

STRAY: Chapter Eleven

by J.K. Hogan

Sebastian had felt it, the exact moment the spell was broken. The tension that had been ever present throughout his body while his consciousness remained tethered to his Felis form instantly dissolved. It happened the very second Noah asked Basti to stay with him. Yet Sebastian wasn't sure how soon after the spell had broken that he would be able to shift. He also didn't want to terrify Noah, so he remained a cat and had planned to stay that way until he could figure out how to introduce Noah to himself as a man.

He could no longer deny that was his true intention. Noah had broken the spell; it was clear he was special and was meant to be a part of Sebastian's life. He would become a Prisma—the word having its roots in archaic Croatian, meaning “intimate”—one of the few humans the Feliscindae trusted with their secrets. But Sebastian had to figure out a way to break the news without sending Noah running.

After he'd fallen asleep curled in Noah's bed, Sebastian had been dreaming about walking on two legs again, of dancing. Maybe with Noah someday. He was ripped from sleep as he was grabbed roughly by his scruff and thrown against the wall across the room. When his head hit the corner of the dresser on the way down, all went dark.

That time his dreams were dark, full of suffering and pain, and heartrending sobs. He came awake slowly, the blurriness fading from his vision by degrees. The ache in his head made him want to slink off and go back to sleep, but he could still hear the sobbing he'd thought was only in his nightmares.

Sebastian blinked his nictitating membrane to clear his eyes. When the room came into focus, he saw that skinny junkie Tom on top of Noah's bed. They were grappling, and Noah was wailing. Sebastian had heard tell of the so-called prey drive, a shifter's animal instinct completely taking over in moments of extreme trauma or fear, but he never truly believed it.

But in that moment, he saw red. His mind went totally blank. One minute he was on the floor probably concussed and the next, he'd shifted, thrown Tom on the floor, straddled him, and was choking the breath out of him. And he wasn't inclined to stop. He wanted the man to hurt, to die for putting his hands on Noah.

Squeezing harder, Sebastian extended his claws but didn't puncture...yet. Though Tom stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes, there was a hint of a sneer on his lips. Sebastian smiled, showing his *true* teeth, and Tom turned white and began to shiver. A growl bubbled up from Sebastian's chest, but a soft sound from behind him gave him pause.

Not letting go of Tom's throat, Sebastian turned his head and saw Noah standing behind him, looking horrified. He'd gone just as pale as Tom, and his startled gaze flicked between his cousin and Sebastian. His face was splotchy from crying. With mussed hair and a torn shirt, he looked impossibly small and fragile. Easy to hurt.

Sebastian wanted to scream. He wanted to rend flesh with tooth and claw. “Do you want me to kill him?” He directed the question at Noah, but he felt Tom's full-body flinch.

“*What?* N—no. No! I... Y-you can't! Who... What is happening?”

Nodding once, Sebastian pulled Tom up by the shirt collar and head-butted him in the face. He slumped down to the floor, unconscious.

Sebastian stood and faced Noah. “I know you have questions. But first we must leave this place before he wakes.”

His face contorted into a mask of incredulity. “No. I mean, I’m not staying *here*, b-but I’m not going anywhere with *you* either. You’re a stranger. How did you even get *in* here?”

Sebastian stepped up to Noah and stroked his jaw, looking deep into his eyes. Noah’s pupils dilated as he stared back. Sebastian wasn’t as adept at intentional magick as other species or even other Feliscindae, but he summoned his power to loosen the charm that had taken Noah’s memory. He didn’t know if he’d accomplished it, or if the boy simply recognized his eyes as being the same as the cat’s.

“Basti,” Noah whispered.

Sebastian nodded once. Tom groaned. “We really must go, because if he wakes, I’ll definitely have to kill him. My restraint only goes so far.” Sebastian knew his elongated canines were showing, but he couldn’t help the rage that curled through him, along with a delicious bloodlust that warmed him to the thought of ripping Cousin Tom’s throat out.

Noah blew out a breath that ruffled his fluffy brown hair. He turned fearful eyes on Tom before looking at Sebastian again. Sebastian was happy to see that the fear was slightly less obvious then. Only slightly.

“Yeah, okay fine. But where can we go?” said Noah.

“For now, we will go to my home. I live in a flat above Club Sanctuary. I’ve been awake most of the night, and I honestly think I have a head injury. I need to sleep it off somewhere we’re both safe.”

Noah’s gaze turned wary and it nearly broke Sebastian’s heart, even though he know the boy was only being smart. “If you’re uncomfortable being alone with me, I...I can call someone. A female, perhaps?”

“I still don’t really understand what’s going on. Let’s just get out of here first, and then we’ll see.”

Not wanting to break the tentative trust Noah had given him, Sebastian kept silent while Noah gathered the few things he kept at Tom’s place. Then he merely grabbed Noah’s hand and pulled him toward the window. He helped him out onto the fire escape, a feature common on the upper levels of the old row houses, and followed him down the rusty ladder until they reached the bottom rung. This building was shitty, so there was a good fifteen feet still to go. Sebastian jumped it easily, landing in a crouch while Noah stared on, wide-eyed.

“Come down the ladder and let go at the bottom. I’ll catch you.”

And he did. Again Noah’s trust was humbling, and Sebastian had to resist the urge to hold him tight and carry him all the way back to Sanctuary.

“I told you not to call me.”

“It’s an emergency,” Tom said. He gulped, shoring himself up for the fury. “I lost him.”

“You...what?”

“The kid. I lost him. He’s gone.”

“You had one job, Thomas. All you had to do was keep an eye on that boy.”

“Yeah, and you said he was alone, but he had help.”

There was a long pause. Tom would’ve thought his contact had hung up if he couldn’t hear the static crackling over the com.

“Find him, or we will. And if we have to do your job for you, that would make you expendable.”

The line went dead.

“Explain.”

Noah stood just inside the door of Sebastian’s apartment, arms crossed over his chest, looking tiny and fearsome and defiant. Sebastian was happy to see that the spitfire hadn’t gone out of him because of the attack.

Pretending to ignore Noah standing there, he shuffled into the kitchen and poured them each a glass of milk, which he brought into the open living room and left on the coffee table. He hadn’t been lying; it had been a long night, and his head hurt like hell. He flopped down on the couch, leaning against the arm and spreading his legs out diagonally, propping his feet up on the table.

“You won’t believe me,” Sebastian said with a sigh. He stretched out his aching muscles, stiff from spending so much time in his smaller feline body.

Noah glared. “Do it anyway.”

“Will you at least come sit down?” Sebastian touched his fingertips to the spot on the side of his head where he’d hit the dresser and they came away red. He cursed sotto voce.

Clucking his tongue, Noah went into the kitchen. Sebastian heard him banging around, opening and closing the fridge, but he didn’t want to turn his head and make it hurt worse. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the couch cushions. When something pressed against the wound, he jumped.

“Hold still,” Noah commanded as he held a washcloth full of ice against Sebastian’s head.

Sebastian winced and tried to pull away, but Noah had slipped a hand around to the back of his skull and his grip was surprisingly strong. It kind of made him want to roll over and show his belly, something he had never felt in his life. He also couldn’t control the clipnosis response that was so instinctive, so his limbs went limp and liquid the moment Noah squeezed the back of his neck. “Don’t worry about me, Noah. I’ll heal,” Sebastian slurred.

Noah cocked his head, narrowing his eyes like he wanted to ask questions about the healing process, but he kept silent.

“What about you? Did he hurt you?” Sebastian clenched his fists as Noah’s grip loosened, his claws extending to puncture his palms. He willed himself not to flinch, because he wasn’t sure he was ready to explain the mediforma to Noah just yet. It was already baptism by fire into all things Supernatural, but Sebastian hoped to ease him into it wherever possible.

Noah dabbed at the wound some more, and Sebastian resisted the urge to growl. He could already feel his skin knitting back together, but it didn’t sting any less.

“How did you do this, anyway?” Noah asked without making eye contact.

Sebastian cleared his throat. “My head struck the dresser. During the struggle.”

Noah hummed. “The struggle with Tom.”

“Yes.”

“You are the man I met on the street that one time when I was being followed, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you took me to Sanctuary when I passed out in the park.”

“Yes.”

“Were you also the masked man who gave me the card at the Bazaar?”

“I was.” Sebastian gently pushed Noah’s hand, and the ice, away.”

Those rich brown eyes widened, and Noah gasped. “The...cut. It was so deep.”

“It will disappear within the hour.”

Noah’s eyes ping-ponged back and forth between Sebastian’s wound and his eyes, and his expression clearly telegraphed his confusion.

“Let’s back up,” Sebastian suggested. “You know something unusual has happened. It might be easier if you ask me what you want to know, instead of me trying to bombard you with new information.”

“I...I don’t know where to start. I guess...how did you get into my room?”

Sebastian realized his error immediately. There really wasn’t any easing into the Supernatural. He couldn’t explain how he’d been there without explaining what he was. He sighed. “In for a penny,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Never mind. I was in your room because you let me in.”

Noah sat back against the couch cushions, leaning away so he could see Sebastian’s face clearly. “Am I experiencing more memory loss then? Because no, I didn’t.”

It appeared that the connection Noah had made between cat and man shortly after his trauma had dissolved, because all Sebastian saw on his face now was skepticism. Still, if he’d figured it out once, he could do so again.

“You did.” Sebastian got right up in his face to ensure full eye contact. “You let me in, and you asked me to stay with you.”

Noah shook his head.

Sebastian reached out and stroked Noah’s jaw with the pads of his fingers, though deliberately keeping his claws extended. Noah saw, and made a whimpering sound deep in his throat. He was afraid, but he hadn’t run yet.

“Noah, look at me. You *know* me. Have done for years.”

Another shake of his head, wavy brown hair flopping. “It’s not possible. That’s not *possible*.” But he still reached out and threaded a strand of Sebastian’s white-blond hair through his fingers, just like he’d done at Sanctuary.

Sebastian closed his eyes and savored the almost-touch from his human. *His* human. His Prisma. “Everything is impossible until it isn’t.”

“So you are a man...”

“Yes.”

“Who can turn into a cat...”

Sebastian inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“...at will?”

“That is rather more complicated. The correct answer is ‘usually,’ but we should probably not get ahead of ourselves.” Sebastian searched his mind for a frame of reference for Noah to understand what he was. All he could come up with was popular culture, which left much to be desired. But he would work with what he had.

“You are familiar with horror movies, yes? Or what your people call para...paranormal?”

Noah gave him a funny look. “Of course, sure. It’s a genre.”

“Ah, yes. Genre. Precisely. But most things in the collective mythos of a culture have roots in truth.”

“What?” Noah appeared skeptical. “So, you’re telling me that Frankenstein, Dracula, and Zombies are real?” He let out a nervous titter.

“Not Frankenstein.” Sebastian waved a hand dismissively. “That’s just a book someone wrote ages ago.” He paused. “Well, come to think of it, so is Dracula, but that’s not to say Stoker didn’t see some things outside Bistritz that he shouldn’t have done.”

“What?” Noah squeaked. “There are *vampires*?”

Sebastian rubbed his eyes. Gods, he was too tired for this. “Unfortunately, yes. Extremely unpleasant creatures on the whole. The man who’d been stalking you that night on the road, he’s one of the more notorious Vamps to ever come through Beltrane, name of Solomon Rydic.”

A shiver rippled through Noah that Sebastian could feel even without touching him. “You’re kidding,” Noah whispered.

“I wish I was.”

“The man that...the one who came into the shelter...”

“Before you ran off?”

Noah ducked his head. “Yes. When that man came in, I felt this wave of fear. I’d never been so afraid in my life. At least, up until tonight. Was that man a vampire too?”

“Yes,” Sebastian growled. “He is called Cyprian. He holds a lot of power, and that’s the only kind thing I can say about him.”

“And the green-haired man? Your friend?”

“Ah, that’s different. Shine is...like me.”

“A cat?”

“Well, no.” Sebastian sighed again. He was going to have to get scientific, and it was far too late at night for that, but he knew that Noah’s questions wouldn’t wait. “You’re studying for your level-twos, yes?”

“Uh-huh,” Noah answered with uncertainty.

“Then you are aware of scientific classification of creatures—taxonomy.” Sebastian waited.

Noah nodded.

“There’s a phylogenetic class that isn’t known to humans, called scinderates. It means ‘dual’ or ‘split.’ Through some bastardization of genetics and Magick, this class of creatures has both hominid and animalian forms. Just like class mammalia or class aves, scinderates branch off into different genres and species.”

Sebastian put his hand on his chest. “My species is called *Hominis Feliscindae*. So indeed, I can shift from a human-like form, as I am now, to my Felis—or cat—form. We can also hover somewhere in the middle, which is called our mediforma. But that might be too much information to dump on you all at once.” Sebastian gave him a rueful smile. They’d probably already reached the “too much information” point.

“And this Shine person is a—a feliscindae too?”

“The singular is Feliscindo, but no. Shine is a different species. *Hominis Luposcindae*.”

“Lup...lupos... He’s a *werewolf*!?”

Sebastian paused to stifle a yawn with his fist. “I don’t suppose there’s any way we can table the rest of this while I get a couple of hours of sleep and try to be less concussed.”

Noah crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

“I thought not.”