Brood Mothers to safety."

"There is no safety here. Sykagoja will be a battlefield. The Torians are at war. We must go to the ship. Return to Uchi."

The blade snapped away and she moved closer. I saw the scarred visage more clearly, and a distant look in her eyes briefly replaced the hyper-awareness of takamera.

"Uchi..." She whistled over her shoulder and a gaggle of Hissho and other peoples limped forward from the darkness.

"Good," she said. "What next?"

### CHOICE #1

*The Brood Mothers were my priority.  
"To the ship," I commanded.*





## TO THE OWL

*Day 1 (continued).*

“We must get the Brood Mothers to the Gray Owl,” I decided.

“Shipmind, tell all Hissho remaining in the facility to meet us at the ship. If they can’t, they will understand the sacrifice.”

We made introductions rapidly and headed outside. Besides the Blood Sister, Akama Daitan, there were four Brood Mothers, their greater girth distinguishing them from the lean shapes of two additional Blood Sisters who were their guardians. With them were four Hissho Crafter scientists, two Raian humanoids, a pale green multi-armed robot, and a squat, three-eyed scientist.

We hurriedly ascended the Great Stairs, passed through the vast doors to the facility, and moved as quickly as we could down the corridors and up the stairs to the higher levels.

Twice we had to stop to fight beasts; a roving pack of kwerna that killed one of the humanoids and gravely wounded a Crafter, and a pair of security robots that fought the shipmind and our own pale green robot. We were victorious in a strange, silent battle that happened in the networks without a shot being fired.

At the top of the facility we paused.

“The roof will be dangerous,” said Akama. “They will see us.”

“No, they see best with their security systems,” stated the shipmind.

“The roof will be safer.”

We went up. The door to the roof was usually alarmed and secured; today it hung open and swung idly in the warm breeze. The three Blood Sisters slipped through and moments later whistled the All Clear. I stepped out, and saw them spread in a triangle formation across the flat roof, crouched and alert, watching the skies. As the others filed through the door I took a moment to look at this gaggle of refugees I had picked up.

The Brood Mothers went through first, silent and strong. I saw the three Blood Sisters advance once they were out—it was clear who was being protecting. Next two Crafters, supporting the wounded one, and a fourth carrying a short sword and a pistol.

They all had the dark feathers in browns and deep greens of the technically minded clans of the Hika Savanna. The wounded one was likely their superior, given the deference with which they treated him.

The robot was a sleek thing, shaped like a tall, slender cone or pyramid with a mass of articulations for sensing and manipulating. A pair of cameras on short stalks rose from the top and regarded me.

“Timothy Four-E-R”, it said in a surprisingly warm and cultured tone. “Xenobiology, adaption, species genetics.”

The Raian grabbed my arm. “Look, I just deliver lab equipment. I don’t know--”

I shoved him hard and pointed to the far side of the roof. “Later. Go, or stay. But no time to talk.”

He moved hesitantly, and was passed by the three-eyed scientist who looked nervous, if not terrified, and hurried to stay with the group.

I ran alongside; the Blood Sisters and Brood Mothers set a good pace. The shipmind spoke to me.

“The Raian and the scientist are slowing you. The wounded Hissho also. Defense systems are being activated and they may detain your ship.”

### CHOICE #3

*Stay together. Who knows what skills will be required for the journey.*





## THE GAUNTLET

*Day 1 (continued).*

I assumed that luck and time would still be with us. "Sisters!" I shouted to the figures moving swiftly ahead of us. "Slow down. We all have to make it to the Gray Owl."

Akama Daitan, the Blood Sister at the head of the protective triangle, yelled back. "There will be losses! Our responsibility is the Brood Mothers."

"I will not leave the others to die. Slow down!"

Reluctantly, they eased their pace. We were now halfway across the vast roof, moving at a slow trot. The Raian and the Haroshem were lagging and the wounded Hissho slowed his team of Crafters.

"Slower!" I barked at them. I saw Akama turn, but before she said anything a robotic hovercop lifted over the left edge of the roof, yellow lights flashing, and trained the laser glare of its targeting system on the nearest Brood Mother.

"You are not permitted here. Return to your quarters."

The voice was feminine, calm, and friendly, but the warning bullets that spat across the roof were not. The nearest Blood Sister reacted; before I or Akama could say anything she leapt for the small platform, dying in a spray of bullets as she jammed her weapon through the defensive grill and into the fans.

The hovercop swung up and to the side, bouncing erratically across the roof until it dropped off. The sudden silence that followed was broken by a crash, but I wasn't listening.

I was watching one of the Brood Mothers slowly topple over, blood running from a dozen wounds. With her dying breath she said one word; the same one that Akama was yelling.

"Run!"

We did. I could hear harsh breaths, erratic footsteps, coughing. We had run through the facility, climbed stairs, and were now racing across a rooftop. Only the Blood Sisters were fit enough to be unaffected.

We made it to the far end of the roof, crossed a walkway, and arrived at a maintenance entrance to the hangers whose laser defenses had been deactivated by the shipmind.

The great bulk of the structure, built into the side of the hill, stood in front of us, but to the side I could see the Gray Owl. The shipmind had apparently readied it for departure and moved it from its berth. We were all bent over or on our knees; only the Blood Sisters remained bright-eyed and alert.

"Can't you blow it open?" the Raian asked, kicking the door.

"We are armed for arena battles, not urban assault," said the other Blood Sister, smiling grimly.

The shipmind suddenly spoke. "Got it!"

The door opened, but as it did so the defensive turrets outside armed themselves.

"Go!" yelled the Crafter, staggering to put himself between the Brood Mothers and the laser fire. Two of his assistants ignored his command and died by his side; the last one entered with us. In the time it took me to close the door the two Blood Sisters and two of the three Brood Mothers were far ahead already, down the metal stairs to the great bay floor and the distant shape of the Gray Owl.

"To the ship," I gasped. The third Brood Mother took two steps and fell. Her heart? A wound? I had no idea. The robot, the Raian, and the Haroshem followed the remaining Crafter who chased after the others. I would have followed but the door opened behind us and several Torian guards armed with shock rods stepped through. At that moment I knew that I had failed, and I accepted it.

"Shipmind," I said, "Transfer all keys, codes, and passwords to surviving Hissho Crafter. Generate a printed archive for the eyrie library and see that it is delivered." I raised my voice. "The rest of you are ordered to return to the ship and leave for Uchi. Get the Brood Mothers home."

I confronted the guards, who were telling me to do something. I wasn't listening.

The sword felt good in my hand.

### CHOICE #3

*Take up the narrative from the point of view of the Sower robot, Timothy 4-ER.*





## COURSE CORRECTIONS

*Day 1, End.*

Our ship was damaged in the take off, but we managed to get far enough from Sykagoja to engage the string gravitics drive. I saw to the survivors and the seven stowaways before I tended my own wounds, took my own rest. The role of the Blood Sister is always to protect, to secure.

Still, I was angry for our losses. Nesa Ye, the Brood Mother, and my Blood Sister, Katte Shogata, should have been with us today. The Captain-Pilot is a regrettable loss, but his lack of focus on priorities led to the inevitable. In his favour, the image of his final action confronting the Torian guards is a noble one. May his spirit be given entrance to the Last Eyrice.

But anger at what-may-have-been is useless for a warrior; my concern is where we are, what we must do next. One cannot drive a vehicle looking in the rear cams...

*Day 2.*

I am Akama Daitan of the Redfield Hills, Blood Sister, trained on Sykagoja by the spirit and the memories of Keka Reikoku.

For the glory of my people my blades run red; my victories in the arena have brought training centres, museums, and schools; there is a dojo in my name in the Redfield Hills where other Blood Sisters are trained. My life has been a good one... though that is a dangerous thought; one must always be prepared to let go of it for the good of the nest.

As I was awake, I went to the bridge, the new Captain-Pilot seated below me. I chose to remain in a position of dominance, not wishing the other to try to assume a leadership role. I will not put the fate of the Brood Mothers in another's grasp a second time.

My thoughts were interrupted by the robot we had picked up on our escape, the one who calls itself Timothy 4-ER.

"Capt-" It looked at the Captain-Pilot in his chair, then looked at me, then paused.

"Commander, we received damage to the superconductors controlling the plates that exploit the Casimir Effect. They are needed to generate the quantum vacuum energy for wormhole passage."

I cocked my head and waited. Occasionally one must take the time to teach brevity.

"Ah. Uh, we cannot traverse wormholes. A generator has been damaged."

Our planet, Uchi, which had been so attainable, suddenly moved away. Perhaps, sadly, my fate lay elsewhere, for I would have once more looked upon... My neck bristled. This was not a time for daydreaming.

"Where can we go for repairs?"

It was the Captain-Pilot who replied. "According to the shipmind, within the system there is only one planet

that contains the necessary facilities."

"Who holds it?"

The Captain-Pilot was looking away, but I saw his shrug. "The Torians. But it is contested."

"Very well. That is our destination. Approach with caution. We will see what we can do to have our ship seem insignificant, damaged, empty..."

"There are technicians in hibernation who may be able to help us," he said. Perhaps the Captain-Pilot would be a grudging ally.

"Awaken them. If we have the supplies, awaken everyone." I turned to leave and inventory weapons, but paused, out of curiosity.

"By the way - what is the name of the planet?"

4-ER replied. "The charts will only contain numerical designations and coordinates. But according to the computer, it is called 'Auriga.'"

END OF BOOK 1