



THE LANGUAGE OF THORNS

MIDNIGHT TALES AND DANGEROUS MAGIC

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FOR GAMYNNE— THE BABE WITH THE POWER

AYAMA and the HORN WOOD



IN THE YEAR THAT SUMMER STAYED too long, the heat lay upon the prairie with the weight of a corpse. The tall grass withered to ash beneath the unforgiving sun, and animals fell dead in the parched fields. That year, only the flies were happy, and trouble came to the queen of the western valley.

We all know the story of how the queen became a queen, how despite her tattered clothes and lowly position, her beauty drew the notice of the young prince and she was brought to the palace, where she was dressed in gold and her hair was woven with jewels and all were made to kneel before a girl who had been nothing but a servant bare days before.

That was before the prince became a king, when he was still wild and reckless and hunted every afternoon on the red pony that he'd done the work of breaking himself. It pleased him to rile his father by choosing a peasant bride instead of marrying to forge a political alliance, and his mother was long dead, so he went without sage counsel. The people were amused by his antics and charmed by his lovely wife, and for a time the new couple was content. His wife gave birth to a round-cheeked princeling, who gurgled merrily in his crib and grew more beloved with every passing day.

But then, in the year of that terrible summer, the old king died. The reckless prince was crowned and when his queen grew heavy with their second child, the rains ceased. The river burned away to a dry vein of rock. The wells filled with dust. Each day, the pregnant queen walked the battlements at the top of the palace, her belly swollen, praying that her child would be wise and strong and handsome, but praying most of all for a kind wind to cool her skin and grant her some relief.

The night their second son was born, the full moon rose brown as an old scab in the sky. Coyotes surrounded the palace, howling and clawing at the walls, and tore the insides from a guard who had been sent to chase them away. Their frenzied baying hid the screams of the queen as she looked upon the creature that had slipped squalling from her womb. This little prince was shaped a bit like a boy but more like a wolf, his body covered in slick black fur from crown to clawed foot. His eyes were red as blood, and the nubs of two budding horns protruded from his head.

The king wasn't eager to start a precedent of killing princes, but such a creature could not be raised in the palace. So he called upon his most learned ministers and his greatest engineers to build a vast maze beneath the royal compound. It ran for mile after mile, all the way to the market square, doubling back on itself again and again. It took years for the king to complete the labyrinth, and half the workmen tasked with its construction were lost within its walls and never heard from again. But when it was done, he took his monstrous son from the cage in the royal nursery and had him placed in the maze that he might trouble his mother and the kingdom no more.

In that same summer of the beast's birth, another child came into the world. Kima was born into a far poorer family, one with barely enough land to feed themselves from its crops. But when this child took her first breath, it was not to cry but to sing, and when she did, the skies opened and the rains began to fall, putting an end to the long drought at last.

The world turned green that day, and it was said that wherever Kima went you could smell the sweet scent of new growing things. She was tall and lithe as a young linden tree, and she moved with a grace that was almost worrying—as if, being so light upon her feet, she might simply blow away. She had smooth skin that glowed brown like the mountains in that

honeyed hour before the sun sets, and she wore her hair unbound, in a thick halo of black curls that framed her face like a flower blooming.

No one in the town could dispute that Kima's parents had been blessed when she was born, for she was surely meant to marry a rich man—maybe even a prince—and bring them good fortune. But then, barely a year later, their second daughter came into the world, and the gods laughed. For as this new child aged, it became clear that she lacked all the gifts that Kima possessed in such abundance. Ayama was clumsy and apt to drop things. Her body was solid and flat-footed, short and round as a beer jug. While Kima's voice was gentle and calming as rain, when Ayama spoke it was like the glare of noon, harsh enough to make you wince and turn away. Embarrassed by their second daughter, Ayama's parents bid her speak less. They kept her at home, busy with chores, only letting her make the long walk to the river and back to wash clothes.

So as not to trouble Kima's rest, their parents made a pallet for Ayama on the warm stones of the kitchen hearth. Her braids grew untidy and her skin soaked up ash. Soon, she looked less brown than gray as she crept timidly from shadow to shadow, afraid of causing offense, and in time, people forgot that there were two daughters in the house at all, and thought of Ayama only as a servant.

Kima often tried to talk to her sister, but she was being prepared to be a rich man's bride, and no sooner would she find Ayama in the kitchen than she would be called away to school or to her dancing lessons. During the days Ayama worked in silence, and at night she crept to Kima's bedside, held her sister's hand, and listened to their grandmother tell stories, lulled by the creak of Ma Zil's ancient voice. When the candles burned low, Ma Zil would poke Ayama with her cane and tell her to get back to the hearth before her parents woke to find her bothering her sister.

Things went on this way for a long while. Ayama toiled in the kitchen, Kima grew more beautiful, the queen raised her human son in the palace against the cliff and put wool in his ears late at night when the howls of his younger brother could be heard far below. The king waged a failing war to the east. People grumbled when he levied new taxes or took their sons to be soldiers. They complained about the weather. They hoped for rain.

Then on a clear and sunny morning, the town woke to the rumble of thunder. Not one cloud could be seen in the sky, but the sound shook the roof tiles and sent an old man tottering into a ditch, where he waited two hours before his sons fished him out. By then, everyone knew that no storm had caused the awful din. The beast had escaped the labyrinth, and it was his roar that had boomed off the valley walls and made the mountains shudder.

Now the people stopped fretting over their taxes and their crops and the war, and instead worried they might be snatched from their beds and eaten. They barred their doors and sharpened their knives. They kept their children inside and their lanterns burning all through the night.

But no one can live in fear forever, and as the days passed without incident, the people began to wonder if perhaps the beast had done them the courtesy of finding some other valley to terrorize. Then Bolan Bedi rode out to tend to his herds and found his cattle slain and the grass of the western fields soaked red with blood—and he was not the only one. Word of the slaughter spread, and Ayama's father walked out to the far pastures for news. He returned with horrible tales of heads torn from newborn calves, and sheep slit open from neck to groin, their wool turned the color of rust. Only the beast could have managed such devastation in a single night.

The people of the western valley had never seen their king as much of a hero, what with his losing wars, his peasant wife, and his taste for comforts. But now they bristled with pride as he took command and vowed to protect the valley and deal with his monstrous son once and for all. The king assembled a vast hunting party to travel into the wild lands where his ministers suspected the beast had taken refuge, and ordered his own royal guard to serve as escort. Down the main road they marched, a hundred soldiers kicking up dust from their boots, and their captain led the way, his bronze gauntlets flashing. Ayama watched them pass from behind the kitchen window and marveled at their courage.

The next morning, when the townspeople went to the market square to do their trade, they beheld a terrible sight: a tower—the bones of one hundred men stacked like driftwood beside the well at the square's center—and at its top, the bronze gauntlets of the king's captain glinting in the sun.

The people wept and trembled. Someone must find a way to protect them and their herds. If no soldier could slay the beast, then the king must find a way to appease his younger son. The king ordered his cleverest minister to travel into the wild lands and forge a truce with the monster. The minister agreed, went to pack a bag, and then ran as fast as he could from the valley, never to be seen again. The king could find no one brave enough to travel to the wild lands and negotiate on his behalf. In desperation, he offered three chests of gold and thirty bolts of silk to anyone bold enough to serve as his emissary, and that night there was much talk in the houses of the valley.

"We should leave this place," said Ayama's father when the family gathered for the evening meal. "Did you see those bones? If the king cannot find a way to placate the monster, no doubt it will come and devour us all."

Ayama's mother agreed. "We will travel east and make a new home on the coast."

But Ma Zil was sitting by the fire on her low stool, chewing a jurda leaf. The old grandmother had no wish to make a long journey. "Send Ayama," she said, and spat into the fire.

There was a long pause as the flames hissed and crackled. Despite the heat of the cookstove where she stood toasting millet, Ayama shivered.

Almost as if she knew it was her part to protest, Ayama's mother said, "No, no. Ayama is a difficult girl, but my daughter nonetheless. We will go to the sea."

"Besides," said her father. "Look at her dirty smock and messy braids. Who would believe Ayama could be a royal messenger? The beast will laugh her right out of the wild lands."

Ayama didn't know if monsters could laugh, but there was no time to think on it, because Ma Zil spat into the fire again.

"He is a beast," said the old woman. "What does he know of fine clothes or pretty faces? Ayama will be the king's royal messenger. We will be rich and Kima will be able to catch a better husband to provide for us all."

"But what if the beast devours her?" asked kind Kima, with tears in her lovely eyes. Ayama was grateful to her sister, for though she wanted desperately to object to her grandmother's plan, her parents had spent so long teaching her to hold her tongue that speech did not come easily.

Ma Zil waved away Kima's words. "Then we sing for her a bone song and we will still be rich."

Ayama's parents said nothing, but they did not meet her eyes, their thoughts and their gazes already turned toward the king's piles of gold.

That night, as Ayama lay restless on the hard stones of the hearth, unable to sleep for fear, Ma Zil came to her and laid a calloused hand upon her cheek.

"Don't worry," she said. "I know you are frightened, but after you have earned the king's reward, you will have servants of your own. You need never scrub a floor or scrape stew from an old cookpot again. You will wear blue summer silks and eat white nectarines, and sleep in a proper bed."

Ayama's brow still creased with worry, so her grandmother said, "Come now, Ayama. You know how the stories go. Interesting things only happen to pretty girls; you will be home by sunset."

This thought comforted Ayama, and as Ma Zil sang a lullaby, she fell into dreams, snoring loudly—for in sleep, no one could quiet her voice.

Ayama's father sent word to the king, and though there was much scoffing at the thought of such a girl making the endeavor, the only condition the king had set for his messenger was courage. So Ayama became the king's emissary and was told to travel into the wild lands, find the beast, and hear his demands.

Ayama's hair was oiled and rebraided. She was given one of Kima's dresses, which was too tight everywhere and had to be hemmed so that it did not drag in the dust. Ma Zil tied a sky-blue apron at her granddaughter's waist and sat a wide hat with a band of red poppies upon her head. Ayama tucked the little axe she used for chopping wood into the pocket of her apron, along with a dry hermit cake and a copper cup for drinking—if she was lucky enough to find water.

The townspeople moaned and dabbed at their eyes and told Ayama's parents how brave they were; they marveled at how fine Kima looked despite her tearstained cheeks. Then they went back to their business, and away went Ayama to the wild lands.

Now it's fair to say that Ayama's spirits were a bit low. How could they not be when her family had sent her to die for the sake of a bit of gold and a good marriage for her sister? But she loved Kima, who slipped Ayama pieces of honeycomb when their parents weren't looking and who taught her the latest dances she'd learned. Ayama wished that her sister should have all that she wanted in the world.

And in truth, she was not altogether sorry to be away from home. Someone else would have to haul the clothes down to the river for washing, scrub the floors, prepare the evening meal, feed the chickens, see to the mending, and scrape last night's stew from the pot.

Well, she thought, for she had learned to keep silent even when alone. At least I do not have to work today, and I will see something new before I die. Though the sun beat down mercilessly on Ayama's back, that thought alone made her walk with a happier step.

Her cheer did not last long. The wild lands were nothing but parched grasses and barren scrub. No insects buzzed. No shade broke the relentless glare. Sweat soaked the fabric of Ayama's too-tight dress, and her feet felt like heated bricks in her shoes. She quivered when she saw the bleached bones of a horse's carcass, but after another hour she started to look forward to glimpsing a clean white skull or the staves of a rib cage splayed like the beginnings of a basket. They were at least a break in the monotony and a sign that something had survived here, if only for a while.

Perhaps, she thought, I will just drop dead before I ever reach the beast and I have nothing to fear at all. But eventually, she saw a black line on the horizon, and as she drew closer, she realized she had reached a shadowy wood. The gray-bark trees were tall and so thick with thorn-covered brambles that Ayama could see nothing but darkness between them. She knew that this was where she would find the king's son.

Ayama hesitated. She did not like to think of what might await her in the thorn wood. She could well be minutes from her last breath. At least you will take it in the shade, she considered. And really, is the wood much worse than a garden overgrown with pricklers? It is probably very dull inside and will do nothing more than bore me to tears. She gathered Ma Zil's promise around her like armor, reminded herself that she was not destined for adventure, and found a gap in the iron vines to slip through, hissing as the thorns pricked her arms and slashed at her hands.

With shaking steps, Ayama passed through the thicket and into the wood. She found herself in darkness. Her heart thumped a jackrabbit beat and she wanted to turn and run, but she had spent much of her life in shadows and knew them well. She forced herself to stillness as the sweat cooled on her skin. In a few short minutes, she found that the wood was dark only compared to the brightness of the wild lands she'd left behind.

As her eyes adjusted, Ayama wondered if perhaps the heat had muddled her mind. The wood was lit by stars—though she knew very well it was the middle of the day. The high branches of the trees made black shapes against the vivid blue of the twilight sky, and everywhere Ayama looked, she saw white quince blossoms clustered in the brambles where there had been only thorns mere moments before. She heard the sweet call of night birds and the reedy music of crickets—and somewhere, though she told herself it was impossible, the burble of water. The light from the stars caught on every leaf and pebble, so that the world around her seemed to glow silver. She