

Zombie

by
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Chapter One

There was something buzzing in the trees.

As the afternoon light faded and the waning rays of the sun filtered through the Amazonian canopy, Dr. Horatio Pritchard turned slowly to his left and looked above and behind him.

At the junction of the Rio Negro and the Orinoco rivers, monkeys, snakes, panthers, and parrots shared canopy space with innumerable, unrecorded species of insects and plants in the dense green overhead. It was a verdant riot that covered everything except the clear cuts and the rivers.

There was a chance that one of these trees sheltered the nearly mythical, giant carnivorous epiphyte, *Orchidaceae Deciduosis*. It was near here, a little over a year ago, that Pritchard's friend and colleague, a botanist-photographer from New York City, Professor James Fenimore, found the remarkable new giant orchid, the first known specimen of a giant flesh-eating epiphyte.

Orchidaceae Deciduosis had a rare pink pitcher flower that had evolved to live exclusively in the canopy of the rainforest, propagating itself within the decaying bark of large trees and capturing insects and small

animals for nutrients with a deadly trumpet stem beneath the pitcher. A single pink orchid extended from a stem attached to the interior base of the pitcher and hung suspended over the opening like a hovering bird.

The opening in the pitcher's stem was filled with tiny spikes coated with a sap that would lure insects and small animals in with sweet, sticky nectar and then trap them with the barbed spikes which would only bend farther in, toward the cramped and deadly interior of the concave stem. Once trapped at the bottom of the stem the plant would disgorge an acidic juice that dissolved the creatures and carried their life-giving proteins to the base of the stem, a huge pseudopod attached to a tree with dozens of long roots.

Although there were numerous carnivorous epiphytes, this was the first time a giant orchid had been discovered to be carnivorous. The botanist, Professor Fenimore, had been met with professional disgust and denial when he'd announced his discovery to the National Geographic Society. His carefully catalogued photos were denounced as fakes and forgeries. The biggest complaint from the scientific community was over the size of the epiphyte. In the photos Fenimore provided, the flowering pitcher appeared to be over four feet tall.

The experts who failed to prove that the photos were doctored by Fenimore believed that the flower was not an orchid, but a relative of the

giant Indonesian flower *Rafflesia arnoldi*, which was popularly known as the “corpse flower” for the odor of rotting flesh that it gave off.

While his colleagues derided him as a publicity-seeker, the public was fascinated by the lavish photo spread the National Geographic had done on the story, detailing Fenimore’s harrowing travel through the most remote sections of the Orinoco river basin in search of new species. A few weeks after the photo spread the international community of horticulturists officially debunked what they called Fenimore’s “theory” of a gigantic, flesh-eating orchid.

In the light of that embarrassing professional setback, Fenimore swore he’d return to the confluence of the Orinoco and the Rio Negro rivers and bring back a viable specimen of the newly discovered flower. Due to the popularity of the National Geographic article, it had only taken him a few months to gather enough grant money to make the return trip to the jungle.

That had been nine months ago. For the last six months, not a word had been heard from the professor. Most of his contemporaries believed he’d died in the rarely explored jungle where he said he’d discovered the new species.

Doctor Pritchard had been a colleague and friend of Fenimore since their undergraduate days at NYU. He was one of the few who truly believed

a new species had been discovered, although the only evidence other than the photos was his friend's insistence on the find even when they were drunk and arguing over Belgian ales at the pub.

Fenimore, who was a well-known botanist and wildlife photographer, never carried an emergency beacon or a GPS mapping device. He was highly secretive about his methods and locations, constantly worrying he'd be scooped by another botanist searching for the next new plant species. Fenimore spent much of his time living with and interrogating local villagers hoping to find hints regarding undiscovered local species.

But it wasn't all scientific study for Fenimore. He boasted that along with searching for rare new species, he spent time deflowering village virgins in the rainforest. He claimed that at least five tribes had "adopted" him, giving him a choice of their young daughters for a wife. At each village he'd pick the comeliest virgin, spend a few weeks studying flowers and living with the girl then leave early in the morning without saying anything.

Jungle relationships were often dangerous. Though the natives lacked cellphones and satellite dishes, they had a well developed method of village to village communication. Most villages were close to the Rio Negro or the Orinoco River, where fishermen and peddlers would pass by every day.

Each traveler on the river was willing to take a message or two on to the next village, or as far as they were heading.

Many of Fenimore's closest friends believed he'd finally had his comeuppance at the hands of some aggrieved native in-laws who believed their daughters had been misused. The penalties in the jungle for infidelity were often severe.

Though many of the tribes in the Orinoco basin were polygamous, those that were monogamous took adultery seriously. Cutting the nose off an adulterer was one of the most common punishments in the Orinoco basin.

Some tribes, such as the fierce Yanomamo would cut off one of the ears of the perpetrator, or in a more serious case, such as a long-term affair or multiple partners, they would use a machete to hack off one of the buttocks of the adulterer.

As with most cultures, these punishments befell the females more often than the males, although there were a few tribes, such as the Orinoco Caribs, who would stone the male and female to death side by side, with the entire tribe participating.

Some villagers believed that by these rituals the forest gods that controlled their destinies, and their sexual appetites, would be satiated. The gods often came into play in Amazon pregnancies. If a woman bore two

children, that was the god's sign that she had slept with more than one man.

When a child was born with a visible birthmark it was either a blessing from the gods, or a very bad omen, depending on the village shaman's opinion.

When the adultery concerned an outsider, many of whom were often treated like minor deities, there was no telling what the natives would do.

Dr. Pritchard remembered a story his friend had told him of how some Yanomano tribesmen had smeared a researcher with brightly colored paint, blown hallucinogenic ebene up his nose, and then tossed him off the highest tree they could find just to watch him fly. Of course, much as the tribesmen reported, it was also just as possible that the researcher had climbed the tree and jumped to his death by himself during the ebene experience.

Horatio was well aware of the rumors of his friend's infidelities and comeuppance, but somehow, perhaps because of their close friendship and the years of drinking and bragging with his colleague, he felt Fenimore was still alive. He could feel him in his dreams, moving around in the jungle canopy near the junction of the two great rivers. Doctor Pritchard had come halfway around the world searching for his friend and he knew that he was close.

Pritchard stared hard over his left shoulder into the trees behind him. There was a large bundle of something moving around on a branch about ten

feet off the ground. As he stared into the branches his eyes slowly adjusted to the shadowy light. He could see that only the outside of the bundle was moving.

He reached down, picked up a rock and threw it at the squirming mass. An angry hymn of flies and mosquitoes erupted from the bundle and hovered over the thing. Now that the insects no longer covered the object, he could see that it was a body of fungus, with brown and white mushrooms caps sprouting in various locations around the shape.

His foot hit something hard in the ferns. Startled, he jumped back. Pritchard stabbed down into the low ferns with his walking stick and found a Nikon camera with a telephoto lens lying amongst the branches at the base of the plant.

As he picked it up, he realized it was Professor Fenimore's camera, the same device that had been used to record the *Orchidaceae Deciduosus* earlier that year. In that brief moment of recognition, Pritchard looked back above him into the trees.

Now that he looked closer, he could see scraps of cloth hanging from the mass, a shape that resembled a human being with bunches of mushrooms sprouting from the holes in the skull where the eyes, ears, and mouth once

were. The doctor panicked, gasped for breath that wouldn't come, grabbed lamely for his canteen, and then fell over into the soft, dark soil.