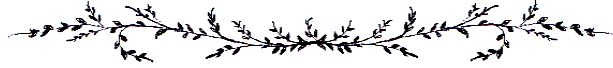


## The Making of a Disquiet Mind

This sample text is the complete introductory section to an online interactive gamebook from the Chronicles of Arborell - A Murder of Crows. The story begins upon the windswept hinterlands of Arborell, before a small stone hut that holds a great secret...



The small stone shelter stood alone at the centre of a cleared circle of exposed ground. In the shadows of a clouded evening Tansen stood quietly at its entrance, his arms folded as he considered whether he should make his way inside. For a moment though he found himself hesitating, the idea of what he might find within more than a little disconcerting. Standing in the face of a cold bluster the Jotun warrior scratched absent-mindedly at his forearm and took a moment to search the horizon for trouble. There was nothing upon the endless expanses of tundra but the hardy mosses of the plains and a few wild Yunta grazing in the distance. It was as lonely a wilderness as any to be found within his father's domain and yet here he stood, about to confront one of the most ancient Beings of his world.

In his mind he knew this to be the cause of his uncertainty. He had never been comfortable with the magics of his world and there resided here power in abundance. Tansen could sense it on the wind, a restless energy that focused in and around the stone shelter, concentrating itself about the ancient soul that lived within. He could taste it in the air, and feel it keenly upon the Word of Aggeron burned deep into his arm. Ever since he had returned from his *deskai* the marking had been a source of constant irritation. His brethren had noticed it immediately, and it had been commented upon on more than one occasion, but it was the prickling itch that plagued him constantly, especially when he stood close to any of Shan'dari's talismans. Standing next to the hut he found his arm burning as if it was on fire.

To find this place had, of course, been the Shaman's idea. As soon as the old Jotun had heard that he would be organising a Voor'cat hunt into the hills to the north of Shalamai, he had been relentless in his insistence that Tansen should seek an audience with the Living Book within. More than once since Tansen's discovery of the emurion'ka the old Shaman had deemed it necessary to send him on seemingly pointless expeditions into the wildlands of the Jotun. He had always counselled that there was a reason, but this small stone *tpesh* had proved to be something altogether different.

It had taken more than five days of hard travel to find the abandoned settlement of Tpush'shalamai, and now that he had found it he could not bring himself to enter. He had come north on the hunt with five companions, and as was the custom for any Being who might consult with one of the Living Books, he had left them two leagues distant, camped within the boundaries of the Shalamai Hills. Just at that moment he could have used the support of his older brother, Glydenhaal, but some things had to be encountered alone, and he knew that this was one of them.

Within the small *tpesh* resided the oldest Living Book known to the Oera'dim. He had come into the possession of Tansen's father some eighty years before, and for that entire span of years had lived within the walls of the circular stone shelter. Nobody knew his name, to all he was known simply as the Book at Shalamai, and in part it was the unknown nature of the ancient Hresh that unsettled him.

In his life he had known many Hresh, mostly of the Tomsk and Duran Kraals who held dominion over large areas of the Lands of Perdition in the far east of the world. He had found them to be arrogant Beings, but to their credit were ruthless, efficient warriors with an unshakeable loyalty to the Clavern'sigh. The Living Books were however, another matter altogether. They were Hresh of the World Past, created before the time of the Great Insurrection, and with no allegiance to anyone except those who fed and housed them. The breaking of the Word of Command by the Jotun had freed them from bondage, and even with its re-utterance by the Mutan of the Sigh, had not fallen again within its thrall. The Living Books were independent creatures, able to act upon their own free will in all matters. It was said that the Living Book at Shalamai had lived over eight thousand years. To the Jotun of the West he was a treasure of immense value and one that needed to be guarded at all costs.

How the Living Book at Shalamai might be safe in such an open place remained a question that Tansen

had not yet reconciled. Looking around he could see nothing except the rolling hills of the Shalamai, and the cold tundra of the Moss Plains to all four quarters of the horizon. His father had once told him that the best place to hide something of great value was in plain sight, and he had to admit that there could be nowhere in the lands of the Jotun of the West less secure than this.

For most of the year these plains were the roaming grounds of hundreds of nomadic communities, following their herds of Yunta Beasts as they migrated over the moss plains to the east and west. Tpush such as Tpush'shalamai could be found scattered throughout the plains, safe shelters from the frequent storms that ravaged the western world, and available to any traveller who might require sanctuary. At this time of year the cold seasons were approaching, and apart from himself and his five companions there would be found no-one else for eighty leagues in any direction. It was a certain truth that most herders had now moved southwards in search of warmer grounds and the safety of the high walls of Kraal Delving. As he stood at the door of the tpush he could feel the cold winds of winter breezing off the ice-caps in the north. Within four weeks all the northern lands of the Jotun would be waist deep in snow, and for any other Oera'dim that was very deep indeed.

Such considerations however, meant little as he waited at the door. He was a Favoured Son of a Jotun Chieftain and he needed no permission to enter the tpush, but the Hresh inside was beyond giving him respect or deference. In the end he decided to do what should always be done in such moments of indecision. He gave no heed to caution and stepped forward.

Carefully he lowered himself through the narrow arched doorway, then pulled aside the weathered leather curtain that hung loosely from its framing above the door. The interior was cold and dark. In the flickering light of a small cooking fire Tansen could see little, however within the gloom there sat the vague shape of the Book hunched within a pile of furs. Without introduction the Book motioned for Tansen to sit.

"Welcome Traveller," he whispered, his voice a harsh rasp as dry as breaking twigs. "What is it you wish of one who has so little to give?"

Tansen steadied himself and sat carefully on a collection of furs that lay before the Book.

"My wants are few Old One. I ask only that you give me the benefit of your wisdom."

The Book laughed quietly, his form moving beneath his coverings. "Well said Jotun. It would seem that Shan'dari has coached you well. Now tell me, do you really wish to speak with me, or are you doing only as your Shaman has requested of you?"

Tansen looked carefully at the dark form of the Hresh and wondered what had given away his discomfort. There could be no advantage in denying it however.

"I have travelled to this tpush for two reasons; the first to hunt Voor'cat with my brethren in the Shalamai Hills to the north; the second to seek an audience with you as requested by my Shaman. On this second task I do so because I respect the wisdom of my elder. On both these matters I intend to be successful."

Tansen sat back and awaited the Book's reply. In the quiet that followed the ancient Hresh sat with his head forward, slowly rocking in place as if he were meditating. As he waited the Jotun looked around the shelter and found little of interest, the shelter bare except for the furs surrounding the Book, and a small supply of packaged food that lay strewn near the cooking fire. Tansen did not realise that he was scratching at his arm until the Book spoke again.

"If you wish guidance Tansen'Delving of the Jotun you will not find it here. Yours is a destiny that does not require consideration or decision, for it is set as surely as water flows within the boundaries of a stream. What I can give you is information, but it comes at a cost for the truth can be an onerous burden."

Tansen wanted to ask what the Book meant, but he was motioned to silence as the Hresh spoke once again.

"If you wish information about what lies before you I will need answers on what has happened in your past. Answer the few questions I pose truthfully and you will not leave here unsatisfied."

In the gloom of the shelter the Hresh gave no clues to what he might ask, but Tansen knew that this audience was important enough for Shan'dari to insist he complete it.

"Very well, ask your questions."

The Hresh moved once again beneath his furs and this time there was a air of expectancy in his voice.

"Is it truth that your father is coming to his End of Days?"

Tansen thought carefully on his answer. This was a subject he found uncomfortable.

"This is so. Before the rising of the new moons he shall have made his journey to the Gates of Hallen'draal. It is my hope that he shall find a fitting place beside his ancestors."

The Living Book nodded. "He is a great warrior Tansen. One who shall find his rightful place in the Halls of Feasting. Such times however, are harder for the living than the dead. Are you prepared for the role you must play on his Last Day?"

This was a question that had the young Jotun wondering as to its intent. Since the writing of the Book of Scars some eight thousand years ago it had been customary that any Jotun who reached his Last Day must be challenged, and then killed, by his sons. More so for a Chieftain, for it was the right of succession that gave legitimacy to a Favoured Son's taking of power. In almost a thousand years no Chieftain of any Kraal had survived to their Last Day, but Agror'Delving had, and it would fall upon Tansen to challenge him for his domain. It was a challenge that could only have one outcome.

"I am as prepared as any son can be for such a task." Tansen replied.

The old Hresh considered his response and turned carefully to take a small piece of Nahla cake from a pouch at his side.

"I have seen many great warriors succumb to the challenges of their sons. It is done for a true purpose, but it makes it none the easier for those who must do it. Remember that it is the words of the True Witness that guide us in these matters."

The Book chewed on the stale cake and pointed at Tansen's arm.

"You scratch at you arm Jotun. What is it you find so irritating?"

"It is a tattoo Old One, a souvenir from my deskai, one that causes me no end of discomfort."

The Book motioned for Tansen to hold forth his arm and the Jotun could hear the Hresh suck in his breath as he recognised it for what it was.

"Ahh, the Word of Aggeron. Such a sigil I have not seen in an age of time. You have passed through Rinfalen's Gate?"

"Yes," Tansen replied.

"And you have stood in the Temple of the Moons at Nem'haleen?"

"Yes," he answered again.

"Well Jotun, it would seem that we have something in common then, for so have I."

In a flourish of furs the Hresh pulled the robes from his arm, and there in faded marking lay burned the same sigil. Through his surprise Tansen could not help notice that the Hresh had been scratching his as well.

"What is this? How do you come to have such a mark upon you?" This was something Tansen could not fathom and he wanted an answer. The Book could see that he now had the Jotun's undivided attention.

"Ahh, now we are interested eh? Don't think for a moment young Jotun that there is anything new in this world. All that has gone before comes again my friend, the cycle of our existence always bringing us back to where we started. Just as you now hold the emurion'ka in your possession, so once did I. Does it not seem a curious happenstance that finds us now sitting together in this squalid little stone hut?"

Tansen moved forward to look more closely at the Hresh's withered arm. It was indeed the same marking. As the Book withdrew his arm beneath his robes Tansen spoke.

"You say that you have stood in the Temple of the Moons. How is it that you came to such a circumstance?"

The Book looked at the Jotun and shook his head. "Such tales are for times other than these. You have come to this place for guidance, but it is information that you shall receive. Sit back and listen for I have the strength only to utter it once."

Tansen resettled himself upon the furs as the Book paused to consider his thoughts. When they came it was on the breath of a voice that had faded almost to nothingness.

"There is rumour and suspicion upon the winds Jotun. At this time the Mutan of the Clavern's sigh look to the south, their thoughts focused on war with the *vehmin*, but to do so they must be sure of the support of all the Oera'dim to succeed. In these times their agents roam the east and west of the world, rooting out dissent and enforcing the Word of Command. I tell you Jotun that the sign upon your arm is known to the Mutan, and they fear it. They know, as I do, that a being of the Oera'dim who wears the mark of Aggeron is not subject to the Word of Command. Their reach is long and their eyes constantly vigilant for any threat to their power. Before war is prosecuted they will come for you, and they will attempt to kill you."

“Time has passed since the emurion'ka has come into your possession I fear, and such talismans cannot be buried deep enough to pass beneath the notice of the Clavern'sigh. They will know that it is in the world, even though they may not know where it is, or for what purpose it might have arisen. They know only that the Word of Command that holds the Oera'dim within their thrall cannot stand against the power of the Light of the World. It will be in their minds that you have it, for Beings such as they do not believe in coincidence.”

“You have come to me for guidance but I can give you only this, and it is a foretelling that you will find difficult to endure. Tansen'Delving, you are a Favoured Son but you shall never become Chief. You hold within your possession the emurion'ka, but it is not for you to wield. Yours is a greater destiny that will end with the fall of the Mutan, and will see the leadership of the entire Oera'dim pass to others. Hear me Jotun, for I speak truths that cannot be denied.”

The young Jotun arose in a rage and stood before the Book, his hands balling into fists as he tried to control his anger.

“Who are you to say that I shall never become Chief? It has been my calling since I was first favoured, and I shall not give it up willingly. Tell me Old One, why should I listen to you? I came here for guidance, and instead I find the utterance of an unlooked-for doom. Tell me now why I should not kill you where you sit, and leave your bones for scavengers to feast upon.”

The Book laughed openly at Tansen's flaring temper and gave no ground.

“Kill me? Do it in anger and I shall ascend to the halls of my ancestors the happier for it. I do not fear you Tansen'Delving, nor those piles of excrement who call themselves the Clavern'sigh. Consider instead that I am the only Being in this world who will tell you the truth, and not fear the consequences of it. It is what makes a Living Book so valuable, young warrior. Take what I have said and go. It will save your life, and in time deliver the Oera'dim from their enslavement under the Word of Command. Now get out. I am tired and in need of rest.”

Tansen stood before the Living Book for only a moment, then turned and made for the door. As he stooped to pass through the entrance the Book called to him one final time.

“Listen to what I have said Jotun. Your destiny resides far from the lands of your father. When the time comes, and it will as surely as the suns rise, you must travel to the Horns of Gorgoroth. There dwells a Stranger amongst the Oera'dim who can answer all your questions. Listen to what he has to say and you will change the destiny of this world. Remember what I have said and act upon it.”

Tansen shook his head and threw aside the leather curtain as he left the tpeash. Never had he believed anything other than his right to become Chief of his Kraal and lead his warriors in battle. Whatever the Old One might think that was his destiny, and it would not be denied. Quickly he picked up his warhammer and cloak and set off northwards to the warm fire that would be waiting at his camp. The night would bring with it the Voor'cat hunt, and the prospect of violence and blood could only ease the discomfort of the Book's words. He could not help studying the plains about him all the more carefully though. Something in the Hresh's foretelling had struck him deeply, and the unease churned at him as he ran into the north and the distant Shalamai Hills.