

STRAY: Chapter Five

by J.K. Hogan

Years later, Sebastian still remembered that boy. Of course, years were like drops in the ocean for his kind. He'd often strolled down that street during his patrols of the city, but he never caught sight of the kid again. The house fell into disrepair, and eventually the whole block of row houses was torn down.

This night, Sebastian was hosting a conclave of the Sentinel at Club Sanctuary. A few of the envoys were less than happy with the venue, but he couldn't have cared less if he were a corpse. They convened in a banquet room in the back, adjacent to the suite that had been converted to a homeless shelter. Envoys turned up their noses in distaste.

Cyprian was the only envoy present from Sebastian's inaugural meeting. Around the table, there were unfamiliar faces with familiar hard expressions. The last year had been a dark time. They'd lost too many humans, and the Sentinel was losing ground.

The Vampire wore all black—a black turtleneck that molded to his slender form, black jeans, black boots. Beyond that, he could have been any twenty-something twink with a melanin deficiency. This time Cyprian held court at the head of the table, even though it was Sebastian's territory. It was a clear statement that Sebastian did not misunderstand.

Cyprian was flanked on the left by Iskra, a female Delphic, Quirin and Aleksey, Loupos and Canis respectively, and a newcomer called Aedon, an Aviscindo. Incredibly rare, Aviscindae were bird shifters, and Aedon was the first Sebastian had ever met in person. On the Vampire's right was Bohdan, an Ursascindo who was almost as big as a bear in his human form, Kishore, a Banshee, and Feroze, a Demon with a face only a mother could love.

Tension suffused the room, making Sebastian's skin prickle as fine hairs stood on end. If he were in his Felis skin, he'd be puffed up like a blowfish. They'd been arguing about what should be done about repeat offenders. Some wanted to build a prison, warded against the Supernatural. Others lobbied for a swift and merciful end of life, while still more advocated for torture and a much more painful death.

The only thing the envoys all seemed to agree on was that what they'd been doing—banishment—was not working. The general consensus had been to table the discussion until the Envoy Summit the next month. More opinions were needed than just the eight who were present at the conclave.

“Next on the agenda,” Cyprian said in his smooth, cultured voice, “is the problem of the Whisper Communes. They're gaining ground all over the Allied Territories, and my scouts have learned that there is a prolific one right here on the outskirts of Beltrane. Sebastian, do you have any insight?” The slick Vamp raised a manicured eyebrow in challenge, probably because he knew very well Sebastian hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

Seeing no way around it, Sebastian had to take the bait. “What are Whisper Communes? I haven't heard of them.”

Cyprian's lips curled in a hard smile with just a hint of fang. “Whisper Communes are the newest religious fad among the humans, especially the doomsdayers awaiting the next purge. The communes are run by churches, usually centered around a single religious leader or, in some cases, a group of leaders. They're hailed as prophets, saviors, while the humans are ignorant to what they really are.”

“Which is?”

“Dark Mages, usually,” said Feroze. “Though some of my kind have jumped on the bandwagon as well.”

Fuck...Demons. Something tickled Sebastian’s memory, but it slipped through his metaphorical fingers each time he tried to reach for it. “But why do they do it? What do they get out of it?”

“That, we don’t know for sure,” Cyprian answered, obviously disgruntled over the lack of information. “Worship, perhaps...adulation. Control. What evil wizard wouldn’t want a bunch of brainwashed humans to do his or her bidding? Or maybe it’s something worse.”

“Worse?” Sebastian asked.

“Worst case scenario? A vehicle for genocide. If you know your history, consider instances such as Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate during the second half of the twentieth century, or the Halcyon Brethren of the mid twenty-first. Imagine if cults like that could coordinate across the territories, and throw in the influence of Magick-Users? We could be talking global extinction.”

“If that’s their goal,” Kishore added. Her expression was skeptical.

“Yes, if,” Cyprian conceded. “But I think we have to presume the worst so we’ll be prepared for anything.”

Finally that errant memory took hold, and Sebastian saw flashes of a slender form, of teary brown eyes, of a boy running. “Actually... Now that I’m thinking about it, I think I’ve met someone who came in contact with the church who runs the commune in Beltrane. It was a boy I saved from a Vampire attack a few years ago. From Rydic,” he said, his gaze sliding to Cyprian, whose mouth tightened almost imperceptibly.

“I was keeping an eye on him in my Felis form, and he was upset so he started talking to me—to a cat. Apparently his parents abandoned him to go live at the commune, and they signed over their house to the church. The kid was basically squatting until the church came to claim the house.”

“Why didn’t they take the boy?” Iskra asked.

“I... I’m not sure,” Sebastian said. “I couldn’t ask without revealing myself. I think maybe he refused to go? And something about them not being his real parents. I don’t think he was sure whether he was adopted, or if it was something they’d said to drive him away. They called him a monster...”

Cyprian steepled his fingers, regarding Sebastian with a cool stare. “Could’ve been one of your Felis cast-offs, yes? Your mountain-children?”

“I suppose it’s possible, but in Roth, we keep close track of the gets, and they are either given to allies who know the truth about us, or to infertile humans desperately seeking children, who’ve been fully vetted. Though I can’t say what other strongholds in other territories do.”

“Where is the boy now?”

For a fraction of a second, profound sadness gripped Sebastian’s heart in its tight fist. “I lost track of him. The house fell into disrepair and was eventually torn down. I don’t know what happened to him. He’d be a man now—had almost been at the time.”

Cyprian’s fist clenched, his sharp nails appeared to be digging into his palms until Sebastian was sure there should be cold blood seeping beneath his fingers. “Find him. Find the boy. I want to know what he knows about the Whisper Commune. This is happening in your backyard, Sebastian the Lucent. Don’t fail me.

Days after the conclave, Sebastian was still irritated at being treated like both a servant and a failure by some *Vampire*. It didn't matter that Cyprian was a Trueborn, the Feliscindae still considered the bloodsuckers an inferior species. Sebastian made a concentrated effort to see past his affront to realize that he really did need information about the Whisper Commune, because the very concept was dangerous. Gods knew what that horde of fanatics was doing just outside the city limits. *His* city.

He prowled the streets of Beltrane at the witching hour, first in his human skin, then in his Felis form. Cats could travel a great many places that humans—or those posing as them—could not. It was a cold night, and Sebastian was grateful for his thick pelt as he padded soundlessly through the park.

Deep within the fifty acre oasis square in the middle of Beltrane, there was a monolithic bridge, one that seemed excessive for the dry riverbed it spanned. The water had dried up ages ago. As Sebastian approached the stone monstrosity, he saw with his cat-eyes that a group of homeless were huddled under its shelter. There was a metal can where they must've had a fire, but it had long since gone out. He sniffed the air, but caught no scent of danger. He made a mental note to come back another time, earlier in the evening, and tell the squatters about the shelter in the back rooms of Sanctuary.

Sebastian continued on, moving like a ghost through the manicured greenery, shrouded by night. He walked parallel to the main path, but stayed in the shadows, away from the streetlamps. He was headed to the south side to patrol, and cutting through the park was the quickest way to make it across town on foot. A familiar scent drifted to him upon the frigid breeze, causing Sebastian to freeze in his tracks. *Noah*.

Expanding his sight once again, Sebastian scanned the area around him with an almost three hundred and sixty degree periphery. Nothing moved, so he followed his nose along the path a few yards. He didn't notice the lump on the park bench until he was nearly on top of it. While it was a common misconception that felines could see in thermal infrared, it was true for the Feliscindae—and they were probably the reason that rumor developed in the first place—but it wasn't as keen or precise as their mechanical counterparts. Still, the more heat an object gave off, the better he could see it in his Felis form... which made it all the more distressing that he hadn't seen Noah on that bench.

Sebastian leapt up onto the bench beside Noah, who was wrapped in a dirty wool blanket. The boy—no, young man now—didn't stir, so Sebastian turned and flicked his tail back and forth across Noah's face. Eventually Noah's nose twitched, and his eyes opened sluggishly. They focused and widened when he saw the source of the tickle.

"Hey, you," he said in a voice that was too weak and scratchy. His cold hand stroked Sebastian's fur. "You couldn't be the same cat..."

Sebastian sank down into the sphinx position, and butted his head against Noah's chin.

"But somehow you are, aren't you?"

Sebastian meowed, having no other way to answer.

"Freaky," Noah mumbled, mostly to himself. "So yeah, things have gotten a little worse since we last saw each other, you know?"

Sebastian purred and snuggled closer.

"The good news is I found a dry place to keep my stuff. But it's a crypt, so it's too cold to sleep in. I'm better..." He trailed off with a shiver. "I'm better off in the open air." His eyelids fluttered and closed.

His pallor was sickly, and Sebastian didn't like the color of his lips. He knew he couldn't save Noah, couldn't give him a home with a snap of his fingers, but he sure as hell could keep him from freezing to death this night. He told himself, as he disappeared into the thick bioretention swale, that he was doing it because he needed to interrogate the guy about the Whisper Commune, and not because, inexplicably, Sebastian cared about him.

Hiding in the reeds, he allowed the change to take hold from prickles to pulls, from pain to relief once he stood his full human height. Unlike the Loupos, Feliscindae used their Magick to retain their clothing during the Change—the wolves loved running around in the nude for some reason—and at a time like this, it came in handy.

Returning to the bench, he scooped Noah up, dirty blanket and all. His eyes blinked open for a brief moment as he gazed up at Sebastian.

“Well look at you,” Noah said in a voice as thin as paper, before passing out cold.

Sebastian told himself it was easier that way. There would be fewer questions. Noah would wake up at Sanctuary, warm and safe, with food available. They could talk, and maybe Sebastian could find a way to anonymously help him.