

STRAY: Chapter Two

by J.K. Hogan

Sebastian strode into his family home deep in the Rothkian Mountains, his body vibrating with rage at the audacity of being summoned like a common servant. He was still in his mediforma—in his human skin, while still possessing his Felis ears and tail—like most of Feliscindae courtiers who lounged around the great hall of the Locke Family mansion.

As he stalked over the ornate carpets that covered the floor of the hall, Sebastian glared at his father. Arliss Locke lounged in an elegant sprawl over the heavy brocade armchair he fancied as his throne. He had one booted leg draped over the armrest, while gently petted a Court servant with his opposite hand. When his lazy-lidded gaze landed on Sebastian, he smiled, but on his scarred face with his sharp, scruffy jaw, it looked more like a sneer. Hell, it probably was. Though they pretended well, there was no love lost between Sebastian and Arliss.

“Ah, Basti. Good of you to join us.” Arliss motioned for Sebastian to approach the velvet draped dais upon which his “throne” sat.

Sebastian ground his teeth upon hearing the diminutive nickname. “I was summoned,” he answered through a clenched jaw.

Arliss being the Provost of the Northern Territories Feliscindae colony technically made the Locke family royalty among their people, but Sebastian had always thought it ridiculous to put on such airs when the rest of the world didn’t even know they existed. Arliss straightened in his seat, acting like every inch the king he considered himself to be. He flicked a hand at the servants, sending them scattering without so much as a word. The courtiers followed suit with much more grace, but they scurried nonetheless.

“Sebastian the Lucent...” Arliss growled. “If you lived in the palace where you belong, you would not have to be summoned.”

Sebastian barely resisted the urge to laugh. “This...” He looked up at the high ceilings which were adorned with a fresco featuring Bacchus surrounded by a flock of cherubs. He spread his arms wide, indicating the cool marble flooring, decadent carpets, and Ionic columns that made up the great hall. “This is not a palace. This is trying too hard.”

Arliss surged to his feet and stomped down off the dais, just as Sebastian knew he would—after all, he’d had centuries of practice antagonizing his father. Arliss’s normally burnished complexion was florid with anger as he approached Sebastian. “You will address this Court with respect, kitten.”

Incidentally, Arliss had plenty of practice baiting Sebastian as well. Sebastian gnashed his teeth at his father, growling low in his throat. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, as his Felis instincts sensed a growing threat. “Why did you call me here, Provost?”

“I hear you’ve been fighting with humans again.”

Sebastian rocked back on his boot-heels and huffed out a breath. “Got spies on me now, have you?”

Arliss narrowed his cold, ice-blue eyes, so similar to Sebastian’s own. “The Praesidium exists for the protection of the Royal family. If you insist on living in that city by yourself, away from your *family*, then they will monitor your actions. You’ve only yourself to blame.”

“I like Beltrane. I’m a solitary animal, so the city suits me. I can disappear in it.”

Sebastian knew at once that he’d said too much. Arliss’s eyes flared, and his face turned into a masked carved from stone. He called a Praesidio sergeant to his side.

The young guard bent at the waist in a half-bow. “Yes, Provost, how may I assist?”

“Petru, have the envoys of the Sentinel arrived?”

“Yes, Excellency. They are convened in the blue room presently.”

Arliss grunted, and Petru faded back to the perimeter of the room, summarily dismissed. Arliss then scowled at his son. “I have given you every opportunity to perform your duties as Prince and you deny me at every turn. Your continued refusal, as well as your antagonism of the humans, will be punished.”

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest, drawing himself up, not to be quelled by his father’s bluster. Much like archaic humans, Arliss expected his sons to bear sons, for the preservation of the family name—or in their case, the species. Sebastian thought the species was doing just fine. He arched a brow at his father. “And how exactly am I to be punished?”

Arliss circled him, the buckles on his boots jangled with every step. “You still refuse to search for a mate? To carry on our line?”

Sebastian was fine with Arliss believing him merely to be some degenerate loafer, content to rest on his laurels until his last breath. His father needn’t know about his proclivities, the true reason he couldn’t lie with a female. “I do.”

“Well then you’ll by God do something else with your life, you lazy son of a—”

“Careful how you speak of your dear, departed mate, Provost. One might think you cold-hearted.”

“Cold-hearted? Maybe, but what I am is a man tasked with protecting our very existence, who has a son who simply can’t be bothered,” Arliss growled.

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose, defense against the migraine gathering there, but he pulled his metaphorical punches because, technically, his father was not wrong. “And what sort of ‘punishment’ did you have in mind for my unbearable insouciance, Father?”

“You will join the Midnight Sentinel, as an emissary from my household. If you refuse to contribute to the preservation of the species by producing offspring, you will do so by safeguarding the humans.”

Sebastian reared back as if he’d been slapped, then made a scoffing noise in the back of his throat. “You *can’t* be serious. You couldn’t find someone who cared less about humans than I without actively wanting to hurt them. Why would you possibly want me to sit on the Sentinel?”

The Midnight Sentinel was a conclave of Supernatural Beings and Magick-Users that had been formed to protect humankind after the latest near extinction. Their motives were all completely selfish, mind, though the reasoning varied. For the Feliscindae it was breeding, their very DNA. For the Vamps it was the obvious food source—which proves to be a renewable resource if one does not kill one’s prey—and for the Louposcindae—the werewolves as they were called in human lore—it was secrecy. The more humans harmed by Supernatural Beings, the more questions were asked. The Loupos despised questions. They just wanted to be left alone on their own land, with as little interaction with other species as possible.

The Magick-Users were in a unique position. Mages and Witches started off as human and were imbued with power later in life. Sebastian guessed they still held some kind of affinity for what they’d once been. It was of no consequence to him. Other species and Fae creatures had more obscure, vague motives that Sebastian didn’t care to indentify. Somehow they’d convened under a common purpose and formed the Midnight Sentinel, and now, apparently Arliss expected Sebastian to join.

Arliss stepped into Sebastian’s space and his meaty fist shot out, taking hold of the collar of Sebastian’s heavy Feliscindaean frock coat. Though Sebastian had a couple of inches over

Arliss in height, and could match him tit for tat with quick wit and sharp tongue, Arliss had bulk that Sebastian did not. Sebastian flinched away from the pure, animalian rage that vibrated from his father's hulking frame. A glint in Arliss's eye told Sebastian that the reaction had not escaped his attention.

"You will do this, little Prince, or I will see you banished. And you'll be lucky to make it out of Roth with your hide intact."

Sebastian knew when to stand down. He couldn't afford to be tossed out on his ear any more than he could get his traitorous body to perform for a woman long enough to breed. "As you wish, Provost," he said in the traditional valediction of the Praesidium—the royal guard.

Content with his momentary victory, Arliss released Sebastian and even went so far as to smooth out the wrinkled material of his collar. He turned once again to the young, fair-haired sergeant. "Petru."

"Yes, Excellency. Follow me, if it pleases."

Arliss took off, with his long strides eating up the ground, not sparing a glance to make sure Sebastian had fallen into step behind him. He had.

Petru led them down narrow, carpeted, high-ceilinged hallways until he reached the gilt door that opened to the blue room. The room was named such due to the heavy blue drapes that hung on each of a long wall of windows, and the blue upholstery of the chairs around the thick, rectangular banquet table. The wallpaper above the wainscoting was even of a blue and white toile pattern. Sebastian found it hideous. Judging from the expressions of several guests sitting at the table, he was not alone.

Sebastian seated himself in a chair at the head of the table, only because it was the one Petru had pulled out for him. He saw more than a few curled lips at the positioning, but he had no interest in political drama, so he ignored it, holding himself with the straight-backed, regal bearing that befitted—so Arliss thought—his station.

Arliss's gravelly voice rang out from behind him. "Allow me to introduce my son, Prince Sebastian, who will act as envoy from the House of Locke, representative of the Northern Territories."

Heads nodded around the table. A willowy, pale man who would have easily passed for twenty-five, but could very well be centuries old in this company, acknowledged Arliss with bow of his head. His skin was as white as alabaster, and his dark hair curled boyishly around his face and ears. *Definitely a Vampire*, thought Sebastian.

"You have our infinite gratitude, Your Excellency. I'm sure young Sebastian will prove very...useful."

The man's gleaming smile could be described as nothing other than predatory. God, how Sebastian abhorred Vamps. He gave the man a tight-lipped smile that was about as sincere as the compliment had been.

The fellow, who seemed to be somewhat in charge, spoke to Arliss once more. "If you'd be so kind Provost...er, only members of the Sentinel can be privy to these proceedings."

Arliss jolted, as if he'd been completely caught off guard by a fact Sebastian was sure he'd been aware of, but he recovered quickly. "Of course. When you are finished, you may ring a servant from the intercom there, and someone will show you to the dining hall for repast." He bowed to the members of the Sentinel, and slipped out of the room on silent feet. All but forgotten, Petru followed behind him.

Sebastian turned his attention back to the waifish, black-haired man.

“Welcome, Sebastian. May I call you Sebastian, or would you prefer some sort of honorific instead? I’d hate to offend.”

God, no. “Sebastian will be fine. And you are?”

“I am Cyprian, envoy of the Northwest Vampire clan. I’m something like a Chairman, if there were any titles in the Sentinel. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Something about Cyprian’s mannerisms suggested that he might actually be less than pleased. Holding his thoughts, Sebastian dipped his head in a nod that he hoped seemed friendly enough to pass.

“How much do you know about the Midnight Sentinel, Sebastian?”

“Little to nothing.”

“I see. Clean slate then. I’ll introduce our fellow envoys, give you the abridged version of what we’re about, a quick rundown if you will, and then we’ll get down to brass tacks.” He raised his brows as if to ask if that sounded agreeable.

“It’s your show,” Sebastian conceded.

Cyprian’s lips tightened, and he narrowed his eyes as if he was trying to puzzle out whether or not Sebastian was being supercilious or simply had no manners. “Immediately to your right, you have Kasimir and Kirill, envoys of the Northwest and Northeast Loupos packs respectively.”

Sebastian eyed the two men. Kasimir was a dark-skinned, thick brute who was probably a mammoth of a wolf in his Loupos form. Kirill was tall, blond, and golden, fit without the bulk of his counterpart. If it wasn’t for the unfortunate wolf business, Sebastian wouldn’t have minded taking him for a spin.

Cyprian cleared his throat to draw attention back to himself. He indicated a buxom redhead to the right of Kirill. “This is Clotilde, a Witch from the Middleton coven.”

Clotilde gave Sebastian what he imagined was intended to be a seductive look, though it was lost on him. He cut his glance away.

“On my right,” Cyprian continued, “is Lafayette of the White Mages. Whether that’s his first name or last name, I couldn’t say.”

The white-haired wizard smiled a Cheshire Cat grin, but made no comment. White Mages all had white hair, it was their unifying trait, along with the nature of their magic. Sebastian inclined his head to Lafayette before returning his attention to Cyprian.

“Next over is Sachie, a Caniscindae shifter. She is our newest recruit, apart from you.”

Sachie was blonde and whip-thin, with a rather pinched look about her face. Sebastian wondered what sort of breed she resembled in her Canis form.

“Last, to your left is our dear Leith Devdas. No one is entirely sure *what* he is, but *my* best guess is a bloody demon.”

The man himself was short, but brutally muscled, covered in tattoos, made no move to confirm or deny the claim. In fact, he gave no indication that he’d heard it at all.

“And that’s it for this particular assembly,” said Cyprian, stroking elegant fingers across the leather-bound folio in front of him. “These are all the envoys who could make it to Roth this time of year. As you can imagine, the Sentinel has made many an enemy among those who target humans for one reason or another. This is why we hold our conclaves at random times throughout the year, and in varying locations only disclosed in enough advance to make last-minute travel arrangements. This is an attempt to avoid being all in one spot for long enough for our enemies to plan an attack. No need to paint a target on our backs. Envoys attend whichever meetings they are able.”

It seemed rather a flawed system to Sebastian, but he held his tongue. It would be quite early to alienate everyone at the table, even for someone as caustic as himself. He planned to learn everything he could about the Sentinel while simultaneously trying to figure out how the hell he was going to get out of this fool's errand Arliss had signed him up for.

"Have you any idea what it is we do, my dear?" Clotilde purred.

Sebastian resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the cloying tone, instead subtly shifting in his seat so that he was a couple of inches farther away from her. "Only what my father has told me, which is very little. Protection of humans for various and sundry reasons. I'm not exactly the law enforcement sort, so I'm not sure how much help I'll be to you."

"Law enforcement? After the last purge, the Human governmental infrastructure collapsed. There are few laws, and even less that are enforced, let alone upheld. It's absolute bedlam out there," Clotilde said.

"Which is where we come in," Cyprian added, in his cool, cultured tone. "There's little we can do about the Humans killing *each other* off, but the Sentinel exists to prevent those like us—Supernaturals, Magick-users—from preying on the defenseless creatures."

Sebastian scoffed at that. "Defenseless? Hardly. Were those not their bombs that so destroyed the atmosphere that the accumulation of pollution reduced the sunlight hours by a third? And that was the generation before the latest purge. Who knows what this tatterdemalion lot will do when they realize there's nothing much left to live for."

Cyprian's gaze snapped to Sebastian's face like the crack of a whip. He was no longer amused by the contumacious questioning. "You make my point, sir. The daylight deficiency makes an already threatened species even more vulnerable. And contrary to what you might personally want, we very much need them to *live*."

Sebastian's scalp bristled and his shoulder blades itched as his back ached to arch. His Felis nature was reacting to the challenge. "Enough with the history lesson," he growled at the stony-faced Vamp. "What exactly is it that you want me to do, as an...envoy."

"You've been living in Beltrane, rather than here in Roth, is that correct?"

Sebastian wasn't sure what that had to do with the Watch, but he played along. "Yes," he answered carefully. "What of it?"

Cyprian flicked his slender wrist, waving away Sebastian's concern. "Oh, please, I have no interest in the Locke Family histrionics. If you chose to eschew the *throne*, as it were, it's of no consequence to me. What I need is an envoy on the ground in Beltrane. I'm wondering if that could be you. It's a convenience that you're already living there."

"I've no plans to leave my flat in Beltrane any time soon. But I need to know what it is you expect me to *do*." Sebastian was tiring of Cyprian's habit of talking around the point.

"We have plenty of operatives on the streets of Beltrane, but they need someone to report to. Someone to organize their efforts, should the need arise. And we need someone powerful enough to step in and deal with the more exigent threats. I've received some disturbing reports from Beltrane of late."

"What kind of reports? What kind of threats?"

The room quieted as Leith Devdas spoke up. His voice, husky and low, as if perhaps his vocal chords had been damaged at some point, cut through the tension with a razor-edge. "Every species has a faction within it that either wants humans extinct or enslaved. The shifters just want to run the world without being discovered, the Mages want to subvert and be worshipped, and the Vampers just want to bloody kill. Regardless of the *reasons*," he growled, "they must be stopped. That is the one and only purpose of the Midnight Sentinel."

Sebastian rubbed his temple with his index and middle fingers, because this was all really more than he cared to deal with. He wanted to live his quiet, solitary life in the city, silently investing in projects he felt were worthy. It wasn't as if he didn't help humans in his own way—regardless of how he felt about their kind. Just recently, he'd talked the co-owner and manager of Club Sanctuary, a Loupos called Shine Blackwelder, about possibly using the club as a homeless shelter outside of operating hours. Homelessness was rampant among the humans, and all that square footage was just sitting empty when the club wasn't open for dancing. He didn't mind helping humans as long as he was able to keep them at arm's length, but now these...these envoys expected him to *police* them.

"I'm not sure I'll be well-suited to this."

Cyprian shrugged a slender shoulder. "Feliscindae are nocturnal creatures, yes? More out of nature than necessity like myself, but it's still true. So instead of sitting at home with your dick in your hand, or fucking about with other shallow pursuits, you might as well be out doing some good."

Sebastian bared his teeth. The little bloodsucker was savage, but that was something he could at least respect. "Fine, then. I'll have a go. I can't guarantee I'll be any good at it, but there we are."

Nodding as if that was all he'd been waiting to hear, Cyprian folded his hands on the table in front of him. "Give me your com-code before I leave, and I'll send you some dossiers on some of the more notorious players you may see on the field."

Sebastian jerked his chin in acknowledgement, even as exhaustion settled heavy on his shoulders. Last night had been a long one, and this had become an even longer day. He wished for nothing more than a hot shower, a stiff drink, and a warm bed.