

THE ATROCITY BELLS

Excerpt #1

The Chief of the Cathyrnee awoke with a start, having fallen asleep by accident. The cool night air touched his bare chest. He lay with his wife, Chieftess Yarlaa, in a round hut with a collapsible wooden frame, covered in felt made from sheep's wool. He reached for Yarlaa beside him, felt her hip beneath layers of fox fur.

A tremor moved through the ground and Arlyn knew instantly what this meant.

"Yarlaa, wake up." He shook her shoulder. "Yarlaa!"

She raised her head, still deep asleep, her hair a nest of tangles. She mumbled.

"They're here again!" Arlyn got onto his knees to grab her. Carry her if he had to.

A pair of attendant warriors rushed into the hut, their broadswords drawn. "We have to get you to safety!" one of them bellowed.

Their roof lifted off and exposed a dark and stormy sky. A yelkin held the shredded remnants of the roof in its long claws. Tall as any tree, the giant's demented, drooling face was like something drawn by a child, its thick, red hide zigzagged with lacerations from previous battles. The yelkin were made up of spindly, red bodies with long, thin arms, claws nearly reaching the ground. Their legs bent backwards like the hind legs of an

The Atrocity Bells

animal. Their mouths peeled back into perpetual grins, showing rows of yellow fangs inside black gums. An immense pair of horns bracketed their heads.

A section of the roof fell away and narrowly missed crushing all of them. Yarlaa cowered with her arms folded over her head. Arlyn lay on top of her. The nearest warrior rushed and stood above them both. Arlyn slid lower and searched for his sword, cursing his carelessness for not keeping it closer. The long, red arm of the giant creature reached in. The warrior dove to swipe at the arm, but his sword merely bounced off. The blade broke and struck him across the brow. He fell back and clutched his hemorrhaging face. The other warrior was already there to take his place, but a second yelkin approached the open structure. It lifted the man with one hand and sank its teeth into his torso, tearing him in half, entrails gushing loose.

Chief Arlyn and Yarlaa were soon surrounded by the shrieks of people meeting similar deaths. Caught in a feeding frenzy, the yelkin roared from every direction. A horned giant reached inside for Yarlaa. Chief Arlyn cried out for his wife and raised his sword above his head. He brought his blade down across the giant's forearm.

Excerpt #2

After much walking and some climbing, made difficult by having to carry a lit torch, the warlock Seelskan found the cave he'd been looking for. He entered while holding his torch forward, making sure the cave was empty. It wasn't particularly deep, likely formed by a reaction between groundwater and limestone bedrock. Of all the times he'd ever come here, he'd only found the cave occupied once by a mountain lion. The animal was young and, after much hissing, darted around him and fled.

The Atrocity Bells

Seelskan set the torch on the ground and took off his robe. He sat naked near the cave's opening and crossed his legs. His lack of clothing allowed for a stronger interconnectedness to the spirit world. After a bout of heavy meditation, his body floated slightly above the cave floor.

The warlock called forth the spirit Baal as he and other Dark Shulams had attempted countless times, but without success. The cooperation of a defeated and oppressed people to erase the sloth and greed of the other kingdoms would hopefully be enough to finally gain the spirit's interest. This evening, as with every time, Seelskan received no response. Deciding to try the other, less safe method, he lowered to the cave floor. He reached into his shoulder-sack and removed a small, fabric mat and unrolled it. He set an array of animal bones in a row. He used a flinty rock to draw two pentagrams on the cave floor, one for him and the other to summon and bind the spirit.

He knelt in the center of his pentagram and shut his eyes. He followed the sensation of his breath entering and leaving his body. He made notice of when his mind wandered, always returning attention to his respiration. Made sure not to obsess over the content of his thoughts, simply pulling back, over and over again.

"Attenrobendum eos," he chanted. *"Ad consiendrum, ad ligandum eos, pariter et solvendum, et ad congregantum eos coram me!"*

Seelskan sensed he was no longer alone in the cave. He opened his eyes. Standing at the cave's entrance stood a large, black wolf, likely attracted by the noise. The warlock calculated the logistics of diving for the dagger inside his shoulder sack. The wolf was close, too close. By the time he got his hands on the weapon, the wolf would likely be on him already. Seelskan went over in his mind what spells he might use when the animal spoke his name. Its voice sounded inside the warlock's skull, right behind his eyeballs. The wolf walked forward and sat inside the other pentagram. The voice said, "Thank you for inviting me here, Seelskan."

"Your presence honors me." He flinched at how puny his own voice sounded in

The Atrocity Bells

comparison. "I am overjoyed at your arrival. I shall do as you request."

"Oh, but I've been here. Your sister summoned me. I regret that the force of my entry into this world has caused her death."

He flinched at this news, expected as it was. "She knew it might kill her. She did it anyway."

"Her sacrifice will not be forgotten. I'm sorry I can't offer you more comfort than that."

Seelskan hesitated, caught askance by the demon's politeness. "I had hoped you were here," he said, "but I wasn't sure. No one heard from you."

"I'm getting things aligned, dear Seelskan. And I'm conjuring monsters. Big ones. You won't believe your eyes to see them."

"I've attained the allegiance of the Chotgor. And the Cathyrnee who are depleted but skilled warriors. Their chief is the one who seeks your aid. I've tried to control the yelkin into fighting for us, but it isn't easy. There's not enough intelligence in them to organize. I'm afraid they would merely see everyone as food and attack indiscriminately."

"You underestimate them. Leave the yelkin to me."

"What of the Magshaa and his followers? The Ghe-sui can be very strong."

In a blink, the wolf changed into a creature Seelskan had never seen before. It possessed a stumpy, pink body with tentacles for legs and arms, and three identical human heads suspended above transparent tubing. "Leave them to me as well," the heads said in unison. "Amass the largest army you can and let me know when it's done. We will march on Tartaria. Slaughter all who stand in your way. We will wipe these filthy lands clean, Seelskan. Start a new civilization free from tyranny and monarchs."

Seelskan trembled while praying and hoped the spirit somehow didn't notice this and mistake it for fear or doubt. It was excitement and awe. After all their work and waiting, they had attracted Baal. He was actually here. Seelskan had always considered himself one of the more powerful warlocks, but this was a presence with a potency far beyond what the warlock could ever possess. His waist felt damp, and he wasn't sure if this was

The Atrocity Bells

from sweat or if he'd pissed himself.

"It will be done," he said.

The spirit's form changed into an exceptionally large lizard with a black, scaly body and golden, glowing eyes. They lit up the walls of the cave, now covered in hieroglyphics. Seelskan had never noticed them before. A sulfuric stench permeated the cave.

"The Ghe-sui are ignorant and helpless," the lizard said inside the warlock's brain. "Their abilities largely remain a mystery to themselves. The Mag-shaa is old and nearing the expiration of his current form. With the wickedness of the royals extinguished, these lands will prosper like never before. There will finally be peace. It's a wonderful thing your sister did by bringing me here, Seelskan."

"I am awash in your greatness."

"I will give you everything. For her sacrifice. You will be the greatest ruler Jyn has ever known."

"I want to be the ruler this world needs."

"I do not doubt it."

"Only one question: You mentioned monsters. What kind of monsters?"

A hot wind blew into the cave and peppered the warlock's face and body with fine sand. He covered his face with his arms and turned away. He gasped and wiped his eyes. He looked back to see the spirit Baal had vanished.

Excerpt #3

She headed home, a four-hour trip by horse. Normally when undertaking such a journey, she would have paid a few of her ranch hands to accompany her. The way to the temple

The Atrocity Bells

was beseeched with bandits and predators lately. She had left the farm in such a hurry though. Ulaan was now forced to brave the night alone. Fortunately, both moons being nearly full kept her way lit and she was able to keep an eye on her surroundings, especially when stop-ping twice to feed the horse and give it a rest.

She passed through a couple of villages, but no one came out to invite her in, which was unusual, even for the time of night. She passed an inn, but it was too loud inside, the patrons too drunk. She rode her horse onward and made it back to the farm just before sundown. Once home, she made some tea and stood in her front doorway. She watched the descending sun scatter its colors over shelves of flat clouds, changing the sky from gray to violet. The scenery was so peaceful and gorgeous it made the idea of an impending evil feel completely farfetched. Was it possible the nightmare the Ghe-sui had shared meant something else entirely and His Holiness was in error?

Ulaan dismissed this idea and set about feeding the chickens some leftover fruit peels. Many ranch hands still remained, working quickly to beat the dying light. They had divided into smaller harvesting teams to pick and sort lettuce, radishes, and garlic. When she saw what appeared to be Queen Saraal's caravan cresting a hill to the west, Ulaan's first instinct was to dash back into the cottage. Wash and make herself presentable. Clean the soil from her skin and skirt at least. But she was far too tired. Besides, it was highly unusual for the Queen to visit again so soon. The timing of her arrival meant the Queen had stayed in Burnya for less than a few hours before coming back. Something must have happened.

Noknok raced out to greet the caravan, barking the entire way, then rushing in circles around the squires. They guided the caravan's horses with other foot servants leading the way.

As usual, the stateliness of the Queen's arrival attracted the notice of every remaining ranch hand. They adjourned from their chores to watch as the caravan pulled up. A consort wearing white knee-breeches and a frilled shirt helped Queen Saraal step out of her

The Atrocity Bells

carriage. Ulaan started to bow but stopped herself.

"I apologize for returning to you again so soon," the Queen said to Ulaan, "but this just couldn't wait."

She took Ulaan by her elbow and led her gently towards her cottage. The Queen's three servants made to follow as normal, but the Queen ordered them to stay outside this time. Noknok sniffed at the Queen's shoes until Ulaan scolded him.

Once inside and seated, the Queen removed her gloves, crossed her arms over her lap. She said, "I want her gone."

A chicken had somehow found its way inside with them. The bird strutted back and forth between the two women as they spoke. Ulaan thought to shoo the chicken outside but was held in place by the Queen's hands on her knees.

"Punished, my Queen?" she asked her.

"I will pay you to place a curse on him. On both of them. A hex. Something to make her go away."

"That's not what the Ghe-sui are about, my Queen. You would need to find a Dark Shulam for something like that."

"A Dark what? No, I don't want to deal with anyone but you." Queen Saraal's eyes were piercing, pleading. "Ulaan, you must help me. This means everything."

"I will need to speak with the Magshaa first."

"No, no, no, I don't have time for that. I need to get rid of this girl. Yesterday. She's going to ruin my life. And ruin the king's life! She will bring down the entire kingdom."

"I've never performed a curse." Ulaan felt the exhaustion from her long trip inside of her bones. Her head hurt.

The Queen leaned in and took Ulaan's hands in hers. "Ulaan, I consider you my friend. I do. I wouldn't say this unless I meant it, but I believe you can do this. You're so strong."

Ulaan wasn't sure how to even begin processing such a statement from the Queen, so she blurted, "Our land has much greater problems that you don't even know about yet,

The Atrocity Bells

Your Highness. The Magshaa is sending emissaries to Burnya as we speak to warn the king.”

“Please, I don’t want to involve anyone else,” she said, not even registering what Ulaan had said. “Make this wretched slut go away. Some servants confided in me that they overheard her pressuring the king to get rid of me.”

“For me to place a curse on someone...at a time like this. It would be extremely dangerous.”

“I’m not asking you to *kill* them. I’m only asking you to help me. Help me save my throne!”

Ulaan opened her mouth to speak but couldn’t find words. She didn’t want to lose this important connection for her fellow shaman. For her leader. What had the Magshaa said? She should start making her own decisions. She decided if their world truly was under attack from a great and terrible spirit, they were going to need the Queen’s financing more than ever, principally if fleeing Jyn became necessary.

“I know you can do it,” Queen Saraal whispered. “Ulaan, please...”

“What do you want me to do? What kind of curse?”

“Make her sick. Make her hair fall out. Make her ugly, so the king no longer wants her.”

“I-I can try...I guess...”

Queen Saraal next did an incredible thing. She knelt before Ulaan who couldn’t withstand the sight of this. She hadn’t swept the floor yet. A stupid chicken scratched at the floor nearby. She bent down with the Queen. “I will do the best I can, but I’ve never done a curse before. The Ghe-sui don’t do curses.”

Ulaan understood harnessing such dark energy could be harmful, take more years off her life than she had surrendered already. Could possibly make her sick. This even had the potential to change her appearance in such a way that other shamans would know what she’d done.

The Queen squeezed her hands harder, smiled. “Name your price. Whatever it is. Does

The Atrocity Bells

that help?"

"It's not about the money, Your Highness."

Her Highness gave a small laugh. "Nonsense, dear Ulaan. It's always about the money. Name your price."

As if in agreement, the chicken made a hiccup noise and pranced towards the kitchen.