

THIS DARK HEART

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**To Holly,
For believing in me when I
didn't believe in myself.**

First published in 2024
by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

print ISBN 978-1-915444-72-1
ebook ISBN 978-1-915444-73-8

This book has been published with the support of the Welsh Books Council.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples

Printed and bound by CPI Group UK





Princess Thiya of Agraal smiled down at Amara, a warmth building until she was sure she would burst. Thiya longed to run her fingers through Amara's brown hair but standing on the balcony looking down on the ballroom below meant Amara was just out of reach.

Lochan came up beside her. Out of the corner of her eye, Thiya saw her personal guardsman – her shara, Chirag – move to her right. She knew without looking that Lochan's shara, Yug, had taken up a position to their left.

Thiya spared Lochan one glance before returning her gaze to the ballroom. The waning sunlight shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows kissed Amara's dark-brown skin with a golden glow.

'What are you planning, little sister?' Lochan asked.

'Nothing.'

Amara greeted yet another suitor. Thiya watched as her own silver bangle – the one her father had given to her and all her siblings when they were born – glinted on Amara's left wrist, half hidden amongst the other bangles that circled her forearm. Thiya had given it to her before the ball, as a symbol of her love.

'It'd better be nothing.' Lochan rested his forearms along the balcony. His shoulder-length curly hair, much like Thiya's, fell in front of his face as he peered down at

the room below. 'Amara needs this,' he added, having spotted who held Thiya's interest.

Thiya scoffed. Society forced women to be wives and mothers, to forge connections that other family members could exploit. If Amara didn't marry, her family would disinherit her. She could be cast out, destitute. That was the only reason Amara *needed* to marry.

'Don't be like Aunt Yesha,' Lochan said, his voice sharp. 'If you care about Amara, you won't ruin this for her.'

If she cared. Lochan had no idea how much she cared.

Thiya wrinkled her nose. 'Why do you always have to compare me to Aunt Yesha?' Every time she messed up, her brothers liked to compare her to their father's older sister: an aether mage who had almost destroyed the country.

'Because she liked to act without thinking.' Lochan poked Thiya's nose.

She swatted his hand away. 'Maybe I do think before I act. I just believe some acts are worth the punishment.' Especially if she was going to be punished anyway. 'But don't worry, I won't ruin this for Amara.'

Thiya leaned a little further over the balcony to get a closer look at Amara's next suitor, Lord Hiresh of Samka. The cold marble pressed into her stomach. She'd been doing this since the beginning of the ball and she was sure she had a bruise to show for it by now, but she didn't care. There were too many lords at this ball, lining up to greet Amara, judging her to see if she was really as beautiful as

the rumours suggested (she was) and as kind (she definitely was). But mostly they were looking at Amara's father, General Sethu, trying to determine what benefits having the king's closest advisor and friend as a father-in-law could offer.

Because that was the reason for the ball – to find Amara, and every other woman of noble birth over the age of eighteen, a husband. The king threw this ball every year, and Amara had turned eighteen last month.

'That's going to be you next year,' Lochan said. 'You won't have time to miss Amara then.'

Thiya bit her lip. Lochan would never understand how unfair it was that she was expected to marry at a younger age than her brothers. Nor was it fair that she would be paraded in front of her suitors while her brothers would have freedom to choose, not that she knew who she *would* choose if she could, since Amara wasn't an option. And it certainly wasn't fair that she was expected to do all that with a smile on her face.

The suitors judged Amara. Thiya judged the suitors. General Sethu would only allow someone who could provide Amara with a good life to marry her – someone rich and well-positioned in society. But Thiya was more interested in whether they would treat Amara well.

Without warning, Lord Hiresh took Amara's hand and brought it to his lips. He said something, his mouth pulling into a smile. He didn't let go.

Amara's eyes flicked to their joined hands. She held

her polite expression, but Thiya knew she wanted Hiresh to release her. Why didn't her father stop him? Normally a look from General Sethu was enough to convince any man that touching his daughter would only end in disaster, but the general was too busy laughing at whatever Hiresh had said. Maybe Thiya needed to go down there and rip off Hiresh's arm.

'I'm serious,' Lochan said, his stern voice cutting through Thiya's violent thoughts. 'Don't sabotage Amara's chances of a good match because you want to keep her here a little longer.'

'I won't.' She had promised Amara she would behave, so she would. Lord Hiresh's arms were safe.

Thiya had known she and Amara wouldn't always be together, but that didn't stop the pain that laced her chest. She hadn't wanted to accept it. Sometimes she thought Amara was a little too accepting of her fate, facing it with a forced smile rather than the scowl Thiya would have preferred. Amara wanted to find a husband tonight to make her parents happy.

'What's the point of being miserable about something we have no control over?' Amara had said to her. 'I'd rather focus on what I can control. At least I have *some* choice in who I marry.'

A choice that didn't include Thiya, *couldn't* include her because they were both girls and part of high society.

A tear tickled her cheek. Thiya brushed it away with an impatient swipe of her hand, but Lochan had already

seen. He hugged her. 'I'm sorry. I know how much she means to you.'

He knew Thiya and Amara had been friends since childhood. He did not know how their friendship had evolved into something more. But Thiya couldn't correct him, and it wasn't because her tongue felt too thick to form words. He could never know the truth.

She shrugged off his touch. 'I won't cause trouble. Don't worry.'

When Thiya looked over the balcony again, Amara was greeting a Rear Admiral who looked as old as General Sethu. Amara's smile was too tight for comfort, but only Thiya saw that. General Sethu and the Rear Admiral laughed with familiar ease. A Rear Admiral would be a good match for Amara – she could admit that, even though the thought left a sour taste in her mouth.

More tears pricked the back of her eyes, but she blinked them back as she stepped away from the balcony, unable to watch any more.

'Are you wearing trousers?' Lochan asked, eyes wide.

Glad of the distraction, Thiya smiled. 'Yes. It was Amara's idea. Kavita and I worked on them together.' She pulled at the edges of the skirt until the blue silk parted in the middle to reveal wide-legged trousers. 'Aren't they amazing?'

Lochan shook his head, but his lips twitched. 'Yes, you're definitely not like Aunt Yesha. You've really thought this through,' he said, sarcastically. 'Couldn't you have worn a sari, or even a lehenga?'

Thiya scowled. ‘No.’ A sari was too fiddly and the current slim-fitted style of skirt for the lehenga too restrictive. Kavita, the royal seamstress, had designed her outfit so it resembled the lehenga at first glance, the wide-legged trousers looking remarkably similar to a skirt. She’d even gone as far as to heavily embroider the waist-length blouse in shades of darker blue and purple with silver accents so the outfit didn’t look too simple while still keeping the trousers light enough to dance in.

Lochan muttered something then, his eyes darkening. Thiya heard their mother’s name mentioned among a few choice curse words.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said with a grin, tapping Lochan’s cheek. ‘Mother will love this.’ Or at least she wouldn’t be able to find fault with the outfit. It was stylish and elegant while still being light and easy enough to move in. The perfect compromise.

The music playing from below changed, as the deeper, louder sound of the dhol took over. An earth mage pulled shutters across the windows, manipulating the wood so they fit perfectly into place, blocking out the night before it had a chance to fall and signal the start of curfew. Thiya had seen the mages do this so many times, and yet their display of magic never failed to leave her in awe.

The curfew had been in place since before Thiya was born, ever since the daayan first appeared. Daayan only attacked at night, so everyone headed indoors before nightfall and shuttered their windows and doors. It was

unusual to party into the night given that people normally hurried home for curfew, but the guests were all staying in the palace tonight.

A fire mage lit the torches inside the palace walls, the flames shooting up to the ceiling. The candles in the chandeliers appeared to catch fire from those flames, but Thiya knew that was the fire mage as well. An air mage, created a breeze that blew around the ballroom, stopping it from getting too hot and stuffy. A titter of excitement filled the air.

‘I think it’s time we joined the others.’ Lochan offered Thiya his arm, which she didn’t take. ‘You can’t avoid this.’

‘Are you sure? I could—’

‘Thiya.’

Thiya slipped her hand through Lochan’s arm before he could invoke Aunt Yesha as an insult again and let him lead her to the staircase at the other end of the balcony. Their shara followed a few steps behind.

The marble staircase was wide, with gold rails on either side. Lochan walked down the middle, and Thiya had to hitch up the front of her trousers with her left hand so she didn’t trip over the hem, revealing silver mojari on her feet that sparkled in the light.

Lochan wandered over to speak to a friend. Thiya snatched a samosa from the tray of a passing servant while searching for Amara. She spotted her on the dance floor where she moved in a circle with the other dancers, clapping and stepping to the beat. Thiya could join them

but the beat was too slow. She liked it better when she could spin around so fast she made herself dizzy.

Thiya took a bite of the triangular pastry and watched Amara for a while. The pastry made a satisfying crunch and the spices of the vegetable filling danced across her tongue. Amara laughed, enjoying herself now no suitors were bothering her. Everything was as it should be.

‘Ah, Thiya,’ her father called out to her from across the ballroom, and Thiya dragged her eyes away from Amara. ‘There you are, beta.’

He strode towards her, pulling someone with him. The stranger had on a simple kurta in bronze and dark blue, but the material was expensive and expertly tailored, and despite his youthful appearance, he oozed power. A mage. Even without his uniform, Thiya knew what he was from the way he carried himself: back straight and eyes alert. Her father had been introducing her to mages since before she was old enough to attend the ball, when she used to sneak inside and sit under the drinks table in the corner, observing everything, especially the mages at work.

The man shifted his gaze, and Thiya found herself looking into stormy grey eyes.

‘You have to meet Kayan. He’s been telling me stories of his time in Tumassi.’ Tumassi was a town to the far north of the country, on the border of Agraal and Kakodha. It used to be a vibrant trading town until the daayan appeared. Now it was the front line of defence.

‘He killed six daayan in one night! Can you believe it?’

The king patted Kayan's shoulder, turned to him and said, 'I was impressed when I heard what you did, so I know my daughter will be too.'

'Thank you, Your Majesty.' Kayan bowed politely, but not before Thiya saw the haunted look in his eyes.

Since daayan were creatures of pure magic, it was almost impossible to kill one in their shadow form. But once the daayan possessed a person, killing the host would kill the daayan immediately. In order to kill the six daayan, Kayan would have had to kill six possessed people – probably people he knew. Just like the soldier she'd seen that night five years ago.

Poor Kayan. No wonder he looked haunted. Thiya hoped this chance to get away from the front line and have some fun would ease his conscience, like the king intended.

General Sethu called for her father and the king wandered away, leaving Thiya alone with Kayan. They stared awkwardly at each other for a few moments, Thiya unsure what to do, before she blurted out, 'Err ... thank you for your service.'

And that was why she didn't take part in politics. That was her older brother Shyam's job. But Kayan took her awkwardness in his stride, his smile putting her at ease.

'It's not like we had a choice.'

Thiya blinked at the sharp voice and it took her a moment to realise it hadn't come from Kayan. Kayan frowned at someone over her shoulder and Thiya turned to see another stranger with angular features. He would

have been handsome if it weren't for the scowl he levelled at Thiya.

Thiya bit her tongue against her response and plastered a sweet smile on her face that she hoped would soothe the stranger's temper. 'Yes, I suppose that's true.'

All mages, regardless of gender or social status, were recruited into the army aged ten and brought to one of several training camps around the country, whether they liked it or not. It was harsh, but that was war. Without mages, the country would not have survived the threat from the daayan.

'Still, I thank you for all that you do.'

And her mother thought she spoke without thinking. She'd warned Thiya that one day her tongue would get her into trouble. *If only Mother could see me now.*

'If you really wanted to thank us, you would sort out your own family drama.'

'Isaac...' Kayan warned.

Chirag moved closer.

'No, we're risking our lives every day because her aunt created the daayan after she tried to kill her younger brother. Mages did everything they could to protect him. They even managed to kill his power-hungry sister despite most dying in the process. General Sethu's own brother sacrificed himself to save the now king – and the royal family won't do anything to fix it.'

'What do you want us to do? We don't have magic,' Thiya said.

Aunt Yesha was the last person in their family to have magic. An aether mage, she had been consumed by darkness. Her death had plunged Sanathri Jungle into shadow, from where the daayan had emerged. Aethanis were healers and destroyers. They could save a life as easily as they could take it, and her aunt had chosen to destroy.

Isaac snorted.

‘Believe me, if I could do something, I would. We all would.’

‘I don’t believe you.’ The cold in Isaac’s voice seeped into Thiya’s skin and she shivered. Chirag stepped in between them.

Thiya heard someone shout outside a moment before glass shattered nearby and Chirag pushed her out of harm’s way. She lost her balance and fell to the floor. Pain shot through her right hip but, before she could catch her breath, Chirag wrenched her to her feet. He pushed her against the wall and crouched in front of her, assessing the threats in the ballroom.

The music stopped playing. In the distance, Thiya heard bells ringing out a familiar pattern that her brain couldn’t quite grasp, the sound muffled by the blood rushing through her ears.

She peered over Chirag’s shoulder, her eyes darting around the ballroom. The shutters had crashed through the windows, raining down little shards of glass onto the floor like diamonds. Guests scrambled away, their arms protecting their heads from falling glass and splintered

wood. They pushed their way to the other side of the ballroom, initiating a stampede on the main entrance. Their screams filled the air, joining the shouts from outside. They all needed to get away from the open window, before shards of glass were the least of their worries.

Chirag tugged on her arm. 'We need to go, Princess.'
'Not without Amara.'

But where was she? The dance floor was empty. Thiya saw her on the other side of the room with the queen, a shara escorting them both out of a side door. Thiya sagged. They would be alright.

The mages around the room burst into action. Fire whipped around in an arc. The light seared Thiya's eyes, making it difficult to see what was happening. Chirag pulled her towards another side door and this time Thiya didn't resist.

Thiya saw a black shadow out the corner of her eye. Her breath caught in her throat. The shadow drifted in through the window, dancing just out of reach of a stream of water sent by a water mage. More screams punctured the air. Chirag tried to pull her onwards, but Thiya couldn't move. She'd never seen a daayan in its shadow form before.

The daayan's dark flickering silhouette sucked the light and warmth from the room. Thiya felt a chill deep within her bones, colder than the ice that lined the top of the Dhandra mountain range.

Guests stuck in the bottleneck at the door screamed and pushed those in front. Chirag tightened his grip around her arm, but Thiya shook him off. Fascination overrode reason. There was something about the daayan that called to her.

The daayan changed form, like smoke twisting and coalescing. It shifted from a tall flame, darker than the darkest night, to a human with impossibly long legs. It darted through the room, next transforming into a ribbon, then a snake, complete with forked tongue.

The snake slithered through the air towards her father and General Sethu. Thiya's chest tightened. The king's shara leapt to hustle him out of danger. Sethu raised a sword that flashed green with earth magic. Magic-infused swords were one of the few things that could weaken a daayan in its shadow form.

Fire flew between the general and the daayan. The daayan sprang back. The mage Kayan stopped beside Thiya, flames dancing on his outstretched palm.

The daayan dodged to the side as an air mage whipped up a gust of wind to blow it off course, but it sped straight towards Thiya's father. Thiya's scream lodged in her throat.

Kayan sent another ball of fire sailing after the daayan, but its smoky form pulled apart at the centre, creating a hole for the fire to sail through. Flames hit the king's shara, setting his clothing alight. The flames were extinguished a second later by a water mage.

Another shara pulled the king away, but the daayan followed. It sailed over the head of the first shara, shifting shape again until it resembled an arrow pointing straight at her father.

Thiya didn't hear herself scream, but she felt the pain of it as it ripped from her throat.

Kayan held more fire within his hands. He lined up his throw, his eyes focused on the king, and waited.

No! Kayan could not burn the king. She couldn't lose her father. But the daayan was about to possess him, and then he would be beyond saving.

An unfamiliar sensation rose up within her: light and love; darkness and desire. Threads of darkness and light pressed against her skin, demanding release. Thiya let them go, but instead of the feeling fading as she released it, it threatened to consume her, to split her apart.

In awe, Thiya watched as the threads of her own magic wrapped around the daayan just before it reached her father. They pulled together, squeezing until the daayan exploded in a shower of black confetti that rained down on the ballroom. Thiya blinked, and the daayan was gone.

The light and the dark threads within Thiya faded, the energy dissipating.

Her father stood where he had before. His eyes were the same dark brown that she knew and loved, and there were no prominent grey veins around them. He was alright. He hadn't been possessed.

Shaky laughter escaped her. She'd almost lost her father. Thiya looked down at her hands and body. What were those threads and where had they come from?

Her father's eyes grounded her. They were hard and cold as he stared at her like he'd never seen her before.

Oh Khal! What had she done now?