

PRINCESS OF THE POMEGRANATE MOON

Chapter 1 Excerpt

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ONE

THE DANCER

The season was uncertain, as it always was, but the stars and the angle of the sun showed it was late in the year, and a cool wind blew over the earth and rustled the sparse grass in the lands beyond the forest. Shadows loomed over the treetops from the hills—long, crisscross shadows from things not quite like branches. Few now living had seen what cast the shadows up close, for of those from older generations brave or foolish enough to follow the witch lights through the wood, few returned with the wits to describe what they saw. Those who were able were unwilling to speak of it, nor even of whether their reluctance was out of fear or due to some occulted prohibition set upon them.

Though the shadows rose above the trees, they fell rarely upon the borderlands on the near side of the forest, and the rooftops of the nearby town. The people disagreed whether this was a blessing or a more fearful omen, for the shadows were obscured by the greater shadow of the Mountain. It stood high above the valley and trees, above the hills and shadows, as tall as heaven and old as the earth, and was called only the Mountain,

for it knew no other name. From the town, at certain points of the year, the sun seemed to circle around it in the sky, rising in the east to its left and setting in the west to its right. In this late age of the world, only those skilled in sorcery and hidden arts of subtle omens had a chance at telling the seasons rightly. Though the sun's yearly course was easy enough to follow, the winds and crops were fickle and prone to secret fates, and the moon itself was a mystery, its phases obscure and unreadable, the arcane crescents it traced in the night intelligible to only the most skilled astronomers.

Still, it had at last become clear enough that the Season of Shadows had fallen over the valley, a time when mists obscured the earth and clouds hung heavy in the air. The sun was weak and thin, too feeble to tell the time of year, but the whispers of the air were unmistakable to the learned, and the moon grew full enough for all to see. In the evening, the sky became a deep and crystal shade of violet, the stars tittered like gems in the night, and though the moon shone white, it was crowned all about with a ring of color, a rainbow prism through the mists that the people of the valley knew heralded the coming of Summer's End.

So the clouds gathered overhead and darkened wide swaths of the little village of Tudur, a quiet settlement in the fields by the border of the forest. The people went abroad in the narrow stone streets only rarely as the Season of Shadows came and then mostly during daylight. But as evening approached and the red tint of the setting sun cast long, fearsome shadows down the alleys, a crowd was gathered in the square—an unfamiliar sight at this time of year. They circled around a dancer, straining above each other to see her, thoughts drawn for a moment away from their homes and their families, their labors and their fears, strung along like streamers in the wake of the dancer's grace. More than a few tossed coins, flowers, trinkets, and the occasional folded

slip of paper bearing a message hastily scrawled in shame and hope, though most knew the dancer was little likely to give them a glance.

The dance drew on, and the performer showed little intention of stopping—a woman with a beauty unmatched by either the women or men of the town. Her skin was soft and smooth, her movements smoother, her brightly colored dress and rainbow shawls flowing and spinning in her wake. Bangles and strings of beads rattled on her arms, and her nimble hands tapped gently but resonantly upon a small hand drum, a tympanum with which she kept a hypnotic beat that she followed in her dance and to which the people lost themselves. They nearly abandoned their reason, flowing along, clapping their hands, lost in the intricate labyrinth of sound the dancer conjured and weaved through the air with her drum.

The crowd grew larger the longer she danced, drawing in more folk who had heard the rapidly spreading word of the performer in the square. Her costume was clearly meant to take advantage of this attention. Her dress was a bright, cutting purple of rare dye, with a short skirt that spun around her knees. She waved turquoise and yellow sashes around her shoulders seductively, and her thick, wild hair flew about her, unnaturally dyed the deep blue green of the pine trees. In a patch of dirt between broken flagstones was plunged a short sword with a mirrored, white blade and a silver crescent of a guard, like the moon. Her dance centered on this sword, as the whirling of the planets lighting the sky centered on the polestar in the tail of the Great Dragon above.

The dancer spun around, and the crowd, once focused on the woman before them, gasped with a clamorous mixture of amazement and fear as small fires lit in the air around her; the floating, spinning flames cast an unnatural yellow-green light on the square and reflected in the dancer's heavy-lidded eyes,

making them flash in the growing dark of the evening. In this eerie cast, the ears that poked gently out of her hair almost seemed to come to slight, elfin points. The magic of the lights could be heard as well as seen; the lights bent the wind with an unearthly hum, like that of strange, distant flutes, accompanied by the beat of the tympanum.

Whispers hissed all around the crowd as the dancer whirled: *She casts witch lights, like those in the woods*, they said. *She's a mage*, others replied. *She's no traveler; she's a fairy*, called a voice clear and sudden. Perhaps she was a fae crept out of the forest on the eve of the Season of Shadows, or a changeling left in the mortal world. Perhaps she was only a dancer, wandering into town for someplace to sleep warmly after days on the road. No matter the truth, she laughed brightly and bowed theatrically, luxuriating in the impression she'd made.

The dancer rose from her bow, and one boy at the front of the audience caught her eye. He stood right in front, head never turning from her as she danced, paying no attention to the rest of the audience. She saw him smiling when she twirled in a particularly impressive spin, an expression of growing wonder on his face, his eyes lighting up whenever she cast a bright spell in the dark of the evening. There was much of this wonder from children and different expressions of attention from older boys and young men, but this enthralled youth looked to be about the dancer's own age, and the innocence and sincere joy that lit his face brought a smile to her own. She cast a light in the shape of a flower toward him, and he laughed and flinched back when it sparkled out where he stood.

Her dance continued and then drew to a close, the light and eerie music of her spells fading away, her body completing her improvised choreography almost automatically, betraying no sign of her thoughts. She graced the audience with a flourish as a few applauded and others murmured in low voices, wondering about

the magic this woman brought to the town. For her own part, the dancer cast kisses into the air, drew the sword from the earth and lifted it above her head, and then—vanished, not behind a curtain but into thin air. Hushed murmurs turned to astonished gasps, and the thin applause rose to a clamor from those more delighted than afraid, all while the dancer stepped silently and invisibly through ethereal mists to a corner of the square beneath the trees.

The townsfolk lingered to talk and argue about the nature of this newcomer. Their voices carried far through the night, before one by two, they reluctantly retreated to their homes or the tavern.

Tonight, the moon grew huge and strange and drew around itself a cloak of clouds that shimmered in a rainbow halo. It was the Pomegranate Moon, the moon so common during this cloudy, rainy season—the same moon that had hung in the sky that night so long ago. Unseen by the villagers, the dancer looked up at the sky through the mists of her invisibility. The light shimmered and wavered through the fog between dimensions but nonetheless emboldened her weary heart.