

THE SUNLIT MAN



A COSMERE NOVEL

BRANDON SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERNANDA SOUZA,
NABETSE ZITRO, AND KUDRIAKEN



THE SUNLIT MAN

A stylized illustration of Brandon Sanderson as the Sunlit Man. He is depicted from the waist up, wearing a black suit with white swirling patterns and a long black cape. He holds a glowing pink sword in his right hand. Behind him is a large, textured pink circle. The background features black silhouettes of cityscapes and red curved lines.

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Rear Endpapers

**FOR ALL OF YOU, THE
FANS OF THE COSMERE,**

Who make my dreams come to life.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEW! WHAT A YEAR! This was quite the wild ride, involving a *ton* of work from everyone involved. I'll make sure to get to them all in this section, but I just wanted to say a big thank-you to everyone. It was a herculean effort to get these books edited, illustrated, and delivered.

Our editor on this book was Moshe Feder, my longtime partner in crime and the man who discovered me. We were thrilled to work with him again, and I'm glad he was here to help me with this next step of Nomad's journey. A special thank-you goes to Dr. Joseph Jensen for his help with the astrophysics, as this one is a bit of a doozy as far as that is concerned. Also, the Cosmere Arcanist team—you guys are great.

I'm represented by the remarkable team at the JABberwocky Literary Agency, with Joshua Bilmes at the helm. Thanks also to Susan Velazquez and Christina Zobel.

This book is odd compared to the other secret projects, as we have three illustrators, not one. We wanted to try out some new people and found some

individuals who worked well for this specific novel. Thank you to all of them for their amazing work. These projects became extra special because of their involvement. Ernanda Souza did the endpapers, full-color illustrations, and concept art. She really did a great job and was awesome to work with. Nabetse Zitro did our interior drawings, joining us again after the incredible work he did on the new comic pages in the *White Sand* graphic novel omnibus. And kudriaken did our spectacular cover illustration.

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From here, let's go to the departments at Dragonsteel. I have the best team in the business, and they all put a lot of work into these secret projects.

Isaac Stuart is our vice president of Creative Development. His team includes Ben McSweeney (who did great concept work to keep the vision of the project cohesive), Rachael Lynn Buchanan (who did a lot of heavy lifting helping Isaac work with the artists, choosing scenes to illustrate, and keeping track of details), Jennifer Neal, Hayley Lazo, Priscilla Spencer, and Anna Earley.

The Instructional Peter Ahlstrom is our vice president of Editorial. His team includes Karen Ahlstrom, Kristy S. Gilbert, Jennie Stevens (our in-house editor of this book), Betsey Ahlstrom, and Emily Shaw-Higham. Kristy Kugler did the copyedit.

The Narrative department is just Dan Wells, who is also its VP. But we let him boss Ben around to make up for it.

Our COO is Emily Sanderson, and the Operations team includes Matt "Matt" Hatch, Emma Tan-Stoker, Jane Horne, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Makena Saluone, Hazel Cummings, and Becky Wilson.

Adam Horne, a.k.a. the Grand Master of Corgis, is our vice president of Publicity and Marketing. His team includes Jeremy Palmer, Taylor D. Hatch, and Octavia Escamilla.

Kara Stewart is our vice president of Merchandising, Events, and making sure you all get your boxes of stuff. Her team includes Emma Tan-Stoker, Christi Jacobsen, Kellyn Neumann, Lex Willhite, Mem Grange, Michael Bateman, Joy Allen, Ally Reep, Richard Rubert, Katy Ives, Brett Moore, Dallin Holden, Daniel Phipps, Jacob Chrisman, Alex Lyon, Matt Hampton, Camilla Cutler, Quinton Martin, Esther Grange, Logan Reep, Laura

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Alpha readers for this book include Karen Ahlstrom, Joy Allen, Christi Jacobsen, Brett Moore, Brad Neumann, Kellyn Neumann, Ally Reep, Emma Tan-Stoker, Sean VanBlack, and Dan Wells.

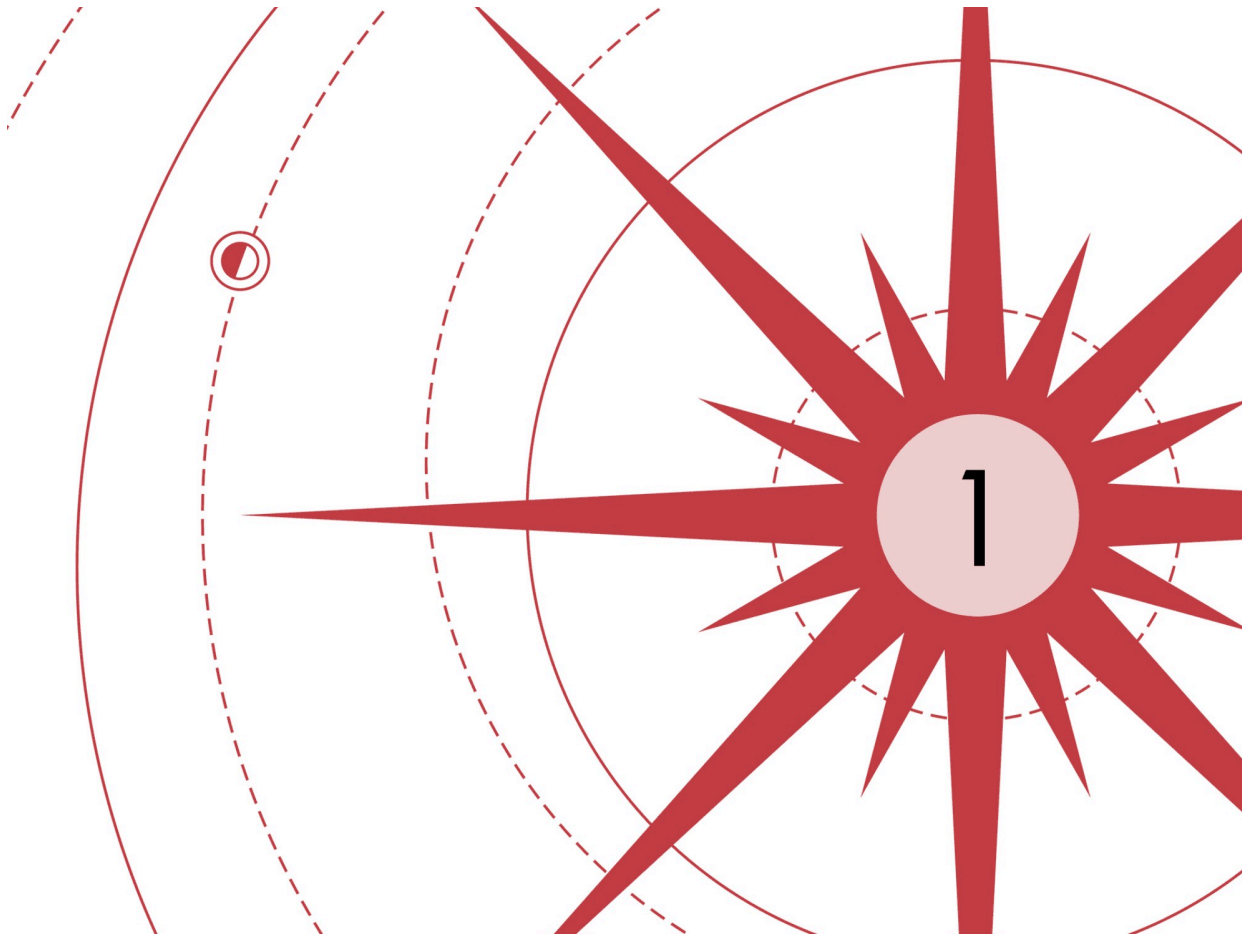
Our beta readers are Ravi Persaud, Ian McNatt, Brandon Cole, Shannon Nelson, Ben Marrow, Jennifer Neal, Poonam Desai, Chris McGrath, Sumejja Muratagić-Tadić, Kendra Alexander, Zenef Mark Lindberg, Paige Phillips, Rosemary Williams, Eric Lake, David Behrens, William Juan, and Erika Kuta Marler. Special thanks to Mikah Kilgore for xyr beta feedback on the image descriptions found in the ebook and audiobook.

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As this is the last book of the Secret Projects Kickstarter, I wanted to take one final opportunity to thank you all. I might have written the books, but you created the *event* that they became. You made this year so very special. After you've read the book, see the postscript for more.

Brandon Sanderson



NOMAD WOKE UP among the condemned.

He blinked, his right cheek in the dirt. Then he focused on the incongruous sight of a plant growing in fast-motion before his eyes. Was he dreaming? The fragile sprout quivered and twisted, heaving up from the earth. It seemed to stretch with joy, its seedpods parting like arms after a deep sleep. A stalk emerged from the center, testing the air like a serpent's tongue. Then it stretched left toward the dim light shining from that direction.

Nomad groaned and lifted his head, mind fuzzy, muscles sore. Where had he Skipped to this time? And would it be far enough away to hide from the Night Brigade?

Of course it wouldn't be. No place could hide him from them. He had to keep moving. Had to...

Storms. It felt good to lie here. Couldn't he just rest for a while? Stop running for once?

Rough hands grabbed him from behind and hauled him to his knees, jolting him from his stupor. He became more aware of his surroundings: the shouting, the groaning. Sounds he'd been oblivious to in his post-Skip grogginess.

The people here, including the man who grabbed him, wore unfamiliar clothing. Long trousers, sleeves with tight cuffs, shirts with high collars all the way up to the chin. The man shook him, barking at Nomad in a language he didn't understand.

"Trans...translation?" Nomad croaked.

Sorry, a deep, monotone voice said in his head. We don't have enough Investiture for that.

Right. He'd barely reached the threshold for his last Skip, which would leave him nearly drained. His abilities relied on reaching or maintaining certain thresholds of Investiture, the mystical power source that fueled extraordinary events on most planets he visited.

"How much?" he croaked. "How much do we have left?"

Around fifteen hundred BEUs. So, in other words, under eight percent Skip capacity.

Damnation. As he'd worried, the cost to come here had left him destitute. As long as he maintained certain levels, his body could do exceptional things. Each cost a tiny bit of Investiture, but that cost was minimal—so long as he kept his thresholds.

Once he had over two thousand Breath Equivalent Units, he could play with his Connection. Then he could Connect to the planet using his skills and speak the local language. Which meant Nomad wouldn't be able to speak to the locals until he found a power source to absorb.

He winced at the breath of the shouting man. He wore a hat with a wide brim, tied under the chin, and thick gloves. It was dim out, though a burning corona lit the horizon. Just before dawn, Nomad guessed. And even by that light, sprouts were growing all across this field. Those plants...their movements reminded him of home—a place without soil, but with plants that were so much more vigorous than on other worlds.

These weren't the same, though. They didn't dodge to avoid being stepped on. These plants were merely growing quickly. Why?

Nearby, people wearing long white coats pounded stakes into the ground—then others chained down people who didn't have those coats. Both groups had a variety of skin tones and wore similar clothing.

Nomad couldn't understand the words anyone was shouting, but he recognized the bearing of the condemned. The cries of despair from some, the pleading tones of others, the abject resignation in most as they were chained to the ground.

This was an execution.

The man holding Nomad shouted at him again, glaring through eyes a watery blue. Nomad just shook his head. That breath could have wilted flowers. The man's companion—dressed in one of those long white coats—gestured to Nomad, arguing. Soon his two captors made a decision. One grabbed a set of manacles off his belt, moving to cuff Nomad.

"Yeah," Nomad said, "I don't think so." He grabbed the man's wrist, preparing to throw him and trip the other man.

But Nomad's muscles locked up—like a machine that had run out of oil. He stiffened in place, and the men pulled away from him, surprised by his sudden outburst.

Nomad's muscles unlocked, and he stretched his arms, feeling a sudden, sharp pain. "Damnation!" His Torment was getting worse. He glanced at his frightened captors. At least they didn't seem to be armed.

A figure emerged from the crowd. Everyone else was swathed in clothing—male or female, they showed skin only on their faces. But this newcomer was bare chested—wearing a diaphanous robe split at the front—and had on thick black trousers. He was the sole person on the field not wearing gloves, though he did wear a pair of golden bracers on his forearms.

He was also missing most of his chest.

Much of the pectorals, rib cage, and heart had been *dug out*—burned away, leaving the remaining skin seared and blackened. Inside the cavity, the man's heart had been replaced by a glimmering ember. It pulsed red when wind stoked it—as did similar pinpricks of crimson light among the char. Black burn marks radiated from the hole across the man's skin, extending as far as a few specks on his face, which occasionally glittered with their own much smaller sparks. It was like the man had been strapped to a jet engine as it ignited—somehow leaving him not only alive, but perpetually *burning*.

"Don't suppose," Nomad said, "you fellows are the type who enjoy a comical blunder made by a newcomer to your culture?" He stood and raised his hands in a nonthreatening way, ignoring the instincts that told him—as always—that he needed to *run*.

The ember man pulled a large bat off his back. Like a police baton, but more begrudging in its nonlethality.

“Didn’t think so,” Nomad said, backing up. A few of the chained people watched him with the strange, yet familiar, hope of a prisoner—happy that someone *else* was drawing attention.

The ember man came for him, supernaturally quick, his heart light flaring. He was Invested. Wonderful.

Nomad barely dodged a mighty blow.

“I need a weapon, Aux!” Nomad snapped.

Well, summon one then, my dear squire, said the voice in his head. *I’m not holding you back.*

Nomad grunted, diving through a tall patch of grass that had sprung up in the minutes since he’d woken. He tried to make a weapon appear, but nothing happened.

It’s your Torment, the knight helpfully observes to his moderately capable squire. It has grown strong enough to deny you weapons. As usual, Aux’s voice was completely monotone. He was self-conscious about that, hence the added commentary.

Nomad dodged again as the ember man slammed his baton down in another near miss—making the ground tremble at the impact. Storms. That light was getting brighter. Covering the entire horizon in a way that felt too even. How...how large *was* the sun on this planet?

“I thought,” Nomad shouted, “that my oaths overrode that aspect of the Torment!”

I’m sorry, Nomad. But what oaths?

The ember man prepared another swing, and Nomad took a deep breath, then ducked the attack and bodychecked the man. As soon as he went in for the hit, though, his body locked up again.



Yes, I see, the knight muses with a conversational tone. Your Torment now attempts to prevent even minor physical altercations.

He couldn't so much as *tackle* someone? It *was* getting bad. The ember man hit Nomad across the face, throwing him to the ground. Nomad managed to roll and avoid the baton and, with a groan, heaved himself to his feet.

The baton came in again, and by instinct, Nomad put up both hands—catching it. Stopping the swing cold.

The ember man's eyes widened. Nearby, several of the prisoners called out. Heads turned. Seemed like people around here weren't accustomed to the sight of a person going toe-to-toe with one of these Invested warriors. The ember man's eyes widened further as—with teeth gritted—Nomad stepped forward and shoved him off balance, sending him stumbling backward.

Behind the strange warrior, blazing light warped the molten horizon, bringing with it a sudden, blasting heat. Around them, the plants that had grown so rapidly began wilting. The lines of chained people whimpered and screamed.

Run, a part of Nomad shouted. *Run!*

It's what he did.

It was all he knew these days.

But as he turned to dash away, *another* ember man behind him prepared to swing. Nomad tried to catch this blow too, but his storming body locked up *again*.

"Oh, come *on!*" he shouted as the baton clobbered him in the side. He stumbled. The ember man decked him across the face with a powerful fist, sending him to the dirt again.

Nomad gasped, groaning, feeling gritty soil and rocks on his skin. And heat. Terrible, bewildering heat from the horizon, still building in intensity.

Both ember men turned away, and the first thumbed over his shoulder at Nomad. The two timid officers in the white coats hastened over and—while Nomad was in a daze of pain and frustration—manacled his hands together. They appeared to contemplate pounding a spike into the earth and pinning him there, but rightly guessed that a man who could catch the bat of an Invested warrior could rip it out. Instead they hauled him over to a ring that had been affixed to a section of stone, locking him there.

Nomad fell to his knees in the line of prisoners, sweat dripping from his brow as the heat increased. His instincts screamed at him to run.

Yet another piece of him...simply wanted to be done. How long had the chase lasted? How long had it been since he'd stood proud?

Maybe I'll just let it end, he thought. *A mercy killing. Like a man mortally wounded on the battlefield.*

He slumped, the soreness in his side pulsing, though he doubted anything was broken. So long as he maintained around five percent Skip capacity—around a thousand BEUs—his body would be more powerful, more endurant. Where others broke, he bruised. Fire that would sear others only singed him.

Healing engaged, the hero says with a confident voice to his humiliated valet. You're under ten percent Skip capacity, so your healing won't be as efficient as you're used to.

At times he wondered if the enhancements he bore were a blessing or another part of the Torment. The light increased with the heat, becoming blinding. That smoke in the distance...was that the *ground* catching fire? From the light of the sun?

Damnation. Damnation *itself* was rising over the horizon.

That light, Aux said. *It's far too powerful for ordinary sunlight—at least on any habitable planet.*

“Think the light is Invested?” Nomad whispered. “Like on Taldain?”

A plausible theory, the knight says with a musing curiosity.

“Think you can absorb it?”

Possibly. We'll likely soon see...

If he could absorb enough, he could Skip right off this planet and put even more space between himself and the Night Brigade. Wouldn't that be nice for once? To have a head start? Still, something about the intensity of that light daunted Nomad. Worried him. He stared at it as the nearby officers—including the ember men—finished locking down the prisoners. Once done, they ran to a line of machines. Long and thin, they had six seats each. Open to the air, with a windshield in front and controls for the front left operator.

They kind of looked like...six-seater hovercycles? An odd construction, but he wasn't sure what else to call them. You apparently straddled each seat—there was an opening for the inner leg—though they were all locked together along a central fuselage with no outer wall or door. Regardless, he wasn't surprised when fires blasted underneath the first of these, raising it in the air a half dozen feet or so.

What did it matter? He turned toward the ever-increasing light as the plants—vibrant only minutes ago—browned and withered. He thought he could hear the roar of flames in the distance as the full-intensity sunlight advanced, like the front of a once-familiar storm.

He had a guess, watching the strength of that light, that he wouldn't be able to absorb it. No more than a common cord and plug could handle the raw output of a nuclear reactor. This was something incredible, a force that would fry him before he could make use of its power.

Uh, Nomad, Aux said in his monotone voice. I get the feeling that trying to absorb and use Investiture from that is going to be like trying to pick out a snowflake from an avalanche. I...don't think we should let it hit you.

"It will kill me if it does..." Nomad whispered.

Is that...what you want?

No.

No, even though he hated much about his life, he *didn't* want to die. Even though each day he became something more feral...well, feral things knew to struggle for life.

A sudden frantic desperation struck Nomad. He began pulling and flailing against the chains. The second of the four hovercycles took off, and he knew—from the speed of the advancing sunlight—that they were his only hope of escape. He screamed, voice ragged, straining against the steel, stretching it—but unable to pull it free.

"Aux!" he shouted. "I need a Blade! Transform!"

I'm not the one preventing that, Nomad.

"That light is going to kill us!"

Point: it is going to kill you, my poor valet. I am already dead.

Nomad yelled something primal as the third hovercycle took off, though the last one was having troubles. Perhaps he—

Wait.

"Weapons are forbidden to me. What about tools?"

Why would they be forbidden to you?

Nomad was an idiot! Auxiliary was a shapeshifting metal tool that, in this case, he could manifest physically as a crowbar. It formed in his hands as if from white mist, appearing out of nothing. Nomad hooked it into the ring on the boulder, then threw his weight against it.

SNAP.

He lurched free, hands still manacled, but with two feet of slack between them. He stumbled to his feet and dashed toward the last of the hovercycles

as the fires finally ignited underneath it.

He summoned Auxiliary as a hook and chain, which he immediately hurled at the cycle. It struck just as the machine took off. At Nomad's command, once Auxiliary caught it, the hook fuzzed briefly and sealed as a solid ring around a protrusion on the back of the vehicle. The other end of the chain locked onto Nomad's manacles.

The sunlight reached him. An incredible, intense, burning light. Prisoners burst into flame, screaming.

Oh, storms, the knight shouts.

In that moment, the slack on the chain pulled tight. Nomad was yanked out of the sunlight, his skin screaming in agony, his clothing aflame.

He was dragged away from certain death. But toward what, he had no idea.