

MERCURIAL

Book 1

STRANGER

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Excerpt:

This file contains Chapter 1 only

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The patio light had made Ivy visible by the time she stepped up to the glass door and looked through, but Bunderbye hadn't noticed her yet. He was sweeping upholstery stuffing, broken glass, crushed doll faces, and other waste from the ravaged household into a box taped to the carpet. A mop and basin stood next to one of the graffiti-covered walls, and a vacuum cleaner waited in the foyer.

It wasn't what she'd expected.

So what did you expect? To find him on a pedestal in the Temple of Conquering Heroes?

"...that utterly destroyed Madrid yesterday remains unexplained. The electrical storm was of unprecedented violence and scientists say the scale of energy released by it can only be conceptualized by comparing it to a nuclear explosion." The radio was branded with the ChirpFellow cartoon; it must belong to the Briarson boy.

She recognized Bunderbye easily: his narrow face and dark hair and eyes, and his nose broken near the bridge, an old break. There were more bruises on his face and arms now; they'd had three days to reach their glory. The cut lip was half-healed, the black eye extraordinary. And he stood a little crooked as he swept.

She rapped cautiously on the glass. Bunderbye turned, startled and ready to defend—was he reaching for a now absent gun? Then he peered sharply out at her though the reflected glare. Recognizing her easily, smiling warmly, carrying the push-broom with him, he unlocked the door. She came in and felt the impact first of his pleasure and surprise, then of the well-lit despoiled family room.

"...coming only three months after the unforeseen explosive destruction of the planet Mercury, has terrified..."

He turned off the radio. Ivy had never in her life felt as self-conscious, or perhaps self-aware, as she did while Bunderbye studied her in the silence. She took stock of the room to gain time for something like self-possession. Her eyes were drawn again and again to the graffiti. A huge 5 in a teardrop. EMPIRE A 2 Z. AZA! A pentagram drawn not with straight lines but sickle-curves. FEAR THE DARK. Urine-splashes.

End tables collapsed in pieces, trampled books, and floor lamps bent and fallen. On the floor by the lamps, the marred and disframed family photos that had guided her. New white-and-gold curtains hung by the new glass door. Out on the patio, a black beetle stomped a meandering path in the light by the cat-food bowls. Standing over them

was the reflection of Bunderbye gazing at her curiously, still with that private warmth. She turned to face him.

“Is anyone else here?” She made that a whisper in case they were.

“The Briarsons are staying with the rest of their family in town for a few more days. Closer to the hospital than here.” He didn’t whisper.

“How are they doing?”

“They’re holding up.” He sighed. “Better than they look on the news.” Another pause. “The place needs cleaning up before they come home again.” He put out his hand and she shook it, finding it easier to look at this hand of his than at his intent face.

“Jeremy Bunderbye.”

“um? Ivy Langbourne.”

“It’s been three days. I was afraid you wouldn’t show up till the trial.”

She paused an instant when she saw the size of his relief. *Of course you never thought to tell him how to contact you!*

“Oh no, not the trial,” she blurted in consternation, and some amusement at it, “they might recognize me. No no no no.”

Jeremy laughed, and put a hand on his ribs and tried to stop, and kept on laughing until he was empty. Ivy was piqued.

“They’re still sure you were a boy!” He looked down at her with a quantity of wry humor. It almost hid the glint of plain male appreciation.



Jeremy watched Ivy laugh in scorn, snort in surprise, put her hands on her hips, yank a hand off again to gesture widely. Yeah, that got her. Outrage wins out over shyness.

He’d thought she might clean up pretty, but he’d expected the quirky dashing kind of prettiness. She was more contained than that. He might not have recognized her in daylight and a dress. Here, with night behind her, he had no trouble.

Her clothes were almost as dark and baggy as last time, a man’s shirt, but even so. Look at her mouth, and the slim wrists and the smooth brown hair. *Some boy!*

“They really did? I thought that was, it wasn’t just something to trick me out of hiding? They still think that? Isn’t that the damndest thing!”

“A hippie boy,” he told her. “Some white kid running with the Aza gang, who grew a soul almost too late.”

“HA! Well, I had my hair ponytailed and greased back out of my way, but the clothes aren’t that shapeless,” she complained. He agreed but he’d pick a different moment to say so.

She paused. “It was kind of you,” she said with care, “not to

disabuse them. I never want to have to explain...”

Seeing his opening, Jeremy put up a hand to mean wait-a-minute. She stopped explaining at him. He went to the foyer and killed the lights there and in the kitchen. Hand on the switch for the living room lights, he paused to anticipate her reaction. He flipped the switch. Yeah, it was dim enough but there was still plenty of light from the hall and patio. She couldn't misinterpret and think he'd hidden in the dark in the trad way. He looked her in her half-puzzled face and faded.

“That's why I didn't tell them,” he said. Let her hear his voice coming from nothing. Then she'll be sure.

“You can do it too!” Ivy took a couple of steps toward him. He stayed invisible. “I can't believe I didn't notice.” She grinned suddenly and looked through him even harder. “I suppose there were distractions.”

“It isn't supposed to be noticed.”

“That saves me a lot of explaining!” *Bet on that.*

Jeremy unfaded. Look at that smile. She couldn't have had anybody to talk to about this. It must have been months for her as it had been for him.



Ivy made a close orbit of the planet Awe when she saw him vanish, and never mind how likely it seemed that Jeremy Bunderbye was the same kind as she was. (*Whatever on Earth that was.*) She couldn't regard him as anything but one of a kind.

“How long have you had the power?”

“Twenty-two years.” The corners of his mouth lifted in a wry vee, and his eyebrows rose at the inside ends. Ivy guessed he was recalling his own starting days. Would he have been in his twenties then?

“That's approximately eighty-eight times as long as me.” *Please train me...*

He switched on the living-room light. The broom, left leaning against the wall, turned maliciously and slipped away when he touched it. Swiftly he reached to catch it. He missed, grimacing.

“What?” Ivy knew it must be another three-day-old injury, though if it were serious the Briarsons of all people surely wouldn't have put him back to work.

“Bruised ribs.”

“Do you mind if I help?”

Jeremy considered her for an extended moment. All of his smiles were wry and pointed at the bottom, she concluded, even this one that was the softest she'd seen from him.

“Wouldn't be a first.”



Ivy hunkered down, picking up salvageable debris as they talked. She glanced up at him to see if he agreed with her choices. He did.

"I've been experimenting the last two months," she said, "but there's only so much I could... Is it all right if I ask questions? Lots of questions?"

"Who, what, where, when, why, and how?" See if they taught that in her school days, too.

"Ha! And, how much? How much can I trust it? What are the limitations?"

They took their loads through the kitchen.

"Limitations on fading? Light brighter than twilight, unless it's moonlight. Gold, diamonds, sunflowers, or heliotrope if we wear them or carry them. Other nightrunners can see you if they're faded too." What else could catch her off guard? "Cats see us during the new moon."

"Nightrunners? Is that what we're called?" Curious as a stray cat at new moon. It was a pleasure to feed her.

"We're called lots of things." He laughed. "Stick to what we like to be called. Nightrunners, nyctanthropes, nyctads, lurkers, runners, lopers, were-shadows." He aimed the polite finger at her. "Don't ever say darkies." Then he realized he'd gotten carried away. She could ask some troublesome questions now. He reminded himself, the surest way to be careful what he said was to be careful what he thought about.

She stayed quiet a moment. Jeremy scrubbed at the high graffiti. She wiped the mess lower down. That was the latrine job, he'd meant to do it himself but she'd given him a look and moved in on it.

"Huh." She looked intrigued. "Why is gold a problem?"

Good. She hadn't caught it.

"Because it has the nature of the sun." *There, he thought, magic is a safe subject. Even people who don't believe it take it for granted that somebody always has.*

"The sun? That sounds like magic." Her smile said discomfort. "I'd noticed my wedding ring interfered with, with fading, but I figured it was an emotional block."

"You're married?"

No wedding ring, right, there's a reason for that. But what about three nights ago? What kind of idiot husband let her go unarmed to do that?

She hadn't missed a thing about his reaction.

"I don't know whether I'm married," she said.

He stared at her. She looked back at him directly, quiet and unhappy.

“My husband disappeared a few months ago. I don’t have any idea—”

“During that wave of missing persons?” A yank and a nightrunner in one household. *There’s a coincidence.*

“That’s right.”

He glanced down at her and away again. The polite thing now was to pay attention to the wall.



He isn’t much like Mark, is he?

Then Ivy ejected that from her mind.

All of the walls of the room (pale pink) needed to be cleaned. The scrubbing was heavy work that made it hard to talk without grunting, and that made an excuse for not talking except in the most functional way.

Jeremy grunted now and then, when his ribs ached, and was always looking the other way when she glanced at him. The privacy he gave her was not wholly welcome because it made it too easy to watch him. *But if that’s not what you wanted, why did you come here?*

She ejected that too.

He called it “nightrunning.” There it was, a thing with a name, and what kind of a life did it mean her to have from now on? In some parallel universe, in some alternate history, Ivy Langbourne hadn’t become a nightrunner. Now there in that universe was an Ivy whose life had comprehensible implications. It could even be that she still had a husband.

Out with that.

She glanced, and confirmed that Jeremy wore no wedding ring. Around his neck was a thin steel chain pulled down by some pendant under his shirt. He hadn’t had that three nights ago. Something the Azas had taken, that had been returned to him?

Another sidelong dart of her eyes told her that he was almost done with his scrubbing. The next logical step would be to vacuum up the tiny needles of glass. Ivy was not about to let him push that vacuum cleaner himself.



Jeremy stretched knowledgeablely. By today he was an expert on how not to stretch. He was satisfied. The living room looked like humans might live there again someday. The carpet didn’t glitter. The graffiti were ghosts. The savable parts of the end tables were stacked on the couch along with the undamaged books and photos. He heard Ivy emptying the washbasin into the toilet. Good thing he’d cleaned the

bathrooms and the kitchen before she got here. That had been a puking kind of job.

He killed the living room light and looked east through the glass door. The moon was barely up, judging by the glow behind Green Mountain. That made it not long after eleven. They had hours of good running time before dawnlight. He saw Ivy's reflection checking her watch.

"Leave the furniture for the repair crew tomorrow..." He peeled the manufacturer's label off the glass. "I could use a nightrun."

She looked at him questioningly. The eager student was back.

"Want to come along?" He locked the door, bending to place the bar. A pang, ribs again.

"What about your ribs?" she asked. Observant.

"Best thing for them."

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