

CHAPTER I

The night birds were hushed and the insects barely rustled. This was a bad sign, a portent of horror that old Moraika the wise woman was awaiting. She sensed it coming, knew that, when the blanco woman took the old slaver mansion, the darkness would enter the land. When even the animals who ruled the night were silent and frightened, the land was warning all to beware...to hide or be consumed.

Shaking her gourd, a medicine object she only used to frighten away the jaguars, serpents and other animals, she summoned the tribe to the long house. They came, obedient despite the youngsters' desire to refute the ancient beliefs of the old crone. But they all sensed something in Moraika. She was old when their grandparents were young and knew secrets that she only imparted in hushed whispers in the night.

As tiny as Khuno the hunter's young daughter of ten summers, and as withered as a flower denied water, the ancient crone seemed to grow in size and power as they squatted within in the long house. Nobody in the small tribe could mistake Moraika for some elder who lived beyond her years. She had knowledge, inner power, and could see the invisible forces that lived in the world. When she called and demanded attention, all obeyed without murmur or question.

This small tribe was named in their primordial and nearly forgotten tongue, "The Living." They were a small collection of huts and one long house on the shore of a mighty lake in the country known to the world as San Pedro. This nearly uninhabited region of that country was called *Corazon Negro*, the Black Heart. Few tribes resided in this harsh rainforest, a forbidding land with a terrible history.

The Living possessed a simple, yet surprisingly deep, view of the universe. Humanity was divided into three distinct parts: the first was the Living, their folk, never large but very tightly knit; the second group was the jungle dwellers, other tribes of humans who kept to themselves, rarely dealing with the Living. There was a harmony between both groups; the jungle dwellers kept to the deep rainforest; the hunters of the Living stayed on the outskirts.

The final group was the outsiders, men and women from across the lake. They possessed no respect for the land, the Living, or the jungle folk. They viewed all as obstacles to be defeated, with fire, metal and powders which exploded. The Living possessed no true respect for these humans; they were missing an essential element of life.

This element was the nature of life and death. The spirit of life, called Allpa, embodied the air, the sky, the jungle, the waters of the lake, the plants, the animals and humanity. You embraced Allpa, who was part of all living beings. To deny this spirit was to oppose the entire natural world, a path that resulted in a bad end.

Death was known as Supay, but this spirit was neither feared, nor embraced. To the Living, death was an inevitability for all. Even ancient trees, ones with branches larger than the long house, fell one day and became part of the earth. It was a cycle: Allpa created life; Supay brought them back to the dust. A cycle, one the Living understood and respected.

But outsiders, they seemed to believe this simple, yet complex, way of life was to be opposed, to be defeated. They attempted to destroy parts of the jungle to seize metals or stones from the ground. Or they tinkered with the body, believing they could live as long as the mountains one day. Foolish. In the end, no beings could deny the power of Allpa and Supay. But the outsiders did come to the *Corazon Negro* with this battle in mind.

The first outsider to come was a seeker of gold and other metals and jewels. Known as Hortado, the man died from the bite of a yellow snake two days after arriving. His followers all fell to a fever, their bodies quickly consumed by the creatures of the jungle.

The next of the whites to arrive was Hortado's brother, who sought the remains of his dead sibling. Heartier and stronger of body, this Hortado survived the land, but slowly went mad. Declaring himself a king, and later the son of God, he brutally murdered many of his followers before killing himself by leaping into a fire.

It was many years before another arrived, this one a fat, jolly man called Father Pupo. The Living knew he was as insane as Hortado, but in a different way. Where the former howled, screamed and attacked with his sword and blade, Pupo giggled and used a long black whip on the bodies of his followers and The Living. With the help of outsiders from his land, he built a house, larger than the long house with a second floor. The Living hid from him, hiding in the jungle, knowing he wished to enslave them and send them across the lake and into the hands of other whites. Pupo also died badly; his mangled corpse was one day found to be missing eyes, hands, tongue, feet and testicles.

Three more came to live in the large house on the top of the hill over the years. And they all died in terrible ways. One declared to all one day that he was God, sounding like the ancient dead Hortado. He stepped off the balcony on his house and crashed to the ground, breaking his neck and dying instantly. The second went into the jungle with a hunting party and vanished without a trace. Nothing, not even the metal rifles he and his men carried were ever found. And the last was killed by his wife, maddened that she found him in the bed of one of the slaves. The slave himself died as well and the wife ran into the lake, screaming and wailing. Old Moraika, who claimed to have known both Hortado brothers, once told that the screaming white wife was eaten by a giant snapping turtle. None questioned her word, but all who fished the river made certain they did so quietly, fearful of waking the terrible turtle.

And none of The Living questioned the tales of Moraika on the history of *Corazon Negro*. There was something fearful and abysmal about the land they called their home. The air was always heavy, humid and difficult to breathe by all but those native to the expanse. The days were short, with harsh sunlight that beat down upon all with startling intensity. And the nights were stygian, terrifying and filled with the cries of animals, the chirps of thousands of insects, and the calls of creatures unknown to all but The Living.

But the true horror to outsiders were the scents, the many smells that the jungle released which wafted into the nostrils of all. There was an overwhelming pungent sweetness that hung over everything, a noxious odor that was, at first, pleasurable. But within time, the corruption of that spoor became paralyzing, intoxicating and nauseating. To The Living, this was the aroma of life and death, birth and decay. But to the whites and others from beyond the lake, this was the essence of the very monstrous nature of the *Corazon Negro*.

Old Moraika declared that this was the jungle's method of protecting itself from those who sought to despoil the land and the people. Few could argue. She used the thighbone of Hortado as her walking stick, and many said her medicine gourd was filled with the finger bones of other whites who died in the land of The Living. Even Ayar the Fisherman, strongest in the village and one of its leaders, dared not argue with to the ancient wise woman. She was Allpa and Supay in one body, life and death, a terrible being who the tribe respected above all.

And the ancient crone was most fearful of the newest outsider, the pale-skinned woman and her companion. They appeared two moons ago, taking the old Pupo dwelling. A large team of men appeared with them, working day and night and carrying in many boxes brought from boats. But the workers left as soon as their duties were completed. These men, all strong, large workers with rough hands and loud voices, left with their heads low and their words hushed. The *Corazon Negro* was, to them, a fearful place full of terrible creatures. Escape was their choice, happily and without a second thought.

But the woman stayed, her male following her like an obedient pet. She met briefly with Moraika and The Living, giving them metal knives, leather pouches, food and medicines that the wise woman deemed acceptable. She gave these items as payment for privacy, requesting she never be interrupted in her work.

This request was met with amusement by all of The Living. None wished to enter the stone and wooden long house created by Father Pupo many years ago. The tribe didn't have a word in their language, but they felt an inner revulsion for the house. There was a wrongness about the dwelling on the hill... a violation of the natural order that they respected so fully. None would step a foot in that place, even if threatened with a horrible, lingering death. The closest they could come to referring to that fearful locale was to call it, "not part of Allpa or Supay." To The Living, nothing was more dreadful than that pronouncement.

But this woman's presence caused the old wise woman to become fearful and restless. And this was alarming to The Living, since nothing seemed to break the powerful calm of ancient Moraika. She stared at the jungle, the lake, and the horrible house on the hill for hours without moving. At these times, she resembled a statue, a carving made from a hoary piece of wood from one of the massive trees in the jungle. And when she emerged from these trances, her words were harsh, guttural and chilling. Old Moraika hinted at fearful times coming, events of monumental magnitude. None scoffed, though some, such as the gossipy Killa the Gatherer, or the dour Pacha the Lame, wondered if the crone's mind was finally losing its grip upon life. But even this, they contemplated only in their hearts, never daring to utter such a thought out loud.

When all were assembled in the long house, Moraika pointed her thighbone cane at the fire and whispered, "No fire. No sounds. None speak."

Pacha, who limped because of a jaguar bite had left him in charge of the fires and long house, put out the fire. And The Living sat in silence, staring up at Moraika. Even the babes, unnamed yet, and in their parent's arms, went silent. The wise woman had a strange ability to bring quiet to even the youngest of the tribe, often with a soft word. The children were not fearful at these times; they just obeyed without understanding why. Just as their parents and siblings did at the command of the ancient crone.

The twisted hag stood at the head of the gathering, her eyes scanning left and right. Jungle and lake. Her head moved back and forth in odd, jerky movements. To many present, she resembled a bird, a tiny creature that lived in fear of dozens of predators who dogged their steps on land, water and air. The Living knew something bad was coming, none having ever seen the wise woman behaving in such an odd manner. But Moraika's calm was broken, and her tribe squatted at her feet, fearful at the portents.

Then her ancient form froze, her eyes locking upon the lake. A visible shudder filled her body and she closed her eyes. The Living all tensed, watching her and feeling the dread cover them like a dark mist. Something was coming, something loathsome and rank, a transgression against the natural order that caused Moraika to quake in terror.

A low sloshing sound broke the apprehensive stillness, a wet sound of movement that was peculiar to their ears. It sounded as if a giant being was stepping from the depths of the lake, streaming with water and weighed down. The discord grew in volume, approaching the long house with long, heavy strides. Instinctively, the children hid their eyes, the young pressing their faces into the arms of a nearby adult, the older hiding their heads in their arms. They knew, without understanding, the truth of the situation. Something unnatural had arrived in their world, something fearsome and dangerous.

Then the being arrived, standing framed in the doorway of the long house. The creature was shaped like a man, but was like no being The Living had ever viewed. He was tall; two of The Living standing on each other would not reach this creature's head. And his skin, visible in the bare light, was the pale gray of an ancient corpse. His hair, as dark as that of the tribe, was long, wild and framed his head like the pelt of a jungle cat. A giant, terrifying figure. Its clothes were a collection of tattered rags, the remnants of the odd coverings outsiders used to hide their bodies.

But it was the eyes, the unnatural yellow orbs that scanned them with deliberation, that they would remember to their dying day. They were large, luminescent and strange to view. They were neither the golden optics of the jungle cat, nor the faceted jewels of the larger insects. There was an almost reptilian coldness within these eyes, a perverse alien intensity that tore into the tribe with a glance.

This was no common outsider, this was a bizarre being too terrible to contemplate. The Living huddled before the creature shaped like a man, none daring the utter a sound or move a muscle. They were as frozen as a sparrow before a serpent, incapable of even the natural reactions of fight or flight. For they all knew, in their heart of hearts that either would result in an instant and painful demise.

The colossal fiend then smiled, causing all of the tribe to instinctively recoil. Razor sharp teeth glinted in the bare light, the fangs of a predator in the maw of a man-shaped monstrosity. They could be nothing more perverse, a more contorted parody of Allpa and Supay. The Living quaked with fright, waiting for the eldritch beast to strike.

But then the creature turned away, heading towards the house on the hill. Its stride was long and water shed from the miscreation's odd clothes. It fell as if Allpa's water wished to flee the form of this evil organism.

The monster vanished from view within seconds, no trace of a passage visible. But all knew the fiend's target: the outsider woman in the horrible house on the hill.

Finally, it was Moraika who spoke, her watery eyes meeting all of the tribe in a glance, "It begins again."

"What begins?" Khuno was the only who dared to ask, and even that was done in a voice that shook.

"The destroyers of Allpa, the deniers of Supay. They return. And they seek to change the order of all." Moraika's voice was a harsh croak, a rasp as fearful as that of the being who had just left them in peace.

"Do we run? Hide?" Killa huddled next to Pacha and looked at the crone with a tear streaked face.

Moraika shook her head slowly, deliberately, "No. We prepare. I will tell you. First, we sleep. Then, the work begins. For the outsider in the house on the hill is now an enemy to all life. And we must be ready when she acts to destroy Allpa and Supay. Go! Go to your homes and sleep. We have much to do."

The Living filed out, but few would sleep that night. All remembered the ghastly yellow eyes and the terrible teeth of the creature. And all remembered he had gone to the home of the outsider.

The outsider known by the odd name of Frankenstein.