

The Orb Forest

An Excerpt

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Chapter One

The android stared into the rising sun. Anticipation lit up his eyes, making them flicker with satisfaction and renewed excitement.

Soon, the mutant super-ape would return to him – it was only a matter of time.

He waited, patiently, scanning the eastern perimeter security fence, where a large hole had been torn into the luminous mesh. Shafts of morning sunlight fell onto the tree-lined compound, highlighting a blackened, burnt area where, only twenty-four hours ago, Malu – a nine-year-old, Category-5 male orang-gorilla – had attacked him and escaped, chasing and confronting a young female islander in the process.

Admittedly, his unauthorized experiment with the creature had taken a dangerous turn. Malu's expert use of fire during the attack had been unexpected, and the viciousness of his assault extreme; yet it was the ape's new-found ability to plan and execute an escape that had really taken the android by surprise. However, he wasn't daunted. *The game*, as he called it, had only just begun – he was enjoying himself too much to stop now.

The android, aptly nicknamed *Cutter* – on account of his infatuation with the mid-21st century horror actor, Jon "Cutter" Pascali – smeared colour onto his face. Streaks of red and purple mirrored the silver and black greasepaint already accentuating his pale synthetic skin, making him look menacing and war-like. He crouched behind the trunk and lower branches of a solitary spruce and entered a set of digits into a keypad on his arm. A live holographic image of his mentor and commander, Dr Rani Bai, appeared in front of him.

'Tell me something,' said Rani brusquely, downing a shot of neat bourbon, her melodic Southern drawl, today, evincing only a faint Indonesian lilt. 'I saw your prep report

last night, but I've only just got up to speed on this. What the hell happened yesterday? Are you okay? How long before we get him back?'

Cutter again stared into the distance, beyond the hole in the perimeter fence.

'Any time soon,' he replied. 'Don't worry, Dr Bai, he won't have roamed far. Forty-eight hours without a shot of Vibrant-7 is a long time for Malu...and yes, I'm okay.'

'He'd better be back soon, Cutter,' she replied. 'There's a lot at stake here – the company's reputation, for one thing. If news of this latest little escapade gets out, we'll have more than the local Indo-Pacific government to deal with. It's not as if it's the first time you've had a problem with Malu, is it. Is there any news on the girl? Is she hurt?'

'She ran off toward the village...I think she's okay,' said Cutter. 'Hopefully, the incident won't go any further. I've programmed an aux bot to follow up, just in case. We should be able to keep this under wraps – money talks, after all...but since when were *you* concerned about the company's reputation, Dr Bai?'

Rani reached for her bottle of newly opened, vintage *Knob Creek*.

'And *what about* Malu?' she went on, ignoring Cutter's subtle slur. 'We can't have him roaming around the island. What if he attacks someone else from the village?'

'Malu didn't attack the girl, he only chased her as far as the outer compound,' the android replied irritably, defending the super-ape's actions. 'There was a brief confrontation, that's all...then she ran off.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better?' Rani remonstrated.

Cutter knew the girl was physically unharmed, for he had witnessed the incident from the edge of the perimeter fence. Yes, she had been terrified – but who wouldn't have been

terrified when faced by a charging, 475-pound orang-gorilla? However, the circumstances surrounding the islander's encounter with the creature weren't as straight forward as he had made out to Rani, for, mysteriously, Cutter had also seen the girl gesturing to Malu and pointing toward a path leading away from the village, just before the super-ape had run off into the jungle following that very route.

It was almost as if Malu and the girl had shared some kind of non-verbal exchange. But that was crazy, wasn't it? *Maybe not*, Cutter thought to himself.

'Cutter?' You there?' said Rani, pouring herself another shot.

Cutter hesitated, momentarily lost in thought; but whatever the android surmised, he wasn't about to divulge it to Rani at this moment.

'As far as I know, the girl was unharmed, Dr Bai – that's the main thing,' he said.

'This time around, maybe – but we can't take any chances. An islander being chased by a mutant is enough to break international protocol, even if they weren't attacked. Anything could have happened. We need him back immediately. What are you doing about it?'

'Dr Bai, you and I both know he won't last much longer without his next fix. All the Category-5 mutants are hungry for Vibrant-7, and Malu is no exception. He'll be back as soon as he realises his predicament. Not even a super-ape can handle two nights of purgatory. *V-7 Brain-Freeze Trauma*, as we call it, isn't the most pleasant experience...besides, he hasn't been fed for two days – he'll be hungry.'

'I hope you're right,' Rani responded. 'We're totally screwed if this gets out.'

'I should have called out Intel-Government Security,' Cutter sighed, already knowing what the answer would be. 'They would have neutralized him within the hour.'

‘What, and compromise the company’s glorious secrets? You must be joking. You know my thoughts on outside assistance, Cutter – only use it in extreme cases. We’d have the world press at our door the same day. But I admit, I *am* worried.’