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THE  
LOST  
SOULS  
AMIE JORDAN

Chicken  
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*For Major –  
the most loyal wolf I know.*

*Now this is the Law of the Jungle —  
as old and as true as the sky;  
And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper,  
but the Wolf that shall break it must die.  
As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk  
the Law runneth forward and back —  
For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf,  
and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.*

Rudyard Kipling, 'The Law of the Jungle' (1894)

# I

## OREN

Oren stared up at the dark bedroom ceiling.

Every night he relived the same memories in his nightmares: Sage covered in blood, gasping for air, and he couldn't save her.

Even now, the thought still made him feel physically sick. The . . . *helplessness* he'd felt. The realization that his magic, so integral to his very being, which had never failed him, had simply gone like someone had flicked a switch.

She could've died. And that made his chest feel so heavy he could hardly breathe.

The way her hand had grappled with his collar, pulling him close, telling him to let her die, let her become a ghost, let her stay young with him forever? The fact that for even the briefest of moments he'd considered it made him feel equally as sick.

He'd never been perturbed by death his whole killing career, he had no right to be afraid of it that night. But he just couldn't face the finality of it at that moment. The abrupt end to . . . *what if?*

Anyway, he'd saved her. Against all the odds, he'd managed to keep her alive. And wondered every day since whether he'd made a mistake. Had he made the right decision by saving her life? Or should he have let her freeze herself in her youthful, ghostly body forever? He still didn't know.

*I don't regret getting to watch her live*, he'd told P when they'd sat up quietly talking that night, and he'd meant it. But both of them knew that decision came with a cost. Werewolves aged like humans, so Sage was the only one of them who would grow old and frail. It was an impossible decision, and every side lost.

Oren sighed and glanced at the clock on his bedside table. Barely four. The sky was still dark outside his window, but he wouldn't get back to sleep now. He kicked off the covers and grabbed a T-shirt from his drawer. He pulled his bedroom door shut behind him with a soft click and crossed the hallway to the door that was never fully closed. He nudged it gently with his shoulder to ease it silently open.

Of course, she was in there. He could scent she was from across the hall, and hear the slow, rhythmic breathing of her sleep. But he just needed to see her without the gouge in her chest and the lingering scent of blood that haunted his dreams. Her back was to the door, hair tied in a knot on the top of her head. She wore some silky designer pyjamas Berion had gifted her in a Yuletide box.

'She's still here,' a quiet voice said from behind.

‘I know.’ He pulled the door shut and turned to face the silvery ghost.

Only the top half of P’s body was visible through the carpeted floor of the landing, her legs dangling underneath. She was watching him with a suppressed smile.

‘She’ll still be there tomorrow, and the day after.’ Her eyes filled again with that look that understood him all too well. ‘So will I. We’re not going anywhere, Oren.’

The lump in his throat was back. He swallowed. He hated it when she made him feel so human.

She gave him a small, encouraging smile, like she knew speech was impossible. ‘Toast?’

He nodded, and she disappeared through the floor into her kitchen.

A couple of weeks into Sage’s recovery, they’d squeezed on to the sofa in their old apartment, Berion and Hozier too, for pizza and Netflix.

‘There just isn’t enough room, is there?’ P had sighed.

‘Maybe we should get a bigger one,’ Oren had said.

He’d meant a sofa, but the next day P had thrown colour-coded printouts from a Downside estate agent on to the coffee table. And that was that.

Now he lived in a four-bedroom, three-storey townhouse with a large kitchen for P and garden for the BBQ parties she was planning.

He lived with his friends.

*His friends.*

People he cared about, who cared about him.

It horrified him.

Every day when he woke from that nightmare, he realized that he'd allowed himself to become so attached that when he'd thought Sage was about to die, he'd known he'd rather die too than allow her to leave him alone again. Bereft of the acceptance and understanding she represented. A feeling he'd thought for so many years he'd neither wanted nor deserved.

He hated himself for it. Hated the vulnerability of it.

How many would target her if they knew she was his weakness, in revenge for death sentences he'd passed on their loved ones? What bounty had he placed on her head?

He heard the tinkling of cutlery in P's pristine kitchen, and thanked whatever gods might be listening that only one of his two beloved housemates still had a life force to be taken. If he had to face the possibility of losing both of them—

He shook his head. He was Oren Rinallis. He feared nothing.

But as he set off down the stairs in hunt of his breakfast, he couldn't shake the feeling that it might not be so true after all.