

## STRAY: Chapter Ten

by J.K. Hogan

*The dream descends upon me like a thousand tiny deaths, pawing at my brain with slick fingers, and I can't shake it loose.*

*Tonight I am a man of interminable power, something like magick, that should not exist, and I dream of nothing but burning the world to ashes.*

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Noah woke gasping as if he'd just swum forty meters on a single breath. His body bolting straight up like Dracula rising from his mythical coffin had dislodged Basti from his perch, who then let out a disgruntled yowl that made Noah laugh despite the nightmare. The cat was probably hungry, but then again, so was Noah, but he'd run off before he was able to make any money.

He'd been about to score some change off one of Tom's customers when the guy and two others decided they should be able to sample the goods for free. Tom had been asleep while one guy held Noah down and the others fondled every bit of skin they could get their hands on. He'd woken up before anything serious had happened, but had seemed content to let things play out however they might, instead of intervening on Noah's behalf.

Eventually he'd deemed Noah's rage-sobbing and struggling "bad for business," and had told the guys to cut it out. He didn't make them leave, though, and Noah had seen it in their eyes—they'd have tried again the minute Tom was otherwise occupied. So once they were spaced out from a fresh dose of eiki, Noah had run for his life...or at least his virtue.

He'd taken sanctuary in the library, because his education, his dedication to learning, felt like literally the only thing he had left. It was all that kept him from jumping off the North Bridge instead of just sleeping under it. That and this stubborn cat who probably belonged to someone else.

Noah stroked Basti's fur and allowed the gentle purring to comfort him. "I don't know what I'd do without you," he whispered.

As trash fires winked out one by one, the darkness became a living thing, coiling around the edges of the riverbank, reaching out with ghostly fingers to pull Noah back into the abyss. Fear thundered through his bloodstream even as exhaustion stole his consciousness.

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*I am a God among men. I am exalted above all others. The livestock flock to me and follow me, smiling, to the slaughter.*

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Noah hadn't any other choice. He'd been forced to go back to Tom's. A cold snap had veiled the city—the unpredictable climate a product of the nuclear destruction of bygone days—and sleeping outside became unbearable. When he let himself in, Tom greeted him in the living room with a tentative smile.

“Hey, Cuz. I was worried when you didn’t come back yesterday. I hope you didn’t let those stoner fools scare you off.”

Noah bit the inside of his cheek to keep from going off on Tom for not defending him. He needed the roof over his head, so he had to bend over and take the abuse. It terrified him, because it was more than just the fact that Tom hadn’t stepped in. There’d been something in his eyes before he’d schooled his expression...something dark.

Noah forced a tremulous smile. “Didn’t mean to worry you. I just spent the night with a friend,” he said. So what if the “friend” happened to be a stray cat? Tom didn’t need to know that. “I had a long day studying at the library, so I’m just gonna crash. ’Night.”

Tom studied him so intently that Noah felt his gaze like a touch—an unwelcome one. Eventually he turned his attention back to the holographic display of his com-unit, leaving Noah to escape to his borrowed room. As he climbed the creaky staircase, it struck him how similar Tom’s house was to the one he’d shared with his parents. The thought brought back a flood of uncomfortable memories.

Once inside his room, he flopped down on the twin-sized bed without bothering to turn down the covers. His mind was invaded with thoughts of his parents. He wondered if they’d found what they’d been missing in the commune. He also wondered if it was true, that he wasn’t theirs. If it was, where the hell had he come from, and why hadn’t they wanted him either?

Angrily swiping tears from his eyes, Noah rolled over to his side, facing the wall. He didn’t mean to fall asleep, but the next thing he knew, he was awakened by an insistent tapping on the window.

He got up and pulled back the heavy drapes. He gasped when he saw the inexplicable—the damn cat had found him again. Basti was sitting on the fire escape and had been pawing at the window. Noah couldn’t contain the erratic thump of his heart, both from joy and relief that he wouldn’t have to be alone. He quickly raised the sash but paused for a moment, during which they silently regarded each other, neither making a move.

With a sigh, Noah stepped back, giving Basti room should he choose to come inside.

“C’m’ere boy,” Noah pleaded. “Would you stay with me? Since you seem content to follow me around everywhere. Wanna be my cat? Please? I’m so tired of being alone.” He hated the desperate quality his voice took on, but there was no point in pretending to be strong anymore.

Basti eyed him warily for a moment before hopping through the window with a soft meow. Without a word, Noah stripped down to a t-shirt and boxers, and climbed into bed. Basti leapt onto the mattress and curled up at his feet. The air crackled with a strange static, and a breeze stirred the drapes even though he’d closed the window.

If Noah thought it was peculiar, he was too overwhelmed by a warm sense of peace to notice as he drifted off to sleep once again.

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Noah couldn’t breathe. At first he thought it was one of the nightmares, because they always seemed so real. But this was truth, he realized, as his head began to pound from lack of oxygen. He was dimly aware of rough hands attempting to drag down his boxers. Had the men from the day before returned?

Noah bucked against the unfamiliar weight that covered him. Hot breath fanned his face, and the bitter scent of cloves hit him—which was *entirely* familiar.

“What the fuck? Tom!” Noah yelled, only it came out as a choked whisper because of the constriction around his throat, which he now knew was Tom’s hand.

The closed drapes allowed very little light into the room, so all Noah could see were Tom’s glittering, angry eyes. Tom clamped his free hand over Noah’s mouth and glared down at him.

“I’ve watched you sell your mouth to every two-bit junkie that passes through here, and it’s only a matter of time before you start selling your ass, so I might as well be first in line.”

Noah let out a muffled sob. “Why are you doing this to me?” he choked out. “We’re supposed to be family. That’s—that’s...” He shuddered.

Tom let out a sinister laugh that chilled Noah to the bone. “See, the thing is, we’re not actually related. My ma was married to your ma’s brother, but I was born before that—she was never married to my sperm donor. So you’re nobody to me. When I heard that your folks split, I asked if you needed a place to stay because I thought having you around would be good for business—and I was right. But it ain’t fair I don’t get a little taste...after all, you’ve been living here for free.”

Tom grinned, and something short-circuited in Noah’s brain. He flailed and writhed with renewed strength, trying to dislodge Tom’s hold. All he managed to do was get his mouth free so he could scream his throat raw.

Tom laughed again. “Who’s gonna come help you? That mangy cat you snuck in here? Don’t worry, I took care of *it* already.”

Noah’s heart squeezed painfully, he tasted bile on his tongue, and tears slipped out of the corner of his eyes. *Basti*. “You asshole!” Noah screamed, bucking hard.

Tom merely licked his lips and ground his hardness against Noah’s hip. “Yeah, go ahead and struggle. I like it rough.” He jerked his pants and boxers down, and Noah felt the unwelcome weight of his erection slithering across his skin. Then Tom forced his legs apart.

“No!” Noah shouted, dissolving into sobs.

Suddenly, the sound of shattering glass filled the room, and a searing white light burst in front of Noah’s vision, burning his retinas. While he was temporarily blinded, Tom’s weight was lifted off of him as if it had never existed at all, and all Noah could do was listen to the dull thuds and grunts echoing around him. It sounded like a fight, but how could that be? No one else was around except possibly some of Tom’s junkie friends.

Noah jumped when something crashed into the night table beside him, though he still couldn’t see, and then there was no more movement at all. His vision began to clear, but with it came a new threat. There was a stranger in his room.