

Copal Jenness – A Prologue [Part 1]

By: FastWinger

This is the story of Copal Jenness, a Tiefling detective, and how his rare talents and heritage could have fitted him for a life of wickedness or dissipation, yet they did neither. This is rather, the story of how he became an unlikely hero.

Copal Jenness had come to the Island Nation of Teak by both chance and circumstance; chance in that he had cast about for most of his early years as a soldier of fortune in the vast lands that lay south of the great equator. Here he roamed, far from the country of his birth in the hardy Northern Steppes.

He came south to a land of extremes. A land of the heat he had never known as a child. A land of wild, luxuriant forests, deep rivers full of trade ships, cities and ports to rival any on the planet. The dark ocean of The East intoxicated him with its sweep and secrets and he took to a life at sea on the roving Ships of Sail that had come back into fashion in the great centuries after The Rising. Gone were the dirty tramp steamers with their black smoke smudges against the blue, replaced on a much wiser earth by the riot of colored sails that marked each of the cargo lines.

The year was T.R. 8023. After The Rising, much of the world had changed, and The Rising had lifted the mountain ranges of the Mariana Trench to their present height upwards of 2000, over the not now so empty Great Ocean to the East. For now, where there had once been only the endless sweep of sky above sea, lines of tropic islands dotted the Great Ocean, running their rainforests up their steep sides to fill the sky. It was here, on the great island of Teak, two days sail from the continent of his birth, that Copal Jenness lived and worked in the legendary trade town of Tamarind, where much of the brisk business of the islands was conducted.

To tell of the look of the man, Copal Jenness stood well over six feet. Depending on his mood, he could lean across a dimly lit bar, drink in hand, and seem smaller, more intimate; or step back and flex every muscle to *tadasana*, until he stood like a willow, tall as a lance.

His hair was a shade of burnished sunshine seen only in the glint of light across a sheen of copper, and you could never be certain if it was yellow-gold or flame. Tucked among the tendrils were the Tiefling markers; soft brown curved horns that lay unobtrusive and flat, along the sides of very pointed ears, with smaller and shorter horns in the hairline above his amber eyes. Amber. Looking into them you almost expected them to be gems, pulled from a hundred-million year old forest, freed from entombment in the mountain rock, cut and polished by a master. They neither looked through you or at you, but instead you were drawn into them, as into a warm place, away from the dark.

Other men could perhaps have had similar characteristics in the hair, and maybe even the height, but not the face. If the high planes of the face lingered from the Samuri of long ago in the bloodlines of any today, they surely showed in his visage. He had the aquiline nose and tapered jaw to match, with the fine-pored, buff coffee and cream skin of his people. In short, he was worth looking at twice. He seemed bemused by the stares and greeted any and all with the same open look that drew people to him, not for his looks, but rather his presence.

His Tiefling tail suited him, added to his balance, made him more formidable to consider as an opponent. And consider you must.

If you passed Copal Jenness in the market, you would note that he appeared to the superficial glance to be wearing almost the same fabrics and styles that most of the traders wore. It was only if you stopped and really looked that you would see the difference in cut, fit and quality. Even then you might overlook the subtle weapons, and the armour.

There was the white sail shirt, laced, casually, almost as an afterthought; and fine worsted black pants with an extra pocket aside each knee. The wide, buckled, black leather belt, carried the crest of his family, etched deep in the silver. But who in such a marketplace would look twice, let alone know the language and style of the buckle, or the House the crest marked. His jacket was something else entirely. Close fit, with notched lapels, it was made of the darkest smooth brown leather and fell just mid-thigh. Flat overlaid studs crossed the shoulders, chest and upper arms of the jacket; studs of a metal that gave back no sheen, and flexed with the wearer, unnoticed. The boots Copal Jenness wore were designed to be

unobtrusive as well. Dark brown, smooth and tall, they fastened just below the knee, laced and tied. The soles were thicker than similar boots, and perhaps just suggested at long treks.

The scarf he wore across the white laces at his throat was of the deepest cranberry cashmere, fine and soft; but if you know cashmere, oh so warm when needed. It was without ornament or fringe and lay quietly under the front of the double notched lapels and double front of the jacket.

Copal Jenness moved with an ease and suppleness that marked him as a man not yet at midlife. Seventy-two. A Tiefling. And as such, an age of three-hundred was not beyond his grasp, if no blade found him.

And blades of his own he had. They did not all reveal themselves, for firstly there was the double shoulder dagger harness. It crossed in a web over his back, under the jacket. At the front it only fastened under the belt, unseen; but he needed only to place a hand inside his jacket on either side to draw one or both daggers from it.

Almost casually, as if part of his attire, a slightly curved and very thin sheath lay against his right thigh, just at his fingertips, and left it a mystery to the observer what lay sleeping inside.

Copal Jenness loved the town of Tamarind. There he was free to be himself, un-judged for his race. And the town had given him something else besides freedom; it had given him a purpose.

Not all traders passing through Tamarind were honest. Not all ships docking at the piers bore cargo.

Copal Jenness walked the slips and quays as his own, quietly noting the ships and men to investigate. The would-be pirates; and more often, the subtle and truly dangerous, concealed pirates, in their oft-painted ships, attempting to cover the long scrapes against their hulls, and small musket holes in the scuppers. He noted the crew who limped into port, and the sailors with too much money.

He took his work to heart, every vigilant, and sometimes he would linger in the town for two or three days and nights with very little sleep, if he had his suspicions, all the while watching, while appearing not to watch.

Other times the docks lay relatively quiet. Tired sailors slept. The ocean was calm and fair. It was then that Copal Jenness walked in his thick-soled boots, up the mountain, to the clearings on the terraces above the town of Tamarind, to his simple jutaku, built by his own hands among the quiet trees. He would sit on the wide veranda and gaze down on the silent town, propping his boots up on the sturdy railings, head back on a high wicker chair, the finest of cigarillos lit and curling smoke around him. If his amber eyes closed he dreamed of his home where his mother lived and worked. He dreamed of the wild mountains of his childhood, and knew if he survived, that someday he would return.

In much the same way his mother, Morning Glory, had returned years before to the high Steppes. For Morning Glory had travelled the earth, trained in swordsmanship by her own father, Tianjin, Copal Jenness' grandfather.

Tianjin had hired out as an outrider, and Morning Glory worked with him. It was there on the long caravan runs that she met her husband, River Jenness. Copal Jenness' father. They had travelled and worked together, guarding the mountain caravans, ranging across the continent, until Copal was born. River Jenness, the father he never knew, was taken from all of them in the Mountain Passes of Ty in a great battle.

Copal and his sister Caspia, were saved by their father's bravery as he gave up his own life for Tianjin, Morning Glory and her children. Because of River Jenness, they lived to return to the Northern Steppes. There, Copal and Caspia learned swordsmanship from their grandfather Tianjin, and also from their mother, Morning Glory. Learning to fight as they learned to walk, they were trained from birth.

The discipline of swords had drawn Copal Jenness farther along into the study of the body as a weapon, the art of self-defence, of movement; where a leap, the turn of a wrist, the balance of a sweeping movement, all made him a very dangerous man. In part, that was the trail he had followed away from his home, across the world, as a soldier, a bodyguard, a student of every martial art where a teacher could be found.

And yet something was lost. Something always is in the raw pursuit of perfection.

Copal Jenness rarely rested. Even on a calm summer evening such as this, with the ficus leaves all around the long veranda. With his long frame at ease across the woven deck chairs and feet characteristically up over the sturdy railings. He was aware of how exquisite the view of the aquamarine harbour was, closed in on three sides by mountains, with a hundred tall ships anchored and sea birds rioting across the skies in their own territorial wars. Copal Jenness imagined how his mother would love the extravagance of the forest and the hills of the tropic mountain. Someday . .

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