

## STRAY: Chapter Twelve

by J.K. Hogan

Sebastian looked so haggard Noah almost felt bad for him. Almost. Then he reminded himself that this stranger had been in his house, inside his room, and still hadn't offered a plausible explanation.

However, that wasn't to say that Noah entirely disbelieved him.

When he looked into Sebastian's eyes, he *saw* Basti. He knew those eyes. The cat had been his confidante and friend off and on for years, and for some reason, finding out that it had really been some sort of guardian angel following him around and keeping him safe hadn't shocked him as much as it should. And when he'd seen Sebastian the man, so many memories came flooding back, all the times they'd met before. Why had his mind blocked images of man but not cat? Unless...

"Did you *do* something to me? Why am I only now remembering having met you before? Tell me you didn't mess with my mind."

Sebastian's gaze shifted away from Noah's face.

"Unbelievable."

"It's a biological defense mechanism, Noah. We can't have humans knowing about us. We'd be dissected, or worse, exterminated. And there are certain species... Let's just say some would enjoy a convenient excuse to declare war on humans. This peace is a tremulous one."

Noah didn't want to admit it, but he was beginning to have trouble keeping his eyes open. The lack of sleep and stress of the attack were taking their toll. He still had so many questions, and he was afraid if he didn't ask them now, Sebastian wouldn't be so willing to spill his guts tomorrow.

"Okay, setting aside the psychological manipulation—*for now*," he said, casting a pointed glare at Sebastian, "why have you been following me around so much lately?" He looked around at the small but well-appointed apartment. "It's obvious that you have a place to live, so what's with turning into a cat and following around some poor homeless guy?"

Sebastian's head drooped, and he'd slumped farther down into the fluffy couch cushions. Then he yawned wide enough to crack his jaw. "That...is a long story. One I actually do want to share with you, because you think I saved you, when really it was you who saved me. But..."

Noah sighed. "But you're exhausted."

Sebastian nodded, apology telegraphed in his expression.

"Yeah, I am too." Noah said. "I should... I need to get going."

That apparently was enough to wake Sebastian. He sat up, spine stiffening. "Noah, I'm not going to let you go sleep on a park bench or inside a crypt! Especially not after the night you've had. Take my bed. I'll sleep right here on the sofa."

"I never actually *slept* in the crypt," Noah muttered, aware that he sounded like a petulant child. "Look, I can't just invade your home."

"You can and you will."

When Sebastian's voice went growly like that, it made Noah's belly flutter, which caused him great annoyance. But then the bone-deep exhaustion reared its ugly head. "I'm too tired to argue with you. Just one night."

"Sure," Sebastian said, capitulating too easily.

Noah didn't believe him at all, but he'd given up caring until he got some sleep.

Sebastian stood with a grace Noah couldn't fathom, crossing the room to what turned out to be a linen closet. He got a few towels out and motioned for Noah to follow. "This way."

They went down a short hall, then through one of two doors. Sebastian's bedroom was small and Spartan, but the one thing he appeared to have splurged on was the bed. It took up nearly all the square-footage of the room. The drapes were pulled, and the only light came from a dim lamp beside the bed. Noah wrapped his arms around himself, feeling suddenly very alone and very insignificant with his new enlightenment about the world. What good was one young human in an existence of magic and immortality?

Sebastian had followed behind carrying the towels and Noah's backpack. He stood framed by the doorway, looking shy and uncertain, a look which Noah instinctively knew was alien to him. "Um...bathroom's across the hall. Just let me know if there's anything you need. Make yourself at home."

He turned and shuffled out the door like the walking dead. *Oh, god, zombies.* "Hey! Where are you going?"

Freezing mid-step, he looked over his shoulder. "Out to the couch. Something else you need?"

I shuffled over to the bed and sat down. "Why the hell would you do that? You've got a bed the size of a small country. I'm sure we'll both fit."

"I...um..."

*Holy hell, he's blushing. Who knew supernatural creatures could blush?*

"I just...figured you might want some privacy. Didn't want you to think I expected anything...you, know, in return for staying here."

Noah's mouth dropped open when he realized that Sebastian was concerned for his virtue. Either that, or he was attracted to Noah and didn't want to pressure him. Noah kind of hoped it was the latter. He'd settle for either.

"I don't think you're going to ravish me in my sleep, if that's what you're worried about. I think we're both too exhausted to be anything but unconscious anyway."

"Ah...all right, if you're sure. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'm going to go around and check all the locks."

Noah's heart ricocheted in his chest. "You think he might have followed us?"

Sebastian sighed, tucking his long hair behind his ear—an ear that Noah now realized was slightly pointed at the top. "I don't think so. I'm almost positive he was still unconscious when we left, but we can't be too careful. Besides, I'm not without my own enemies."

Noah frowned, but his fuzzy mind wouldn't allow him to focus enough to puzzle out what Sebastian meant by that. He climbed into the bed, melting into sheets that were about a million thread count, and was fast asleep by the time his head hit the pillow.

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Noah hadn't felt warmth like this since he was a kid, untouched by the cruelty of the world. It wrapped around him, enveloping him and vibrating with safety and comfort. *Wait.* Noah went still. *Vibrating.* That wasn't just his imagination. The bed was vibrating, or rather, something *in* the bed was vibrating.

Noah blinked open one eye and flinched when he realized the situation he'd gotten himself into. At some point during the night, he'd turned toward Sebastian, curling up against

him with his face buried in the man's chest. Sebastian had obligingly wrapped his limbs around Noah, and the vibrating sensation, along with a strange noise, seemed to be coming from him.

"Are you...*purring*?" Noah asked, mostly to himself. The noise stopped, and he felt strangely bereft. But when he drew back and cleared the sleep from his eyes, he was confronted by a pale aquamarine gaze regarding him warily.

"Possibly," Sebastian rumbled. "It can happen sometimes in human form, when I feel...never mind."

Noah pinched his arm. "When you feel what?"

Sebastian's lids shuttered, his lashes sweeping his cheeks. "When I feel...content."

Noah's heart gave an awkward thump. He should move. He should get this man's arms off of him. He couldn't understand why his body couldn't summon the will to move away from Sebastian.

Noah's gaze flickered to Sebastian's pale pink lips. The purring morphed into a rumbling growl, and before Noah could say a word, those lips were on him. The warmth that radiated from his body was more intense than anything Noah had ever felt, and his skin was silky soft. At first it was just a gentle press of lips upon lips, fingertips brushing jawlines, until Sebastian licked the seam of Noah's lips. Noah parted them on a sigh and sank into the kiss, winding his arm around Sebastian's waist.

Somewhere deep inside, Noah's subconscious was screaming that this wasn't something he should be doing in his current predicament, but he couldn't deny the feeling of absolute rightness that settled over him. That, more than anything brought him back to reality, such as it was. He broke the kiss, but tucked his head under Sebastian's chin.

"It isn't even light out yet," Sebastian slurred, sounding punch-drunk. "You should sleep more."

"What about you?" Noah's words were muffled, because his face was once again pressed against Sebastian's chest.

"I am nocturnal."

It was like ice water being dumped on Noah's head, a stark reminder that the man wrapped around him was *not human*. He gently pushed against Sebastian's chest until he shifted and withdrew his arms. Then Noah sat up. "Welp, I'm awake now."

Sebastian flopped over onto his back, giving Noah an indulgent moment to admire his bare chest. He was all sleek lines and lithe muscles with skin so pale, it was almost translucent. Noah's own skin was several shades darker, and when he glanced at his hand, he had the sudden, unwelcome wish to see what they looked like against one another.

After a languid stretch that arched his back, Sebastian settled more deeply into the mattress. It reminded Noah of how Basti would spin in circles and paw at the ground before he lay down. Sebastian had the same contented look on his face too, and now that Noah was able to look at him up close, he looked so young. *Is that because...?*

"How old are you? Are—are you...*immortal*?"

Sebastian sighed, and Noah had a brief moment of regret for popping their little bubble of peace that existed only inside that bedroom.

"The short answer is no..."

"But..." Noah prompted.

"The Feliscindae age very slowly. Glacially, even. Sometime, between the ages of fifteen and around...thirty-five, I'd say, forty at the oldest, we reach our 'age of maturity,' where the biological aging process goes into stasis. That's why many of us appear so young. You'll see a

wrinkle pop up here and there, maybe a few threads of gray hair, but most of us appear almost the same as when we reached maturity.”

“But, like, can you be killed?”

Sebastian raised an elegantly arched brow. “Planning your escape? Don’t worry, you’re not a prisoner here.”

“No, but you’ve just told me monsters are real. I’m trying to process all this new information.”

Hurt flashed across Sebastian’s face, though it was gone in an instant. Noah wondered if he’d thought he was calling *him* a monster. Surprisingly, Noah hadn’t been. “You’ve come this far,” Noah urged.

“Yes, we can be killed, but it isn’t easy. We can survive a typically-fatal event exactly nine times. The tenth is permanent.”

“Nine times.” Noah’s eyes went wide. “Nine...*lives*. Oh, gods.”

Sebastian smirked. “Most myth is rooted in some kind of truth, my young friend.”

The “young friend” bit had Noah narrowing his eyes. “Just how old are you?”

“That is something that even I couldn’t tell you. After you’ve been alive so long, time loses meaning. It moves differently.”

“So basically you’re *so* old you can’t remember how old you are.” Noah rubbed a hand over his face. “Talk about daddy issues.”

Sebastian’s laugh rumbled out of his chest, making Noah long to hear it more often.

“I think you need to explain to me what you meant when you said *I saved you*,” Noah said.

Sebastian inclined his head. “As you wish. Shall I make coffee?”

“Stop stalling.”

At least he had the grace to look sheepish. “Fair enough. I was being punished by my father.”

“Wow... I didn’t really think about you having a family. I guess I figured it was something like a vampire or a werewolf or whatever, where you’re made instead of born.”

“Ah, that’s a myth as well. Vampires and Lupos are born just like any other.”

“Oh. Okay, so you have a family just like everybody else.” Noah shrugged. “They couldn’t be worse than mine.”

“Hmm... You’d be surprised.” Sebastian reached out and brushed his fingers across Noah’s cheek, the barest hint of a touch, but Noah shivered all the same. “It’s true, they didn’t abandon me like yours did, although there were times I wish they had.”

“It’s that bad?”

“My father is what we call the Provost. He’s something akin to a king among the Feliscindae of the Northern Territories.”

“That makes you like a prince, then?”

“Among my kind, that’s exactly what I am. My official title is Sebastian the Lucent, White Prince of the Northern Territories, though I’ve mostly turned my back on that lifestyle. I don’t care about politics.”

“Are you serious?” Noah asked with wide eyes.

“Unfortunately. Though I no longer live in Roth at my family’s ancestral home, I’m expected to uphold certain...standards of decorum. Apparently, I failed.”

“How so?”

“I used to have a certain...apathy towards humans. I didn’t actively hate them...exactly, they were sort of just inconsequential to me. When that apathy led to me not preventing the death of a human—don’t misunderstand, he was a rapist—my father decided it was time I was taught a lesson. He ordered me entombed in my Felis form, so I was unable to shift.”

“He can do that?” Noah squeaked.

“He can order it. Nikhil, the White Mage, actually did the dirty work. Mage is like...your human wizard myth.”

“Ah, like Harry Potter!”

“I do not understand.”

“He’s a character from old children’s literature. A boy wizard.” Noah waved it off. “Never mind. Please, keep going. This Nikhil turned you into a cat and made it so you’d stay that way. That’s dangerous. People kill cats around here.”

Sebastian laughed without humor. “Yes, I mentioned the same thing. I was told that Nikhil would help me if I were in mortal danger. And indeed, he did save me from the Cat-Catchers once, but it’s not an experience I’d like to repeat.”

“And what does all this have to do with me?”

“The condition of this punishment was that I had to make a connection with a human and convince him or her to give me their trust and accept me into their life in order to break the spell.”

“But...you were a cat. You couldn’t even talk,” Noah said, his brow furrowing.

“Precisely. I didn’t even know any humans personally, so how was I to accomplish this? But then I remembered you. You’d seen me as Basti several times before so there was always the chance that I could build upon that connection. The moment you asked me to stay with you, the spell was broken. And not a moment too soon, as I would’ve been able to do little to protect you from Tom otherwise.”

Noah gave a delicate shudder, then shook his head. “You realize this sounds nuts, right?”

Sebastian gave him a fond smile that Noah enjoyed just a little too much. “It’s not even the half of it. But I think that’s quite enough before we’ve caffeinated, don’t you?”

“Fair enough, but I’m not done with you yet, not by a mile.”

Sebastian’s lips twitched up into a lazy smile. “Glad to hear it.”