

Copal Jenness – A Prologue [Part 3]

By: FastWinger

Copal was most surprised as he looked across the terraces, down the long mountain side, to see a party of five on horseback on the winding switchback trail below him, moving lazily towards the village of Tamarind. Most travellers came by sail, and although small pack teams moved through the mountains, this was not one of them.

A Knight led the little group, his pennants fluttering from the holstered lance across his horse's shoulders. A blonde Paladin rode by his side, with lesser colors, signifying he was of the same house yet not of the same rank. The following two horses carried travellers who seemed to be actually almost asleep. Both of them were wide in girth, and heavy in the saddle, letting their horses take the lead. One had a mandolin buckled across the croup of his sturdy horse, and the other had wineskins securely fastened to ample saddlebags. But the rider who caught Copal's eye was none of these.

Rather it was a dark and lovely lady, wrapped in a lavender cloak that almost, but not completely, hid both her delightful beauty and the weapon on her person. A longbow graced her horse's side, secure in its lacings, only the tip of it visible under the wide travelling cloak. A quiver lay across the saddle.

Over the years Copal had watched hundreds of rough and able sea-goers amble the roads and ways of the village, but a troupe like this was rare indeed; and Copal was immediately suspicious. Making his way straight through and down the walled terraces, Copal hurried over the loopbacks, plunging down the steep mountain, stepped authoritatively into the road just as it turned, and hailed the party.

A tall imposing Tiefling with sword by side, and to the well-knowing eye, a jacket cut to conceal shoulder holsters, was more than enough to bring even a well-armed set of riders to a halt.

“Halt! State your business at Tamarind! With haste and full truth!”

One of the sleepy pair of back-riders ambled his sturdy mount slowly to the front of the troupe, and with unsteady ankles in the stirrup, dismounted in a more or less orderly fashion; although it seemed he needed the horse's shoulder to lean on. The horse obliged by stopping stock-still.

“Well met fellow seeker! For truly I see that you are a man who has always been searching and yet has not yet found that which he seeks. I am Roth, Cleric of Wellsmere Isle. Advise us of your true intent and if it be not robbery, we in turn will oblige with ours.”

The words were slightly slurred, but intelligible, and the speaker's jolly manner and face disarmed Copal. Yet he dare not let his guard down, or show any sign that he was rather taken with the entire party; and he spoke so:

“I am Copal Jenness, and my intent is as it has been these many years. To protect and serve the Law of Tamarind. No mischief or wrongdoing will be permitted. Peaceful trade and lawful travellers are welcome and need not fear. All others will be dispatched from our borders.”

The merry Cleric rolled forward with the telltale gait of one who has spent a lifetime making certain that winemakers are doing their jobs correctly.

Undecided if the hale fellow was actually going to offer his hand, Copal signalled wordlessly that this gesture would not be welcomed, by placing one hand slightly askance his jacket lapel, and the overfriendly rider stopped. Copal knew appearances were deceiving, and this hearty gentleman could run him through with a dagger, quicker than look at him. Copal had no doubt that the man could fight, and well.

“We seek only food and lodging in the most lawful manner,” spoke the Knight from the edge of the party, but his Paladin had one hand hovering on his sword, and looked like a man unsettled.

The farthest opposite of unsettled was the manner of the fourth rider, who sat his horse at the back of the company, and was quietly and wordlessly,

making circles in the air with his hands as if he were either composing a new melody for the mandolin across his saddle bow, or else he was completely mad, and engaged in serious battle with an army of butterflies.

However; even with all these oddities, a hasty truce was struck. Copal became their forthright guide to the best Inn in Tamarind, and in return they would oblige with a few questions answered.

Had the travellers seen a lovely maiden with beautiful dark eyes and long hair, for she had gone missing just this morning.

The enchanting lady archer in the lavender cloak looked directly at Copal and spoke. "Yes, a striking girl with market-berry baskets and a sunny smile."

"Were there no other riders?"

The lady looked Copal over in the most forthright manner and he could not tell her thoughts. Had she never seen a Tiefling before? Was she uneasy for her life, even with her companions bristling with weaponry? Copal felt he could cope with any challenge there, and even leap a string shot should she loose one. Had he not seen the red deer jump as arrow left bow, and even done so himself from time to time! He set aside his immediate wariness and moved in closer to the mysterious bow-woman.

But it was the Knight who answered Copal's question. "Yes. A rider on a dappled roan passed us at fair speed down the mountain with only a nod of greeting, and with a canvas roll lashed to the saddle. I never thought, ever, what the saddle-roll might contain" His words trailed off to silence and his face turned pale.

Copal Jenness spoke. "I thank you for your forthrightness. I suggest to you the Inn of Tamarind where you will find both the food and lodging you seek, and an honest barkeep. There you need have no fear. They can help and direct you should you seek a Captain or a Ship. I caution you to hold to the Law! For Justice is swift here." Then he turned to step away.

“Hold fast, Copal Jenness!” It was the arm-waving, butterfly-fighting Bard. “We are not soft. We can all aid you in this haste to fetch back the dark-eyed maiden from this dastardly horseman. We know what he looks like and you do not! And now we know what he carries!” the Bard had stopped drawing circles and swirls in the air, and patted the saddle under the mandolin where a crossbow rested.

The elven-sorceress in the lavender cloak extended an arm wound with leather armour to Copal, and indicated that he should ride with her.

“I am the lightest, with the strongest horse, who may easily carry us both. Quickly, Copal Jenness. This is no time for propriety and wasted manners. The stolen maiden should be everyone’s first concern. We will now seek six ways for the rider instead of your one. Your chances of finding her alive are greatest at this moment. Haste!”

And Copal forgot he was a Tiefling. He forgot not to trust strangers. Here was help in a common purpose. To seek the maiden and return her to her family.