

Chapter One

A crowd ripples just like the ocean, if it's got a force pushing against it. Tonight, here and now, Tovah Connelly intended to be that force. She concentrated, drawing strength from the myriad individual consciousnesses surrounding her. From one she plucked the beat of a song while another provided the taste of a tropical drink, sharp in the back of her throat. From yet another she drew the feeling of silk, a dress, hanging short upon her thighs.

Around her, the club grew brick by brick, created from the mingled desires of many but woven together from the force of her will. That was the way things worked here in the Ephemeris, the land of dreams. The landscape bent to the individual will of those who knew how to shape it. Some were skilled with it. Others, like Tovah, had only just discovered their abilities to move and shape the world they entered when they slept. And still others, less fortunate, would never know how to shift their bodies or mold the terrain to suit them. They would never know that in dreams, they could control the world.

Now she pushed outward with her will, seeking what she needed from the sleepers around her who wanted, needed, but couldn't shape this for themselves. The walls formed, and the floor. A bar. A DJ, spinning tunes she didn't need to know to enjoy. Tovah opened herself to the ever-constant push and pull of desire and, like a conductor, took the jumbled mass of notes and made them into a symphony.

It would be easy to lose herself in it. Even now she felt the tug of another's will upon her, urging her body to shift and change to fit someone else's vision. She shielded herself from it, turning the tug into a push of her own and using it to create another slew of small details to bring realism to this scene.

"Hey, hey." The voice pricked her ears even above the writhing, pounding music surrounding her, and Tovah turned.

She didn't see him at first, shrouded as he was in shadow. The darkness rippled the same way the crowd had when she teased it with her will. Spider, the size of a large cat and striped with bands of crimson and gold, flicked his mandibles at her. He pulled the darkness back around him, his will stronger than hers, and she moved forward so as not to lose sight of him.

"Spider, how do you expect me to learn if you keep balking me?"

"How do you expect to learn if you're never pushed?" Spider's feet clicked on the tile floor. The crowd parted around them as he backed up, and Tovah followed.

The current of mingled desires flowed around her, tendrils reaching out to caress as she passed, but she ignored them. She followed Spider out of the club and onto the grass, a place where even an arachnid the size of a household pet would feel more comfortable. She didn't want to lose the club and so kept the doorway fixed behind her. The Ephemeris never stayed the same unless it was held in place by desire. She could talk to Spider and hold the door, but she had to be careful not to get distracted or else anything could shift. It was a balancing act, one she was only slowly learning how to perform.

Spider squatted in a tuft of purple grass. His coloring had changed, now banding his round, hairy abdomen with green and silver. A lamppost of filigreed iron slid out of the mist and highlighted a circle of earth around him. Tovah didn't think spiders could preen, but this one did.

"Very nice," she said.

"Thanks." Spider smoothed one jointed leg over his head and set of eight wee ruby eyes. "How *you* doing?"

A *Goodfellas* spider. Tovah laughed. "I'm fine, Spider. How are you?"

He bounced lightly on eight legs, his colors swirling again before settling into a pattern of mottled blues and greens. "Fine. Fine. You been practicing?"

Tovah looked at the lamppost, which became an old-fashioned gaslight under the subtle pressure of her will. "A little."

It wasn't a lie. She did, sometimes, spend her time in the Ephemeros practicing the complicated task of building and destroying worlds. Just not as often as Spider thought she should.

"You should practice more." Spider didn't look with even one of his eyes at the post, and it changed back. "You're too easy to push. Almost as bad as a sleeper."

She frowned. "Hey."

Spider managed a shrug without shoulders. "I'm just saying. You take too much from them instead of making it yourself. You rely too much on them. Anyone can come along and push you, that's all. Not all of them are as nice as me."

Taking from sleepers was different. They couldn't do it for themselves, and yet they still needed whatever it was their minds were trying to create. Tovah knew there were shapers who didn't play by the rules, those who used their

skills to force their will on those weaker than they. But most shapers she'd encountered were careful not to use their will on other shapers without permission. It would have been rude, like peeking at someone in the shower. They might be sharing the same dream space, but they weren't necessarily sharing the same dreams. She'd met a few rude sons of bitches who'd tried to convince her she wanted bigger breasts or blonder hair, but she'd been able to put them off without any trouble.

"You know, Spider, there are assholes in the waking world who think they have the right to push other people around, too. I get by." She looked over her shoulder at the doorway of the club. It had been a plain wooden doorframe a moment before; now it arched and featured a bolted door padded with crimson satin. Someone had done that, not her, but as long as there was a door, she didn't care what it looked like.

"This ain't the waking world, Tovahleh. I'm just looking out for you."

Tovah looked back at Spider, who'd become her dear friend in a time when she'd desperately needed one. "I know. You've taught me a lot, and I appreciate it. Really."

"But you want me to back off."

"A little, yeah."

Spider made a low noise but didn't argue further. From behind Tovah the door flew open and a woman stumbled out. She was represented as having blond hair and a slim form. Barefoot, clad in a long white nightgown, she was the epitome of a gothic heroine, complete with a rose clutched in one hand.

Spotting Spider, she shrieked. Again and again she cried out, hysterical, sobbing. She cowered against the

doorway, her fingers scrabbling at the wood but never letting go of the flower. Though the air and earth rippled around her, nothing changed. She wasn't a shaper.

Tovah remembered how it felt to be powerless against fear. The first time she'd met Spider, Tovah had been as terrified as this woman. She looked at him. He'd grown larger. No help, there. "Spider, c'mon."

Spider did nothing. With a disgruntled sigh, Tovah turned back to the blonde woman. "Shh. You're having a dream."

The woman screamed again and covered her face, though Spider hadn't moved toward her. Tovah bent and put a hand on her shoulder, shaking gently. The woman stopped screaming and looked up, eyes wide and mouth lax with fear.

"You're having a dream," Tovah repeated. "What's your name?"

"Princess Pennywhistle."

Tovah laughed, though she knew she shouldn't. The woman might be representing as a gothic heroine but she thought she was in a fairy tale. "Princess. This is a dream, okay? That spider isn't real. This is all a dream."

Strands of midnight suddenly streaked the sunshine of Pennywhistle's hair. Her nightgown shortened over a body fuller in the hips and breasts than it had been a moment before. She dropped the rose.

"A dream?"

"Yes. It's just a dream."

The woman looked around, eyes still wide. "Are you sure?"

Tovah nodded and gave her a confident smile. "Absolutely."

The other woman closed her eyes briefly. "I'm not here."

"Well..." Tovah shot Spider a look, but he was no help. She fudged her answer a bit, not wanting to get into a deep philosophical discussion about the technicalities of being "here." "You're dreaming. Which means you can go anyplace you like. Wouldn't you like to dream of something nicer than a big, ugly, hairy spider?"

"Hey!" Spider complained. "I'm not ugly!"

The woman flinched when he spoke and turned her face away. "I would love to dream of something nice."

"Then all you have to do is do it. What do you want to dream about?"

The now-dark-haired woman didn't answer in words. She stood, her body changing once again. The front of her nightgown swelled. Her hair grew lush and long, swirling around her. She ran her hands over the bump of her belly and smiled with an uncertainty that made Tovah's throat close with emotion. She'd had the same dreams, once.

Spider had been the one to teach Tovah how to escape a nightmare. Now she painted letters with her finger in the air above the door. They became a blinking neon sign, familiar to most people.

"See? Look there. It's an exit light. Just go back through that door," Tovah prompted. "You'll be all right. And remember, you control your dreams. They don't control you."

The woman nodded, already losing sight of Tovah and Spider as she turned and went through the door. It closed behind her with a snap. Tovah looked back to her friend. It was impossible to read his expression, since he had no mouth or nose and was an arachnid, but she guessed at his mood anyway.

“She was terrified. What was I supposed to do? Just let you scare her into apoplexy?”

Spider chuffed. “She needed to be scared.”

“Spider,” Tovah sighed. “Who really ever *needs* to be scared?”

“Lots of people. Why does anyone need anything? I dunno how it works, Tovahleh, just that’s how it is. In here, everything that happens to you is because you need it for some reason.”

“Who decides that?” She threw out her arms, wide, and turned in a circle with her face turned up to the night sky her will had shaped and Spider’s had pricked with stars. “God? Who?”

“I don’t know.” Spider sounded sad. “Believe you me, kiddo, I wish I did.”

Tovah shot him a sharp look. “I couldn’t just let her scream herself sick because of you. What harm does it do to tell her she can control what happens here? She can, you know. We all can, if we try.”

“She wasn’t a shaper.”

“She shaped.”

“You guided her.”

“You guided *me*,” she reminded. “Maybe she’ll learn.”

Despite what she’d just said, Tovah knew that was unlikely. Dreams arose from individual experience, thoughts, memories. Fears. But it took desire to shape the dream world to one’s own purpose. Conscious desire. And remaining conscious in the land of unconsciousness wasn’t a talent granted to everyone.

Spider got a little bigger, his front legs rubbing against each other. Another chuff, this one sounding like a laugh. “You done good with her. Helped her out. You’re a good guide.”

Now she knew where this was going. She wagged a finger. “Ah, ah, ah. No. We’re not going there. I don’t want to be a guide. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else but me. That’s too much pressure, Spider.”

“Too much work, you mean.”

“That, too.” She reached behind her to touch the wood of the door, making sure it hadn’t gone away while Spider distracted her with discourse. “I’m going back to the club.”

Spider sighed, a sound so human and so at odds with his inhuman features Tovah stopped. “So much to do here and all you wanna do is play.”

Good friends can get away with saying things like that, and Spider had become a very good friend. Still, Tovah’s back stiffened and she clenched her jaw. “I’m a grownup, Spider. I know the rules. I’m not the only person who wants to play.”

He snorted, his body turning completely black. “That don’t make it good.”

Exasperated, she snapped, “Why does it make it bad?”

Spider said nothing for a moment. This wasn’t their first argument. She knew him. He was thinking of a way to zing her.

“It’s dangerous,” he said, surprising her.

His concern touched and irritated her. She didn’t miss the irony of him warning her against danger and urging her to become a guide—which would mean deliberately opening herself to the shaping of others. Talk about dangerous.

“I can take care of myself, Spider.” She softened. “Really. I promise. You taught me, remember?”

Spider sighed. “How could I forget?”

Tovah blew him a whimsical kiss, the pair of red lips like a butterfly fluttering from her fingertips toward him. “I’ll see you later.”

Spider grunted, low, and scuttled forward. “I haven’t seen you in a while. You been avoiding us?”

“Of course I haven’t.” Guilt pinged her. She had, maybe a little. She turned the handle of the door but didn’t open it. “I saw Ben just a few days ago. And look, I’m here with you, now. Besides. You know you can always find me if you want. It’s not so easy to find you.”

“Ben does.”

Geographically, the Ephemeros had no boundaries. It was as likely for her to meet someone who lived in China as it was for her to bump into a man she’d passed that day on the street, or her neighbor, or a friend. It didn’t matter where their physical bodies existed. The only requirement was that the other person be dreaming too.

Add to that the ability to shape your surrounding reality, and the Ephemeros offered limitless opportunities for interaction. Shaping your reality meant shaping your companions, too. Creating a past lover’s face on someone didn’t always mean that lover was really there.

That’s what guides did. Filled in all the empty places, the roles in others’ dreams. A good guide was also a good shaper, able to mold a cast of thousands from nothing but the gray mist of the Ephemeros, and all based upon the desire of the person they guided. Guides helped sleepers finish what they started.

It was too much work. Easier to...not steal, exactly. Tovah didn’t consider what she did as theft. *Nipping* was a better word. She nipped bits and pieces of what others wanted or needed and used that to create what she did. If that meant there were sleepers out there haphazardly

populating their dreams with half-formed figures and uncompleted tasks, well...that wasn't her problem.

Tovah forced her gritted jaw to relax before she answered. "Ben's a better shaper. I get it, Spider. Ben works hard. Ben's a good guide. Ben can make the Eiffel Tower out of a couple of toothpicks. Yeah, I know."

"You could do it too. If you wanted."

"Well, I don't want!" she shouted. "I don't want to be a guide. I don't want what Ben wants, or you want, okay? I don't go to sleep at night with dreams of helping the world finds its way, all right? I just want to find my own!"

She glared at him, but it was next to impossible to determine Spider's expression. He rubbed a leg over his head. She'd seen him do the same in the waking world, run a hand over and over his hair, rumpling it.

"I just worry about you, that's all. If you're wandering around and things go wonky—"

Tovah waved a hand. "It's no different than anything else here. Yes, sometimes things get scary here. But I know they're not real. I know it's a nightmare. And I get out of it. I'm not a sleeper."

"Sleepers have nightmares. Shapers don't."

She sighed. "Fine. So sometimes things get...out of control. Sometimes someone with a little too much desire makes it ugly for the rest of us. Just like in the waking world. The difference is, in here, I can control what happens to me. It's not real."

The light around him went out. All she saw were the glinting rubies of his eyes. "Dreams are just as real as anything else, girlie. When're you gonna learn that?"

A smart retort rose to her lips, but too late. Spider had vanished. He'd been in the Ephemeros a long, long time.

Tovah didn't have the skill to find him if he didn't want to be found.

Dreams were as real as anything else. Four years ago she'd have laughed at that. She'd been married to her college sweetheart and trying to have a baby. She hadn't known the Ephemeros existed. Spider had been the one to introduce her to this second reality, and now guilt singled her for snapping at him.

Tovah pushed through the door and the club laid itself out before her. The edges were blurry, formed by the desires of those closer to it than she, or those with stronger shaping skills. That didn't matter. She wasn't here to build a world, nor destroy one. She was only here to enjoy it.

The music was loud, the lights flashing. While there were oddities here and there—a clock that ran backwards, a sign upon which the letters kept changing—those were common quirks of the dream world and as comforting in their own way as proof she really was in the Ephemeros and not something darker, like insanity. The patrons here seemed more interested in manipulating themselves than the environment, which was fine with her. Tovah preferred a setting that mirrored her normal reality more closely than, say, a dance floor set above a volcanic pit.

Not that it couldn't shift at any time, depending on the whim of one strong shaper, or the collective desire of many lesser ones. But for now it looked like any other club, albeit with a few patrons whose unusual appearances were not merely cosmetic.

One of the first things most people learned to do in the Ephemeros was represent themselves as something different than their natural appearance. After all, what was the fun in looking the way you did in real life when you

could be taller, thinner or sexier? Representation was about how you felt, not necessarily what you were. She passed a woman with gleaming red eyes and a set of onyx wings cascading to the floor. The woman gave her a once-over, sliding a red tongue along glistening lips, but didn't approach. She was probably a middle-aged man in her waking life, Tovah thought with a small grin. Ah, well. To each his or her gender-bending own.

Tovah had always represented pretty close to her true appearance, with one small exception. Compared to the people around her, some who sprouted fangs or wings or fur, she felt it wasn't dishonest to represent as whole when in reality she'd been damaged. And yes, that was an issue her therapist would've spent hours on, back before she'd discovered the Ephemeros and still needed therapy. Tovah didn't care.

Here, in this world, she didn't have to put on a face for anyone. She didn't have to do what anyone else wanted or expected her to do. She answered to nobody. In the Ephemeros, Tovah could be sexy and free and selfish.

She could dance.

Someone had shaped an oasis in the center of the club. A small fountain. Some trees. Soft white sand. Tovah recognized the shaper's touch and moved toward it.

Ben sat on the fountain's tiled rim, dabbling his fingers in the water until he caught a shimmering goldfish and pulled it from the water where it wriggled and splashed. It mustn't have pleased him, because he tossed it back and looked up as she approached. The water he flicked toward her became diamonds in midair and fell, clinking, to the sand. There they became rivulets, like mercury, flashing silver until they disappeared.

“Tovah,” Ben greeted her with a nod. “Did Spider find you?”

“Yes.”

Behind her, the club pulsed and flashed, tempting her to move her body to the music. In front of her the oasis was a study in peace and calm. Tovah stayed on the edge, in between both and part of neither.

Ben glanced over her shoulder and smiled slowly. “The club scene? That’s challenging.”

It was actually much easier than what he’d done, since in the club she had only to shape her own space and leave the rest to the collective will of those who sought the same nightscape she had. Here in Ben’s oasis, he was both creator and sovereign. The club could encroach, but not overtake, what he’d done.

“This is nice,” she told him. Her boots touched the edges of sand shading into the club’s concrete floor.

“You can say it. Nice, but boring.”

“Depends on what you’re planning on doing in it.” Tovah lifted a brow.

Ben laughed and looked around. “Not what you’re planning on doing out there.”

Ben didn’t need to dream the same sorts of things Tovah did. She didn’t ask why he needed to create an oasis, or water, or the fish he was always looking to catch. She wished he had as much consideration for her privacy.

She looked over her shoulder at the club, which had gotten very far away. She pulled it closer with an effort that shouldn’t have taken as much will, but did. Ben’s oasis was stronger than her dance club. Ben was stronger.

“I like to dance,” she said simply and left “What’s it to you?” unspoken.

Ben apparently heard it in her voice, because he smiled and stood. He represented as he always did, a tall man with sandy hair and regular features, eyes the color of sun-faded denim and a long-legged, lumbering gait. He wore the same pair of worn brown cords and blue button-down shirt every time she saw him and, like his need to shape a space of quiet in the midst of chaos, Tovah never asked why.

“I like the sound of flowing water,” he said as though she’d spoken aloud. The fountain tinkled a little louder. “I find it very soothing.”

“Dancing is a great tension reliever.” She drew a line in the sand with her toe. “Dare you to try it, Ben.”

Eight months ago Ben had shown up on the edge of a meadow Spider had been encouraging her to shape for practice. At first she’d thought he was a sleeper, so befuddled had he looked. In moments it had become clear he was a shaper when he turned her meadow into the seashore, Spider into a sand-crab and Tovah into a mermaid. He had a lot of power right away and clearly no knowledge of how to use it. Or of etiquette. She’d been the same way the first time she realized the Ephemeros was a real place, not just a part of her sleeping mind.

Eight months ago he’d been brand new to shaping, but he’d passed Tovah’s skill and now rivaled Spider. Ben worked hard at shaping. At making details. And he wanted, as she did not, to be a guide.

“I don’t dance.” His words were easy enough, without sting.

Tovah let them bounce off her without flinching. “That’s too bad.”

She’d never asked him why he wanted a mermaid so badly, or what that had meant to him. Or if he’d been

disappointed to discover that the woman in his arms that first night, the mouth he'd kissed, belonged to someone who wasn't a figment of his imagination. Who wasn't a fulfillment of his desire. They never mentioned the way he'd literally swept her off her feet and into his embrace within moments of seeing her for the first time.

Tovah thought about it, though.

"Sure you won't join me, instead?" Ben waved a hand at the fountain, the sand, the trees.

She tilted her head and gave him a smile. "Only if you'll dance with me."

He opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head and laughed. "Tovah..."

Impulsively, stupidly, she reached for his hand and snagged his sleeve. She pulled him a little, knowing all he had to do was want to resist her and he wouldn't budge a step. But he moved, reluctantly closer. She put his hand on her hip and put hers on his shoulder, then held up the other for him to take.

"I don't dance," Ben repeated.

"It's easy. I'll show you."

Despite his protests, they started moving at the same time. One, two, three, four. A simple box step, set to the music Tovah pulled from the air around them as prettily as from a music box.

"See?" she told him, tipping her head back to look into his face. "You're a natural."

Ben stopped. His hand tightened on her hip while the other squeezed her fingers. "I didn't say I couldn't dance. Just that I don't."

His mouth had tasted sweet, his lips warm. His breath had filled her, creature of the sea though he'd willed her to be, and she'd taken him deep inside her. The kiss, that

first and only kiss, had lasted a second and a lifetime. They'd become closer since then, both students of Spider, and they'd shared jokes and laughter and more than a bit of not-always-so-friendly rivalry...but they'd never spoken of that kiss or what it had meant.

Or what it hadn't.

She shook her head, backing away. "Right. I get it."

"Tovah—"

She held up a hand. "No, no, Ben. Don't worry about it. I just thought...never mind. I'll catch you another night."

He scraped a hand over his hair, standing it on end, that small detail she knew he hadn't shaped on purpose but which told her so much about how he was representing just then. Ben was always full of details like that, every tiny piece of him and what he made around him perfect and natural. What she struggled with, he simply did.

She waited for him to take her in his arms again, or at least to call her back, but Ben didn't. "Right. See you, Tovah."

She took another step back, letting go of the oasis and again shaping the club, and Ben let her do it. She felt the release of his will on hers like the slow unwinding of thread from a spool, bit by bit until he'd gone. Flashing lights and pulsing beats filled in around her, and her heart leaped to the thud of the bass that also pounded in the floor beneath her feet.

She had come to dance, after all. It was time to get to it.

Tovah wasn't the only person looking for a partner. Shapers and nonshapers alike moved to the ever-changing

music. A man approached her, his eyes narrowed with desire, smile practiced and charming.

“How about it?”

Waves of desire hovered around him. Though easily brushed aside, they tugged her, and when she extended a tendril of desire toward him, he responded at once. His brown eyes shifted briefly toward green. She relaxed the shield protecting her from the push and pull of the collective will. Still, he did nothing. He wasn't a shaper. She could feel what he wanted, but he couldn't make it happen.

He needed her, for that.

“How about what?” She leaned closer, checking him out. Laughter burst from her throat. Colors brightened and dimmed around them as her focus at keeping her surroundings in place got fuzzy for a moment. She looked back at her would-be wooer.

He was cute. Probably representing taller and broader than he was in the waking world, but so what? Unless he suddenly grew tentacles, she wasn't about to complain.

Her snappy answer set him back a little bit. He was probably used to his dream women slaving all over him. His teeth were very, very white and clean. “Come with me, and I'll show you.”

Fooling around with a sleeper was tricky. Wanting something and knowing how to get it were two separate things in the Ephemeros, as in the waking world. Sleepers could influence shapers but because they lacked control, things could easily go awry. Sleepers were generally too easily distracted. Keeping them focused was too much like guiding for her tastes.

Still, the offer was appealing. She nodded, reaching out her hand. He took it with fingers soft and warm, the

small and somehow intimate detail of the calluses telling her more than anything else probably would.

He knew how to dance. Each step landed with perfection. The hand on the small of her back led her with gentle pressure. They moved effortlessly through a crowd that parted to make way for them. He didn't know how to waltz, but she did, and that was enough.

"Like music-box dolls," he said suddenly.

"Is that what we are?" Tovah laughed as he dipped her so low her hair swept the floor.

The people around them became music-box dolls, and she did nothing to change them. If that was what her partner wanted, well, so long as he kept dancing, she didn't care. She just wanted to dance.

His breath, hot in her ear, got heavier. She closed her eyes, pleasure already spiking through her. She felt a whisper of breath, the tentative touch of a tongue. She opened her eyes to look at him.

And then he disappeared.

"Dammit," Tovah murmured as she was left holding nothing but vaguely shimmering air.

So much for taking a chance on a sleeper. He hadn't left so much as a scent behind. He'd woken.