

STRAY: Chapter Seven

by J.K. Hogan

Sebastian was patrolling the west end of Beltrane with a newly-minted Sentinel named Pace, a young Psi born in a hollow northeast of Roth City, deep in the Rothkian Mountains. Sebastian was training the boy himself, because he was worried about him. He was smart as a whip and hadn't an ounce of fear in his body, but he was soft-hearted, so Sebastian wasn't sure he'd be able to do what was needed in order to protect the humans.

So far, they hadn't come across any threats from Supernatural beings—just human on human violence. Only a few days before, Pace had stumbled upon a man attempting to rape a woman behind a dumpster in Shackle Alley. Sebastian had allowed his young charge to flex his metaphorical muscles, to practice using his power to stop the attack. A Psi—slang for Psychic Vampire—drained energy from his victims rather than blood. Their essence. Their life force.

Pace placed his hand on the back of the attacker's skull—the man still had his pants around his ankles, which had allowed them to overtake him quickly—and began siphoning energy. The psi was strong, Sebastian would give him that, because the attacker dropped to his knees on the wet blacktop in record time. The woman, his intended victim, was half naked, shivering in the corner between the chipped brick wall of the butcher shop and the rusted metal dumpster.

"It's all right," Sebastian murmured in what he hoped was a soothing tone. He reached out for her hand. "You're all right now."

The trembling woman cringed away from Sebastian, her gaze ping-ponging back and forth between him, Pace, and the crumpled heap of asshole on the alley floor.

"No one's going to hurt you anymore," Sebastian crooned. "We should probably get you to the hospital so they can check you over."

Sebastian took another step forward, but she gasped and shifted farther away. When her wide-eyed stare finally fixed on Pace, she made the sign of the cross over her chest. She clambered to her feet with surprising agility and speed for someone who'd just been assaulted, and took off running. Sebastian could hear the sound of her labored breaths echo through the alley as she fled from them.

Sebastian cursed when he turned and saw that the attacker had recovered his wits and taken off while they had been checking on the girl. With a weary sigh, he'd turned on his heel and beckoned Pace to follow. Pace had been confused, had wondered why they didn't follow her and insist she get help. "We can't make them accept our help," had been his answer.

Tonight on patrol had been quiet; no threats, human or Supernatural, had made themselves known. Pace's apartment was on the west side, so Sebastian walked him home through the graying twilight. Then he strolled through the park, heading north, back to Sanctuary, back to his apartment and his warm bed. He let his mind drift to that day at the Bazaar, months ago now, when he'd disguised himself so he could see Noah one more time. Noah had never come back to Sanctuary to ask after the job Sebastian had hinted at, one that didn't exist, but that Sebastian had fully intended to create with the express purpose of getting Noah off the street. Sebastian had no idea why he couldn't forget about Noah. Getting mixed up with a human of any kind was ill-advised at best, incredibly stupid or even dangerous at worst. That young man would become old and withered, and fade into dust, while Sebastian always, *always*, remained the same. Still, something about Noah—

Sebastian almost groaned aloud when he caught a scent. It was the distinctive old-garbage-and-sweat odor of an Uluscindo—a coyote shifter. Sebastian had *so* been hoping for a quiet night, free from trumped up drama that seemed to always swirl around anything related to the Sentinel. He wanted to ignore it, to go on home where he could have time alone, a rare commodity of late. But his conscience pricked him until he changed direction. Ulus were vicious predators. While as a species, they had no particular quarrel with humans, if an Ulus had singled out a particular person for a grudge, it would mean almost certain death for a mortal.

His footfalls made no sound as he snaked his way past a cluster of swales, a small pond, into a thicket of trees. With his cat eyes, he could make out two separate warm bodies masked by the thick ash trunks. Sebastian kept himself hidden, drifting through the trees like a wraith, knowing he wouldn't be seen unless he wanted it, but he might be scented. Finally he drew close enough to see them with his human sight.

The Ulus, a hulking male with greasy brown hair and tattered clothes, had cornered a human man up against a wide oak. The Ulus growled from deep in his chest as he unhurriedly circled his prey. His claws extended and curled, preparing to rip into flesh. Sebastian took a step, preparing to intervene, but he froze when he got a look at the human's face. It was the man from a few nights ago, the one Pace had subdued. The rapist.

The human caught sight of Sebastian for only a moment, and they locked gazes. His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth as if he would call out for help. In the same instant, Sebastian stepped back into the shadows, and the Ulus attacked.

Sebastian opened his door to see two members of the Praesidium standing on his threshold. He was dressed in nothing but the silk lounge pants he'd slept in, his hair loose and in disarray, but neither guard batted an eyelash at his appearance. "May I help you?" he asked irritably, not feeling at all helpful contrary to his words.

The guards shouldered their way into Sebastian's flat, forcing him to take a few steps back. Deep in his gut, Sebastian felt it was a symbolic gesture. Someone wanted him to know that he was not in control. "Sir, the Provost requests your presence in Roth immediately."

Ah, so Arliss then. Sebastian should have guessed immediately. Something had once again crawled up his father's ass, and he was going to pay the price with another lecture about his biological duty to the species. With a sigh, he silently regarded first one meaty, refrigerator-built guard and then the other.

"Of course. Wait here for a moment while I go get dressed."

The guard on the right treated Sebastian to a small sneer, which was new, because while the Praesidium were a thorn in his backside, they hadn't ever treated him with anything less than the deference befitting a prince. "You look dressed to me... *Sir.*"

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. His claws extended, punching into his palms as his hands curled into fists at his sides. "Do you think I should go to Court shirtless, in sleep pants? How would that be received by your Provost, do you think?" He crossed his arms over his chest and waited, only just restraining himself from tapping his foot.

The guards shared a look, before the one on the left turned back to Sebastian and nodded. "Be quick."

Sebastian turned his back and strolled into his bedroom, keeping his steps measured and slow so as not to give away the fact that his pulse was racing, and sweat was gathering at the

nape of his neck. The lack of respect the Praesidium were showing their prince was troubling—it clearly meant that Arliss was angry with him, and for something other than his usual inefficacy as a son and heir. Sebastian did not like to be caught off guard, so as he changed into Rothkian courtier garments, he racked his brain to think of what he'd done to piss off his father this time.

When he returned to the front room, clothed in head-to-toe leather, one of the guards opened the door for him. They both followed him out when he stepped through, and the other guard clasped his arm to lead him. He glared down at the hand clutching his leather-clad arm, then over at the guard. "I think I know the way."

The guard's face was implacable, his hold unyielding. If anything, he squeezed tighter, pulled Sebastian just a bit faster. Something wasn't right.

Sebastian remained docile as they descended the four flights of stairs to the main landing. The landing had a door on either side, one leading out to the street, and the other into the back rooms of Sanctuary. Shine had just entered from the outside and passed them heading to the club's door. He gave Sebastian a questioning look, raising his eyebrows at the guards. Sebastian gave a small shrug, and an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Shine's narrow-eyed stare didn't ease, but he kept on walking until he'd disappeared inside Sanctuary.

Outside, the sun was just sinking below the greenhouse haze on the horizon, and would soon be obscured by the Beltrane skyline. Night was already falling. A huge black utility vehicle awaited them at the curb. One of the guards went around to the driver's seat—merely pretense now, as the vehicle was navigated and controlled by a central data-bank—while the other helped Sebastian into the back. When he pushed Sebastian's head down to avoid the doorframe, Sebastian nearly slashed the man's throat with his claws for treating him like a common criminal. Once he settled whatever had riled Arliss up this time, he'd have both the men removed from duty.

He watched through the window as the vehicle ascended, the comforting glow from his beloved city fading away into the darkness of the mountain highways. A ride from Beltrane to Roth generally took about forty five minutes, but the Praesidio at the controls had the vehicle speeding. They made it in thirty.

When Sebastian was escorted into the great hall, uneasiness shivered through him as he noticed there were no courtiers mingling in the wings or lounging around at the foot of the dais. There was only Arliss, seated on his throne like a statue, looking like he swallowed a lemon. No one else was in the hall but the quorum of Praesidium guards flanking him.

Sebastian's boots sank into the plush carpet runner that led straight to Arliss as he approached, unhurried despite the prodding of his original two chaperones. He stopped a few feet in front of his father and crossed his arms over his chest. Arliss knew how much Sebastian hated to be summoned, but this time there was no woeful attempt at feigned joviality, no nicknames or awkward hugs. Arliss's face was as serious as the grave.

"You asked for me, Father?" Sebastian was being diplomatic, as sending guards to forcibly escort him couldn't really constitute as "asking."

Instead of answering, Arliss addressed the two guards behind him. "Join ranks."

The men saluted, and marched stiff-backed and straight-legged to opposite sides of the dais, joining their respective companies. Arliss sat up straight on his throne, and the Praesidium ranks snapped to attention at some indiscernible command.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes, though his insides trembled at the oddly formal greeting. "What is this? Where is everyone?"

Arliss laced his fingers together in his lap. “I thought you might not want an audience for this. I was trying to be considerate.”

“For *what?*” Sebastian growled, becoming increasingly irritated with each moment he was forced to stand at his father’s feet. “The considerate thing would be to stop with the theatrics and tell me why I’m here.”

“I had hoped consigning you to the Midnight Sentinel could save you, son. I really had. If I couldn’t force you to do your duty of carrying on our bloodline, I tried to at least instill in you a respect for the value of human life. Yet you remain...unmoved.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed as he thought about nightly patrols, training young recruits, not to mention his homeless shelter. “I don’t understand. I’ve done everything the Sentinel has asked of me and more, even when Cyprian came to see me in Beltrane outside of a conclave—which I had believed to be against the rules, but I’m no expert. So what is it that you think I’ve done?”

“Three nights ago, were you patrolling in Beltrane’s central park?”

“Obviously you know that I was, or you wouldn’t be asking.”

“Impertinence won’t do you any favors.”

“Neither will obeisance, evidently.”

Arliss took a loud breath in through his nose, visibly trying to calm himself. “Did you or did you not ignore a human being attacked by an Uluscindo?”

Sebastian froze. He’d known Arliss had the Praesidium watching him, but he hadn’t realized just how closely they followed. “The *victim* was a cretin. While on patrol, I caught him raping a girl—another human—but he escaped while we were helping her. As far as I’m concerned, he deserved whatever he got.”

“What he got was his throat torn out and his heart eaten, in case you were wondering. Ulus are carrion-eaters by nature, but one won’t ignore an easy kill if he happens upon it.”

Sebastian rocked back on his heels, wondering where exactly Arliss was going with all this. “I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Exactly. You don’t *see*. You knowingly left a human to be ripped apart by a Supernatural, when your job is to protect them!”

“Not just a regular human. A *rapist*.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Arliss bellowed. “It’s up to the humans to set their own laws and govern themselves. That is not your mission!”

“Humankind can barely wipe their collective asses, much less govern themselves. I think the girl he raped would agree with my decision.”

Arliss went still. “Then you are clearly admitting that it was a conscious decision? Not just a heat-of-the-moment act or a lapse in judgment. You knew he would be killed and you allowed it to happen.”

Sebastian lifted his chin, prepared to stand firm in his convictions. “Yes.”

“Do you realize that not only did you fail in your obligation to the Sentinel by allowing a human to be killed, but you risked exposing us all by not preventing a Supernatural-on-human crime? Is any of this penetrating?”

It was starting to, yes. Sebastian believed to the very core of his being that the rapist deserved to become a quick meal for the Ulus, but the risks in allowing it were starting to sink in. He licked his dry lips. “All right, I can see your point, Father. It won’t happen again.”

“No, it won’t,” said Arliss in an ominous tone that told Sebastian he had something altogether different in mind to prevent future errors in judgment. “Petru.”

The fair-haired, newly-minted Captain of the Guard broke rank and came to Arliss's side. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Summon the White Mage."

"As you wish, Provost."

Petru faded into the velvet-draped wings just as Arliss's words sunk in for Sebastian. His eyes widened and his head spun with a sudden wave of vertigo. "What? No!"

"Sebastian the Lucent, White Prince of the Northern Territories, I charge you with gross negligence which directly led to the death of a human. The penalty for this can be anything from banishment to imprisonment as deemed befitting by the White Mage."

"Father—"

"You're lucky it isn't death!" Arliss roared. "A man of a lesser station, or one who committed crimes in the past mightn't've been so fortunate. You will defer to Nikhil's judgment in this matter." Arliss looked away.

Now Sebastian's outsides were trembling as well, because he found all deliberate magick terrifying, and knowing that it was about to be used to punish him severely was a paralyzing reality.

Every Provost kept within his or her Court both a White Mage and a Dark Mage, named such for the type of magick each practices. While White Mages were tenuous allies to the Feliscindae, Dark Mages were enemies. Each sent emissaries to Court to keep one another from having complete autonomy, and unchecked influence over the Provost.

Sebastian had known Nikhil, the Locke's White Mage, all his life, while he'd only seen Solen, the Dark Mage, a few times in centuries. It was only fitting that Nikhil be the one to mete out his punishment, a man who'd been closer to him than his own father.

The heavy carved mahogany doors opened behind him, and Nikhil entered wearing traditional White Mage ceremonial robes, the heavy red and black brocade trailing the carpet. This was to be a somber affair, apparently. Like all White Mages, Nikhil had white hair, though his was kept short on the sides, and longer on top and in the back, and his skin was pale, radiating a soft lambent glow. His hands were tucked inside his sleeves, and he kept his head down as he slowly approached.

When he finally met Sebastian's gaze, Nikhil's eyes were sparkling with unshed tears. He didn't look away from Sebastian as Arliss reread the charges for his benefit.

"You will...handle this," Arliss said to Nikhil, while making a vague gesture in Sebastian's direction, his voice suspiciously gritty. "I wish to have no further involvement."

Sebastian's pulse leapt, and an undignified whimper escaped him as his father turned his back on him. He flinched when a warm came down on his nape, the touch gentle. Nikhil urged him to turn and guided him out of the room. Sebastian was in a daze, completely separated from reality. How was this happening? He was being...banished. Or...imprisoned. Over some human shit-stain rapist who'd finally picked on someone his own size and lost.

Sebastian knew he should be devastated—*was* devastated—but his body and heart were numb. At least he wouldn't be facing execution, something that was far more brutal and horrifying to the Feliscindae than any other species. Human mythos was mostly based on the realities of beings they did not understand. That old wives' tale about cats having nine lives came from snippets of Felis ethnology trickling down over time from the few humans who were privy to the knowledge.

A Feliscindo wasn't entirely immortal. He would not die of natural causes and aged at a glacial rate, but he could be killed. He had nine regenerations, but the tenth fatal blow would be

permanent. A Felis execution had rarely ever happened because of how horrific the method. The few times where a crime had been so unthinkable that the sentence was death, the offender was staked in the courtyard, not crucified, but impaled. That would almost always be the first death. Each day, after regeneration, the criminal was ceremonially killed a different way until the tenth execution finally ended him.

As Nikhil led him through the courtyard, Sebastian shivered while remembering the single execution he'd witnessed in all his many years of life. Instead of stopping, they exited through a gate in the wrought iron fence, and continued to stroll the grounds. Nikhil gave him a sideways glance as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder. "It will be okay, you know."

Sebastian stopped and glared at the wizard, a man who had been more of a father to him than Arliss, and more of a brother to him than his real one, Dalian. "Will it, *friend*?"

Nikhil sighed heavily and stopped in his tracks. "Yes, Basti. It will."

"Gods, don't call me that," Sebastian scoffed, even though Nikhil was the only one who'd ever said it without derision.

"Arliss would never hurt you, no matter what you'd done. You'll probably find your punishment...unpleasant, but you'll survive it intact." He turned to continue their stroll to gods knew where.

Sebastian hurried to catch up to him. "Could we just get on with it?"

"Patience, Basti. Something you could stand to have more of."

Sebastian glared, but didn't correct him about the nickname again. He didn't want to prolong him getting to the damn point. He just kept his mouth shut and followed. They traveled over the grassy, gently rolling hills of the grounds, until they were walking parallel to the edge of the woods. Nikhil pointed toward the tree line.

"Consider the Japanese arrowroot."

"Huh? The Kudzu?" Sebastian asked, noting the dense thicket of vines draping over huge, ancient oaks until they had almost covered them entirely.

Nikhil nodded. "Many consider it a weed, a parasite, the way it covers the existing flora, shades it, and borrows nutrients. It is a delicate balance. When living symbiotically, the arrowroot adds valuable nitrogen to the earth the trees depend on, enriching the topsoil to help the vegetation thrive, and its deep root system prevents erosion. But if allowed to grow unchecked, it chokes the life out of the trees and blocks the sun from the grass, until everything around it withers and dies."

Sebastian knew it was some sort of elaborate metaphor, but he couldn't concentrate on anything until he knew what his sentence would be. He could barely contain his nervous twitching as he wiped his sweaty palms on his leather jodhpurs.

Nikhil turned to face him. "*We* are the kudzu. Sebastian the Lucent, it is time for you to learn what it is like to be the tree. Because you must remember we are, all of us, half human." The wizard's eyes filmed over, turning an opalescent milky white. "Shift. Please."

What? If he shifted now, he wouldn't be able to speak, to gesticulate, to...fight back. Though he was expected to accept his punishment without contention, it was his natural instinct to want to protect himself. "Now? But how can I—"

Somehow those pupil-less, white eyes managed to look imploring, almost sad. "Don't make me force you, Basti. Please."

Sebastian fiddled with the cuffs of his coat with trembling hands, before closing his eyes and allowing his body's need to shift take over. Once he was in his Felis form, he sat, curling his long tail around his body like a shield.

“Thank you. It will be easier for both of us if you can’t argue.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened, but just as Nikhil wanted, he couldn’t respond with anything but a plaintive trill.

Nikhil paced back and forth in front of him, clearly agitated. “You will be tethered to your Felis form, unable to shift.”

Sebastian gasped, but it came out as a hiss. He was to be imprisoned inside his own body? Locked away somewhere on the estate where no one would ever find him? He swallowed down the urge to vomit. With a growl, he lowered his belly to the ground and waited. Nikhil had said he wouldn’t be hurt.

“You will return to Beltrane as an ordinary cat. A stray. You will spend your time among the humans, for whom you have so little regard, and you will earn their trust. You must form a kinship with a human or humans, to gain this confidence. Only when a human trusts you enough to willingly invite you into his or her home, their life...only then will you be able to become a man again.”

Dear gods, Sebastian had expected something horrible, but he’d never imagined this. Roaming the city, unable to shift, he would be in so much danger. He could starve. He could be run over by a motorized vehicle, or worse, he could be captured by the human Cat-catchers. Nine chances could go by in a blink of an eye in such a dangerous environment.

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s too dangerous. But I won’t let you be hurt. You’ll still have access to your apartment and...” His lips quirked. “And we’ll install a cat door so you may come and go.”

Sebastian growled again, and Nikhil ignored him. “If you get into a situation in which you feel your life is in danger, you know how to call me.”

There was a particular incantation that could be employed to summon the White Mage, but it was only supposed to be used in dire emergencies, so Sebastian had never done it. And of course, since he had no voice, he’d have to speak the words telepathically, something that Sebastian had never been very good at, much to Nikhil’s disappointment as his tutor in all things Supernatural.

Nikhil waved his hand, and something burned the inside of Sebastian’s right ear. “A brand, so any non-humans will know not to touch you. I know it stings, but it is for your own good, and the pain will fade quickly. I will escort you back to Beltrane to see you settled in safely, but you shouldn’t stay inside long. You won’t find any humans to charm in your empty bedroom.”

Branded. Like cattle. Like an *animal*. Sebastian was not an animal. He was a gods-damned Feliscindo. A *Prince*. But none of that mattered now, not in the slightest. For all intents and purposes, he was a house cat.