

Copal Jenness – A Prologue [Part 2]

By: FastWinger

The Port of Tamarind had been strangely quiet for weeks. Not the trade kind of quiet, for great ships came and went with as much precision as wind and tide allowed. Another kind of calm held the port. Copal could not place it. Like a hush, a silent jaguar watching, Copal felt certain something was amiss, yet could not see it.

As the weeks full of hot days all ran together, Copal began to hear whispers. First; that the local sail-maker's daughter had disappeared along with the eldest daughter of the owner of the Great North Quay Trading Company. People whispered that they had run off with handsome sailors, but Copal did not believe the talk, for they were both very responsible girls.

Maybe because of his beloved sister Caspia, maybe because of his mother Morning Glory, Copal had always been protective. Watchful that the seamen roving through Tamarind knew, that he, Copal Jenness, would not stand for sailors trifling with the hearts of the village beauties.

The morning of the first day of the fifth week of summer, Copal had already passed up and down every dock in Tamarind and stopped as usual at the Tea Shop of the Sun, where everyone knew him and he was treated well.

Copal had been more aware than usual of hushed whispers between the ladies of the village as of late, and was puzzled that the kind and very polite ladies at the Tea Shop of the Sun seemed troubled too. Even the youngest person at the Tea Shop, Miyu, a girl of eight, talked in hushed tones.

There was something to be discovered in the village, but Copal did not know what. Perhaps the vendors in the markets would be more forthright.

It was only an hour later that the beginnings of that discovery found him. In the Tamarind Town Market Square a little circle of ladies gathered around Copal, and the oldest, his good neighbour Old Em, came forward, selected by the group to speak first.

He knew the little old lady well, for she greeted him every day from her tea-berry terraces next to his quiet jutaku. Sometimes she sent over a new tea for him to try, and endlessly lectured him on the evils of cigarillos. She watched over his garden when he was away, and often he would come home late at night and find she had left a basket. Always with some treat; perhaps sweet-rolls, or a bit of baked trout.

“Copal, the good ladies of Tamarind have worries.”

Almost a dozen ladies came forward and spoke. Each one had a neighbour, a cousin, a friend or a family member with a story of a missing young woman. Copal’s face betrayed his disbelief and shock. How could this happen in his village, and he did not see. With what self-control he could, Copal stayed calm and began gathering information with meticulous precision from each lady at the market, each neighbour, each parent, each cousin.

The list Copal made, included even a whisper, a rumor of a missing girl. He was horrified to find the final number well over a hundred and set out at once to begin the task of speaking to each and every family. The previously rare evenings of relaxation at his jutaku disappeared into none in the ever obsessive search, as he forgot dinner and walked the terraces and village roads, high into the mountains, making notes and keeping an ever watchful eye. But clues eluded him, and as the days went by, Copal realized he was no closer to solving this case than he had been on the day in the market when Old Em brought the families to him for help.

The morning of the first day of the tenth week of summer, found Copal on his way to speak to his neighbour, Old Em. Walking purposefully across the terraces, from his jutaku, toward her apricot orchard, he was puzzled to see two empty market baskets overturned under the apricot trees.

At the same moment, the elderly lady herself, Old Em, rushed across the footpath from her door towards Copal.

“Copal, quickly! The little lady that takes my apricot tea down to the Merchant Shop has not arrived on her morning trip! I fear for her! The Hound of the Mountain has taken the girl! She is Ginger Petal, the daughter of the Tea Merchant in Tamarind.”

Copal quickly returned to the overturned baskets, followed by little Old Em. The soft green grasses around the trees where the basket fell showed deep hoof marks of a shod horse. The trail wound a circle around the baskets. No hound of the mountain had taken the lady. For hounds do not ride. And what a special girl Ginger Petal was. Copal thought of her helping her father at the Tea Wharf. She was as kind as she was lovely, with long dark braids and eyes like ebony.

Copal consoled the little old lady with a promise to set out at once in search of Ginger Petal. In fact, he did not believe he had even a moment to spare. He turned for the downward trail, determined to search for the horseman that had kidnapped Ginger Petal!