

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON
SANDERSON

STARSIGHT

THE SEQUEL TO SKYWARD



For Eric James Stone,
who has tried to show me how to be brief
 (a lesson I've mostly failed to learn)
but has been an amazing friend and role model nonetheless.

BRANDON
SANDERSON

STARSIGHT
THE SEQUEL TO SKYWARD

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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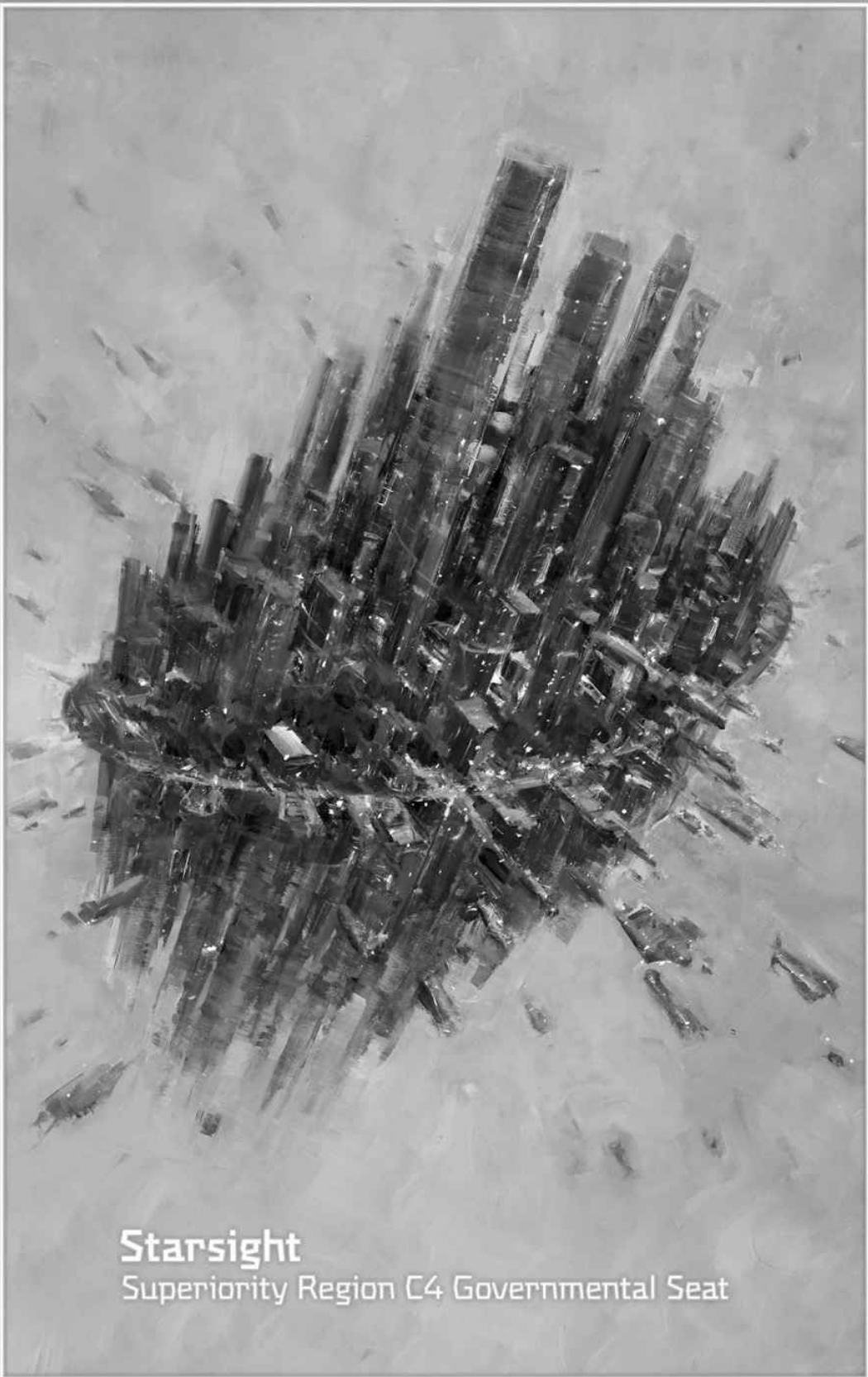
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By Brandon Sanderson

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Starsight

Superiority Region C4 Governmental Seat

PART ONE

I slammed on my overburn and boosted my starship through the middle of a chaotic mess of destructor blasts and explosions. Above me extended the awesome vastness of space. Compared to that infinite blackness, both planets and starships alike seemed insignificant. Meaningless.

Except, of course, for the fact that those insignificant starships were doing their best to kill me.

I dodged, spinning my ship and cutting my boosters midturn. Once I'd flipped around, I immediately slammed on the boosters again, burning in the other direction in an attempt to lose the three ships tailing me.

Fighting in space is way different from fighting in atmosphere. For one thing, your wings are useless. No air means no airflow, no lift, no drag. In space, you don't really fly. You just don't fall.

I executed another spin and boost, heading back toward the main firefight. Unfortunately, maneuvers that had been impressive down in the atmosphere were commonplace up here. Fighting in a vacuum these last six months had provided a whole new set of skills to master.

"Spensa," a lively masculine voice said from my console, "you remember how you told me to warn you if you were being extra irrational?"

"No," I said with a grunt, dodging to the right. The destructor blasts from behind swept over the dome of my cockpit. "I don't believe I did anything of the sort."

"You said, 'Can we talk about this later?'"

I dodged again. Scud. Were those drones getting better at dogfighting, or was I losing my touch?

"Technically, it was 'later' right after you spoke," continued the talkative voice—my ship's AI, M-Bot. "But human beings don't actually use that word to mean 'anytime chronologically after this moment.' They use it to mean 'sometime after now that is more convenient to me.'"

The Krell drones swarmed around us, trying to cut off my escape back toward the main body of the battlefield.

“And you think *this* is a more convenient time?” I demanded.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because we’re in combat!”

“Well, I would think that a life-and-death situation is *exactly* when you’d like to know if you’re being extra irrational.”

I could remember, with some measure of fondness, the days when my starships *hadn’t* talked back to me. That had been before I’d helped repair M-Bot, whose personality was a remnant of ancient technology we still didn’t understand. I frequently wondered: Had all advanced AIs been this sassy, or was mine just a special case?

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “You’re supposed to be leading these drones toward the others, remember?”

It had been six months since we’d beaten back the Krell attempt to bomb us into oblivion. Alongside our victory, we’d learned some important facts. The enemy we called “the Krell” were a group of aliens tasked with keeping my people contained on our planet, Detritus, which was kind of a cross between a prison and a nature preserve for human civilization. The Krell reported to a larger galactic government called the Superiority.

They employed remote drones to fight us—piloted by aliens who lived far away, controlling their drones via faster-than-light communications. The drones were never driven by AIs, as it was against galactic law to let a ship pilot itself. Even M-Bot was severely limited in what he could do on his own. Beyond that, there was something that the Superiority feared deeply: people who had the ability to see into the space where FTL communication happened. People called cytonics.

People like me.

They knew what I was, and they hated me. The drones tended to target me specifically—and we could use that. We *should* use that. In today’s pre-battle briefing, I’d swayed the rest of the pilots reluctantly to go with a bold plan. I was to get a little out of formation, tempt the enemy drones to swarm me, then lead them back through the rest of the team. My friends could then eliminate the drones while they were focused on me.

It was a sound plan. And I’d make good on it . . . eventually.

Now, though, I wanted to test something.

I hit my overburn, accelerating away from the enemy ships. M-Bot was faster and more maneuverable than they were, though part of his big advantage had been in his ability to maneuver at high speed in air without ripping himself apart. Out here in a vacuum that wasn’t a factor, and the enemy drones did a better job of keeping up.

They swarmed after me as I dove toward Detritus. My homeworld was protected by layers of ancient metal platforms—like shells—with gun emplacements all along them. After our victory six months ago, we'd pushed the Krell farther away from the planet, past the shells. Our current long-term strategy was to engage the enemy out here in space and keep them from getting close to the planet.

Keeping them out here had allowed our engineers—including my friend Rodge—to start gaining control of the platforms and their guns. Eventually, that shell of gun emplacements should protect our planet from incursions. For now though, most of those defensive platforms were still autonomous—and could be as dangerous for us as they were for the enemy.

The Krell ships swarmed in behind me, eager to cut me off from the battlefield—where my friends were engaging the rest of the drones in a massive brawl. That tactic of isolating me made one fatal assumption: that if I was alone, I'd be less dangerous.

"We're not going to turn back around and follow the plan, are we?" M-Bot asked. "You're going to try to fight them on your own."

I didn't respond.

"Jorgen is going to be aaaaaangry," M-Bot said. "By the way, those drones are trying to chase you along a specific heading, which I'm outlining on your monitor. My analysis projects that they've planned an ambush."

"Thanks," I said.

"Just trying to keep you from getting me blown up," M-Bot said. "By the way, if you *do* get us killed, be warned that I intend to haunt you."

"Haunt me?" I said. "You're a robot. And besides, I'd be dead too, right?"

"My robotic ghost would haunt your fleshy one."

"How would that even work?"

"Spensa, ghosts aren't real," he said in an exasperated tone. "Why are you worrying about things like that instead of flying? Honestly, humans get distracted so easily."

I spotted the ambush: a small group of Krell drones had hidden themselves by a large chunk of metal floating just out of range of the gun emplacements. As I drew close, the ambushing drones emerged and rocketed toward me. I was ready though. I let my arms relax, let my subconscious mind take over. I sank into myself, entering a kind of trance where I listened.

Just not with my ears.

Remote drones worked fine for the Krell in most situations. They were an expendable way to suppress the humans of Detritus. However, the enormous distances involved in space battle forced the Krell to rely on instantaneous

faster-than-light communication to control their drones. I suspected their pilots were far away—but even if they were on the Krell station that hung out in space near Detritus, the lag of radio communications from there would make the drones too slow to react in battle. So, FTL was necessary.

That exposed one major flaw. I could hear their orders.

For some reason I didn't understand, I could *listen* into the place where FTL communication happened. I called it the nowhere, another dimension where our rules of physics didn't apply. I could hear into the place, occasionally see into it—and see the creatures that lived there watching me.

A single time, in the climactic battle six months ago, I'd managed to *enter* that place and teleport my ship a long distance in the blink of an eye. I still didn't know much about my powers. I hadn't been able to teleport again, but I'd been learning that whatever existed inside me, I could harness it and use it to fight.

I let my instincts take over, and sent my ship into a complex sequence of dodges. My battle-trained reflexes, melded with my innate ability to hear the drone orders, maneuvered my ship without specific conscious instructions on my part.

My cytonic ability had been passed down my family line. My ancestors had used it to move ancient starfleets around the galaxy. My father had had the ability, and the enemy had exploited it to get him killed. Now I used it to stay alive.

I reacted before the Krell did, responding to their orders—somehow, I processed them *even faster* than the drones could. By the time they attacked, I was already weaving through their destructor blasts. I darted among them, then fired my IMP, bringing down the shields of everyone nearby.

In my state of focused concentration, I didn't care that the IMP took down my shield too. It didn't matter.

I launched my light-lance, and the rope of energy speared one of the enemy ships, connecting it to my own. I then used the difference in our momentum to spin us both around, which put me into position behind the pack of defenseless ships.

Blossoms of light and sparks broke the void as I destroyed two of the drones. The remaining Krell scattered like villagers before a wolf in one of Gran-Gran's stories. The ambush turned chaotic as I picked a pair of ships and gunned for them with destructors—blasting one away as a part of my mind tracked the orders being given to the others.

"I never fail to be amazed when you do that," M-Bot said quietly. "You're interpreting data faster than my projections. You seem almost . . . inhuman."

I gritted my teeth, bracing, and spun my ship, boosting it after a straggling Krell drone.

“I mean that as a compliment, by the way,” M-Bot said. “Not that there’s anything wrong with humans. I find their frail, emotionally unstable, irrational natures quite endearing.”

I destroyed that drone and bathed my hull in the light of its fiery demise. Then I dodged right between the shots of two others. Though the Krell drones didn’t have pilots on board, a part of me felt sorry for them as they tried to fight back against me—an unstoppable, unknowable force that did not play by the same rules that bound everything else they knew.

“Likely,” M-Bot continued, “I regard humans as I do only because I’m programmed to do so. But hey, that’s no different from instinct programming a mother bird to love the twisted, featherless abominations she spawns, right?”

Inhuman.

I wove and dodged, fired and destroyed. I wasn’t perfect; I occasionally overcompensated and many of my shots missed. But I had a distinct edge.

The Superiority—and its minions the Krell—obviously knew to watch for people like me and my father. Their ships were always on the hunt for humans who flew too well or who responded too quickly. They’d tried controlling my mind by exploiting a weakness in my talent—the same thing they’d done to my father. Fortunately, I had M-Bot. His advanced shielding was capable of filtering out their mental attacks while still allowing me to hear the enemy orders.

All of this raised a singular daunting question.

What *was* I?

“I would feel a lot more comfortable,” M-Bot said, “if you’d find a chance to reignite our shield.”

“No time,” I said. We’d need a good thirty seconds without flight controls to do that.

I had another chance to break toward the main battle, to follow through with the plan I’d outlined. Instead I spun, then hit the overburn and blasted back toward the enemy ships. My gravitational capacitors absorbed a large percentage of the g-forces and kept me from suffering too much whiplash, but I still felt pressure flattening me against my seat, making my skin pull back and my body feel heavy. Under extreme g-forces, I felt like I’d aged a hundred years in a second.

I pushed through it and fired at the remaining Krell drones. I strained my strange skills to their limits. A Krell destructor shot grazed the dome of my

canopy, so bright it left an afterimage in my eyes.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “Both Jorgen and Cobb have called to complain. I know you said to keep them distracted, but—”

“Keep them distracted.”

“Resigned sigh.”

I looped us after an enemy ship. “Did you just *say* the words *resigned sigh*?”

“I find human nonlinguistic communications to be too easily misinterpreted,” he said. “So I’m experimenting with ways to make them more explicit.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Obviously not. Dismissive eye-roll.”

Destructors flared around me, but I blasted two more drones. As I did, I saw something appear, reflected in the canopy of my cockpit. A handful of piercing white lights, like eyes, watching me. When I used my abilities too much, something looked out of the nowhere and saw me.

I didn’t know what they were. I just called them the eyes. But I *could* feel a burning hatred from them. An anger. Somehow, this was all connected. My ability to see and hear into the nowhere, the eyes that watched me from that place, and the teleportation power I’d only managed to use once.

I could still distinctly remember how I’d felt when I’d used it. I’d been on the brink of death, being enveloped by a cataclysmic explosion. In that moment, somehow I’d activated something called a cytonic hyperdrive.

If I could master that ability to teleport, I could help free my people from Detritus. With that power, we could escape the Krell forever. And so I pushed myself.

Last time I’d jumped I’d been fighting for my life. If I could only re-create those same emotions . . .

I dove, my right hand on my control sphere, my left holding the throttle. Three drones swept in behind me, but I registered their shots and turned my ship at an angle so they all missed. I hit the throttle and my mind brushed the nowhere.

The eyes continued to appear, reflected in the canopy, as if it were revealing something that watched from behind my seat. White lights, like stars, but somehow more . . . aware. Dozens of malevolent glowing dots. In entering their realm, even slightly, I became visible to them.

Those eyes unnerved me. How could I be both fascinated by these powers and terrified of them at the same time? It was like the call of the void you felt

when standing at the edge of a large cliff in the caverns, knowing you could just throw yourself off into that darkness. One step farther . . .

“Spensa!” M-Bot said. “New ship arriving!”

I pulled out of my trance, and the eyes vanished. M-Bot used the console display to highlight what he’d spotted. A new starfighter, almost invisible against the black sky, emerged from where the others had been hiding. Sleek, it was shaped like a disc and painted the same black as space. It was smaller than normal Krell ships, but it had a larger canopy.

These new black ships had only started appearing in the last eight months, in the days leading up to the attempt to bomb our base. Back then we hadn’t realized what they meant, but now we knew.

I couldn’t hear the commands this ship received—because none were being sent to it. Black ships like this one were not remote controlled. Instead, they carried real alien pilots. Usually an enemy ace—the best of their pilots.

The battle had just gotten far more interesting.

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My heart leaped with excitement.

An enemy ace. Fighting drones was exciting, yes, but also lacking. It wasn't personal enough. A duel with an ace instead felt like the stories Gran-Gran told. Brave pilots engaging in grim contests on Old Earth during the days of the Great Wars. Person against person.

"I will sing to you," I whispered. "As your ship burns and your soul flees, I will sing. To the contest we had."

Dramatic, yes. My friends still tended to laugh at me when I said things like that, things like were said in the old stories. I'd mostly stopped. But I was still me, and I didn't say those things for my friends. I said them for myself.

And for the enemy I was about to kill.

The ace swooped toward me, firing destructors, trying to hit me while I was focused on the drones. I grinned, diving out of the way and spearing a chunk of space debris with my light-lance. That let me pivot quickly, while also swinging the debris behind me to block the shots. M-Bot's GravCaps absorbed most of the g-forces, but I still felt a tug pulling me downward as I swung through the arc, destructor fire blasting into the debris, one shot coming very near me. Scud. I still hadn't found a chance to reignite my shield.

"This might be a good time to head back and lead the enemy ships toward the others," M-Bot said. "Like the plan said . . ."

Instead, I noted the enemy ace overshooting me—then I swung around and gave chase.

"Dramatic trailing-off of speech," M-Bot added, "laden with implications of your irresponsible nature."

I fired at the ace, but they spun on their axis, cutting their boosters. Momentum carried them forward, although they'd turned back-to-front and were now facing me. They couldn't steer well flying in reverse, so the

maneuver was usually risky, but when you had a full shield and your enemy had none . . .

I was forced to break off the chase, boosting to the left and dodging out of the way of the destructor fire. I couldn't risk a head-on confrontation. Instead, I focused on the drones for a moment, blasting one out of the sky, then screamed through its debris—which scraped up M-Bot's wing and smacked the canopy with a fierce *crack*.

Right. No shield. And in space, the debris didn't fall after you shot the ship down. That felt like a rookie mistake—a reminder that despite all my training, I was new to zero-gravity combat.

The ace fell in behind me in an expert tailing maneuver. They were good, which was—on one hand—thrilling. On the other hand . . .

I tried to veer back toward the battle, but the drones swarmed in front of me, cutting me off. Maybe I was in a little over my head.

“Call Jorgen,” I said, “and tell him I might have let myself get cornered. I can't lead the enemy into our ambush; see if he and the others are willing to come help me instead.”

“Finally,” M-Bot said.

I dodged some more, tracking the enemy ace on my proximity monitor. Scud. I wished I could hear them like I could the drones.

No, this is good, I thought. I need to be careful never to let my gift become a crutch.

I gritted my teeth and made a snap decision. I couldn't get back to the main battle, so instead I dove toward Detritus. The defense shells surrounding it weren't solid; they were made up of large platforms that had housed living quarters, shipyards, and weapons. Though we'd begun reclaiming the ones closest to the planet, these outer layers were still set to automatically fire at anything that got close.

I hit my overburn, accelerating to speeds that—in atmosphere—would have caused most starfighters to rattle or even rip apart. Up here I only felt the acceleration, not the speed.

I quickly reached the nearest space platform. Long and thin, it curved slightly, like a chunk of broken eggshell. The remaining drones and the single ace were still on my tail. At these speeds, dogfighting was much more dangerous. The time for me to react before colliding with something would be much smaller, and the smallest touch on my control sphere could veer me off course faster than I might be able to deal with.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said.

“I know what I'm doing,” I muttered back, concentrating.

“Yes, I’m sure,” M-Bot answered. “But . . . just in case . . . you *do* remember that we don’t have control of these outer platforms yet, right?”

I focused my full attention on sweeping down close to the surface of the metal platform without running into anything. The gun emplacements here tracked me and started firing—but they *also* started firing on the enemy.

I concentrated on dodging. Or really just weaving erratically—I could outfly the drones in a raw contest of skill, but they had superior numbers. Down near the platform, that translated into a liability for my enemies—because to the guns, we were all targets.

Several of the drones flared up in explosions—which vanished almost immediately, flames smothered by the vacuum of space.

“I wonder if those guns feel fulfilled, finally getting to shoot something down after all these years up here,” M-Bot said.

“Jealous?” I asked with a grunt, dodging.

“From what Rodge says, they don’t have true AIs, merely some simple targeting functions. So that would be like you being jealous of a rat.”

Another drone fell. *Just a little longer.* I wanted to even the odds a bit while I waited for my friends to arrive.

I sank into another trance as I flew. I couldn’t hear the controls of the gun emplacements, but in moments like these—moments of pure concentration—I felt as if I were becoming one with my ship.

I could feel the attention of the eyes back on me. My heart thundered inside my chest. With those guns trained on me . . . tails giving chase and still firing . . .

A little further . . .

My mind sank down, and I felt as if I could sense M-Bot’s very workings. I was in severe danger. I needed to escape.

Surely I could do it now. “Engage cytonic hyperdrive!” I said, then tried to do what I’d done once before, teleporting my ship.

“Cytonic hyperdrive is offline,” M-Bot said.

Scud. The one time it had worked, he’d been able to tell me it was online. I tried again, but . . . I didn’t even know what it was I’d done that once. I had been in danger, about to die. And then I . . . I’d done . . .

Something?

A blast from a nearby gun nearly blinded me, and with gritted teeth I pulled up and zipped out of the defensive guns’ range. The ace had survived, though they had taken a hit or two, so maybe their shield was weakened. Plus, only three drones remained.