

Jesserith the Lost

Part 1 - A new start

Light rain from a cloudy sky. The whispering sound of wind rustling through the leaves. Cold ground pressing against naked skin. A dizzying, sickening feeling of vertigo.

The world was all wrong, out of place. Like a bad dream that just kept on going after you'd woken up.

She tried to roll over to sit up. But her body felt like someone else's, muscles barely cooperating as she tried to move. Head aching, sight blurry. There was a body on the ground, torn to pieces, covered in marks by claws and fangs. Somewhere deep inside her, there was a tinge of fear, but her mind couldn't quite grasp it. Crawling over to the body was painful and disorienting, as if she hadn't moved for years. The body was that of a young man with short, dark hair and a scraggly beard, his eyes glassy and dead. There was something familiar about him, something deeply unsettling about his face. Who was he?

A sudden thought and realisation hit. She's wearing the body of a woman. What a funny word to use. "Wearing". She was dressed in lithe, colorful and flowing clothing. Quite a lot of jewelry and adornments. She used her hands to feel her own head. Half-shaved, pointy ears with jewelry. Why could she not remember what she looked like? That's the kind of thing one should remember is it not?

But the weather was cold and questions had to wait. Most of the dead man's clothing was ruined beyond repair, but he was wearing a thick, brown poncho that he would never need again. Without hesitating she took the poncho and wrapped it around herself. It helped, but not much. Looking around, there was only deep forest as far as the eye could see. The only thing she could do was to pick a direction and start walking. But before leaving, she picked through the man's stuff – what little remained thereof. A water flask, a knife and a thick hat he had stashed away. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. She took a moment to consider her surroundings. It looked like the man had been coming from the southwest. It was impossible to say if she herself had come from that direction, or

where the man had been going. But going back that way seemed to be the best option, so she started walking.

It quickly dawned on her how severe her loss of memory was. Why couldn't she remember her own name? Who was she? She was obviously Javenian, and she could clearly remember the radiant cities of Javenna. So why couldn't she even recall her own sorcery? It was all deeply unsettling. A gnawing worry was growing somewhere in the back of her mind. But still she felt strangely calm, or perhaps just cold? There was little she could do about it any of it now though, she had to focus on getting to safety. Being caught out in the wilds during the night could be a death sentence.

As she traversed the deep woods, she was hit by a feeling of familiarity. Perhaps she - or both of them - had come through here before? Following this feeling, she soon came upon a small trail going through the forest, almost completely overgrown from years of disuse. It was rough and uneven, and the odd discomfort she felt in her own body made it all the more cumbersome. But soon enough, the massive, leafy trees opened up and revealed a small Lenorian village hidden deep in the forest. A handful of small wooden houses were clustered around a small creek, and there was a small bunch of tents set up on the far side of the creek. There was a scent of grilled game in the air, and all of a sudden she realized how hungry she was. Even this scent was familiar, and suddenly she was showered in brief memories - images from evenings around a fire, sharing food and stories. She had most certainly been here before.

Afternoon was turning into evening as she made her way down into the village, and she could not see many people around. A certain nervousness set in, making her doubt herself. What would she do if they remembered her? Could she tell them about the dead man? Would they ask about him? But her hunger was too great to ignore. She would just have to take the chance. As she came to the edge of the village, she saw an old woman carrying water. Just as she was about to raise her hand in greeting, the old woman saw her, grimaced and spat in her direction, muttering some Lenorian curses under her breath as she wandered off. Either the village didn't like outsiders much, or they had unpleasant memories.

Exploring further into the village, she came upon two men sitting by a fire,

whittling away at some pieces of wood. Above the fire was a healthy piece of morsel, slowly roasting on a spit. The younger of the two was the one who noticed her first, his eyes growing large in recognition. As the older one noticed her his reaction was far more subdued, only nodding to greet her.

“I thought you left for Idon Kardam already, miss. Together with that lad from down south?” he asked, his voice thick and drawling. She hesitated, unsure of what approach to take. She had to buy time to figure out what had happened to her.

“I-am-uh”- she tried speaking, but like her muscles, her tongue refused to cooperate. In her head, the words were clear as day, but her mouth refused to speak them. Embarrassed, she tried again, slowly “I-we were attacked. In the forest, by animal. He lost me, I came back here.”

The old one’s brow furrowed. “That doesn’t sound too good. I did warn you that these are wild lands. But I’m sure he’s fine, miss,” he got up, and took the morsel off the roasting spit. “Why don’t you join us? You must be mighty cold...” His offer was more polite than kind. But she happily accepted and sat down by the fire. The young one averted his gaze, visibly blushing even in the fading light. He was hardly handsome, but not ugly either, just a plain village boy on the cusp of adulthood. One look at him told her that the boy would probably tell her whatever she’d want to know. But she had to be smart about it. The old one offered her a piece of the morsel with some cooked beans in a bowl. Simple, but heavenly after the long, cold walk. Thankfully, the old one didn’t ask many questions, but was content with just eating his own meal in peace. The soft warmth of the fire and the food soon made her doze off a bit, and as she gazed into the crackling flame she slowly drifted into sleep. Suddenly, there was a flood of images and memories. All manner of places and people from all around Lenori flashed through her mind. With a jolt she was wide awake once more, disoriented by the sudden assault of impressions. Were those memories? They couldn’t be, could they?

“Looks like you might be ready to get some sleep there miss?” the old one said, with a gentle, amused smile. It was true, suddenly she felt unbearably tired, as if she hadn’t slept for weeks.

“Yes...would be very. Pleasant.” She still struggled with words coming out wrong, like her mouth had never used the language before. “Is there a, em, bed to use for me?”

The old one took out a long pipe and knocked it against the bench he sat on. “Mmh, don’t know about a proper bed in a house... But there’s a spare bed in the stables out back that’s mighty comfy with a few blankets. Yerek here can take you there and get some blankets for you,” he said, nodding at the young one.

“Oh-I, uh, sure thing, uncle,” the boy said visibly flustered, still failing to hide his straying gaze.

“No funny business now, you hear? Your mother would skin the both of us,” the old one added with a derisive look. Yerek just nodded meekly, ashamed that his uncle could read him so well.”

“This way, uh, miss,” he said, motioning for her to follow. He was completely silent as he led her to a small stable, where a herd of goats were settling in for sleep. A small wooden bed with a primitive mattress was pushed up against the wall in a corner. It looked far from comfortable, but at that moment she would have accepted sleeping with the goats.

“Here’s the bed, miss. If you give me a moment, I’ll, em, get you some nice blankets,” he said, avoiding looking her in the eye. “Wouldn’t want...want you to sleep uncomfortably, I mean.”

She laughed to herself, almost felt bad for the poor boy. But she was much too tired for this, and simply laid down on the bed, almost falling asleep as soon as she her head hit the makeshift pillow. “Thank you Yerek,” she said softly, already drifting off to sleep. The next thing she knew was the feeling of soft blankets and pelts being laid on top of her. She wrapped herself in their warmth, ready to forget the troubles of the day and accept the embrace of deep sleep. She barely heard as Yerek walked out, turned and whispered.

“I...think about that night a lot.”

At once, she woke up. But Yerek was gone already. What night was he talking about? What had she done? A deep feeling of guilt gripped her heart. She had to figure out what was going on. There was, after all, no way to undo anything right now. So she let herself slowly drift to sleep, leaving all the confusion behind.

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Her dreams were strange and vivid. Sweeping, elaborate dreams of Lenori and its deep forest. Uncountable people, horrible visages of war and pain, dark wilderness and stormy coasts. Strange visions of dark Serdanos and its horrid winters. Dazzling javenian vistas of colorful gardens, exotic pleasures and innumerable feasts. But also of blood and screams, of horrible chambers where dreadful, beautiful monsters dwelt. Ice cold eyes, shining in the dark. A name. Jesserith.

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She awoke in a cold sweat, with a dreadful, burning terror in the pit of her stomach. Instinctively, she had to get out. Crawling and stumbling she got out of the bed and into the cool air outside. Dawn was breaking in the east, a radiant, golden light cracking the clouds open. Sitting down against the wall, she breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the cool morning air. Suddenly she remembered a great many things, but they were too many and too dissonant. They didn't make sense. Memories of several lifetimes, in several nations, all blended together. Trying to grasp them were like trying to hold on to water, they were but elusive images that disappeared as soon as you looked too close. Suddenly, she was very thirsty.

So she made her way down to the small creek running through the village. Here and there were the faint sounds of households waking up for the day, but outside was still empty and quiet. As she reached the creek, she could see that the tents on the other side were a small camp of mountainborn. Here and there, people in the camp were stirring, slowly waking up with the sun. She knelt down by the water, and just as she was about to fill her water flask she finally saw her own face in the reflection of the water.

Her white hair was partially shaved, with decorative tattoos on the sides.

Across her right eye was the light blue swirl that marked her as a light sorceress. Sparkling makeup in blue and turquoise had been a bit smeared during the night. It was a beautiful face, no doubt. But it wasn't hers, she was sure of it. But if not hers, whose was it?

"Hi there?" the sound of a woman's voice shook her out of her trance. Looking up, she saw a mountainborn girl on the other side of the creek, probably a few years younger than herself, carrying a large ceramic jug. The girl's hair was wild and untamed, and she had a large pelt wrapped around her, obviously just out of bed.

"I...Hello."

"Are you alright there? You look a bit...spooked," the girl continued with a concerned look.

"...yeah. I am alright. Thank you." She really wasn't alright. But how could she explain what she felt?

"What's your name, stranger?" the girl's tone was playful, almost a little bit mocking.

For a moment, she panicked. She had no idea what her name was. On a whim, she offered the first name she could think of. "Jesserith. My name is Jesserith."

"You don't quite look like you're from around here," the girl said as she knelt down and started to fill the jug. "My name is Rechi. Do you want to come have some breakfast with us? We have plenty to spare."

"I..." She hesitated. On one hand, she felt like she needed to be on her own to figure things out. But on the other hand she really wanted something to eat. And somehow, she felt like the mountainborn wouldn't ask her any uncomfortable questions. After all, they were just some scruffy nomads. What was the worst that could happen? "I would like that, yes. Thank you," she finally said, trying to give the girl a relaxed smile. Even the act of smiling felt strange.

“Well then, come along!” Rechi exclaimed, obviously rather enthusiastic about the idea of such an exotic guest.

So she crossed the small wooden bridge that had been built over the creek and joined the Mountainborn. Together they walked into their camp, where more and more people were getting up from their bedding. Unsurprisingly, a Javenian in their midst attracted a lot of attention. Some seemed a bit apprehensive, but each and everyone greeted her with politeness, if not outright affection. She was sat down together with the others in a ring and introduced, and soon there were fresh flatbreads with honey and several small pots of strange mushes being passed around. It was a simple, but filling meal.

Luckily, Rechi and the others did not ask her many questions, but were content about telling of their own travels. There was a certain comfort in being lost in their stories, even for just a moment. But at one point she noticed that one of the elders was watching her intently. He was a wrinkled old man with a majestic beard decorated with a wealth of beads and dressed in colorful wraps and a heavy hood covered with painted symbols. There was nothing malicious or invasive in his gaze, but it still made her nervous, as if he was looking right through her.

For the rest of the meal, she tried to ignore him as best as she could. But once she knew she was being watched, she could no longer relax. When the meal was over and the camp members got up to start their doing for the day, she was more than ready to get up and leave. Rechi, however, asked her to come help out with the cleaning after breakfast, and after the hospitality the camp had extended, she couldn't very well refuse. The elder had disappeared, however, so once they got to work she started to relax again. Menial work took her mind off her own troubles for a while, and she wasn't in a hurry to return to the village. But suddenly, a man from the camp came and took Rechi aside, and whispered something to her. Rechi looked confused, but simply nodded.

“Jesserith?” Rechi said, looking a bit strangely at her guest. “Our elder would like to speak with you.”

“With me? But...why?” Jesserith said, not quite keen on the idea.

“I’m not sure... But he’s a sweet man. I’m sure he’s just curious,” Rechi said with a smile. “If you don’t mind?”

Jesserith hesitated. She didn’t really like the idea, but then again, what harm could befall her in a mountainborn camp? “I suppose it’s alright... Where is he?”

Rechi took her along to a low tent at the back of the camp, an old thing made up of treated hides and ropes. A bit of faintly blue smoke was rising through the top, and slight humming could be heard from inside.

“He’s in there. I’ll be out here when you are done,” Rechi said, sitting down on a log.

Jesserith opened the tent with a bit of apprehension. Inside, she could see the old man sitting in front of a small clay construction, inside of which a small fire was burning. He looked at her with hazy eyes as she entered, and motioned for her to take a place on the other side of the clay fireplace. So she sat down on some pillows, awkwardly avoiding his gaze. A few moments of tense silence passed before he spoke in a deep voice, rough as bark.

“Something is troubling you. Is it not?” he looked at her intently, but with concerned kindness.

She hesitated. He was absolutely right, but how could he possibly know? Exactly what did he know? Did he-

“It is written clearly on your face, inscribed into your very being,” he continued, strewing a pinch of some strange dust in the fire. “I can help you, if you should wish...?”

An icy hand gripped her stomach. “What...do you mean? What exactly is – what is that you think is wrong with me?”

He gazed at her for a moment with eyes that pierced like glass. Despite his old, wrinkled visage, there was a formidable air around him. “There are not quite words that I could use to explain it to you. Your being and your

flesh are...in conflict. Fighting each other. You do not seem to be your true self.”

As he spoke, the grip on her stomach grew stronger. His word rung just a bit too true. But how could this old mountainborn grandfather know how about such things? “How do you...know?”

“This too is hard to explain. But it is clear to me that you are lost, confused,” his voice grew fainter, almost sad. “Do you wish for me to help you on your path back?” he asked, and it was clear from his voice that this was no offer to be taken lightly. She hesitated. But she quickly realized that blindly fumbling along would get her nowhere. As much as it frightened her, this was her best option. So she nodded.

“Very well. I shall sprinkle a powder on the fire, and you should breathe in deep of the fumes. To most, this would do nothing...” He grew quiet as he brought out a small pouch from the shadows. “...but for you, it should bring clarity and truth. Are you ready?”

She didn't quite know how she could be ready, or what she should be ready for. But again, she nodded. The old man started humming a melody in a deep, low tone, deeper than she felt was humanly possible. Suddenly it felt like his voice was reverberating through the tent, making her very core vibrate. Little by little she felt herself calm down and relax as the melody carried her away. She barely noticed as the old man took a handful of a dark powder and carefully sprinkled it over the fire. Breathing deep, she felt a cool smoke fill her lungs and as she breathed out a vision flashed before her eyes.

She was walking through the woods, walking staff in hand. Talking to someone who was walking behind her. Turning, she saw the Javenian woman she was wearing, walking a few meters behind her. Suddenly, a loud shriek cut through the woods and the cracking sounds of breaking trees followed soon after. Something large, dark and grisly came thundering through the woods, a nightmare in thick fur. In the flash of an eye, the Javenian disappeared from sight and in panic, she started running for her life, stumbling over roots and pits. Then the horrible feeling of being torn, bitten and ripped like a toy. Exquisite, terrifying pain that

sent her spiraling into darkness. The next thing she sees is the Javenian woman running towards her own mangled body, lying on the ground. She desperately tries to fight it, but she is not strong enough. Reaching out to the Javenian, she rips the woman's being right out of her, and takes her place. For a short second, she looks at the body she just abandoned, dying before her very eyes. And then, darkness.

Suddenly she was back in the mountainborn's tent, but panic quickly took hold. With tears welling up in her eyes, she stumbled out of the tent, barely able to hold her balance. She couldn't even hear the confusion and alarm around her as she started running, as fast as her legs could carry her. Fear had her completely in its hold. Rechi started chasing her, but on pure impulse, she let loose her sorcery and in a flash of light she vanished into nothingness. Into the woods she ran, with reckless abandon through bushes and thicket.

Through her mind flashed a million images. Images from all the lives she had lived before and all the people she had been. So many moments of terror and joy, so much love, hate, fear and hope. All these mingled with the memory of the woman whose body she had taken. A lifetime of Javenian extravagance and abundance, showered in the best Javenna had to offer. Years of servitude to a frightening mistress, and bloody deeds carried out in darkness. The torrent of memories seemed endless, and finally she collapsed on the forest floor, weeping and crying desperately. She felt like throwing herself off a cliff, like jumping in a river and drowning herself, like cutting her throat open with a sharp rock. She so desperately wanted to die in that moment. But she didn't.

For what seemed like an eternity she laid there crying, until the images finally settled. By then, they were like a thick fog clouding her mind. But now, she knew the truth. She was Jesserith. Soul sorceress. Deserter of the Javenian council of Judgement and traitor to Javenna. For hundreds of years she had been running, taking new bodies as the old ones had failed. She had fathered and mothered children. She had created and destroyed lives. The lifeless body she had abandoned in the woods had been hers, in a perverted way. But all those memories were flowing together. She was all of them and none of them. This was not the first time she had taken another body, but something had gone wrong this time. As the tears dried

and her breath settled, she tried to sense who the person whose body she had taken was. But the shock had been too much, the memories too strong. There was, however, one thing that had stuck with her. Images of the Javenian stronghold being built in eastern Lenori. That was where she had been going before. Exactly why, she couldn't remember. But that was as good a goal as any right now. Suddenly, there was a rustling in the thicket. She bolted upright, certain that some predator had found her. But out of the thicket came Yerek, bow in hand. When he spotted her, he stopped, and for a moment they just looked at each other.

"I...heard you cry out," he started, awkwardly. "So I...tracked you here. Are you alright...?"

She smiled weakly at him, touched by his genuine, if misguided, show of caring. "Not quite. But I will be, I suppose," she said, her voice hoarse from the crying. Yerek came down and sat next to her in silence. Maybe he didn't know what to say, or he knew better than to say anything. In that moment, she felt like she didn't have the strength to lie. "I...am going through very strange things, Yerek. Things I do not understand. Memories fail me," she said as he looked at her in silence. "Would you...tell me what we shared that night?"

For a moment, there was a wounded look on his face that gave her a pang of guilt. Somewhere inside her was the memory of what happened between the boy and the woman whose body she now wore. But for now, it was lost to her. "Well"- he started, hesitantly. "We sat on the rocks by the upper part of the creek above the village. The moons were really bright that night. I kissed, well, uh, I guess you kissed me. It felt like...like fire," he started blushing, and turned his gaze away. A weight was lifted off her. There were many things she took pleasure in, but breaking young hearts was not one of them. And Javenians certainly weren't known for their chastity.

"Is that...all?" she asked carefully. Yerek's face went beet red.

"Uh, um-I, yeah," he stammered, twisting and turning. "That's it. I was-yeah. Yeah, that's it."

She laughed lightly, suddenly feeling a bit less suffocated by her own dark thoughts. “Oh, my...I’m sure I will remember it in time,” she took him in her arms and embraced him closely. This, she knew, was why she had remained in Lenori for so long. That unrefined, sometimes almost childlike nature of its people. She couldn’t help but feel a little bit guilty about considering using the poor boy’s desires to manipulate him. Especially with someone else’s body. She let go of Yerek, and looked at him intently. “I need your help, Yerek. Can I count on you?” Again, Yerek blushed, but he nodded so hard she thought his head might fall off.

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Sometime later, the two of them were back where she had left the mangled body that she had worn for years. As Yarek watched from a distance, holding a goat he had snuck out of the village, she knelt down beside the corpse and took the face in her hands. She studied the face she had known as her own for many years, all its scars and marks so well-known to her. There was a tragic beauty in its stillness that cut her heart, but also a strange sense of otherworldliness. That had been her face once, and now she had to learn to wear a new one. Leaning down, she kissed the cold, clammy forehead. He had been a man sentenced to death once. She had offered them both a way out. This would be their final goodbye.

She returned to Yarek, carrying the body. He had promised to bring it back to the village, and see to it that the remains were given a respectful treatment. Just like it deserved. She would carry on towards Idon Kardam, and the Javenian stronghold. As the sun scattered its rays through the thick leaves into a golden patchwork on the forest floor, she held him close, and looked him in the eye. A sad, but tender look, because she knew all too well how much the recklessness of her people could hurt.

“Thank you for all your help,” she finally whispered. “I wish you all the best, and I will think think fondly of your kindness. Maybe we will meet one day again.”

Then she held his face and kissed him deeply. A kiss that no sorcery could ever make him forget. And then he watched with an aching heart as she got on the goat and rode away. He would never know exactly who it was that had kissed him so tenderly. But then again, over the last two hundred years, few had ever really known the real Jesserith.