

TRANSCENDENT

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Orion

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For Eunata, my grandma

CHAPTER ONE

The town of Jinja, Uganda, was an explosion of sound and vivid colour, its smell a pungent mix of car fumes, market spices and body odour. Car horns blared. Market sellers shouted. Dirt was heavy in the air. It coated everything from the dented bonnets of the cars to the fruit and vegetables in the stalls. Crouched in the alleyway, Kira Flynn could feel it mingling with the sweat on her skin. The sun was so hot that she could not stay in the same place for too long. She winced and shifted her back along the rough brickwork.

Kira's piercing eyes of electric blue peered into Wanyama Road. The facades of the buildings, originally painted in bright colours, had dulled over time beneath the burning African sun. Market stalls lined the red soil on either side of the afternoon traffic, which was at a standstill. A policeman in the middle of the street blew his whistle and pointed but nothing moved. Kira could

see a black Jeep Cherokee parked next to him. The car was gigantic. It dominated the road and all the cars around it looked little more than toys. Its windows were tinted so they were just as black as its bodywork. Something about the car made Kira uneasy. It took her a moment to work out what that was.

The Cherokee was gleaming. There was not a speck of dirt on it. It obviously had not been in Uganda long and people who came to town in that sort of car were rarely up to anything good. Kira pulled out her RanaPhone, scrolled until she found the contact named *ORANGUTAN* and began to type. A bead of sweat curved its way through the grimy layer from her frizzy hair to her temple. When she was finished, she tapped *SEND*.

ORANGUTAN!

The word blared from Jacob Flynn's own RanaPhone in the sound of Kira's voice. Jacob grimaced. He really needed to stop Kira changing his text alert. Ian turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised. Jacob pulled his RanaPhone out of the back pocket of his jeans. He switched it to silent, put it back and waved in apology.

'My bad. Do continue.'

Jacob and his best friends, Ian and Zachary, were squeezed into the sweltering basement of Ian's mother's drapery shop on Wanyama Road, less than a hundred feet from the alleyway where Kira was crouching. Fabrics

were stacked against the walls. High on one side, a barred window looked out to street level, letting in not just light but the sounds and smells of Jinja. Jacob could see ankles and feet walking past. He did his best to ignore all of that and focus on the video they were supposed to be recording.

‘Actually, Captain Cosmic,’ said Ian, scowling at the RanaPhone which Zachary was holding up to film them, ‘it’s your turn to speak.’

Zachary swivelled to point the RanaPhone at Jacob and gestured impatiently with his other hand.

‘Oh, right! Thank you, Spaceman,’ exclaimed Jacob. He pointed at an old gas lantern on the floor in front of him. Joined to the lantern by a rubber pipe was a contraption that looked like a heavily modified electric microwave. The contraption began to splutter and spark violently.

‘Get a good shot of it before it catches fire!’ Jacob beckoned to Zachary before straightening to face the camera and speak excitedly.

‘In the middle of Jinja, we are surrounded by engines, guzzling fuel and coughing up carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. My twin sister and I have created this atmospheric converter to recycle that carbon dioxide into fuel for this gas lantern. It works by reducing the carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide and then combining it with hydrogen to—’

ORANGUTAN!

Both Ian and Zachary looked at Jacob this time. He had switched his RanaPhone to silent! How did she do that?

‘Apologies, Spaceman. We’re going to have to cut today’s video short.’ Jacob hurried towards the basement door and past the atmospheric converter, which was producing a lot of smoke. Zachary stopped recording and lowered his RanaPhone.

‘Jacob, that’s the third video your sister has ruined.’

‘She does it on purpose,’ Ian pouted.

‘The last time Kira texted me more than once, she’d flooded and set fire to our kitchen at the same time,’ said Jacob. ‘I really need to go.’

‘Before you do,’ said Ian, using one of his mother’s drapes to fan away the smoke, ‘Double M’s uploaded a new video. Looks like a good one.’

‘I’ll watch it tonight,’ said Jacob. ‘See you later.’

He jogged up the steps that led onto Wanyama Road. It had been hot underneath the drapery shop but stepping outside was like stepping inside an oven. Sweat crawled from the fade of Jacob’s close-cropped hair. His T-shirt and jeans clung to his body. Making his way along the crowded footpath beside the road, he stood on the tips of his toes to look over the heads rushing past to the other side of the street. Where was Kira?

Jacob stopped. His electric blue eyes narrowed.

Kira's text had been right. That Jeep Cherokee was definitely too clean.

The driver's door of the Cherokee opened and Jacob retreated under the shade of a market stall, keeping his eyes fixed on the parked car. A man stepped out. Just like his car, he was a colossal figure, clad completely in black. More than six feet tall, his broad shoulders towered over the other shoppers, who made sure to step aside as he stalked onto the footpath. The man was wearing a bomber jacket and sunglasses. His bald head was taut with muscle and his face contorted into a permanent scowl. Both sleeves were rolled up to reveal an expensive watch on his tattooed left wrist.

ORANGUTAN! ORANGUTAN! ORANGUTAN!

Kira was calling him now. Jacob frowned and pulled his RanaPhone out of his pocket, answering the call. Bomber Jacket was bending to speak to a street seller and had his back to Jacob. He seemed to be arguing over the price of a bottle of water.

'I don't like him,' said Kira on the other end of the line.

'Where are you?' Jacob muttered, looking frantically around. 'Also, how did you change my text and call alerts to the sound of your own voice? There's not even an option for that!'

'Clock the boy,' said Kira, ignoring the questions.

Jacob turned again. A little down Wanyama Road, a

boy no older than ten was creeping along the footpath by the road and away from the other shoppers. He was wearing a faded T-shirt that hung to his knees. There was something on the boy's neck. Even from a distance, Jacob could see it was the blue tattoo of a spider.

Spider's eyes were fixed on Bomber Jacket's watch.

Spider ran, his naked feet slapping the road. He held his hand out, aiming to rip the watch from Bomber Jacket's wrist. Bomber Jacket was ready. He turned with alarming speed away from the street seller and grabbed the front of Spider's T-shirt, hauling up the boy so he was dangling in front of him. Spider struggled and kicked with his feet. Bomber Jacket's face was twisted in fury, like a towel being wrung. He raised the other hand. It was the size of a dinner plate. He was going to strike the boy across the face.

'Yeah, I really don't like him,' said Kira.

'Kira. Don't,' said Jacob.

'Too late.'

There was the scream of an engine. It was Kira, racing a red Yamaha DT125 motorcycle down the far side of the street in the narrow gap between the cars and the footpath. People yelled and threw themselves out of the way. Just before she reached Bomber Jacket, Kira hurled herself from the bike and grabbed Spider. They collapsed onto the footpath in a heap at Bomber Jacket's feet. The bike crashed onto its side and skidded in a six-foot

arc until it rested, smoking, at the feet of some tourists, who had dodged it just in time. Bomber Jacket looked down at Kira in shock while still holding his hand up to strike Spider. The rear wheel spun in the air.

‘Pick on someone your own size,’ panted Kira, heaving herself to her feet. She straightened to her full, fourteen-year-old height and only then seemed to realise the top of her head barely reached Bomber Jacket’s barrel of a chest.

‘Kira!’ Jacob shouted. He fought his way through the crowd and onto the road. The traffic had just started moving again. Jacob ignored the car horns and dodged the hot, metal bonnets that were slowly beginning to roll forward. The Cherokee was still parked in the middle of the road with its driver’s door wide open. The other cars beeped as they manoeuvred around it. Jacob placed himself between Kira and Bomber Jacket.

‘Back off, mister. Or I’ll make you back off,’ Jacob said.

Bomber Jacket’s eyes were wide, his face screwed into an expression of flabbergasted surprise. He seemed unable to speak.

Kira mouthed a bemused, ‘Mister?’ at Jacob then ran to the Yamaha, hauled it upright and jumped back on. For a moment, Bomber Jacket looked as if he were finally about to say something but Jacob turned his back on him to face Kira.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Jacob demanded. ‘I could have stopped him hitting the kid.’

‘From across the road?’ she asked in return. ‘I know you’ve got the freakishly long arms of an orangutan but—’

‘No, I mean, what do you think you’re doing *now*? Get off the bike. I’m driving.’

‘Why? Because I’m a girl?’

‘No! Well, yeah.’

‘What’s the point? You can probably reach the handlebars from over there.’

‘Kira, you’re wasting time!’

Jacob looked back at Bomber Jacket, who was starting to look less and less surprised and more and more angry. His hands were curling into fists the size of plump market chickens.

‘OK. Off we go,’ said Jacob.

He darted to the Yamaha but Spider had already hopped onto the back, thin arms wrapped snugly around Kira’s waist. Jacob could see the hairy body of the tattooed spider nestled on the boy’s neck. Two of its eight legs crept up to his ear.

‘He’s coming too, is he?’ asked Jacob in exasperation.

‘Do you want to leave him here?’

The boy blinked mutely up at Jacob, who glanced back at Bomber Jacket.

‘Good point. Let’s go.’

Jacob had just enough time to leap on and put his arms around Spider and Kira before his sister released the throttle and kicked the Yamaha into third gear. The 123cc engine screeched. The back wheel spun, spraying dirt. They sped down the road. Hot air rushed over them. Jacob's shirt hugged his chest and rippled across his back. Sweat that had been creeping vertically down his face slowly turned horizontal. Pedestrians, cars and market stalls hurtled past in a blur, inches away on either side. A dog yowled and dashed out of their path.

'Kira, slow down!' yelled Jacob over the bellow of the engine and the howl of the wind.

'Do you really want me to do that?' Kira yelled back.

Squinting to keep the biting dust out of his eyes, Jacob twisted round to look back down the road. His stomach wrenched itself into a knot.

The Cherokee was following them. Its gigantic, black form could be seen over the tops of the other cars. The traffic was flowing much faster and there were large enough gaps between vehicles for the Cherokee to navigate its way around them to keep up with the Yamaha.

'Speed up! Speed up! Speed up!' Jacob shouted, facing forward again.

Kira was forced to do the opposite. Spider had also seen the Cherokee and appeared to have decided he had more of a chance of escaping Bomber Jacket on foot

than he did on wheels. He squirmed on the seat. The Yamaha rocked dangerously and Kira had to jerk the front brake. The front wheel of the Yamaha screamed to a halt. The back wheel skidded and cut another arc into the footpath with the sound of tearing paper. A cloud of red dirt billowed around them. Stones scattered across soil. As soon as the Yamaha was stationary, Spider attempted to spring from it like a leaping frog. Jacob saw a glint of something in the sunlight.

‘Wait!’ Jacob’s hand closed around the boy’s wrist, hauling him back. Incredibly, Spider was wearing Bomber Jacket’s watch. The black leather strap was far too big for him and slid up and down his spindly arm.

‘That doesn’t belong to you,’ said Jacob.

Spider tried to wrench his hand out of Jacob’s. As the two of them struggled, both pairs of eyes fell on the back of the round watch face and the logo engraved upon it.

It was an R in the middle of a golden crown. The RanaTech logo.

Both Jacob and Spider stared at the logo and then each other. Then Spider finally tore his hand free and, with nothing but a toothy grin, slipped from the Yamaha and vanished into the crowd that had gathered around them.

Jacob looked back at the oncoming Cherokee. It was less than twenty feet away and the gap was closing fast.

Either Bomber Jacket had not seen Spider escape or he did not care. It appeared to be Jacob and Kira he was interested in now. Even though Jacob could not see anything through its tinted windows, he could imagine Bomber Jacket's huge form hunched over the steering wheel, black leather boot pushing ever further down on the accelerator.

'Time to go.' Kira twisted the throttle.

'Wait!' Jacob gripped Kira's hand to stop her releasing it completely.

'What are you doing?' Kira cried.

Jacob was muttering under his breath. 'If we take a left by Ico Computers then a right by Dheyongera Electronics that will bring us onto Tororo Road and we can lose him by Mukobe Homestay and if acceleration is the rate of change, that means it's a derivative of velocity so the speed differential will be less than . . . I got it. Go that way!'

Jacob pointed through the crowd towards an alleyway five feet in width. Kira did not question him. She wrenched the handlebars. Onlookers scattered as the bike careered into the alleyway and away from Wanyama Road. Flashing past them on one side was a rugged brick wall and, on the other, a corrugated metal fence, behind which the concrete skeleton of a high-rise loomed. Hot air and stinging dust buffeted them. Up ahead, construction workers milled around the alleyway,

staring up at a stack of blue water pipes on a pallet the size of a small car. It was being hoisted precariously to the upper floors by a rope winch.

‘Is he following us?’ Kira shouted over her shoulder.

‘I don’t know! I can’t see him,’ Jacob shouted back.

With feline agility, Kira twisted herself around so she was facing Jacob. She pulled her legs up and rested her dirty trainers on the saddle.

‘Get off! Get off! Get off!’ Jacob pulled his face away from the filthy knees of Kira’s jeans. He reached around her to grab the handlebars. The Yamaha swerved alarmingly. Tufts of grass whipped at the spokes.

The construction workers shouted, scrambling out of the way as Jacob and Kira roared past. The shadow of the water pipes swept over them. Kira reached into her back pocket and pulled out a slingshot, along with a stone that had been sharpened to a vicious point. She loaded the stone, pulled back the elastic sling and then it was her turn to mutter under her breath.

‘Multiply the spring constant by the distance to find the magnitude of the force and use the kinetic energy of the projectile to find the horizontal and vertical velocity so the trajectory will be . . .’

Kira stuck her tongue out between her teeth and let fly with the slingshot. The stone whistled through the air, slicing the rope. It frayed. The water pipes jerked violently. Their shadow swayed over the alley. The

construction workers pulled each other out from underneath it, yelling and gesticulating after the Yamaha. Kira waited until the workers were clear, loaded another stone and let fly again. The rope snapped cleanly. The pipes plunged downward. There was a shattering discord as they struck the rough gravel of the road, bouncing, quivering and rolling along the ground. A cloud of red dust filled the alleyway.

‘Let’s see him bully his way through those.’ Kira grinned and twisted herself back to take the handlebars. She slowed the Yamaha and steered it out of the alley and onto the main road.

‘There was no need to do that,’ said Jacob. ‘I’d already thought of a shortcut.’

‘It was an amazing shot, though, wasn’t it?’

‘There’s something very wrong with you,’ Jacob sighed.

‘Yeah? Then why didn’t I miss?’

Cars honked as Kira weaved the bike past them to reach the other side before following Tororo Road out of Jinja. Jacob loosened his grip and leaned back on the saddle. He looked down at Bomber Jacket’s watch, which he had managed to pull from Spider’s wrist before the thief had escaped. The golden RanaTech logo glinted in the sunlight.

‘Kira, that man worked for RanaTech.’

‘RanaTech? The biggest technology conglomerate in

the world?’ Kira sounded surprised. ‘Did you forget to pay your phone bill?’

‘What if he comes looking for us?’ Jacob asked.

‘He won’t come looking for us, Jacob. That kid stole his watch so he went after him. It had nothing to do with us.’

Jacob craned his neck back around to watch Jinja shrink behind them. There was no tarmac outside of town, and the Yamaha lurched along the red dirt track, belching smoke.

‘I don’t know,’ he said nervously. ‘It looked a lot like he was gunning for the two of us back there.’

‘Don’t worry yourself, Jacob.’ Kira laughed. ‘I bet you five thousand shillings we never see that guy again.’