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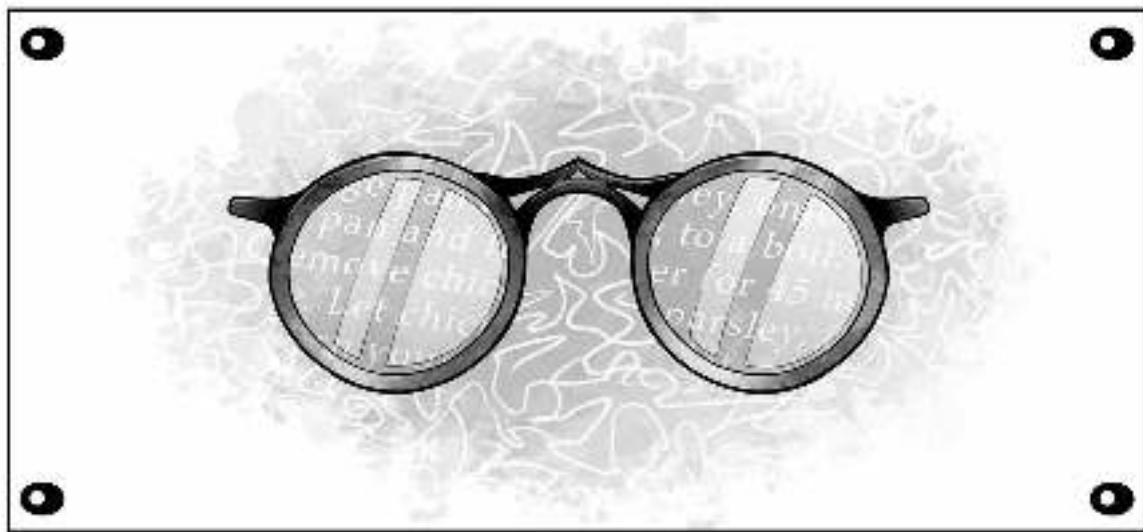


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAYLEY LAZO

ALCATRAZ
• VS. THE •
EVIL LIBRARIANS



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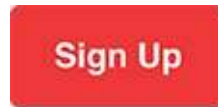
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For my father, Winn Sanderson, who bought me books

Author's Foreword

I am not a good person.

Oh, I know what the stories say about me. They call me Oculator Dramatus, Hero Savior of the Seventeen Kingdoms.... Those, however, are just rumors. Some are exaggerations; many are outright lies. The truth is far less impressive.

When Mr. Bagsworth first came to me, suggesting that I write my autobiography, I was hesitant. However, I soon realized that this was the perfect opportunity to explain myself to the public.

As I understand it, this book will be published simultaneously in the Free Kingdoms and Inner Libraria. This presents something of a problem for me, since I will have to make the story understandable to people from both areas. Those in the Free Kingdoms might be unfamiliar with things like bazookas, briefcases, and guns. However, those in Libraria—or the Hushlands, as they are often called—will likely be unfamiliar with things like Oculators, Crystin, and the depth of the Librarian conspiracy.

To those of you in the Free Kingdoms, I suggest that you find a reference book—there are many that would do—to explain unfamiliar terms to you. After all, this book will be published as a biography in your lands, and so it is not my purpose to teach you about the strange machines and archaic weaponry of Libraria. My purpose is to show you the truth about me, and to prove that I am not the hero that everyone says I am.

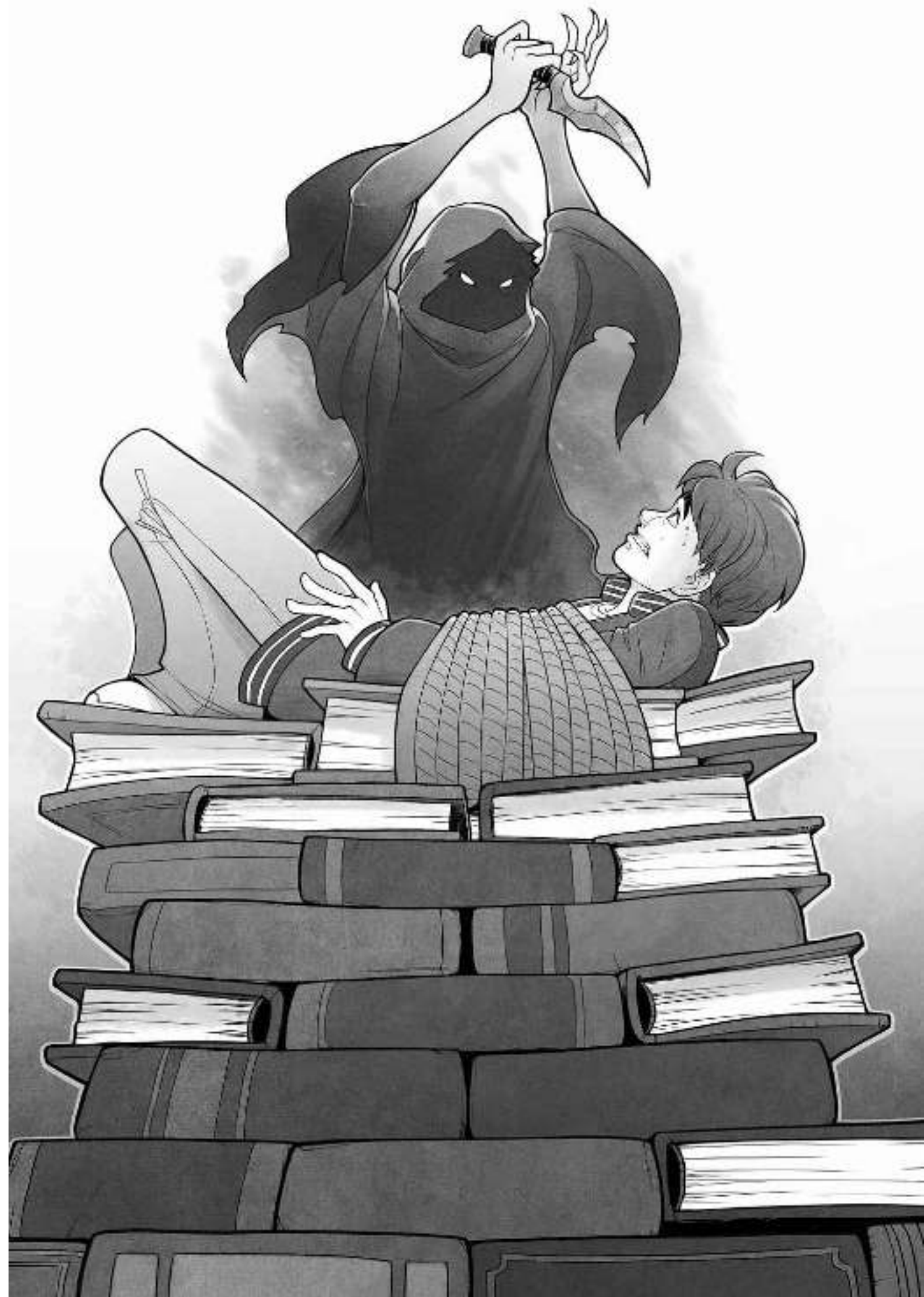
In the Hushlands—those Librarian-controlled nations such as the United States, Canada, and England—this book will be published as a work of fantasy. Do not be fooled! This is no work of fiction, nor is my name really Brandon Sanderson. Both are guises to hide the book from Librarian agents. Unfortunately, even with these precautions, I suspect that the Librarians will discover the book and ban it. In that case, our Free Kingdom Agents will have to sneak into libraries and bookstores to put it on shelves. Count yourself lucky if you've found one of these secret copies.

For you Hushlanders, I know the events of my life may seem wondrous and mysterious. I will do my best to explain them, but please remember that my purpose is not to entertain you. My purpose is to open your eyes to the truth.

I know that in writing this I shall make few friends in either world. People are never pleased when you reveal that their beliefs are wrong.

But that is what I must do. This is my story—the story of a selfish, contemptible fool.

The story of a coward.





So there I was, tied to an altar made from outdated encyclopedias, about to get sacrificed to the dark powers by a cult of evil Librarians.

As you might imagine, that sort of situation can be quite disturbing. It does funny things to the brain to be in such danger—in fact, it often makes a person pause and reflect upon his life. If you've never faced such a situation, then you'll simply have to take my word. It, on the other hand, you have faced such a situation, then you are probably dead and aren't likely to be reading this.

In my case, the moment of impending death made me think about my parents. It was an odd thought, since I hadn't grown up with them. In fact, until my thirteenth birthday, I really only knew one thing about my parents: that they had a twisted sense of humor.

Why do I say this? Well, you see, my parents named me Al. In most cases, this would be short for Albert, which is a fine name. In fact, you have probably known an Albert or two in your lifetime, and the chances are that they were decent fellows. If they weren't, then it certainly wasn't the name's fault.

My name isn't Albert.

Al also could be short for Alexander. I wouldn't have minded this either, since Alexander is a great name. It sounds kind of regal.

My name isn't Alexander.

I'm certain that you can think of other names Al might be short for. Alfonso has a pleasant ring to it. Alan would also be acceptable, as would have been Alfred—though I really don't have an inclination toward butlery.

My name is not Alfonso, Alan, or Alfred. Nor is it Alejandro, Alton, Aldris, or Alonzo.

My name is Alcatraz. Alcatraz Smedry. Now, some of you Tree Kingdomers might be impressed by my name. That's wonderful for you, but I grew up in the Hushlands—in the United States. I didn't know about Oculators or the like, though I did know about prisons.

And that was why I figured that my parents *must* have had a twisted sense of humor. Why else would they name their child after the most infamous prison in U.S. history?

On my thirteenth birthday, I received a second confirmation that my parents were indeed cruel people. That was the day when I unexpectedly received in the mail the only inheritance they left me.

It was a bag of sand.

I stood at the door, looking down at the package in my hands, frowning as the postman drove away. The package looked old—its string ties were frayed, and its brown paper packaging was worn and

faded. Inside the package, I found a box containing a simple note.

*Alcatraz,
Happy thirteenth birthday!
Here is your inheritance, as promised.
Love, Mom and Dad*

Underneath the note, I found the bag of sand. It was small, perhaps the size of a fist, and was filled with ordinary brown beach sand.

Now, my first inclination was to think that the package was a joke. You probably would have thought the same. One thing, however, made me pause. I set the box down, then smoothed out its wrinkled packaging paper.

One edge of the paper was covered with wild scribbles—a little like those made by a person trying to get the ink in a pen to flow. On the front there was writing. It looked old and faded—almost illegible in places—and yet it accurately spelled out my address. An address I'd been living at for only eight months.

Impossible, I thought.

Then I went inside my house and set the kitchen on fire.

Now, I warned you that I wasn't a good person. Those who knew me when I was young would never have believed that one day *I* would be known as a hero. The word *heroic* just didn't apply to me. Nor did people use words like *nice* or even *friendly* to describe me. They might have used the word *clever*, though I suspect that *devious* may have been more correct. *Destructive* was another common one that I heard, but I didn't care for it. (It wasn't actually all that accurate.)

No, people never said good things about me. Good people don't burn down kitchens.

Still holding the strange package, I wandered toward my foster parents' kitchen, lost in thought. It was a very nice kitchen, modern looking with white wallpaper and lots of shiny chrome appliances. Anyone entering it would immediately notice that this was the kitchen of a person who took pride in their cooking skills.

I set my package on the table, then moved over to the kitchen stove. If you're a Hushlander, you would have thought I looked like a fairly normal American boy, dressed in loose jeans and a T-shirt. I've been told I was a handsome kid—some even said that I had an "innocent face." I was not too tall, had dark brown hair, and was skilled at breaking things.

Quite skilled.

When I was very young, other kids called me a klutz. I was always breaking things—plates, cameras, chickens. It seemed inevitable that whatever I picked up, I would end up dropping, cracking, or otherwise mixing up. Not exactly the most inspiring talent a young man ever had, I know. However, I generally tried to do my best despite it.

Just like I did this day. Still thinking about the strange package, I filled a pot with water. Next I got out a few packs of instant ramen noodles. I set them down, looking at the stove. It was a fancy gas one with real flames. My foster mother Joan wouldn't settle for electric.

Sometimes it was daunting, knowing how easily I could break things. This one simple cure seemed to dominate my entire life. Perhaps I shouldn't have tried to fix dinner. Perhaps I should



simply have retreated to my room. But what was I to do? Stay there all the time? Never go out because I was worried about the things I *might* break? Of course not.

I reached out and turned on the gas burner.

And, of course, the flames *immediately* flared up around the sides of the pan, far higher than should have been possible. I quickly tried to turn down the flames, but the knob broke off in my hand. I tried to grab the pot and take it off the stove. But, of course, the handle broke off. I stared at the broken handle for a moment, then looked up at the flames. They flickered, catching the drapes on fire. The fire gleefully began to devour the cloth.



~~Well, so much for that, I thought with a sigh, tossing the broken handle over my shoulder. I left the fire burning—once again, I feel I must remind you that I'm not a very nice person—and picked up my strange package as I walked out into the den.~~

There, I pulled out the brown wrapper, flattening it against the table with one hand and looking at the stamps. One had a picture of a woman wearing flight goggles, with an old-fashioned airplane in the background behind her. All of the stamps looked old—perhaps as old as I was. I turned on the computer and checked a database of stamp issue dates and found that I was right. They had been printed thirteen years ago.

Someone had taken quite a bit of effort to make it *seem* like my present had been packaged, addressed, and stamped over a decade earlier. That, however, was ridiculous. How would the sender have known where I'd be living? During the last thirteen years, I'd gone through dozens of sets of foster parents. Besides, my experience has been that the number of stamps it takes to send a package increases without warning or pattern. (The postage people are, I'm convinced, quite sadistic in that regard.) There was no way someone could have known, thirteen years ago, how much postage it would cost to send a package in my day.

I shook my head, standing up and tossing the M key from the computer keyboard into the trash. I stopped trying to stick the keys back on—they always fell off again anyway. I got the fire extinguisher from the hall closet, then walked back into the kitchen, which was now quite thoroughly billowing with smoke. I put the box and extinguisher on the table, then picked up a broom, holding my breath. I calmly knocked the tattered remnants of the drapes into the sink. I turned on the water, then finally used the extinguisher to blast the burning wallpaper and cabinets, also putting out the stove.

The smoke alarm didn't go off, of course. You see, I'd broken *that* previously. All I'd needed to do was rest my hand against its case for a second, and it had fallen apart.

I didn't open a window, but did have the presence of mind to get a pair of pliers and twist the stove's gas valve off. Then I glanced at the curtains, a smoldering ashen lump in the sink.

Well, that's it, I thought, a bit frustrated. Joan and Roy will never continue to put up with me after this.

Perhaps you think I should have felt ashamed. But what was I supposed to do? Like I said—couldn't hide in my room all the time. Was I to avoid living just because life was a little different for me than it was for ordinary people? No. I had learned to deal with my strange curse. I figured that others would simply have to do so as well.

I heard a car in the driveway. Finally realizing that the kitchen was still rank with smoke, I opened the window and began using a towel to fan it out. My foster mother—Joan—rushed into the kitchen a moment later. She stood, horrified, looking at the fire damage.

I tossed aside the towel and left without a word, going up to my room.

* * *

“That boy is a disaster!”

Joan's voice drifted up through the open window into my room. My foster parents were in the study down on the first floor, their favorite place for “quiet” conferences about me. Fortunately, one of the first things that I'd broken in the house had been the study's window rollers, locking the windows permanently open so that I could listen in.

“Now, Joan,” said a consoling voice. It belonged to Roy, my foster father.

“I can't take it!” Joan sputtered. “He destroys everything he touches!”

There was that word again. *Destroy*. I felt my hair bristle in annoyance. *I don't destroy things, I thought. I break them. They're still there when I'm finished, they just don't work right anymore.*

“He means well,” Roy said. “He’s a kindhearted boy.”

“First the washing machine,” Joan ranted. ~~“Then the lawn mower. Then the upstairs bath. Now the kitchen. All in less than a year!”~~

“He’s had a hard life,” Roy said. “He simply tries too hard—how would you feel, being passed from family to family, never having a home...?”

“Well, can you blame people for getting rid of him?” Joan said. “I—”

She was interrupted by a knock on the front door. There was a moment of silence, and I imagined what was going on between my foster parents. Joan was probably giving Roy “the look.” Usually it was the husband who gave “the look,” insisting that I be sent away. Roy had always been the soft one here, however. I heard his footsteps as he went to answer the door.

“Come in,” Roy said, his voice faint, since he now stood in the entryway. I remained lying on my bed. It was still early evening—the sun hadn’t even set yet.

“Mrs. Sheldon,” a new voice said from below, acknowledging Joan. “I came as soon as I heard about the accident.” It was a woman’s voice, familiar to me. Businesslike, curt, and more than a little condescending. Perhaps that had something to do with why Ms. Fletcher wasn’t married.

“Ms. Fletcher,” Joan said, faltering now that the time had come. They usually did. “I’m ... sorry ___”

“No,” Ms. Fletcher said. “You did well to last this long. I can arrange for the boy to be taken tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes, sighing quietly. Joan and Roy had lasted quite long—longer, certainly, than any of my other recent sets of foster parents. Eight months was a valiant effort when taking care of *me* was concerned. I felt a little twist in my stomach.

“Where is he now?” Ms. Fletcher asked.

“He’s upstairs.”

I waited quietly. Ms. Fletcher knocked but didn’t wait for my reply before pushing open the door.

“Ms. Fletcher,” I said. “You look lovely.”

It was a stretch. Ms. Fletcher—my personal caseworker—*might* have been a pretty woman, had she not been wearing a pair of hideous horn-rimmed glasses. She perpetually kept her blonde hair up in a bun that was only slightly less tight than the dissatisfied line of her lips. She wore a simple white blouse and a black skirt that went to mid-calf. For her, it was a daring outfit—the shoes, after all, were maroon.



~~“The kitchen, Alcatraz?” Ms. Fletcher asked. “Why the kitchen?”~~

“It was an accident,” I mumbled. “I was trying to do something nice for my foster parents.”

“You decided that you would be kind to Joan Sheldon—one of the city’s finest and most well-renowned chefs—by burning down her kitchen?”

I shrugged. “Just wanted to fix dinner. I figured even *I* couldn’t mess up ramen noodles.”

Ms. Fletcher snorted. Finally she walked into the room, shaking her head as she strolled past my dresser. She poked my inheritance package with her index finger, harrumphing quietly as she eyed the crumpled paper and worn strings; Ms. Fletcher had a thing about messiness. She turned back to me. “We’re running out of families, Smedry. The other couples are hearing rumors. Soon there won’t be any place left to send you.”

I remained quiet, still lying down.

Ms. Fletcher sighed, folding her arms and tapping her index finger against one arm. “You realize, of course, that you are worthless.”

Here we go, I thought, feeling sick. This was my least favorite part of the process. I stared up at my ceiling.

“You are fatherless and motherless,” Ms. Fletcher said, “a parasite upon the system. You are a child who has been given a second, third, and now *twenty-seventh* chance. And how have you received this generosity? With indifference, disrespect, and *destructiveness!*”

“I don’t destroy,” I said quietly. “I break. There’s a difference.”

Ms. Fletcher sniffed in disgust. She left me then, walking out and pulling the door closed with a snap. I heard her say good-bye to the Sheldons, promising them that her assistant would arrive in the morning to deal with me.

It’s too bad, I thought with a sigh. *Roy and Joan really are good people. They would have made great parents.*

Chapter

2



Now, you're probably wondering about the beginning of the previous chapter, with its reference to evil Librarians, altars made from encyclopedias, and its general feeling of "Oh, no! Alcatraz is going to be sacrificed!"

Before we get to this, let me explain something about myself. I've been many things in my life: Student. Spy. Sacrifice. Potted plant. However, at this point, I'm something completely different from all of those—something more frightening than any of them.

I'm a writer.

You may have noticed that I began my story with a quick, snappy scene of danger and tension—but then quickly moved on to a more boring discussion of my childhood. Well, that's because I wanted to prove something to you: that *I am not a nice person*.

Would a nice person begin with such an exciting scene, then make you wait almost the entire book to read about it? Would a nice person write a book that exposes the true nature of the world to all of you ignorant Hushlanders, thereby forcing your lives into chaos? Would a nice person write a book that proves that Alcatraz Smedry, the Free Kingdoms' greatest hero, was just a mean-spirited adolescent?

Of course not.

I awoke grumpily that next morning, annoyed by the sound of someone banging on my downstairs door. I climbed out of bed, then threw on a bathrobe. Though the clock read 10:00 A.M., I was still tired. I had stayed up late, lost in thought. Then Joan and Roy had tried to say good-bye. I hadn't opened my door to them. Better to get things over without all that gushing.

No, I was not happy to be reawoken at 10:00 A.M.—or, actually, *any* A.M. I yawned, walking downstairs and pulling open the door, prepared to meet whichever assistant Ms. Fletcher had sent to retrieve me. "Hell—" I said. (I hadn't intended to swear, but a boisterous voice cut me off before I could get to the "o.")

"Alcatraz, my boy!" the man at the doorway exclaimed. "Happy Birthday!"

"—o," I said.

"You shouldn't swear, my boy!" the man said, pushing his way into the house. He was an old man who was dressed in a sharp black tuxedo and wore a strange pair of red-tinted glasses. He was quite bald save for a small bit of white hair running around the back of his head, and this puffed out in an unkempt fashion. He wore a similarly bushy white mustache, and he smiled quite broadly as I

turned to me, his face wrinkled but his eyes alight with excitement.

“Well, my boy,” he said, “how does it feel to be thirteen?”

“The same as it did yesterday,” I said, yawning. “When it was *actually* my birthday. Ms. Fletcher must have told you the wrong date. I’m not packed yet—you’re going to have to wait.”

I tiredly began to walk toward the stairs.

“Wait,” the old man said. “Your birthday was ... yesterday?”

I nodded. I’d never met the man before, but Ms. Fletcher had several assistants. I didn’t know them all.

“Rumbling Rawns!” the man exclaimed. “I’m late!”

“No,” I said, climbing the stairs. “Actually, you’re early. As I said, you’ll need to wait.”

The old man rushed up the stairs behind me.

I turned, frowning. “You can wait downstairs.”

“Quickly, boy!” the old man said. “I can’t wait. Soon you’ll be getting a package in the mail, and —”

“Stop. You know about the package?”

“Of course I do, of course I do. Don’t tell me it already came?”

I nodded.

“Blistering Brooks!” the old man exclaimed. “Where, lad? Where is it?”

I frowned. “Did Ms. Fletcher send it?”

“Ms. Fletcher? Never heard of her. Your parents sent that box, my boy!”

He’s never heard of her? I thought, realizing that I’d never verified the man’s identity. *Great. I’ve let a lunatic into the house.*

“Oh, blast!” the old man said, reaching into his suit pocket and pulling out a pair of yellow-tinted glasses. He quickly exchanged the light red ones for these, then looked around. “There!” he said, rushing up the stairs, pushing past me.

“Hey!” I called, but he didn’t stop. I muttered quietly to myself, following. The old man was surprisingly spry for his age, and he reached the door to my room in just a few heartbeats.

“Is this your room, my boy?” the old man asked. “Lots of footprints leading here. What happened to the doorknob?”

“It fell off. My first night in the house.”

“How odd,” the old man said, pushing the door open. “Now, where’s that box...?”

“Look,” I said, pausing in the doorway. “You have to leave. If you don’t, I’m going to call the police.”

“The police? Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re in my house,” I said. “Well ... my ex-house, at least.”

“But you let me in, lad,” the old man pointed out.

I paused. “Well, now I’m telling you to leave.”

“But why? Don’t you recognize me, my boy?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m your grandfather, lad! Grandpa Smedry! Leavenworth Smedry, Oculator Dramatus. Don’t tell me you don’t remember me—I was there when you were born!”

I blinked. Then frowned. Then cocked my head to the side. “You were there...?”

“Yes, yes,” the old man said. “Thirteen years ago! You haven’t seen me since, of course.”

“And I’m supposed to remember you?” I said.

“Well, certainly! We have excellent memories, we Smedrys. Now, about that box...”

Grandfather? The man had to be lying, of course. *I don’t even have parents. Why would I have a grandfather?*

Now, looking back, I realize that this was a silly thought. Everybody has a grandfather—two of them, actually. Just because you haven't seen them doesn't mean they don't exist. In that way, grandfathers are kind of like kangaroos.

At any rate, I most certainly *should* have called the police on this elderly intruder. He has been the main source of all my problems ever since. Unfortunately, I didn't throw him out. Instead, I just watched him put away his yellow-tinted spectacles, retrieving the reddish-tinted ones again. Then he finally spotted the box on my dresser, scribbled-on brown paper still sitting beside it. The old man rushed over eagerly.

Did he send it? I wondered.

He reached into the box, taking out the note with an oddly reverent touch. He read it, smiling fondly, then looked up at me.

"So, where is it?" Grandpa Smedry—or whoever he really was—asked.

"Where is what?"

"The inheritance, lad!"

"In the box," I said, pointing at the package.

"There isn't anything in here but the note."

"What?" I said, walking over. Indeed, the box was empty. The bag of sand was gone.

"What did you do with it?" I asked.

"With what?"

"The bag of sand," I said.

The old man breathed out in awe. "So, it really came?" he whispered, eyes wide. "There was actually a bag of sand in this box?"

I nodded slowly.

"What color was the sand, lad?"

"Um ... sandy?"

"Galloping Gemmells!" he exclaimed. "I'm too late! They must have gotten here before me. Quickly, lad. Who's been in this room since you received the box?"

"Nobody," I said. By this point, as you can imagine, I was growing a little frustrated and increasingly confused. Not to mention hungry and still a bit tired. And a little sore from gym class the previous week—but that isn't exactly all that relevant, is it?

"Nobody?" the old man repeated. "Nobody else has been in this room?"

"Nobody," I snapped. "Nobody at all." Except ... I frowned. "Except Ms. Fletcher."

"Who is this Ms. Fletcher you keep mentioning, lad?"

I shrugged. "My caseworker."

"What does she look like?"

"Glasses," I said. "Snobbish face. Usually has her hair in a bun."

"The glasses," Grandpa Smedry said slowly. "Did they have ... horn rims?"

"Usually."

"Hyperventilating Hobbs!" he exclaimed. "A Librarian! Quickly, lad, we have to go! Get dressed. I'll go steal some food from your foster parents!"

"Wait!" I said, but the old man had already scrambled from the room, moving with a sudden urgency.

I stood, dumbfounded.

Ms. Fletcher? I thought. *Take the inheritance? That's stupid. Why would she want a silly bag of sand?* I shook my head, uncertain what to make of all this. Finally, I just walked over to my dresser. Getting dressed, at least, seemed like a good idea. I threw on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and my favorite green jacket.

As I finished, Grandpa Smedry rushed back into my bedroom, carrying two of Roy's extra briefcases. I noticed a leaf of lettuce sticking halfway out of one, while the other seemed to be leaking a bit of ketchup.

"Here!" Grandpa Smedry said, handing me the lettuce briefcase. "I packed us lunches. No telling how long it will be before we can stop for food!"

I raised the briefcase, frowning. "You packed lunches inside of briefcases?"

"They'll look less suspicious that way. We have to fit in! Now, let's get moving. The Librarian could already be working on that sand."

"So?" I said.

"So!" the old man exclaimed. "Lad, with those sands, the Librarians could destroy kingdoms, overthrow cultures, dominate the world! We need to get them back. We'll have to strike quickly, and possibly at great peril to our lives. But that's the Smedry way!"

I lowered the briefcase. "If you say so."

"Before we leave, I need to know what our resources are. What's your Talent, lad?"

I frowned. "Talent?"

"Yes," Grandpa Smedry said. "Every Smedry has a Talent. What is yours?"

"Uh ... playing the oboe?"

"This is no time for jokes, lad!" Grandpa Smedry said. "This is serious! If we don't get that sand back..."

"Well," I said, sighing. "I'm pretty good at breaking things."

Grandpa Smedry froze.

Maybe I shouldn't play with the old man, I thought, feeling guilty. He may be a loon, but that's no reason to make fun of him.

"Breaking things?" Grandpa Smedry said, sounding awed. "So it's true. Why, such a Talent hasn't been seen in centuries...."

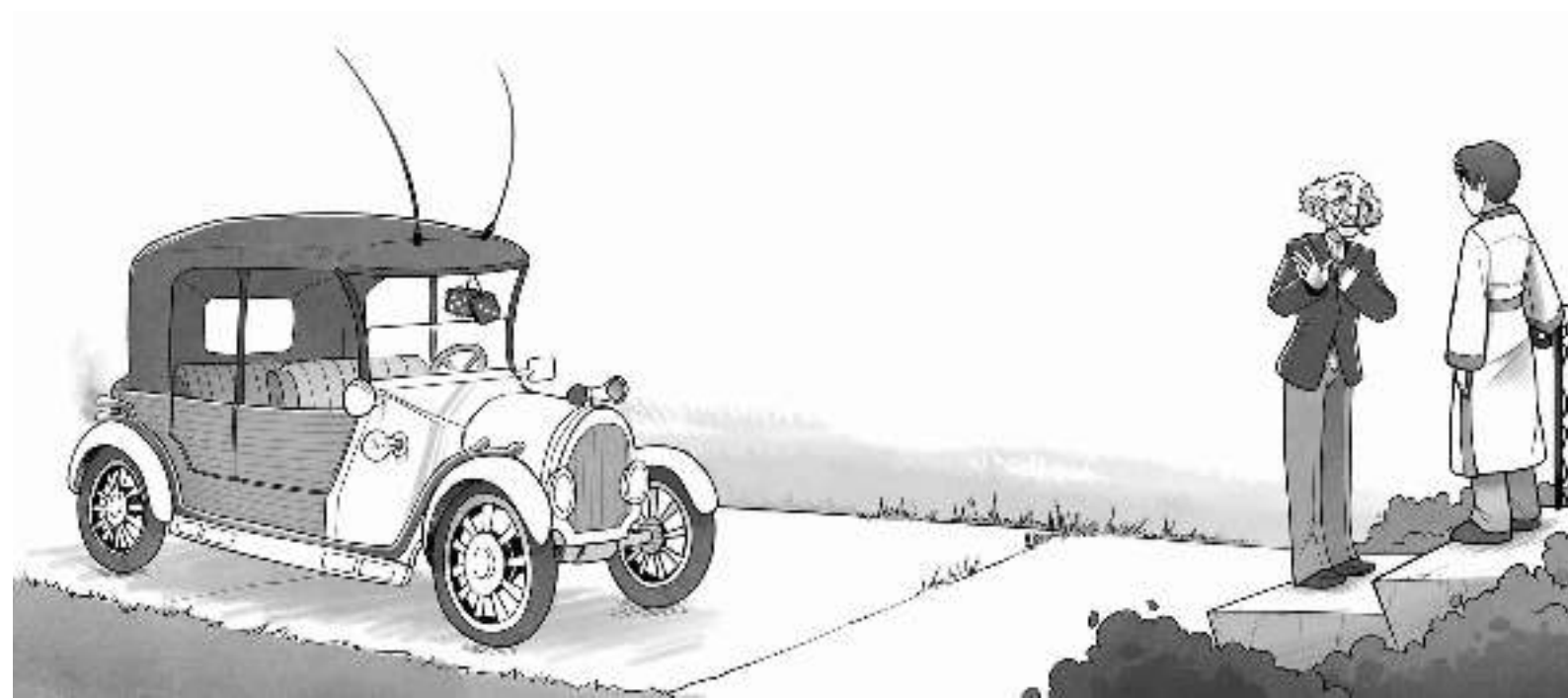
"Look," I said, raising my hands. "I was just joking around. I didn't mean—"

"I knew it!" Grandpa Smedry said eagerly. "Yes, yes, this improves our chances! Come, lad, we have to get moving." He turned and left the room again, carrying his briefcase and rushing eagerly down the stairs.

"Wait!" I cried, chasing after the old man. However, when I reached the doorway, I paused.

There was a car parked on the curb outside. An old car. Now, when you read the words *old car*, you likely think of a beat-up or rusted vehicle that barely runs. A car that is old, kind of in the same way that cassette tapes are old.

This was not such a car. It was not old like cassette tapes are old—it wasn't even old like records are old. No, this car was old like Beethoven is old. Or at least so it seemed. To me—and likely to most of you living in the Hushlands—the car looked like an antique. Kind of like a Model T.



But that was just my assumption.

The point is that many times, the first thing a person presumes about something—or someone—is inaccurate. Or at the very least incomplete. Take the young Alcatraz Smedry, for instance. After reading my story up to this point, you have probably made some assumptions. Perhaps you're—despite my best efforts—feeling a bit of sympathy for me. After all, orphans usually make very sympathetic heroes.

Perhaps you think that my habit of using sarcasm is simply a method of hiding my insecurity. Perhaps you've decided that I wasn't a cruel boy, just a very confused one. Perhaps you've decided—despite my feigned indifference, I didn't *like* breaking things.

Obviously, you are a person of very poor judgment. I would ask you to kindly refrain from drawing conclusions that I don't explicitly tell you to make. That's a very bad habit, and it makes authors grumpy.

I was none of those things. I was simply a mean boy who didn't really care whether or not I burned down kitchens. And that mean boy was the one who stood on the doorstep, watching Grandpa Smedry waving eagerly for him to follow.

Now, *perhaps* I'll admit that I felt just a little bit of longing. A ... wishfulness, you might say. Getting a package that claimed to be from my parents had made me remember days long ago—before I realized how foolish I was being—when I had yearned to know my real parents. Days when I had longed to find someone who *had* to love me, if only because they were related to me.

Fortunately, I had outgrown those feelings. My moment of weakness passed quickly, and I slammed the door closed and locked the old man outside. Then I went to the kitchen to get some breakfast.

That, however, is when someone drew a gun on me.

Chapter

3



I'd like to take this opportunity to point out something important. Should a strange old man with questionable sanity show up at your door—suggesting that he is your grandfather and that you should accompany him upon some quest of mystical import—you should flatly refuse him.

Don't take his candy either.

Unfortunately, as you will soon see, I was quickly forced to break this rule. Please don't hold me against me. It was done under duress. I'm really not used to being shot at.

I walked tiredly into the kitchen—which still smelled of smoke—hoping that the strange old man wouldn't take to pounding on the door. I didn't really want to call the police on him—not only would I likely break the telephone in the process (I'm particularly bad with phones) but I really didn't want the old loon carted away in a police car. That would have been—

“Alcatraz Smedry?” a voice suddenly asked.

I jumped, turning from the half-burned cupboard, a box of cornflakes in my hand. A man stood in the doorway behind me, wearing slacks and a button-down shirt. I frowned, realizing that I recognized the symbol on the man's shirt pocket and standard-issue attaché case. He was a foster care caseworker—*this* was the man that Ms. Fletcher had sent to pick me up from the house. I realized that when I originally went chasing the old man up to my room, I'd left the front door open. The caseworker must have come in looking for me while I was upstairs chatting with the lunatic.

“Hi,” I said, putting down the box. “I'll be ready in a bit—let me have breakfast first.”

“You're him, then?” the caseworker asked, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. “The Smedry kid?”

I nodded.

“Good,” the man said, then pulled a gun out of his attaché case and raised it toward me. It had a silencer on the barrel.

I froze, shocked. (And don't try to claim that you did anything different the first time a government bureaucrat pulled a gun on you.)

Fortunately, I eventually found my tongue. “Wait!” I said, raising my hands. “What are you doing?”

“Thanks for the sands, kid,” the man said, and moved as if to pull the trigger.

At that moment something massive crashed through the wall of my house—something that looked a lot like the front end of an old Model T Ford. I cried out, dodging to the side, and the caseworker stumbled to the ground in the chaos.

The man who called himself Grandpa Smedry sat happily in the driver's seat. A chunk of smoke-damaged ceiling fell down onto the hood of the car, throwing up a puff of white dust. The old man poked his head out the window.

"Lad," he said, "might I point out that you have two choices right now? You can get in the car with me, or you can stay here with the man holding a gun."

I stood, dazed.



"You really don't have much time to decide," Grandpa Smedry said, leaning toward me, speaking in a kind of half whisper, as if he were sharing some great secret.

Now, I'd like to pause here and note that Grandpa Smedry was lying to me. I didn't have only two choices at that point—I had quite a few more than that. True, I could have chosen to stay in the room and get shot. I also could have chosen to get in the car. However, there were lots of other things I could have done. For instance, I could have run around the house flapping my arms and pretending that I was a penguin. The logical choice to make in this situation would have been to call the police on both of those maniacs.

Unfortunately, I didn't think of penguins or police and instead did as Grandpa Smedry said, scrambling over and getting into the car.

As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, I really shouldn't have done this. I was soon to learn the dangers involved in following strange old men on quests. I don't want to give away any more of the story, but let me say that my fate at this point took a sharp turn toward altars, sacrifices, and evil Librarians.

And possibly some sharks.

The car backed out of the house, the tires leaving tracks in the lawn. I sat in the front passenger seat, still stunned, looking at the wreckage of the Sheldons' house. Bits of siding were falling off the outside wall, crushing Roy's prize tulips. This was more damage than I'd ever done to any foster home. This time it wasn't directly my fault, but ... well, that didn't change the fact that the kitchen was no longer merely burned but also had quite a large hole in it.

We turned onto the street in front of the house—the car pattering along at a modest speed. The caseworker didn't chase after us, but that didn't stop me from watching anxiously until the house

disappeared in the distance.

~~Someone just tried to kill me~~, I thought, feeling numb. You may find it hard to believe—considering the number of things I’d broken in my life—but this was the first time someone had actually tried to shoot me. It was an unsettling feeling. A little like the way you feel when you have the flu. Maybe there’s a connection.

“Well, that was exciting!” Grandpa Smedry said.

I was still staring out the window. The street passed outside, a suburban neighborhood distinctive only in that it looked pretty much like every other one in the nation. Calm two-story houses. Green lawns. Oak trees, shrubs, flower beds, all carefully maintained.

“He tried to kill me,” I whispered.

Grandpa Smedry snorted. “Not very well. You’ll understand eventually, lad, but pulling a gun on Grandpa Smedry isn’t exactly the smartest thing a man can do. But that’s behind us. Now we have to decide what to do next.”

“Next?”

“Of course. We can’t just let them have those sands!”

Grandpa Smedry raised a hand and pointed at me. “Don’t you understand, lad? It’s not only your life that’s in danger here. This is the fate of an entire *world* we’re juggling! The Free Kingdoms are already losing their war against the Librarians. With a tool like the Sands of Rashid, the Librarians will have just the edge they need to win. If we don’t get the sands back before they’re smelted—which will only take a few hours—it could lead to the complete overthrow of the Free Kingdoms! We are civilization’s only hope.”

“I ... see,” I said.

“I don’t think you do, lad. The Lenses smelted from that sand will contain the most powerful Oculatory Distortions either land has ever seen. Gathering those sands was your father’s life’s work. I can’t believe you let the Librarians steal them. I’ll be honest, lad—I had higher hopes for you. I really expected better. If only I hadn’t come so late...”

I sat quietly, looking out the windshield. Now, it’s time you understood something about me. Despite what the stories like to say about my honor and my foresight, the truth is that I possess neither trait in large amounts. One trait I’ve *always* possessed, however, is rashness. Some call it irresponsibility; others call it spontaneity. Either way, I could rightly be called a somewhat reckless boy, not always prone to carefully considering the consequences of my actions.

In this case, of course, there was something more behind the decision I made. I had seen some very odd things that day. It occurred to me that if something as crazy as a gunman showing up in my house could happen, perhaps it could be true that this old man was my grandfather.

Someone had tried to kill me. My house was in a shambles. I was sitting in a hundred-year-old car with a madman. *What the heck*, I thought. *This might be fun*.

I turned, focusing on the man who claimed to be my grandfather. “I ... didn’t *let* them steal the sand,” I found myself saying.

Grandpa Smedry turned to me.

“Or, well, I *did*,” I said, “but I let them take the sand on purpose, of course. I wanted to follow them and see what they tried to do with it. After all, how else are we going to uncover their dastardly schemes?”

Grandpa Smedry paused, then he smiled. His eyes twinkled knowingly, and I saw for the first time a hint of wisdom in the old man. Grandpa Smedry didn’t seem to believe what I had said, but I reached over anyway, clapping me on the arm. “Now *that’s* talking like a Smedry!”

“Now,” I said, holding up a finger. “I want to make something very clear. I do not believe a word of what you have told me up to this point.”

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