

STRAY: Chapter Nine

by J.K. Hogan

When Sebastian had let himself into his flat through the humiliating pet door, he'd paced aimlessly for hours, wondering how the hell he was supposed to get a human to take him in as a stray cat—these days, a creature more despised than even rats. Finally he'd curled up into a furry ball of exhaustion and woke at dawn the next day. The first thing that popped into his mind was Noah.

Sebastian had already interacted with Noah in his *Felis* form, and even though he'd wiped the guy's memory of seeing him at Sanctuary, Noah would remember the big white cat. Since he knew that Noah went to the Bazaar every Tuesday, Sebastian had followed him, and gotten a meal out of the deal.

He'd always thought that getting involved with a human in any way was a dangerous game of chicken, so he didn't quite understand what Nikhil was trying to do by forcing it. Sebastian supposed that *Feliscindae* had to get close to humans long enough to mate but every single time, it was a risk. Of exposure. Of labs and experiments. Of extermination. The classic Frankenstein Effect.

A shudder rippled through Sebastian's body, starting at his whiskers and ending with a rattle of his plume-like tail.

But things didn't seem that much safer for Noah than for a stray cat, or a *Feliscindo* for that matter. Humans often liked to talk to animals, and Noah was no exception. Some of what he spoke about, the things he had to do to survive, made Sebastian's skin crawl and his gut burn with rage. There were so many evil humans out in the world, so why must life be so hard for a kind-hearted kid—*man*—such as Noah?

Sebastian had gathered from their one-sided conversation that the place Noah was staying wasn't a safe one. Initially, he'd been happy to find that Noah wasn't on the streets every night, but his instincts were telling me that this *Tom* person's place might be worse, so he followed Noah even after he'd told him to stay. Against his will and better judgment, Sebastian had formed an attachment to the guy and he couldn't stand the thought of him being hurt. And now that he had more information about Noah, there was absolutely nothing Sebastian could do for him because he was trapped inside his own body.

He followed Noah to a tiny slum-district, to another row house on a different street from the first one he'd followed him to. This house was much more worn down and in need of repair, but Sebastian had a feeling the so-called *owners* of the houses here were nothing more than squatters who'd gotten there first.

Sebastian made a note of which house Noah went into, but he didn't try to follow him inside. Something told him he might go insane if he saw Noah being mistreated when he was unable to help. Impotent fury welled up inside his chest, directed at the Praesidium for following him, at Nikhil for blindly following orders, but mostly at Arliss.

Once Noah had disappeared, Sebastian began the short walk back to his flat. Once inside, he went straight to the bathroom and jumped onto the counter. He settled into the sink so he could get as close to the mirror as possible, because he needed to confirm with his own eyes what Nikhil had done to him. He cocked his head and rotated his ear forward. Sure enough, there it was, the five-pointed crown of the house of Locke, along with the loathed nickname, the black ink a stark contrast to the pink paper-thin skin of the inside of his ear.

That fucking bastard. Nikhil had probably only been following Arliss's orders. Arliss knew how much Sebastian disliked the diminutive, how it made him feel like a snot-nosed kid, which was no doubt exactly why he'd made Nikhil brand him as such. *Gods-be-damned, what the hell am I going to do?*

Sebastian had a brief moment of self-pity—and, okay, terror—before he decided he was going to do exactly what he did every day. He would spend some time at the club, and then go on patrol. He couldn't exactly perform his duty as an envoy but he could watch, and he could keep an ear to the ground. He wouldn't be a cat forever...he hoped.

The back door from the stairwell into the club didn't have a pet door of course, and wasn't loose enough for Sebastian to push it open, so he waited until one of the employees exited to take out the trash. Then he darted inside before the door swung shut. He trotted through the back halls and across one of the three dance floors until he found Shine's favored booth. He'd have spotted the man a mile away, as his mohawk had been dyed neon green recently.

Sebastian hopped right up onto the vinyl bench, and then on top of the table. Shine's eyes bugged out of his head and he set down his drink with a thud. "Tha hell? Oi, Costa! I think we need an exterminator."

Sebastian grumbled deep in his chest and stared at Shine until the man began to fidget.

Shine squinted. "I know those eyes."

Cocking his head, Sebastian tweaked his ear back and forth until Shine gingerly pinched it between his thumb and forefinger so he could read the tattoo.

"Basti... Well, I'll be damned. Bloody hell, man, what are you doing here in Felis form? You trying to get yourself killed?"

Sebastian dropped down into sphynx position and laid his chin on his paws, then hissed. Thank the gods Shine had seen him as a cat, so he recognized him after a bit of a nudge, but Sebastian had no idea how to communicate the extent of what had happened.

Shine rubbed his chin, narrowing his eyes at Sebastian. "This ain't like you, man. You can't shift or something?"

Sebastian pawed at his arm.

"Fuck. That stinks of Mage shenanigans. Let me guess, your daddy is behind this somehow."

Sebastian swatted at him again. The man was a lot smarter than he'd given him credit for.

"Goddamn. Is it permanent?" Shine asked.

Keeping still, Sebastian merely blinked, because that was too complicated a question for him to answer with cat charades. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd come to the club—it wasn't like there was much he could do. Perhaps he'd just needed someone else to know what had happened to him so he didn't just disappear into the ether, and Shine had been his best bet.

As a rule, Sebastian generally kept to himself, which was odd considering the Feliscindae were generally social among their own kind. But this not being able to communicate thing was making him realize that he actually spoke to people a lot more than he thought. So much for being a recluse, which is what he'd intended when he left Roth. With a sigh that came out more like a sneeze in his current form, he rose gracefully to his feet and gave Shine a long look.

Shine shook his head and clucked his tongue. "Damn, that is some shit, man. I knew Arliss hated you, but that is straight cold-blooded." He looked Sebastian right in his cat eyes. "You find yourself in trouble, come get me, you hear?"

Sebastian nodded.

“And whatever it is Arliss wants you to do to get back to yourself—because I know there’s *something*—just do it, mate. We need you around here.”

If Sebastian had the ability, he might’ve shed a tear over the unusually heartfelt words from the big brute. They shared one more long look before Sebastian leapt off the table and dashed through the darkened main room, squeezing out the front door behind someone who was leaving. Trotting along the sidewalk, his feet headed west without consulting the rest of him. Before he knew it, he was across the street from Noah’s current residence—not even Noah called it a home—watching from a sedate distance.

Sebastian didn’t expect to see Noah during the day—he seemed like he spent as many daylight hours away from that place as he could—so he was startled when Noah burst out of the front door and hit the sidewalk at a dead run. He didn’t even bother to shut the door.

Heart in his throat, Sebastian took off after him, knowing he’d never catch up, but hoped to keep Noah in his sight long enough to find out where he was going and make sure he was okay. He cut through the southwest quadrant of the park, which contained footpaths over grassy rolling hills, until it spilled him back out onto the street.

He jaywalked diagonally across an intersection, and entered a shabby brown building that Sebastian had never paid much attention to. Sebastian thought maybe Noah had sensed him following, but he didn’t pause before he disappeared inside. Thanking the gods that his mind wasn’t altered in the shift, he searched for something that would tell him what the building was.

The sign, when he found it, was cracked with paint peeling off in chips, and it hung crooked from a post at the southeast corner of the building. *Library*. Sebastian was astonished—he didn’t think those even existed anymore. As he settled in to wait across the street from the library, he thought that Noah must be *very* interested in whatever the vestige of bygone days contained, because he stayed in there. All. Day.

Sebastian remained crouched at the edge of the tree on the perimeter of the park, across the street from the looming relic of a library for several hours. He kept a watchful eye on the comings and goings on the street, the slow foot traffic and sporadic vehicles, to make sure no one went in after Noah. The general population couldn’t afford personal vehicles so the average Beltranian either walked or utilized public transit. The only cars going by were undoubtedly owned by the Nouveau Elite, Beltranian society’s rich upper crust.

Sebastian realized too late that he had been so focused on Noah that he’d failed to watch his own back. The fur along his spine rose just a moment before a figure leapt out from the shadows. A man in black coveralls loomed over him, and Sebastian couldn’t identify him because he was wearing a full-face rebreather mask. He only guessed that it was a man based on size and build. The jumpsuit had a bull’s-eye logo right over the center of the man’s chest.

Cat-Catchers!

Sebastian hissed and darted between the Catcher’s legs. The faceless man raised a shout to his comrades no doubt in the trees just beyond view. Sebastian didn’t pause to check, he scrambled through the woods like he had a dog on his tail—though truthfully that would’ve been far better than his current predicament.

A leather-and-steel-gloved hand seized him by the scruff, and Sebastian immediately concentrated on starting the shift, only nothing happened. Because he was a cat now. *Only* a cat. And as such, prey. He screeched and swatted at his captor, who merely stared at him through the

impenetrable shield of his mask. Before he could tear at clothing and draw blood, Sebastian was stuffed into a burlap sack and dragged roughly over the ground for some interminable amount of time.

Eventually he landed with a thud onto some hard surface. After wiggling around for a moment, he realized that the bag wasn't sealed in any way, which allowed him to claw his way out. It didn't matter, because he was in the back of some kind of vehicle. It was almost pitch-black inside because there were no windows, but he could see just fine. It was filled with cats.

With a cursory sniff, Sebastian could tell that these were all real cats, *just* cats. But the Cat-Catchers wouldn't know the difference. They were mostly independent contractors who sometimes formed small groups they called guilds. They sold their services to the highest bidders, which meant sometimes the cats would be headed to labs for genetic testing and experimentation, while others went straight to the incinerator.

There might be a small hope for Sebastian to escape if he got sent to a lab, but he had no way of knowing where his eventual destination would turn out to be. No, he had to do something fast. Nikhil had promised he would be safe, that he wouldn't be harmed, but where was the White Mage now?

Wait. That's it. The realization dawned suddenly, like a flash of lightning in the dead of night. Nikhil had left a failsafe, hadn't he? The summoning spell. But without a voice it would be difficult, and Sebastian might not know if it worked until the last moment. All he could do was try. He sank down into sphinx and closed his eyes, gathering every ounce of enchantment that existed within him.

Lys obscuri morkede. They seemed like such simple words. Sebastian had no idea if his power was great enough, but it was his only hope.

Mere moments later there was a jarring impact, tossing the cats around. They jostled to right themselves as the vehicle spun, slammed into something else, and stopped. The second impact had loosened the tailgate—apparently the vehicle was an ancient pick-up truck with its bed sealed by a camper top—leaving the cats a route for escape. A little bruised but no worse for wear, Sebastian hopped out and looked around.

It seemed as though the driver had lost control and jumped the curb, then spun out when he over corrected, and got rammed by a driver going the opposite direction. Sebastian sprung up to the hood of the car, wincing at the heat from the engine. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like the drivers were only unconscious, rather than dead.

A flash of movement to the right drew his attention, and when he turned his head, Sebastian caught a glimpse of a black-clad, white-haired figure disappearing into an alley. Nikhil. He had done this.

Hell of a response time.

After the Catcher incident, Sebastian trudged back to his post across from the library, hoping Noah hadn't left while he was gone. Luckily, Noah emerged at sundown, but he didn't head back to his cousin's place like Sebastian suspected he would. Instead, he dashed across the street and headed straight into the heart of the park, eschewing footpaths for tromping straight through the woods. He was a man on a mission, casting looks in every direction as if he were being chased by a pack of demons.

And what if he is? Sebastian, following at a much slower pace, sniffed the air, but no unfamiliar scents reached him. Still, ever since he'd met Noah, Sebastian had sensed...something about him that seemed to invite trouble. People wanted him, either for his blood, or his body, or for what he could do for them, and Sebastian hadn't quite figured out exactly why. But as much as Noah inspired the prey drive in others, he inspired protective instincts in Sebastian. And so the white cat followed the young man into the woods.

Noah ran like a bat out of hell, only slowing when he tripped over rocks and tree roots. Noah was crying—Sebastian could smell his tears—so he sped up to keep pace with him, just out of sight.

At first Sebastian assumed Noah would take the path back to his cousin's house, but instead, he went off trail in the direction of the older part of the park, toward the cemetery. In fact, it looked as if the old boneyard was his actual destination. He skirted the edge, following the wrought-iron fence until he came to a dilapidated crypt.

The cemetery was in itself a relic; no one buried the dead anymore. At least not in Beltrane. Nobody came to the little city of the dead any longer. It was obsolete. The land would eventually be reclaimed when capital once again flowed through the economy. But for now, Sebastian thought the concrete and stone vaults would call to street kids like Noah as a place to hide out, somewhere they wouldn't be found.

Sure enough, Noah stopped in front of one of the moldering crypts, flicked open a rusted padlock that was obviously only for show, and pushed ajar the heavy, rotting wood door. Sebastian darted through the doorway just before the thick panel swung shut. He slinked along the perimeter of the small room, keeping to the shadows that hovered at the fringes—the only light being from a few holes where the concrete had crumbled and the moonlight shone through.

He recognized Noah's worn leather duffel, the one he used to carry his merchandize to the Bazaar. There was the threadbare wool blanket, and a couple of changes of clothes stacked in a corner. What it looked like was a bug-out stash, provisions in case Noah needed to leave the place he was staying in a hurry. Maybe he had.

Noah knelt in the far corner and fussed with his possessions, moving things around but not accomplishing much of anything. When he stood up again, his back was to Sebastian, but the tension he held in his shoulders was visible all the same. He swayed, then slumped against the wall, just leaning there for a moment before he turned and pressed his face against the stone.

Sebastian could see the fine tremors rippling his muscles as he let out an inhuman wail and slid to the ground. Feeling impotent beyond all reason, Sebastian emerged from the shadows to approach the sobbing young man. What had happened to him this time? Sebastian was almost afraid to know, and almost glad he couldn't ask. He did the only thing he could think of; he rubbed his body along Noah's legs, which had been drawn up against his chest, and purred as if his life depended on it.

Noah stilled as if startled, but Sebastian smiled inwardly as a hand came down to stroke his back. There was a long pause, then a watery snuffle.

"You just keep showing up," Noah said, his voice wavering with more tears not yet shed. "Maybe you're like my guardian angel or something."

With a distinctly feline sigh, Sebastian curled up next to him. He hated to tell Noah that angels were no more all good than demons were all bad. They were yet another species of Supernatural like any other, and had little-to-nothing to do with grace or human religion. Truth be told, Sebastian would sooner trust a demon with his life than an angel since angels were, as a general rule, quite self-serving.

“I can’t... I shouldn’t go back there, Basti. But I don’t know what else to do. I’m afraid.”

Sebastian’s body was coiled with tension from being so helpless, so paralyzed by the limitations of his form, that he couldn’t even ask Noah to elaborate. What, *what*, had happened to him? Who did Sebastian need to kill to set it right?

That thought, more than any other, shocked him into clarity and galvanized him into action. Noah couldn’t stay here in this dank prison for much longer. The nights weren’t nearly as cold as they were back when he’d found Noah sleeping in the park, but the cool stone of the walls and the earthen floor of the crypt would act like a root cellar, trapping in the cold, and Noah would freeze to death before he even realized it.

Sebastian rose to his feet and padded over to the door. He pawed at it, looking back at Noah, and meowed as fiercely as he could muster.

Noah sniffed, then scrubbed his face with his sleeve, though his cheeks remained ruddy from crying. “What is it? You need out? I was hoping...I thought you’d stay with me for a bit.”

Sebastian meowed again, louder.

Noah stood, groaning like an elderly man, then opened the door with a weary sigh. “Go on then.”

Sebastian trotted a few feet, then turned and sat, waiting.

Noah eyed him warily. “Aren’t you going?”

Sebastian meowed again, for lack of a better—or *any*—way to communicate.

Noah regarded him solemnly, then his gaze flicked back to the vault, then back to Sebastian, who could see the very moment understanding dawned. “You want me to go with you?” he asked, seemingly more to himself than Sebastian. “Or...you don’t want me to stay here.”

Sebastian let out a plaintive cry, louder than all the others had been.

Noah smiled then, dimples winking. “You were worried about me! I wasn’t going to sleep here. It will get much too cold for that. You’re right, I’d probably never wake up,” he said, as if he’d been having a normal discussion, instead of a one-sided conversation with a cat.

“I was going to head over to North Bridge. There will at least be other people there. And fire for warmth.”

“North Bridge” sounded like a city district but in reality, it was an actual bridge at the northern corner of the park. A colony of homeless gathered there, utilizing its shelter and relative isolation from other areas of Beltrane. Somehow Sebastian knew Noah didn’t intend to *live* there, but he would go there to weather the cold night.

“You could come with me,” Noah said with some hesitation.

Sebastian gave a soft, twittering meow and trotted back to sit at Noah’s feet, which he hoped Noah would take as agreement.

Again came that glittering smile. Noah disappeared into the crypt and reemerged shortly with his backpack and the old blanket. “Let’s go then,” he said, and started to walk.

By the time they got to North Bridge it was nearly midnight, but the camp was still alive with activity. Several rubbish fires dotted the riverbank under the bridge, and people of varying ages gathered around them, some talking and laughing, some singing, some cooking food. Sebastian didn’t miss the quick wave of silence that passed over them when Noah showed himself, just a pause in breath, a stilling of the air around them, before the din started up again. He wondered if Noah had noticed.

Noah seemed to regard all of them warily, that hunted look never leaving his baby-faced countenance. He chose a spot near enough to one of the fires to stay warm, but well away from

any other people, and spread out his blanket, making a pallet on the mossy bank. Settling in for the night, he laid down on the worn material, pulling the excess over his lower half to seal in the warmth, and he stuffed his backpack under his head as a pillow.

Sebastian curled up by his shoulder and purred while Noah stroked his back. “I can’t offer you a steady food source, or even safety...” Noah began. “But I feel better when you’re with me. It’s selfish, but it is what it is.”

Sebastian’s cold heart expanded, and he nuzzled Noah’s arm, making small chuffing noises that he hoped were reassuring. He couldn’t explain how much his cat-self wanted to be Noah’s...and maybe even his man-self—but he couldn’t think that just yet...or ever, really, with a human.

Noah shivered, but Sebastian didn’t think it was from the cold, as the temperature hadn’t dropped too low just yet. As if in confirmation, Noah spoke again. “I hate being around strangers. I always feel like they’re watching me, waiting for something, or that they’re out to get me. It’s like they can tell there’s something not quite normal about me.

And is there?

“There are always strangers in Tom’s house, and maybe...” Noah swallowed thickly. “Maybe it’s because I look younger than I am, or because they’ve...paid me, in the past. But several of them c-came after me.”

Sebastian’s rapidly-beating feline heart lodged somewhere in his throat. A gang of druggies had attacked his Noah and there was nothing he could’ve done—nothing he could do—to protect him. And then Sebastian heard his own thoughts ringing in his ears and he couldn’t believe the direction they’d taken. *His* Noah? When had he started considering this human his responsibility? He couldn’t blame Nikhil’s curse, because he’d felt it happening even before then.

Noah sniffed, and burrowed deeper into his blanket. “I barely got away before things...got out of hand. And now I’m out one place to stay. Again.” He treated Sebastian to a sorrowful gaze. “So you see, I’m really not a good person to imprint on.”

Sebastian meowed, which was the closest he could come to arguing. He thought he’d known rage before in his life, but the fire consuming his gut rivaled the nuclear burnout that had caused the last purge. A bunch of stoned cretins had tried to force themselves on a younger, penniless man, because they knew he could do little to fight back. Once Sebastian broke Nikhil’s curse, he would hunt down every last one of them and rip their throats out with his bare hands—and he’d do it with a smile on his face.