

STRAY: Chapter Eight

by J.K. Hogan

Noah's stomach cramped with hunger as he tapped the glass touchpad that controlled the holographic display. He was using the library's public data-deck to take a practice test for his level twos. If he got the grades he thought he would, he might be able to escape his almost certain future of working in a factory or a plant, and instead become an engineer. Level two proficiencies were the highest level of education for everyday citizens—doctors, for instance, went on to level threes. Noah knew from his history lessons that back in the days of brick-and-mortar schools, level twos were referred to as “university.”

He sipped bitter coffee that someone had left sitting on the machine, obviously having forgotten about it while it was being filled. Gods, he was hungry. He hadn't made many sales at the Bazaar last Tuesday, and a couple of his regular customers had stopped coming around, so he had literally five dollars to his name at the moment. He just had to manage not to starve to death before he took the tests, then he could get a decent job and find an actual place to live and, like, food and stuff.

At least he had a current roof over his head, as undesirable as it was. And crashing with Cousin Tom was definitely undesirable. Being a dealer meant that Tom had a revolving door for customers at any time of the day or night, and they were always eyeballing Noah real creepy-like. Sometimes even Tom did. Noah had gotten used to living with the hunted feeling, that need to constantly be on his guard and look over his shoulder. He always felt like there was someone just around the corner, waiting to grab him—be it Tom's addict friends, stalkers on the street like that one time years ago when the blond guy saved him, or even goons from his parents' church-cult, deciding they were going to force him to join after all. He'd never, ever felt at ease. Well, only once. With that guy. Whose name, irritatingly, he couldn't ever seem to remember.

Noah had been avoiding going back to Tom's, because the way the man looked at him had been making him increasingly uncomfortable. Sure, they were family—at least, he thought they were. He'd only met Tom after his parents had dumped him. They ran in the same circles, and Tom approached him one day, saying that he was the son of Emmy Cowan's estranged brother. Noah had been so desperate for any kind of connection to another human being that he hadn't questioned it. Still, occasionally Tom's stare became sort of possessive, and even...predatory. Sometimes.

Noah scored nearly perfect on the practice test before his hunger started making him lightheaded. He had two more days until the Bazaar opened again, but he'd starve before then. He had no other choice but to back home—not that it was *his* home—and find someone to blow for a twenty. There were always some tweaked-out druggie closet-cases around to hit up. They consumed more when they got off, so it was lucrative for both Noah and Tim. As much as he hated doing it, Noah refused to let himself feel ashamed. It was survival, pure and simple.

As he walked home later, Noah passed by Sanctuary just like he did every time he went to the library. And each time, he remembered the masked man who suggested there might be a job for Noah inside. Hell, the guy probably just wanted Noah to come in because he thought he was pretty. It had been a nice fantasy, but Noah didn't believe a word of it. It was rare for businesses to have enough capital to employ an in-house engineer to keep their tech up and running. Still, every time Noah walked by, he wondered if he'd given up before he even tried.

Tom lived in a ramshackle house on the edge of a former residential district that hadn't survived the last purge. No one had bothered to claim the land and redevelop, so people like Tom and his ilk had colonized it, squatting in buildings in various stages of disrepair. The front door rocked on its hinges as Noah swung it open to reveal stained tan carpeting and puke green walls that were peeling enough to expose the sheetrock beneath the paint. The sickly sweet smell of ganja was a physical cloud in the hallway, so Noah followed it into the dark den with its blackout curtains and psychedelic tapestries.

Tom lounged on the threadbare couch with two men who were obviously sampling the wares, and a woman was asleep—or unconscious—in the recliner that hadn't reclined since they'd found it on the side of the road. Tom looked over and gave him an oily grin.

"Eyy, Noah, my dude! Have you been at the fuckin' library this whole time?"

With a sigh, Noah half sat, half fell into the only empty chair left. "Yep. Killed my practice test though. I'll be ready for my level twos. I only came home because...I got hungry."

Tom took a sip of his lager and eyed Noah for a moment, before jerking his chin at the guy to his left. "I'm sure Adam here can help you out."

Noah's stomach rebelled, and he had to swallow down the urge to vomit air—because that's all he had in his stomach—but a guy had to eat. At least Adam was somewhat attractive, built like a tank, with a razor-sharp jawline and a crooked nose, but he also looked like he could get mean with very little provocation.

"My cuz here needs some work to make a little extra cash," Tom said to Adam. Some kind of silent communication must have happened to inform Adam just exactly what kind of work Tom meant, because Adam gave Noah a long onceover and licked his lips.

Fuck. The guy was definitely down for it, and Noah should be happy because he would get to eat but, *fuck.* Noah stood up and headed for the door, looking over his shoulder and raising a brow until Adam got the picture and followed him. As he climbed the stairs, with Adam's fingers brushing the top of his ass, Noah hated himself just a little bit more.

Tonight I am a creature. A man but not a man. Who dreams of nothing but murder.

Tuesday, the Bazaar was swamped. Noah sold half the inventory he'd brought from the crypt, and he should have been flying high on the accomplishment, his full belly, and the wad of cash in his pocket, but he was just...numb. All he could think of was the feeling of Adam's beefy hands on his skull, pulling his hair, and Noah wondered why he did it.

He had no one. No family, not really, no real friends, only people who seemed to want to use him, so why the hell did he fight so hard not to starve. Why didn't he save himself the trouble, and his jaw the strain, and just go fall off a bridge somewhere.

Shaking his head, he stuffed his remaining tech into his duffel. How fucking melodramatic. He'd never been suicidal...not really. Honestly, he'd always felt like there was something just offstage, waiting in the wings, something that he was meant to do but couldn't quite see the full picture yet. Some days it was the only thing that kept him from knotting sheets together.

He piled up his boxes and crates behind an old food stand from the bygone days of the amusement park and hoped no one would steal them before next Tuesday. The back of his neck prickled as he bent to pick up his duffel, so he spun around and scanned the almost empty Bazaar. There was no one near. No one, except for a big white cat.

This time, the coincidence of seeing the cat again made Noah's hair stand on end. He was half convinced he'd been hallucinating the creature this whole time. His fingers clenched on the leather strap of his bag, but he tried to act like he wasn't afraid he was losing his mind.

"Hey, there, um...cat. I don't know how you keep finding me. In fact, I'm ninety-five percent sure I'm seeing things. I'm surprised you haven't gone home by now. Hell, I'm surprised you're still alive." Noah scrubbed his hands over his face, then shook his head. "I'm surprised I'm still talking to a gods-be-damned cat."

The creature meowed, then slinked over and wove its way between and around Noah's legs, leaving long white hairs all over his jeans. He brushed off the denim-myolene blend and glared at the cat. "Yeah, thanks for that."

The cat purred and let out another plaintive moan.

"Ugh... I know that look too well. You're hungry, yeah? All right, then, follow me. Today, we eat like princes."

Eating like princes for Noah meant one of the mobile kitchens that frequented the park. He ordered some falafel, with curry chicken and rice, and hauled it all over to a picnic table. He sat down on the table part, while bracing his feet on the bench. Inexplicably, the cat followed him like it thought it was people. With a sigh, Noah spread out a napkin and spooned some chicken onto it for the cat, who eagerly wolfed it down, snarling a little as it chewed.

"Easy, killer," he said with a laugh. "Don't choke. Damn, you must've been starving. Been there, pal. Hey, at least you found a generous benefactor to keep you in curry, and you didn't even have to blow anybody to get money."

As if it understood, the cat froze. It stopped eating and stared at him, blinking slowly. It sat back on its haunches, ignoring the food, and waited, as if it expected him to continue. Embarrassed about talking to a cat, Noah gave an agitated wave of his hand.

"It's nothing. When you're homeless, you do what you need to do to get by. Every day I see people who are way worse off than me, so I try not to complain."

The cat padded closer, curling up and pressing against the side of Noah's thigh, purring. Noah stroked its back, running his fingers through the soft fur, and felt the knobby bumps of its spine as it arched up to chase his touch. Looking down at the cat, Noah noticed something he'd never seen before—a flash of black on the inside of its ear.

"Hey, what's this?" he asked, as if the cat was going to answer him. He swiped a finger along the pink, paper-thin skin of the cat's inner ear. It was ink. A tattoo. He knew that animals were often tattooed with ID numbers by shelters, or even their owners, but this marking was unusual. It was a glyph of a small, five-pointed crown. Beneath it, letters spelled out a word he didn't recognize. "I wonder what this means. *Basti*."

When he said it, the cat whipped his head around to stare up at him, and it let a garbled little growl. It sounded so disgruntled that Noah had to laugh. Obviously at some point, someone had cared about this cat enough to mark it, but he'd seen it on the streets too many times for it to be anything other than a stray.

"Is that your name, then? Basti? It's cute."

The cat narrowed its eyes, exhaled sharply through its nose, then mewed and went back to the curry chicken. That, apparently, was that.

While Basti inhaled his food, Noah ate at a more sedate pace, savoring the feeling of, for once, not being hungry. He looked at the cat, who in turn watched him. It was lithe and willowy, but not skinny. Its bones didn't protrude past its thick coat, so it had to be fed with some regularity.

"I wonder where you normally get your food," Noah said before he could quell the impulse. He sighed, setting down his now-empty food carton. "I know I must seem like some freaky stranger who speaks to you as if you were human, in a language you couldn't possibly understand but...I don't have many people—or animals, I guess—in my life, so I just can't help myself. You're safe." Noah didn't know if he meant that the cat was safe for him to talk to, or that the cat was safe with him. Maybe both.

"I have to go home. It will be dark soon." The last place he wanted to be was Tom's, but it wasn't safe on the streets at night. "You should go on back to wherever you normally sleep and eat. Trust me, where I'm going isn't anywhere you want to be."

Noah tossed their trash into a nearby agri-dump receptacle, and set off west, toward Tom's. The cat jumped down from the picnic table and followed. Noah sighed heavily, because with his work done and his belly finally full, all he wanted to do was lie down on his lumpy mattress and sleep for a week.

"Shoo! Get out of here! Trust me, you don't want to go where I'm going."

Basti grumbled and sat back on his haunches. As Noah continued through the rapidly darkening park, he pretended he didn't know the precocious feline was still following him.