

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON



SKYWARD

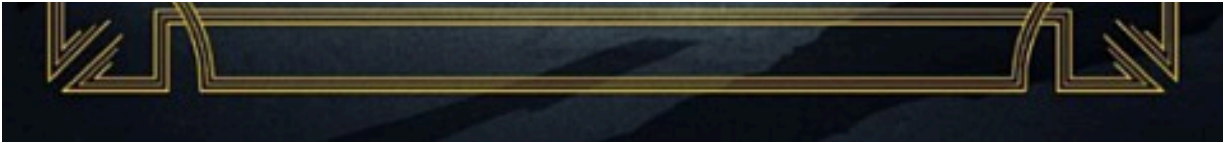
CLAIM THE STARS

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GOLLANCZ
LONDON

*For Karen Ahlstrom, who counts all the
days that I forget*

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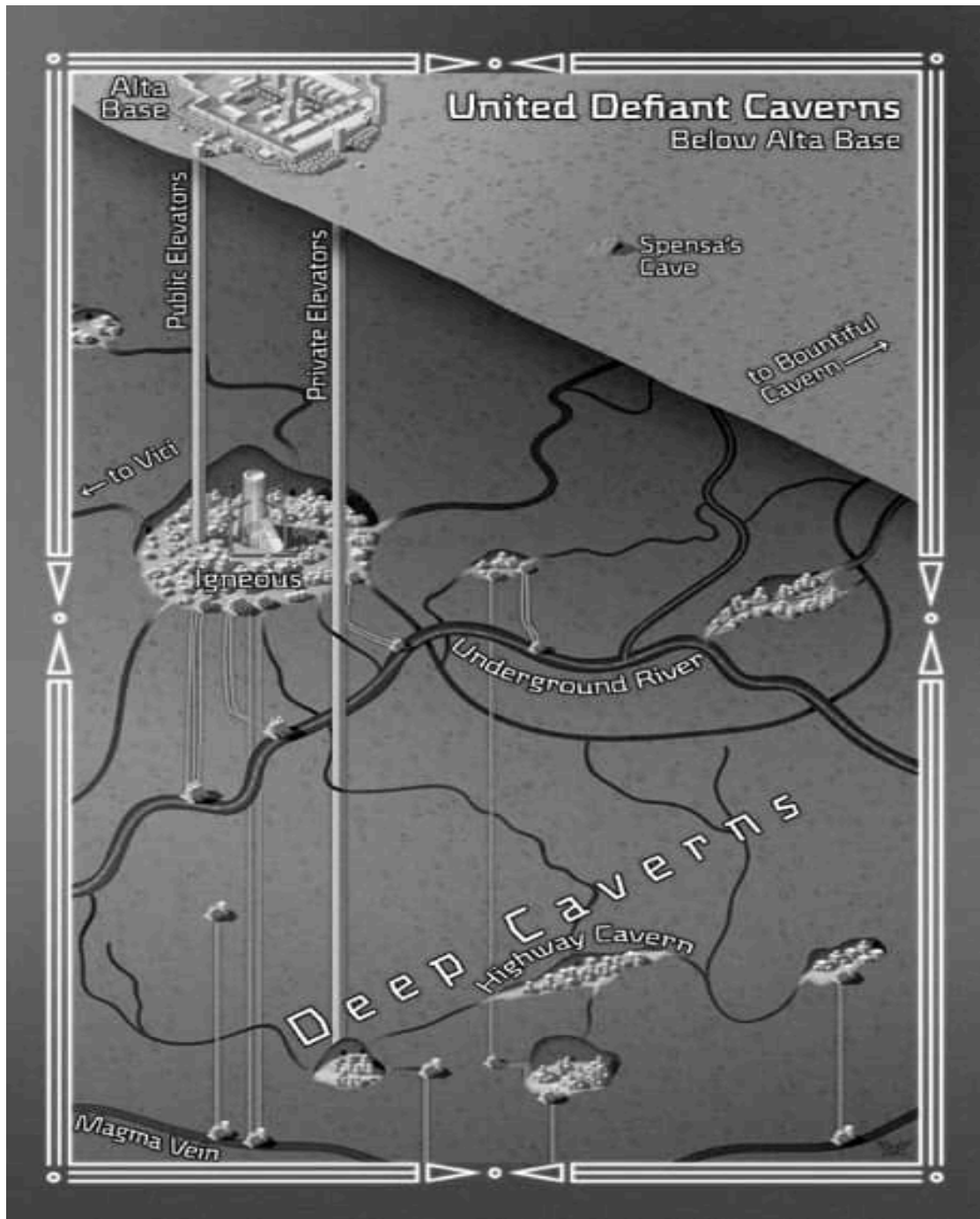
EPILOGUE

ALSO BY BRANDON SANDERSON FROM GOLLANCZ

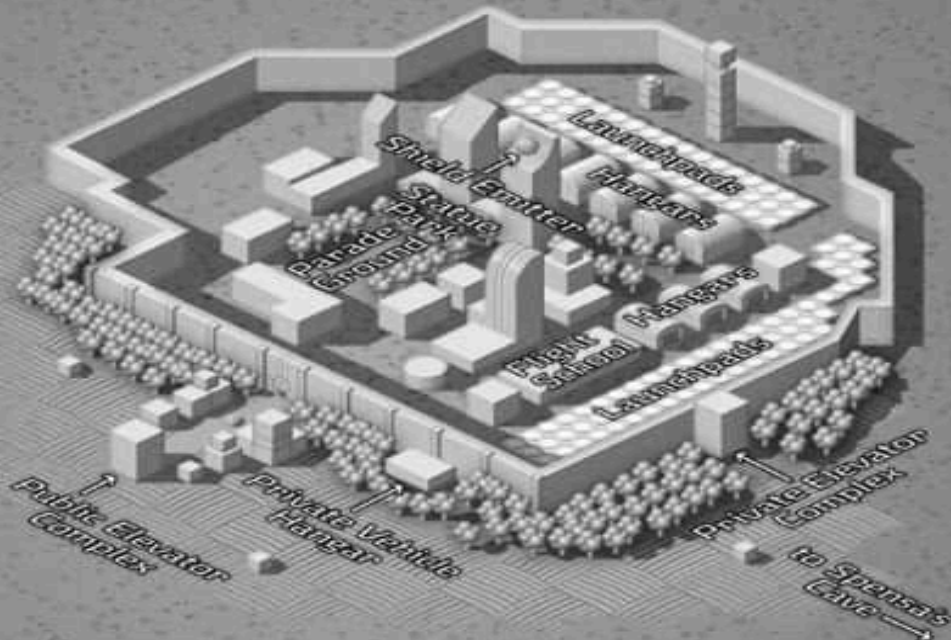
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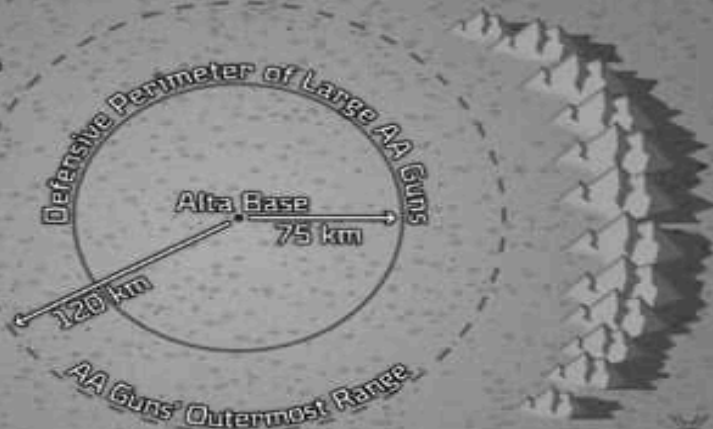
MAP



Alta Base



Defensive Perimeter Surrounding Alta Base



PROLOGUE

Only fools climbed to the surface. It was stupid to put yourself in danger like that, my mother always said. Not only were there near-constant debris showers from the rubble belt, but you never knew when the Krell would attack.

Of course, my father traveled to the surface basically every day—he had to, as a pilot. I supposed by my mother’s definition that made him *extra* foolish, but I always considered him extra *brave*.

I was still surprised when one day, after years of listening to me beg, he finally agreed to take me up with him.

I was seven years old, though in my mind I was completely grown-up and utterly capable. I hurried after my father, carrying a lantern to light the rubble-strewn cavern. A lot of the rocks in the tunnel were broken and cracked, most likely from Krell bombings—things I’d experienced down below as a rattling of dishes or trembling of light fixtures.

I imagined those broken rocks as the broken bodies of my enemies, their bones shattered, their trembling arms reaching upward in a useless gesture of *total and complete defeat*.

I was a very odd little girl.

I caught up to my father, and he looked back, then smiled. He had the *best* smile, so confident, like he never worried about what people said about him. Never worried that he was weird or didn't fit in.

Then again, why should he have worried? *Everyone* liked him. Even people who hated ice cream and playing swords—even whiny little Rodge McCaffrey—liked my father.

Father took me by the arm and pointed upward. “Next part is a little tricky. Let me lift you.”

“I can do it,” I said, and shook off his hand. I was grown-up. I'd packed my own backpack *and* had left Bloodletter, my stuffed bear, at home. Stuffed bears were for babies, even if you'd fashioned your own mock power armor for yours out of string and broken ceramics.

Granted, I *had* put my toy starfighter in my backpack. I wasn't crazy. What if we ended up getting caught in a Krell attack and they bombed our retreat, so we had to live out the rest of our lives as wasteland survivors, devoid of society or civilization?

A girl needed her toy starfighter with her just in case.

I handed my backpack to my father and looked up at the crack in the stones. There was ... something about that hole up there. An unnatural light seeped through it, wholly unlike the soft glow of our lanterns.

The surface ... the sky! I grinned and started climbing up a steep slope that was part rubble, part rock formation. My hands slipped and I scraped myself on a sharp edge, but I didn't cry. The daughters of pilots did *not* cry.

The crack in the cavern roof looked a hundred meters away. I hated being so small. Any day now, I was going to grow tall like my father. Then for once I wouldn't be the smallest kid around. I'd laugh at everyone from up so high, they'd be forced to admit how great I was.

I growled softly as I got to the top of a rock. The next hand-hold was out of reach. I eyed it. Then I jumped, determined. Like a good Defiant girl, I had the heart of a stardragon.

But I also had the body of a seven-year-old. So I missed by a good half meter.

A strong hand seized me before I could fall too far. My father chuckled, holding me by the back of my jumpsuit, which I'd painted with markers to look like his flight suit. I had even drawn a pin on the left over my heart, like the one he wore—the pin that marked him as a pilot. It was in the shape of a small starfighter with lines underneath.

Father pulled me onto the rock beside him, then reached out with his free hand and activated his light-line. The device looked like a metal bracelet, but once he engaged it by tapping two fingers against his palm, the band glowed with a bright molten light. He touched a stone above, and when he drew his hand back, it left a thick line of light like a shining rope fixed to the rock. He wrapped the other end around me so it fit snugly under my arms, then detached it from his bracelet. The glow there faded, but the luminescent rope remained in place, attaching me to the rocks.

I'd always thought light-lines should burn to the touch, but it was just warm. Like a hug.

"Okay, Spin," he said, using my nickname. "Try it again."

"I don't *need* this," I said, plucking at the safety rope.

"Humor a frightened father."

"Frightened? You aren't frightened of anything. You fight *the Krell*."

He laughed. "I'd rather face a hundred Krell ships than your mother on the day I bring you home with a broken arm, little one."

"I'm *not* little. And if I break my arm, you can leave me here until I heal. I'll fight the beasts of the caverns and become feral and wear their skins and —"

"Climb," he said, still grinning. "You can fight the beasts of the caverns another time, though I think the only ones you'd find have long tails and buckteeth."

I had to admit, the light-line was helpful. I could pull against it to brace myself. We reached the crack, and my father pushed me up first. I grabbed the rim and scrambled out of the caverns, stepping onto the surface for the first time in my life.

It was so *open*.

I gaped, standing there, looking up at ... at nothing. Just ... just ... *upness*. No ceiling. No walls. I'd always imagined the surface as a really, really big cavern. But it was so much more, and so much less, all at once.

Wow.

My father heaved himself up after me and dusted the dirt from his flight suit. I glanced at him, then back up at the sky. I grinned widely.

"Not frightened?" he asked.

I glared at him.

"Sorry," he said with a chuckle. "Wrong word. It's just that a lot of people find the sky intimidating, Spensa."

"It's beautiful," I whispered, staring up at that vast nothingness, air that extended up into an infinite greyness, fading to black.

The surface was still brighter than I'd imagined. Our planet, Detritus, was protected by several enormous layers of ancient space debris. Junk that was *way* up high, outside the air, in *space*. Wrecked space stations, massive metal shields, old chunks of metal big as mountains—there were many layers of it, kind of like broken shells around the planet.

We hadn't built any of that. We'd crashed on this planet when my grandmother was a girl, and this stuff had been ancient then. Still, some of it worked. For example, the bottom layer—the one closest to the planet—had enormous glowing rectangles in it. I'd heard of those. Skylights: enormous floating lights that gave illumination and warmth to the planet.

There was supposed to be a lot of littler bits of junk up there too, particularly in the lowest layer. I squinted, trying to see if I could pick any of that out, but space was too far away. Other than the two nearby skylights—neither of which was directly above us—the only things I could see were some vague patterns up there in the greyness. Lighter chunks and darker chunks.

"The Krell live up there?" I asked. "Beyond the debris field?"

"Yes," Father said. "They fly down through the gaps in the layers to attack."

“How do they find us?” I asked. “There’s so much *room* up here.” The world seemed a much larger place than I’d imagined in the caverns below.

“They can somehow sense when people gather together,” Father said. “Anytime the population of a cavern gets too big, the Krell attack and bomb it.”

Decades ago, our people had been part of a fleet of space vessels. We’d been chased by the Krell to this planet and had crashed here, where we’d been forced to split up to survive. Now we lived in clans, each of whom could trace their lineage back to the crews of one of those starships.

Gran-Gran had told me these stories many times. We’d lived for seventy years here on Detritus, traveling the caverns as nomadic clans, afraid to congregate. Until now. Now we’d started to build starfighters and had made a hidden base on the surface. We were starting to fight back.

“Where’s Alta Base?” I asked. “You said we’d come up near it. Is that it?” I pointed toward some suspicious rocks. “It’s right there, isn’t it? I want to go see the starfighters.”

My father leaned down and turned me about ninety degrees, then pointed. “There.”

“Where?” I searched the surface, which was basically all just blue-grey dust and rocks, with craters from fallen debris from the rubble belt. “I can’t see it.”

“That’s the point, Spensa. We have to remain hidden.”

“But you fight, don’t you? Won’t they eventually learn where the fighters are coming from? Why don’t you move the base?”

“We have to keep it here, above Igneous. That’s the big cavern I showed you last week.”

“The one with all the machines?”

He nodded. “Inside Igneous, we found manufactories; that’s what lets us build starships. We have to live nearby to protect the machinery, but we fly missions anywhere the Krell come down, anywhere they decide to bomb.”

“You protect other clans?”

“To me, there is only *one* clan that matters: humankind. Before we crashed here, we were all part of the same fleet—and someday all the wandering clans will remember that. They will come when we call them. They’ll gather together, and we’ll form a city and build a civilization again.”

“Won’t the Krell bomb it?” I asked, but cut him off before he could reply. “No. Not if we’re strong enough. Not if we stand and fight back.”

He smiled.

“I’m going to have my own ship,” I said. “I’m going to fly it just like you. And then nobody in the clan will be able to make fun of me, because I’ll be *stronger* than they are.”

My father looked at me for a moment before he spoke. “Is *that* why you want to be a pilot?”

“They can’t say you’re too small when you’re a pilot,” I said. “Nobody will think I’m weird, and I won’t get into trouble for fighting because my *job* will be *fighting*. They won’t call me names, and everyone will love me.”

Like they love you. I thought.

That made my father hug me for some stupid reason, even though I was just telling the truth. But I hugged him back, because parents liked stuff like that. Besides, it did feel good to have someone to hold. Maybe I shouldn’t have left Bloodletter behind.

Father’s breath caught, and I thought he might be crying, but it wasn’t that. “Spin!” he said, pointing toward the sky. “Look!”

Again I was struck by the expanse. *So BIG.*

Father was pointing at something specific. I squinted, noting that a section of the grey-black sky was darker than the rest. A hole through the layers of debris?

In that moment, I looked out into infinity. I found myself trembling as if a billion meteors had hit nearby. I could see space itself, with little pinpricks of white in it, different from the skylights. These sparkled, and seemed so, so far away.

“What are those lights?” I whispered.

“Stars,” he said. “I fly up near the debris, but I’ve almost never seen through it. There are too many layers. I’ve always wondered if I could get out to the stars.”

There was awe in his voice, a tone I’d never heard from him before.

“Is that ... is that why you fly?” I asked.

My father didn’t seem to care about the praise the other members of the clan gave him. Strangely, he seemed *embarrassed* by it.

“We used to live out there, among the stars,” he whispered. “That’s where we belong, not in those caverns. The kids who make fun of you, they’re trapped on this rock. Their heads are heads of rock, their hearts set upon rock. Set *your* sights on something higher. Something more grand.”

The debris shifted, and the hole slowly shrank until all I could see was a single star brighter than the others.

“Claim the stars, Spensa,” he said.

I *was* going to be a pilot someday. I would fly up there and fight. I just hoped Father would leave some Krell for me.

I squinted as something flashed in the sky. A distant piece of debris, burning brightly as it entered the atmosphere. Then another fell, and another. Then dozens.

Father frowned and reached for his radio—a superadvanced piece of technology that was given only to pilots. He lifted the blocky device to his mouth. “This is Chaser,” he said. “I’m on the surface. I see a debris fall close to Alta.”

“We’ve spotted it already, Chaser,” a woman’s voice said over the radio. “Radar reports are coming in now, and ... *Scud*. We’ve got Krell.”

“What cavern are they headed for?” Father asked.

“Their heading is ... Chaser, they’re heading this way. They’re flying straight for Igneous. Stars help us. They’ve located the base!”

Father lowered his radio.

“Large Krell breach sighted,” the woman’s voice said through the radio. “Everyone, this is an emergency. *An extremely large group of Krell has breached the debris field*. All fighters report in. They’re coming for Alta!”

Father took my arm. "Let's get you back."

"They need you!" I said. "You've got to go fight!"

"I have to get you to—"

"I can get back myself. It was a straight trip through those tunnels."

Father glanced toward the debris again. "Chaser!" a new voice said over the radio. "Chaser, you there?"

"Mongrel?" Father said, flipping a switch and raising his radio. "I'm up on the surface."

"You need to talk some sense into Banks and Swing. They're saying we need to flee."

Father cursed under his breath, flipping another switch on the radio. A voice came through. "—aren't ready for a head-on fight yet. We'll be ruined."

"No," another woman said. "We have to stand and fight."

A dozen voices started talking at once.

"Ironsides is right," my father said into the line, and—remarkably—they all grew quiet.

"If we let them bomb Igneous, then we lose the apparatus," my father said. "We lose the manufactories. We lose everything. If we ever want to have a civilization again, a *world* again, we *have to stand here!*"

I waited, silent, holding my breath, hoping he would be too distracted to send me away. I trembled at the idea of a battle, but I still wanted to watch it.

"We fight," the woman said.

"We *fight*," said Mongrel. I knew him by name, though I hadn't met him. He was my father's wingmate. "Hot rocks, this is a good one. I'm going to beat you into the sky, Chaser! Just you watch how many I bring down!"

The man sounded eager, maybe a little too excited, to be heading into battle. I liked him immediately.

My father debated only a moment before pulling off his light-line bracelet and stuffing it into my hands. "Promise you'll go back straightaway."

"I promise."

"Don't dally."

"I won't."