

STRAY: Chapter Three

by J.K. Hogan

It was Sebastian's first night out since he'd been consigned to the Sentinel. He wasn't changing his routine much. He was just going for a little nighttime stroll around the blocks that surrounded the club, then he'd spend some time at Sanctuary before having another walk around. It all seemed so innocuous, so unnecessary, but according to Cyprian and his lot, that was what it took to form a wall of protection around the humans.

Since he was meant to be seen, to be known, as the Beltrane envoy, Sebastian did things a little differently when he readied himself to go out. He usually strove to be inconspicuous, especially since his looks were rather noticeable on a good day. He would often tie his hair back or wear a hood, and would wear jejune clothing like hoodies and baggy jeans. But this night, he was going as Sebastian the Lucent, Feliscindae Prince of the Northern Territories and envoy of the Midnight Sentinel. It was a mouthful, to be sure, and Cyprian had insisted that he needed to look the part.

In order to do so, Sebastian took great pains to enhance the features that made him...Sebastian. Whilst looking in the mirror, he lined his eyes heavily, though his lashes and the rims of his lids were already inky black from his Felis genes. He changed out the black titanium rings in his ears for gold ones. He meticulously brushed out his long hair so that it hung around his shoulders like a curtain, and he plaited a couple of braids that wove through the loose locks.

Still nude from his shower, Sebastian crossed the room to assess his closet. He wasn't much of a clothes-horse—he normally didn't take great pains with his appearance since he wasn't out to find a mate—but this night, he wanted to look every inch the dangerous creature he really was. Selecting a pair of leather pants, he tugged them on and they molded to his body like a second skin. Then he shrugged into a black button-down shirt that was slightly see-through and just a tad bit tighter than it should be. Next, he added a black skinny tie, knotted loosely around his neck, and black motorcycle boots.

He evaluated his appearance, this time in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. It was more gothic than was his usual tendency, but it had the desired effect—someone unapproachable, someone to be feared. On top of the whole costume, he wore his black leather, military-style double-breasted overcoat. Humans would likely scatter from his path, thinking he was either a mafia-man or the mythical Dracula—as they hadn't a clue what *real* vampires were like.

Sebastian locked up his modest flat, though there wasn't much for anyone to steal, and he headed down the four flights of stairs that took him to street level. He lived above Sanctuary, so he didn't even have to venture outside if he didn't want to, but it was sort of his job now. He exited the stairwell onto the street corner, and went for a short walk. He kept to the shadows that lined the streets, away from the halogen lamps that dotted the sidewalks, and observed.

He reached out with his other senses as well, those that were enhanced by his supernatural biology. His keen sense of smell and hypersensitive hearing picked up nothing out of the ordinary. His pupils expanded as his night vision engaged, but there were no bogeymen lurking in shadowy corners. In fact, Sebastian had never seen any first-hand evidence of this so-called threat to humans—in his experience, they were pretty destructive without anyone's help—

but he'd also made it a point to stay out of human affairs. Perhaps if he looked with new eyes, things would become clear.

Nevertheless, he made it to Sanctuary without witnessing anything untoward. The bouncer waved him through with a nod, and Sebastian plunged into the sea of slick, writhing bodies. The way they parted for him, it must've been obvious that he was in no mood for debauchery. He made his way to a small alcove of plush booths that was far enough away from the dance floor so as to be isolated from the chaos, but with a good view of the stage and the surrounding real estate. Shine Blackwelder lounged there, holding court among his devotees.

Shine was a ferine brute of a man, who looked almost as wolfish in his human skin as he did in his Loupos form. A thick, crescent-shaped scar carved one side of his face from forehead to chin, something that had to have happened before he reached maturity and gained his healing faculty, but Sebastian had never dared ask. He wasn't afraid of Shine, but there was no need to poke the bear—well, wolf—if it wasn't necessary.

Grinning, Shine raised his glass to Sebastian as he approached, but he didn't extricate himself from the woman and the young man on either side of him.

"Shine." Sebastian tipped an imaginary hat.

"Locke," Shine answered as Sebastian slid into the booth across from him. "Word on the street is you've got a new gig."

"Is that what they're saying? News travels fast down the mountain, apparently."

"Tell me," said Shine.

Sebastian held up two fingers to a passing waiter, and received a nod in return. All the servers at Sanctuary knew his preferred drink was Zhikavic vodka. "The Midnight Sentinel. Ever heard of it?" he asked, his gaze sliding to Shine's companions, both young Louposcindae.

Shine let out a noncommittal grunt. "I've heard things."

"Arliss has consigned me into service because I refuse to carry on my family lineage."

The big wolf bellowed with laughter that tapered off in a snort, and slapped his knee. "Family lineage indeed. Does that man not know you're queer as a clockwork orange?"

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "He's had the Praesidium tailing me, and I don't exactly force my bedmates to sneak out the window. I've never been subtle, you understand, but the surveillance should've left little doubt in his mind."

"Probably why he consigned you, then."

"Indeed," Sebastian acknowledged. He'd come to the same conclusion about his father's motives and timing. "So have you heard of any major players moving through Beltrane? Powerful Mages, Vamps, Witches? Anyone been hassling your crowd?"

Shine stroked his pointed flint-black goatee. "I've heard some murmurs, but nothing specific. No one's come sniffing round here, that's for sure, but they'd have to have brass balls to challenge me on my own turf."

"They're not after you. Supposedly, these threats are against the Humans, and you happen to have a lot of them out there." Sebastian jerked his chin at the dance floor.

"I'll keep my ear to the ground, call you if anything I hear anything."

"I'd appreciate that," Sebastian said. He gave the waiter a tight smile as the young man set his drink down and walked away, swishing his hips in a way that was meant to be invitational. "Any movement on my idea about the shelter?"

Shine winced and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't think it will work. The club floor is open at night, and isn't that when they need shelter the most? Yeah, I could give the homeless a place to hang out during the day, but that only amounts to a few hours."

“What about the back room on the northeast corner? The one with the adjoining guest suite? We could knock out those walls to make it one big room, which would give us a large sleeping area, a kitchen, and a bathroom. That would be enough to make a dent, wouldn’t it?”

“And who’s paying for all of that?”

“I am. Idiot. I told you I would when I pitched the idea.”

Shine shook his head as if Sebastian had lost his mind. “Why are you doing this, man? You don’t even like humans.”

“Humans aren’t the only ones who are homeless. But...I don’t know why.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“It’s just this feeling I get. Like when you dream about something, then you wake up and it just dissolves, and you’re just left with the vague idea of something that happened, something you’re supposed to remember. Something’s telling me that I need to do this, and you know intuition is not to be taken lightly in our world.”

Sebastian left Shine with tentative plans to call out a contractor to get some estimates. He prowled around the perimeter of the dance floor, catching an interested glance from Ethan. Perhaps another night, he thought, as he made his way through the throng of dancers on his way to the door. Tonight, apparently, he was on patrol.

Outside, Sebastian lingered on the street corner beside the club entrance and lifted his nose to the night breeze. A mist was in the air, and it held the crisp, loamy fragrance of new rain. From the park down the street came the scent of grass and soil, with a fecundity that hadn’t been present since the last purge.

He caught a whiff of something else. A bouquet of old cedar and clean soap, with a thread of fear laced throughout. Sebastian refocused, this time with his human sight, just in time to see someone coming down the sidewalk, passing right in front of him. It was a human male, likely in his late teens, dressed in tattered jeans and a threadbare pullover—not nearly enough protection against the autumn evening chill.

Sebastian was struck with the same sense of familiarity he had that night a week ago, when he’d seen the group of homeless across from the club. It shocked him to realize that this was the same young man. He carried a pack on his back, and while he moved casually enough, Sebastian noted the way his slender fingers gripped the straps. Like he was nervous. As if to confirm Sebastian’s suspicion, the boy cast a wary glance over his shoulder.

He crossed the street diagonally at the intersection, and Sebastian was prepared to let him go on his way when he suddenly picked up on something else. It had a bite to it, this essence, the malefic odor of something ancient and very evil. Sebastian inhaled through his nose even as he pushed away from the brick wall to cross the street after the boy. *Unmistakable. Vampire.*

Sebastian stayed hidden by the slithering shadows, choosing to walk along the edge of the park instead of on the sidewalk. He wanted to see if the boy was being followed, but not to be seen himself. After three blocks, the boy stopped at a bus shelter and took out his phone, frowning as he concentrated on the screen. Sebastian wanted to scream at him—why was he ignoring his earlier instinct that he was in danger?

It finally occurred to Sebastian that since the young man couldn’t smell the threat, he likely thought he’d just been paranoid. As the streetlamp above the bus stop blinked out,

Sebastian's body coiled with tension. Everything in him sensed danger, and this boy, this fragile human, was completely incognizant of what lurked in the dark.

Shadows swirled and flickered, and eventually coalesced into the shape of a man. That is, a man who was not a man. The creature stalked Sebastian's young charge while his back was still turned. He was pale of skin and fair of hair—his tresses nearly as light as Sebastian's own—but his eyes were dark, black even, swallowed completely by pupil. He was in his extasis, a trancelike state that allows the Vampire to manipulate the human mind, bend it to his will. There was no time to lose, for Sebastian knew who he was looking at. One of the oldest, most opprobrious Vampires he'd ever heard tell of, Solomon Rydic was more like a cat than Sebastian was, insomuch as he liked to toy with his victims for sport before he drained the life from them. He drank for the kill, not just for sustenance. He was one of the few infamous Supernaturals that Sebastian would recognize on sight, and apparently Sebastian's current "jurisdiction" had become the vile creature's new hunting ground.

He had to make his move. The boy had no more time.

Sebastian darted out onto the sidewalk with a swoop of his coat, placing himself bodily between the Vampire and his prey. Solomon snarled when he realized his stealth attack had been thwarted. It didn't mean he wouldn't still attack, though, so Sebastian crouched into a fighting stance and bared his teeth, as the boy whipped around with a gasp.

"What—"

"Stay back," Sebastian growled without taking his eyes off the menace.

No doubt realizing he was rather evenly matched, Solomon adopted a nonchalant affect. He gave Sebastian a lazy smile and his black pupils widened, nearly obscuring the whites. "Would you kindly move aside? You're keeping me from my meal."

"Your tricks won't work on me, Rydic." Sebastian began the transformation into his mediforma—his pupils dilated to slits and his canines elongated. If Solomon hadn't pegged him as Feliscindae from his scent, he'd know now.

Sebastian felt a tug on the sleeve of his coat.

"E-Excuse me... What is happening?"

"Not *now*," Sebastian said, shaking him off with a rough jerk of his arm. "Your *dining* habits are not welcome in my city," he said to Rydic.

Solomon cocked his head and stroked his chin with long-nailed fingers. Then his expression changed to one of recognition. "I know who you are, Sebastian the Lucent. What are you doing down off your mountain?"

"I live in Beltrane, not Roth, and I am charged with protecting its residents."

"Ah, you've joined the Sentinel, then, have you?"

Sebastian didn't bother to answer. He knew that engaging conversation was a diversionary technique that Vampires often employed to get their way. He stood his ground, arms crossed, glaring at Solomon.

The façade crumbled quite quickly, the Vampire's face morphing into a wicked scowl. "Move aside, *cat*," he said, his voice now garbled from his fangs punching through his gums. The sound he made was deep, resonant, almost demonic.

If Sebastian had been a human, he would be terrified. But he was neither.

Solomon surged forward with a hiss, obviously intent on ploughing through Sebastian to get at his prey. But Sebastian was as immovable as a brick wall. His hand shot out, seizing the Vampire by his throat. He extended his claws so that they stabbed five punctures into Solomon's

neck. It wasn't enough to kill him—he regenerated, of course—but it was just enough to inform him that Sebastian could rip out his gullet in an instant. That, most certainly, would kill him.

Solomon hissed and spat as he clawed at Sebastian's arm. His feet, which now dangled a few inches off the ground, flailed about in a futile attempt to dislodge himself. His eyes glowed red as he gnashed his teeth in impotent rage. Sebastian merely smiled.

"You will leave Beltrane. If I smell your rotting carcass again, I will find you and end you." He tossed the Vampire into the shadows of the park, and he disappeared before he hit the ground. Breathing hard from the exertion of fighting the Vampire's Supernatural strength, Sebastian turned to face the wide, frightened eyes of the boy.

Like Ethan, this one was more of a man than a boy, but Sebastian guessed he was an older teenager—considered an adult by post-purge humans. He hadn't run or fainted after witnessing the fight, even though he'd no doubt realized something horrible had nearly happened to him. That, more than anything, impressed Sebastian.

As the streetlamp flickered back to life, bathing them in a pale artificial glow, Sebastian could see him clearly. Warm brown eyes stared at him from within a golden-skinned, round face. The boy's dark brown hair was shaggy, curling at ridiculous angles like it hadn't been combed in a while—and Sebastian found it strangely endearing. Now that he'd gotten a good look at him, Sebastian didn't think he was homeless. A little bedraggled, yes, but too clean and fresh not to have a place to shower and get some decent rest.

Sebastian should tell him to run along home and not stop until he was safe inside. "What's your name?" Sebastian's voice sounded gritty and underused, even to his own ears.

The boy's tongue darted out to wet his pink lips, a nervous action that drew all of Sebastian's focus.

"Noah. Noah Cowan. Um...Thanks for, uh, running that guy off. I didn't even notice him behind me."

"That's because he made sure you didn't. Take heed, Noah Cowan. The streets are dangerous at night. You should hurry home."

Noah glanced at his feet. "Sometimes home can be dangerous too," he murmured. Then he looked up, and said louder, "You talk funny."

One corner of Sebastian's mouth curved up, flirting with a smile that hadn't quite bloomed. "I suppose. I'm not from around here." Sebastian looked over his shoulder, half expecting Solomon to come charging at him again. "You should go. It's not safe here."

Noah's face fell, but he nodded. "Thanks again."

Sebastian inclined his head in a tiny bow. He should wipe this kid's memory. Who knew how much he understood about what he'd just seen and heard? But Sebastian didn't.

Giving him a shy wave, Noah turned slowly and started to walk away. He looked over his shoulder only once, to see Sebastian still standing in the same spot. When Sebastian was sure no one was looking, he closed his eyes and allowed his body to metamorphose. Static crackled through his veins as the change took hold. The Feliscindae ability to transform was two-thirds biology and one-third magick, so no one could really explain the full picture of *how* it happened. Sebastian only knew of his own experience. The feeling of his muscles and bones disintegrating and reforming was not altogether pleasant, but it wasn't the hideous pain that the Wolves complained of.

It was over in a handful of seconds, and where a man once was now stood a large cat with fur as white as the driven snow. Sebastian blinked, letting his eyes adjust to their new, cat-like perception. The cityscape in the darkness now appeared to him with an almost infrared clarity.

He could hear more, smell more, even sense when movement disturbed the airflow, through his whiskers and the tips of his fur.

Feeling lighter than air, Sebastian padded down the sidewalk a few feet behind Noah. In this form, he could make sure the kid made it home without arousing anymore suspicion than he likely already had. The walk was longer than he liked—young Noah shouldn't be out after dark, walking around unprotected. When he heard his own thoughts, Sebastian pulled up short. The days were quick, the nights long, and most humans were out after dark, alone or otherwise. Why was he worrying so much about this particular boy? He felt some kind of inexplicable kinship, like he needed to watch over Noah, as if Noah needed constant protection.

As Sebastian watched him disappear into a ramshackle but fully intact row house, he mused that it was now his *job* to protect Noah, along with all the other humans in Beltrane. So that was what he would do.