

The Last

Traveler

Book One

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The Last Traveler
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First Edition

**THE LAST TRAVELER
BOOK ONE**



Chapter One

Alex

I

HIS hands trembled and sweat appeared on his brow. One after another, he looked into the eyes of his fellow classmates and faltered as their looks pierced straight into the very depths of his soul. Alexander Wilkinson felt their judgment upon him, he knew that they wanted more, they always wanted more. He held the assembled robot kit in his hands, which he had purchased off of the internet for a low low price of sixty bucks after watching that advertisement on TV with the bearded guy, Randy, that always said, “With a two-year guarantee, don’t be a lowbot, buy a robot! Ramblin’ Electronics, Baaaaby!” But the thing shook wildly under his hold. Why couldn’t he just get himself together? Some people

were lucky, able to just *talk* in front of others as if nothing bothered them, but no, not for Alex.

This had always been hard. In fact, public speaking was one of his worst fears, if not his greatest. Not particularly brave or confident, Alex had trouble standing in front of really anyone and he absolutely loathed the idea of being in front of a group of his peers. It was even worse when he was discussing something that he cared about like the little robot that trembled in his hands. How many hours had he spent putting it together, studying programming, gently twisting the screwdriver as he secured the frame? The thoughts whirled inside of his head as he presented his report on the kit to the class and told them how he had needed to add an extra resistor to reduce the current flow to the control module of the robot. With a wavering voice, he looked back up to the bored faces of his classmates and went quiet. Their eyes returned to his own and he found himself in command of their attention, her attention, and all was still. She was the only one that mattered, her name was Kira Ashridge. She sat in the first row to his right where the girl watched his every move with great anticipation.

But there was silence.

Dead silence.

Mr. Carter (James Carter) prodded him further along, “Please go on, Alex. You’re doing just fine. It’s a good project. Tell us more about the circuit board that you wired.” Positive

encouragement, just the thing that let Alex know he was screwing up big time, his teacher didn't even believe he could muscle through it by himself. And maybe he was right, just like his dad was right. Alex was just too shy for his own good and needed to work on being more "social." He needed to make some friends.

"W, w, well..." Alex stuttered, struggling under the weight of the pressure. He felt a huge lump of saliva crawl up inside of his throat and his left arm tightened. He was having a heart attack, oh God. He looked at Kira, she looked horrified, terrified. His arm went tighter, tighter, tighter...

"Are you kidding? This is fucking stupid," Oren said while sighing loud enough for his friends in the Trolls to hear. The Sidekicks 1, 2, and 3 that sat opposite Alex whooped and hollered. Oren Harper, AKA The Oaf, Leader of the Trolls, was the school bully, the one that was present in every middle school across the nation, the evil entity that seemed to transcend time and space, the big boy chuckles, the ultimate destroyer of dreams. He was the one responsible for pummeling kids and leaving them broken in bed for weeks with fractured arms and legs, terrorizing those who had to walk home when their parents had to work in order to pay for the houses that they couldn't afford. He was the one that stole nude magazines from local drugstores in quantities great enough to lift his bed mattress an extra couple of inches. All in all, he was just a jerk, or at least Alexander Wilkinson thought so. Held back three times in a row, Oren was still an

eighth-grader, despite being sixteen years old and somewhat overweight. A person might say he was rather big-boned, Alex supposed.

“Language, Oren, you just lost yourself a free lunch today. Do it again, Principal Harris next time. Know that’s the truth.”

“I can keep going,” Alex chimed in. “It’s okay.”

“Gay,” Oren said.

“Mr. Carter, I can-”

“Wave goodbye to your lunches for the rest of the week, Oren,” Mr. Carter said with a flip of his hand. “Would you like more?”

The Oaf glared at Alex. Oren had once beat up the smartest kid in school just because the boy had said the word “turtle” and he hated the word “turtle.” In fact, he hated a lot of words, “turtle” was just one of them. Last February, he had posted a list of nouns and adjectives disallowed to be used by eighth-grade student to the lockers outside of Cunningham Science Hall which also included “turquoise,” “peanut,” and “tipsy.” Simon had a turtle and had casually mentioned his pet to Ralphie Stephenson, the class president, which was overheard by Oren, and well, the rest was history. Bye bye, Simon, smell you later. Hope you have a good summer. Alex hadn’t seen him since.

You’re dead, Oren mouthed to Alex.

Spitwad Tommy, The Oaf's right-hand man, assistant terrorist, and boyfriend of Kira, pounced on the silence, "Schmaby the Baby is just too scared to say anything. Just give him an A and put him out of his misery. The kid doesn't even have any friends!" He looked around to the Sidekicks, silently asking for their validation and smirking to himself.

Alex tried to continue, "I-, um, I-..."

"I don't know what I-, I-, I'm doing with my Schmaby the Baby life," Oren mocked. Tommy hacked up a laugh as he prepared his namesake wad to launch into the air. How could a girl like Kira be into a guy like Tommy?

Alex dropped the robot onto the desk where it landed with a loud smack and rolled off the edge of the wooden seat onto the floor. He bent over and picked the thing up, part of the upper frame had cracked from the metal support screw to the servo mounting. So much for the 2-year unbreakable warranty, Ramblin' Randy.

"Oh, this is too good!" Oren said while keeping his deadly stare on Alex and grinning from ear to ear. The bully was known to attack any kid after school was over that seemed smarter than he was, which was just about anyone that answered anything a teacher ever asked unless you were part of his exclusive troll group.

"You guys are such jerks," Kira said.

"Ms. Ashridge, I-" Mr. Carter began.

"Ms. Assridge, I-" Oren mocked.

Alex looked at Tommy expecting the boy to stick up for Kira but he just sat there and laughed with Oren, the kid wouldn't even stand up for his own girlfriend.

“Shut up, Oren!” Alex yelled at The Oaf. The power of Alex's shout split the room and drove it into silence. The eyes of every kid in class opened wide and their jaws fell to the floor. No one had ever said anything like that to Oren Trent Harper. No one. Alex looked at his audience. First to Kira, who smiled at him for her defense, then Spitwad Tommy who was busy collecting saliva, and then to Oren who only patiently watched for the teacher's reaction.

After a quiet few seconds, Mr. Carter finally said, “Tommy, Oren, Saturday School. I'll see both of you after class today to discuss this further.” Oren looked at Mr. Carter and then back to Alex.

You're dead, the great eyes whispered.

With the broken robot shaking in his hands, Alex managed to get the next words out, though unstable, and said, “I think, um, I think I'm done, Mr. Carter. Thank you.”

“It was a good project, Mr. Wilkinson, have a seat.”

Alex did take a seat and he put the broken robot back down on the desk and looked up to the rest of the group which was just as bored as ever, except for Kira. He sat two seats behind her and she leaned over and took a book out from her backpack.

“See you later this afternoon, Alex, Macho Taco, on your way home, prepare your body,” Oren whispered as he snapped his pencil simulating breaking Simon’s arm. “You don’t like turtles, do you?”

Tommy nudged Oren that it was his turn to present in front of the homely science class to which The Oaf proudly stated that he was still working on something quite amazing, after all, and he had yet to finish the wonderful project. James Carter shrugged and scratched something in his grade book. Oren paid no attention, he didn’t care, what was another year anyway?

The whole thing had gone just about as bad as Alex had thought it would when he was preparing the presentation, only now the reality was that Oren had targeted *him*. Oh God, what had happened to Simon? Alex hadn’t seen the boy since. Kira looked at him and smiled. He put his head down into his forearms and just tried to breathe. *It’s going to be okay*, Alex told himself, *Everything’s going to be okay*. Tommy’s spitwad flew across the room and stuck to Alex’s cheek where it slowly dripped down to the desk below and preceded the great laughter of the Trolls.

II

Alex knew it, everyone knew it, he was now a marked man, sentenced to have his bones crushed by the worst human being to ever walk the halls of La Padre Middle School in Southern California. To put it in a clearer and more concise

way, Alexander Michael Wilkinson was *screwed*. If he was to survive the remainder of the day, he would need to get home as quickly as possible where he could hover beneath the protective guardianship of his mostly indifferent parents. Fighting Oren wouldn't work. He didn't know how to fight and certainly wouldn't be able to hold his own against someone as experienced and large as The Oaf. Alex had never even been in a fight. The closest thing that he could think of was that time when he punched Benny Boyle in the arm for stealing his mint condition 1978 stormtrooper action figure in the sixth grade, and Alex never even got the thing back. No, there was no fight in him at all.

Later that afternoon, the school bell sounded at 2:55 PM and signaled the end of sixth-period algebra. Alex took his book bag in his hand and lifted it to his desk. He gathered up the worn pencil, notebook, and calculator, stuffed them in his Duribag, and threw the thing over his shoulder. He needed to hurry. Putting his head down, he merged into the flow of the student body traffic towards the door as the school kids shuffled out of the room into the courtyard where they would eventually walk to their parent's cars to drive them home. They were kids, after all, one could still call them that. But Alex didn't really think of himself as a kid anymore, next year he would be attending Mission Rancho High School as a freshman if he could just survive until this June. However, that little plan required him to get through the afternoon

without running into Oren, and then avoiding him the rest of the school year, and even after that, the long summer.

Maybe it's a long shot, Alex thought.

He stopped and looked around, watching as the students went to and from their lockers and kept a lookout for the bully. The girls stood in front of their own dedicated spaces, enamored with the plentiful displays of multi-colored lipsticks and the curls and ribbons that had been so artfully worked through their hair. The boys walked around in torn jeans and dirty T-shirts, telling jokes, throwing wads of paper into planters, pushing and making fun of each other, and completely oblivious to the fact that the girls had those beautiful ribbons worked through their hair. And there in front of the lockers, each and every day of the middle-aged academic year, these two worlds would collide in a spectacular display of awkward, early, teenage adolescence. Alex wondered where Kira was but knew she was probably off with Tommy already at the tracks next to the creek, their usual spot. On Tuesdays, they got out from school a period early and he assumed they always ran off together to partake in some romantic excursions that weren't necessarily family friendly, that was what couples did after all. Or maybe today it was different, maybe Kira was already waiting for him with Oren in the parking lot of Macho Taco, the place where his presumed life would end. The thought made him shudder as Alex looked at his arms. *I don't want either of you broken today*, he thought. The young man kept his pack on his shoulder and

began to move his way through the crowded courtyard, careful not to acknowledge anyone out of fear that he might get caught up in conversation for longer than he wanted to or he'd have to let himself face the dreadful reality that his life was about to end on the asphalt parking lot of some taco fast-food restaurant next to a hot sauce-stained burrito wrapper that had been nonchalantly cast aside for the birds to pick up.

As Alex moved, he soon reached the outskirts of the school perimeter and his hope for the rest of the day slowly began to rise. Maybe he could make it home in time to finally read and get away from everything. Reading was his escape. And even though it was 2018 and the practice of reading an actual, physical, book was considered completely ancient by seemingly everyone at La Padre, it was the only thing that he really liked doing anymore. His father called it his passion but Alex didn't really see it like that. It was more like traveling, something to be experienced and felt. And from the very first time that he had laid his eyes and thoughts upon *The Fellowship of the Ring* from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it had been his favorite story easily. Alex would give anything to be in that hobbit-filled world now, to be away from Oren and Tommy and the Trolls, to actually live inside of that fantasy landscape and leave all of his problems behind. Maybe in the Shire he could be a bigger person than what he was, he could be someone that bullies wouldn't mess with and a boy that girls actually liked. He could finally have some guts and maybe even some friends and be welcomed into a land that would

wait for him, a place where he belonged. There was just that sense of camaraderie and friendship that existed within the fellowship, something he didn't really feel in his own life.

Alex didn't have a girlfriend to talk with on the phone, or even one to say hello to in the halls aside from Kira, who he had a not-so-secret fond desire of. There was Vanessa too, but she was in the band and Alex thought she was a little strange. He felt most girls likely thought of him as that weirdo awkward kid which was maybe a little too smart for his own good, and they were probably right. Alex wasn't athletic enough to be a jock, a good enough chess player to dominate the chess club, and he didn't have enough dexterity in his young fingers to play a cool, bluesy riff on guitar. He just didn't fit in anywhere. Alex didn't even have a place in the school's social hierarchy to know where he stood when lined up next to his peers. And as for the place he held within his own family, well, his father normally just brushed him off to focus on his corporate financial accounts and his mother was always caught up in her love affair with the muscular junior college dropout that she met while power-walking one morning through the Mission Rancho Mall while wearing her baby-blue, knee-high socks because Alex's dad didn't give her enough attention after his sixteen-hour work days. Yeah, there was that. And then there was Alex in their little trifecta of a family unit. Alex was just kind of there, not very important to particularly anyone. He was a toy, a name that his parents could throw around during formal business party

conversations to say that they had a child of their own that they loved with all of their hearts. But was that true? No, at least Alex didn't feel it to be true, they just ignored him. So instead of dealing with the world, Alex read and he read a lot. And now, he power-walked himself through the baby-blue, quasi-nightmare hell, away from the Troll that hunted him from beyond the land of the dead. He dreamed of safely holding a book in his hand later that night and joining a fellowship of his own. No broken arms existed in Alex's dream.

His thoughts were interrupted as the robot vibrated in his backpack when it accidentally turned on. He fumbled for the zipper, found it, reached inside and slid his fingers against the power switch and turned it back off. Alex remembered the cracked frame of the car and how they had all laughed at him. Lousy jerks, that's what the Trolls were. He looked over his shoulder and saw that he was still clear of Tommy and Oren, at least for now.

He kept moving.

Alex made it to the busy, intersection corner, where the entirety of his attention was directed at the Macho Taco parking lot across the street, the place where The Oaf's last victim had been silenced in a puddle of his own blood and chipped teeth until an ambulance arrived. Simon, the boy who had been forgotten forever, future holder of the tombstone with inscribed epitaph, "The One Who Was Lost Over a Turtle" - Jesus Christ. Alex carefully scanned the small fast-

food joint from afar but didn't see anyone. He was home-free, he could feel it, he knew it. All he had to do was make it across that parking lot and-

"Hey, Baby Schmaby!" a deep and matured voice said as Alex saw Oren crawling up the hill next to the sidewalk, rising up from the animal farm of Mission Rancho High School. The Troll Leader had taken a shortcut. "Thought you'd get away so soon, did you? Well, well, well now. Didn't I tell you we would have a little talk today after what you pulled with your little girl robot?" Oren let out a long breath of air, panting as he made his way up to Alex on the corner of the street intersection.

Alex tried to ignore the bully and watched the red hand of the traffic signal to his right blink once, twice. The counter started. 16, 15, 14 –

"Aren't you going to answer me, baby?"

The walk signal was still a solid red but soon enough it would go white. Alex just needed to stay quiet and try to ignore the Troll. Maybe he could make Oren go away if he just drowned him out in his thoughts and forgot about him.

"Hey!" Oren said and pushed Alex. The breathy smell of vodka passed over his nostrils. Alex was knocked back but landed on solid ground where he was able to maintain his balance. Again, he glanced at the signal, 7, 6, 5 –

Just ignore it all, Alex thought. He'll leave if I just ignore him.

Oren pulled his giant arm back and made a fist. It was coming for him, with one crack to his face it would all be over. Alex pulled his head back, terrified of the damage that was about to be inflicted upon his body.

“Screw you, Oren!” a second winded voice yelled from behind. Alex squinted open his eyes and turned around to steal a glance at the intruder, it was Kira running at the two of them. “Leave him alone, it was your own fault you big, dumb, idiot!”

Oren turned to face Kira running at him from behind and Alex then saw his chance. The walk sign turned white, telling him that it was safe to go. Without looking back, Alex took off running as fast as he could across the street where a neon-green car had to jolt to a stop to avoid hitting the boy. The sedan’s horn blazed and an angry, female, soccer mom’s voice cussed at him from behind. But in his foggy memory of the event later that afternoon, Alex only recalled Oren yelling that he would fight him on Friday after school at the Macho Taco! And that he’d make his life a living hell forever if he didn’t show up. Just like he did with Simon! And then there was the laughter, Oren’s awful incessant laughter. But the worst part of the event wasn’t Oren at all, it was the fact that as he ran, Alex realized that he had literally just been saved by a girl. And no one in the world could save a boy from that.

III

That afternoon his father, Douglas Wilkinson, sat on the orange leather couch in the living room like he had done every day religiously for the last five years, reading a dying newspaper called *The Orange May Register* and mumbling to himself about the pending free agents in the NFL. Alex had always felt orange was an interesting choice of color for a leather couch. And it wasn't the type of orange that would fade gently into the background of the room, it was bright, very bright, even obnoxious.

Still with the backpack containing the robot slung over his shoulder, Alex tried to hurry by and make it to the stairs unnoticed with sweat rolling down his brow. His father brought the paper down and peered at the boy through the top portion of his bifocal glasses. His eyes followed Alex as he crossed the room until the boy made it to the base of the stairs.

"What's wrong, Alex?" his dad asked.

Alex didn't want to talk about it. His dad only acted like he cared.

"Nothing," he replied.

"I know when it's nothing and this is definitely not nothing," his father said as he put the paper down to rest on the oak side-table, next to the bright orange couch.

“It really is nothing,” Alex said again as he went up the stairs. He heard the leather couch let out a long song of flatulence as Douglas Wilkinson stood up.

“Alex!” his father yelled after him but he was already in his room, shutting the door behind. He looked at the posters on his walls. The room was modest and not so unlike any other boy in the eighth grade except where one might find athletic idols or rock bands or curved feminine figures with bust regions the size of pro-basketballs grazing the walls, posters of Carl Sagan and Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man sided his window. Below that very window was a bookshelf which was partially dusted over and contained what Alex estimated to be about one hundred books of all different shapes and sizes. The rest of his collection was stored in an orderly fashion beneath his bed in a clear plastic box, labeled by subject and author.

“Alex! I’m coming in,” his father called out.

“Thanks for the warning,” Alex said under his breath.

The door opened and Alex sat down on the bed and flicked on his tablet. The screen lit and glowed in front of his face while Doug stood high above him, definitely his father’s chosen, authoritative position.

“You in trouble?” he asked.

“Trouble? No, I’m not in trouble, Doug.”

“Don’t call me Doug, I’m your father and you need to respect me. Stop being a teenager like this, you always make everything difficult when you do.”

“Well, Doug, I-” Alex began.

“What did I just-,” his father interrupted.

“-am just trying to tell you that I’m fine. Absolutely, unequivocally, fine. It’s okay.” But he wasn’t fine.

His father sat down and stared at the boy. It was true after all, Alex was being lousy to him but the boy had just been rescued by a girl from the kid from hell who wanted to rip his arms off and talking to his father wasn’t going to cure any of his current troubles. In fact, Alex thought it would probably just make the whole thing worse.

“You get beat up at school today or something? Oren? He had his way with that Steven kid a few weeks ago.”

“No, it has nothing to do with Oren. And the kid’s name was Simon,” Alex said.

“Then what’s with the cut?” his dad asked.

“What cut?”

“The one over your eye?” Alex reached up to his face, there was some blood, not much, but it was there. Was it from the push? The whole event had happened so fast, he couldn’t remember.

“I bumped into a light pole, I didn’t watch where I was going. Just being dumb, I guess. Pretty stupid.”

Douglas Wilkinson laughed, “Just like my little Alex, not paying attention since the day he was born. You were probably watching that Kira girl too long. The one I know you like even

if you won't tell me so, she's cute. But that girl has Tommy Wingles wrapped up. You better give that one up right away or he'd have you licked in a second if you two ever dropped the gloves. You're not a fighter, Alex, you know that. That boy kind of reminds me of your old man, in a way, when I stole your mother. Me and her have been going strong ever since I showed her who the tough guy really was. And I hear Tommy is going to make varsity next year too."

"Yeah," Alex said as he quickly thought of Kira and Tommy in the creek together and then shifted back to the present. "He's a lucky guy, Dad."

"You know, if you wouldn't keep your nose down in those books you love so much all the time, maybe you could get outside every once in awhile. Throw the ball around and make some friends or something. It might help toughen you up a bit, give you some guts." His father turned to leave, nearly shutting the door behind him as he made his way out of Alex's room, but then stopped deep in thought. "This has nothing to do with that little robot thing you made the other day, does it? You had a presentation or something, didn't you?"

"It's next week," Alex said, wondering if his dad had paid enough attention to know that his presentation had actually been today.

"Oh, that's right, that's right, next week. I remember now," his father said and then shut the door behind him as he left. Alex's chest depressed as he let air out of his lungs and he

pressed his finger to the screen of the tablet and started to search for help. He typed: BOOKS ABOUT FIGHTING. The screen populated with over fifty thousand search results. He tried again: HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF AGAINST A BULLY. The search didn't narrow down the results as much as Alex had hoped but it was a start. After filtering through the matches, Alex stopped on one that he knew he had under his bed. The Art of War by Lau Tzu. But it was of no use, he didn't have enough time to do anything about it. He put down the tablet and closed his eyes, thinking of the friends that he didn't have and all of the adventures that he could be on right now with them. The afternoon glow faded into twilight and sleep crept on Alex as his thoughts cleared and the dreams rose.

IV

The standard had to be set, Oren needed to be put down, and it needed to happen in front of everyone. As the remaining days of the week wound down, the word of Alex's impending doom had spread throughout La Padre Middle School and even into Mission Rancho High School to a point where teachers of classes that Alex wasn't even in suddenly asked him if he was doing alright. And the answer was no, he wasn't, not in any significant way, and he knew what was about to happen to him and the grave danger that his body was in. It was as if even these teachers knew what was coming and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. A boy couldn't say

how he truly felt, it was against the widely-accepted and stratified social code. Break it, and you were deemed a wimp forever. His father had ignored him even though Alex realized he hadn't been exactly forthright with any information, his mother had gone missing with her 'secret but not really' special friend, and Alex's own classmates at school didn't know one thing about a fight unless it happened between two lightsaber-wielding wizards on screen. And he couldn't blame them, if they had been in his position, he wouldn't know what to say to them either. So he hid the pressure that he felt, he buried it deep down in an attempt to forget that it was Friday and tried to act as if this afternoon was never going to happen. He pretended that he didn't care and that it would all be over for him soon, which it would be if he thought about it in the right way. After years of abuse from Oren, not one student had ever escaped the bully's wrath.

But there was one problem that was bigger than the rest, Alex was terribly afraid. He wasn't afraid of feeling his face smashed into the point where he had no idea what world he was in or having his bones broken to bits, rather he was afraid of the embarrassment that would come with it. He was afraid of the crowds yelling and the chanting as he was defeated. He would be Schmaby the Baby, mommy lover, a loser, a nerd. Kira would be there too, he was sure of that, and this time she wouldn't be able to buy him any sort of grace. He would never be able to live it down if a girl rescued him *twice*. No, this time

it was going to be on his shoulders to rise above his own fear and defeat Oren. Good luck with that.

After Tuesday night, he had read through his books at a non-stop pace, searching for some kind of information that could possibly help him in his time of need. Could he align Oren in the direction of the setting sun to partially blind his opposition when they lined up? He supposed it was possible to do. Maybe he could fight dirty, faking being hit down onto the pavement of the Macho Taco parking lot where he could find a rock to throw at Oren, or nail him a good one where the sun doesn't shine with a fistful of quarters, or something. Anything really. He was a planner but Alex understood something like this couldn't be planned for. Fights and conversations and relationships always twisted and turned in unexpected ways to a point where the result was impossible to calculate with his analytical mind. And the bottom line was that was due to human nature. Unpredictable, emotional, irrational.

"Alex," someone said from the background of his thoughts, back from somewhere in the classroom he was still sitting in long after the bell had rung. Alex lifted his head from the crossed arms on his desk and looked up, it was Kira.

"Hey," he said.

"Are you doing okay?" she asked. She wore a cheap silver necklace around her neck and a black T-shirt. Even so, Alex thought she looked lovely. She had Stephen King's *The Stand*

tucked away under her arm, she was a reader too. Kira was too good for someone like Tommy, but a young girl's emotion was never one to be corralled.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he told her.

“You haven’t moved for five minutes,” she said and gave him a comforting smile. She reached over with her free hand and put it on his left shoulder. To Alex, it felt as if electricity shot straight out from within her fingers into his body. “It’s going to be okay, you know that right? I won’t let him do to you what he did to Simon.”

“I have to do this on my own,” Alex said.

She took her hand away quickly as Spitwad Tommy walked into the near-empty classroom with the Sidekicks. “Are you ready for later, you little punk?” Tommy asked and laughed. He looked to the Sidekicks who joined him and Alex saw that he was looking for their approval. “Yesterday, Oren just blew up his cat! Have you heard? And he’s going to do much worse to you this afternoon. Believe me, he is. He had some leftover M-80s from Mexico in his closet and told me to come over fast and I did and ohhh man, I am so glad I did. Blew the thing straight up into the sky. I mean, bang! Botta-boom! Send the cat up in in a plume of doom!”

The second of the Sidekicks chimed in, “I got Sir Meows-A-Lot’s paw, it’s good luck. Better luck than a rabbit’s foot. That’s what my old man says anyway. It has something to do with how cats have nine lives instead of one.”

“Shut up,” Tommy told the Sidekick.

“You guys are disgusting,” Kira said as Alex put his head back down into the crease of his crossed arms.

“It’s okay, don’t worry, it will all be over soon, Schmaby,” Tommy whispered to him but still loud enough for the rest of the group to hear. “I hope you’re afraid, Alex, you’re going to deserve what you get. Let me tell you that, Oren was practicing for you. That’s what he told me yesterday. He said he’s going to make a point to the whole school of never crossing him again. You ruined our weekend and we don’t forget little things like that. And Kira isn’t going to be around to save you th-”

“Tommy, ple-” Kira started.

“Don’t let her make you think you’ll be alright. We all heard about Tuesday and how you ran, ran, ran off into the distance. Well, we have something planned for you. Oren is preparing it right now as we speak.”

Alex looked back up and he felt tears starting to form in his eyes. How embarrassing was this all with the girl of his dreams right next to him? He hated Tommy, he absolutely hated Tommy. Instead of responding to him, Alex looked at her.

“Tommy is a jerk, you know that right?” he asked her.

She started to answer but Tommy cut her off, like always.

“Because buddy, I am going varsity next year in high school. Haven’t you heard? And this little beauty is going to ride with me all the way to the top. Aren’t you, babe?”

To the top of what, Alex didn’t know.

She looked at Tommy and smiled but something about her demeanor told Alex she wasn’t really smiling. There was something more to it than that. Like she was hiding something, something she wanted to tell Alex but she couldn’t at that moment. But maybe it was all in his head, he wasn’t sure. Either way, he couldn’t take Tommy anymore. Alex stood up and pushed past the group of Trolls and walked out of the room, searching his mind for ideas on how he could lay down their leader.

V

Friday afternoon came like every afternoon had before. The sun shone through the trees casting long shadows across the asphalt blacktop of the street. Leaves fluttered to and fro and Alex kept his hands in his pockets, careful to keep his hands warm for whatever fate awaited him. He questioned himself as he walked to the parking lot of the dead. Was it worth it? Why not just run from the situation? He could still run, run, run off into the distance. Why walk to the place where he knew he would just get pummeled and embarrassed in front of all of his peers? He tried to give himself a good answer, something that would help him overcome what he felt but he couldn’t think of anything that told him it would be

okay. Alex knew he had to show the school that he wasn't afraid, he had to show them that he could do something beyond the emotional walls that his peers had built around him, that he could be more than what he was. Mostly though, he had to show himself that he could get past his fear, that he could be tough when he needed to be. He tried to tell himself that the results of the fight wouldn't matter. But it didn't work, he knew that it would matter to his peers, he would go home a winner or a loser and it would dominate the rest of his life. Little Alex the Loser, that is what they would all say. He tried to control his emotions but his hands shook deep within his shorts' pockets.

Next to him, a blue sedan was caught between lanes and jerked back and forth on the street as cars driven by the high schoolers swerved around the stalling vehicle honking and flipping the sedan the bird as they drove by. The last car to pass by the sedan puffed thick black smoke from the exhaust pipe and had a bumper sticker slapped diagonally across the beige trunk that read: KISS ASS AND SMOKE GRASS! Mildly aware of it all, Alex looked up and took notice but had no conscious thought about the traffic. Instead, he saw the crowd through the driving cars that loomed in front of him in the parking lot of Macho Taco. His hands quivered in the pockets of his shorts and he knew no amount of positive self-talk would do anything anymore. This was it. Friday afternoon was here and his destiny awaited him.

He reached the intersection of the street where Kira had distracted Oren the last time just long enough for him to take off running. But this time there was no Kira and no Oren, there were no Trolls visible, not yet at least. This time it was just him, Alexander Michael Wilkinson, son of Douglas and Suzy Wilkinson, nerd extraordinaire, and he was alone. He pressed the walk button and the lights flashed for the cross traffic to stop: GREEN, YELLOW, RED. His own walk sign turned and as he crossed the street, he heard the yelling of the crowds growing. It sounded just as he imagined it would. Somehow, it seemed like Alex had known what would happen before he even stepped out between the cars to face his fellow students, like he'd been in this situation before. Rounding the corner of the street behind the wall, he took a deep breath. His hands were still shaking but he couldn't show any of them that. Alex prepared himself for what would happen next.

There, in front of the crowd, stood Oren at the head of the Trolls and the Sidekicks, each of whom held multiple M-80s and matchboxes in their hands. Apparently, Tommy hadn't been lying, the cat had been Oren's practice for him. The Oaf had smeared grease beneath his eyes like those pro-baseball players did when they tried to avoid the glare from the sun, it was all sport and fun to him. And there were maybe thirty others crowded around for the main event, mocking Alex with their smiles and their laughing. Eighth grade was a bitch.

Alone, Alex stepped into the middle of the circle of his peers and felt their attention fall on him. All went silent. He

knew he had to try and keep his composure, no one was going to rescue him this time. No little robot could take the pounding for him, this time it was him and him alone.

“I didn’t mean to get you in trouble, Oren,” he said loud enough for all to hear him, the steadiness of his own voice surprised Alex but his hands still shook silently within his pockets. “I really didn’t.”

“Oh, look at Schmaby the Baby,” said Tommy from behind Oren. “Look at him acting all tough.”

“Tommy,” Oren said with an edge in his voice that silenced his friend. “This one is for me.” The Oaf turned from Tommy and spoke directly to Alex, “No one tells me to shut up, Alex. No one, do you hear me? Do you all hear me? No one in school gets to do that and I hope everyone hears and understands that from now on. Or else you’ll all end up like little Alex here in just a minute.”

The proclamation was set.

The Oaf continued, “If you are so smart, you wouldn’t be in this situation now and me and Tommy woulda never had detention with Carter. Maybe, if you weren’t such a LOSER then you could be at home reading all those dumb little wizard magic books you like to read with your mommy and her boyfriend.”

Alex wondered how Oren knew about that but this wasn’t the time to find out. Oren walked straight up to Alex and faced him directly, again his breath smelled like hard alcohol.

The sixteen-year-old pushed Alex and he flew backward, the strength of the lead Troll was incredible, the extra three years of Macho Tacos had favored his weight well. No one could stand a chance against that.

Still with his hands in his pockets, Alex stood his ground as Oren approached him again. Alex had hoped by the time that he got to this point, that he would have had some sort of plan, some sort of way to survive Oren. But the truth was, was that he didn't. He had no idea what to do. He wasn't a fighter, just like his father had told him.

"Come on and fight me, you stupid baby!" Oren said and smiled. And then the bully swung wide and the rest of it all slowed down from there. Oren connected the punch with Alex's left cheekbone so hard that the boy's head snapped back with the impact of fist on flesh. Blood flew in the air and landed on the gray concrete in front of Macho Taco, decorating the entrance of the fast-food Mexican restaurant with a new type of macho sauce. And as he fell, Alex's hands flew out of his pockets and formed great arcs across the sky before his body slammed into the pavement. To the left side of the crowd, behind two other distraught onlookers, Alex saw Kira, the girl that had started this all in a way, and she had a look of horror spread across her face. Alex smiled at her and tried to wave as he fell, to try to let her know that everything was going to be alright and that at least he hadn't run from the situation again, that he could be tough. But he was going down and he knew that he was now Simon, he was now the

cat about to explode, the ultimate victim of Oren's tyranny over the middle-school world. And what would his fate finally be when it was all over? His head smashed into the edge of the blue car bumper stop of the handicap space and then pain shattered through his skull. At one moment there was a crowd, there was a fight, there was a robot, there were indifferent parents and a schoolyard where he meant nothing. There were the Trolls and the Oaf, and high schoolers, and Carter, and Kira, and a broken family. And then in the next moment, there was nothing, as Alex's hands had finally gone still.

VI

Alex opened his eyes. The sky was a luscious green and the grass had gone violet where he lay. The side of his head still laid against a rock and a headache split his temple. He felt hard rain patter against his forehead and he knew that his shirt and pants were soaked. Alex watched the descending drops hit the creek surface where they formed little splashes on the skin of the water. He was alive. But where was Kira? Where was Oren? Where was the parking lot and the crowd? He forced his eyes open wider and Alex slowly took in his surroundings. The boy saw that he was in the middle of a field surrounded by trees, great pines of a dark sapphire color. A creek ran through the area where Macho Taco had once been which was now only a shoreline of concrete rubble that was covered and run-through with thick vines. The trees sprouted so high that

Alex couldn't see their tops and they surrounded the field on all sides. Next to the creek, a wet dirt path curved round the ruins and split the yellowed field off into the distance of the setting sun. Alex heard the clatter of hooves from behind, pressing into mud as they came closer. He turned around and the pain shot through his head again. Alex then saw black, corroded, metal wheels, framed with wooden spokes, that rotated and shot wet dirt off the sides of a large cart, and then there was a call from above.

“Heyah,” the rider of the cart beckoned to him. “Boy! Get up.” It was a man's voice, masculine but not deep. Alex looked up, still dazed. The dark figure that roared the carriage called for his beasts to stop, not horses for they were larger and shaped differently and horns sprouted from their head. The giant animals heeded the command and the crimson-cloaked figure watched the curious boy from atop his bench. *What had happened?* Alex wondered. Oren and the Trolls were long gone, he was alive, and his prayers had been answered. But what fate had he truly suffered? Alex closed his eyes again from where he lay smashed on the rock and once again passed out.

Alex's travels shall continue soon

in the Second Chapter of

The Last Traveler.

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