

# MISTBORN

THE FINAL EMPIRE

BRANDON SANDERSON



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**TOR BOOKS BY BRANDON SANDERSON**

*Elantris*

*Mistborn*



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**BRANDON SANDERSON**



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

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**FOR BETH SANDERSON,**

*Who's been reading fantasy*

*For longer than I've been alive,*

*And fully deserves*

*To have a grandson as loony as she is.*

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*Sometimes, I worry that I'm not the hero everyone thinks I am.*

*The philosophers assure me that this is the time, that the signs have been met. But I still wonder if they have the wrong man. So many people depend on me. They say I will hold the future of the entire world on my arms.*

*What would they think if they knew that their champion—the Hero of Ages, their savior—doubted himself? Perhaps they wouldn't be shocked at all. In a way, this is what worries me most. Maybe, in their hearts, they wonder—just as I do.*

*When they see me, do they see a liar?*

## PROLOGUE



### **ASH FELL FROM THE SKY.**

Lord Tresting frowned, glancing up at the ruddy midday sky as his servants scuttled forward, opening a parasol over Tresting and his distinguished guest. Ashfalls weren't that uncommon in the Final Empire, but Tresting had hoped to avoid getting soot stains on his fine new suit coat and red vest, which had just arrived via canal boat from Luthadel itself. Fortunately, there wasn't much wind; the parasol would likely be effective.

Tresting stood with his guest on a small hilltop patio that overlooked the fields. Hundreds of people in brown smocks worked in the falling ash, caring for the crops. There was a sluggishness to their efforts—but, of course, that was the way of the skaa. The peasants were an indolent, unproductive lot. They didn't complain, of course; they knew better than that. Instead, they simply worked with bowed heads, moving about their work with quiet apathy. The passing whip of a taskmaster would force them into dedicated motion for a few moments, but as soon as the taskmaster passed, they would return to their languor.

Tresting turned to the man standing beside him on the hill. "One would think," Tresting noted, "that a thousand years of working in fields would have bred them to be a little more effective at it."

The obligator turned, raising an eyebrow—the motion done as if to highlight his most distinctive feature, the intricate tattoos that laced the skin around his eyes. The tattoos were enormous, reaching all the way across his brow and up the sides of his nose. This was a full prelan—a very important obligator indeed. Tresting had his own, personal obligators back at the manor, but they were only minor functionaries, with barely a few marks around their eyes. This man had arrived from Luthadel with the same canal boat that had brought Tresting's new suit.

"You should see city skaa, Tresting," the obligator said, turning back to watch the skaa workers. "These are actually quite diligent, compared to those inside Luthadel. You have more...direct control over your skaa here. How many would you say you lose a month?"

"Oh, a half dozen or so," Tresting said. "Some to beatings, some to exhaustion."  
"Runaways?"

"Never!" Tresting said. "When I first inherited this land from my father, I had a few runaways—but I executed their families. The rest quickly lost heart. I've never understood men who have trouble with their skaa—I find the creatures easy to control, if you show a properly firm hand."

The obligator nodded, standing quietly in his gray robes. He seemed pleased—which was a good thing. The skaa weren't actually Tresting's property. Like all skaa,

they belonged to the Lord Ruler; Tresting only leased the workers from his God, much in the same way he paid for the services of His obligators.

The obligator looked down, checking his pocket watch, then glanced up at the sun. Despite the ashfall, the sun was bright this day, shining a brilliant crimson red behind the smoky blackness of the upper sky. Tresting removed a handkerchief and wiped his brow, thankful for the parasol's shade against the midday heat.

"Very well, Tresting," the obligator said. "I will carry your proposal to Lord Venture, as requested. He will have a favorable report from me on your operations here."

Tresting held in a sigh of relief. An obligator was required to witness any contract or business deal between noblemen. True, even a lowly obligator like the ones Tresting employed could serve as such a witness—but it meant so much more to impress Straff Venture's own obligator.

The obligator turned toward him. "I will leave back down the canal this afternoon."

"So soon?" Tresting asked. "Wouldn't you care to stay for supper?"

"No," the obligator replied. "Though there is another matter I wish to discuss with you. I came not only at the behest of Lord Venture, but to...look in on some matters for the Canton of Inquisition. Rumors say that you like to dally with your skaa women."

Tresting felt a chill.

The obligator smiled; he likely meant it to be disarming, but Tresting only found it eerie. "Don't worry yourself, Tresting," the obligator said. "If there had been any *real* worries about your actions, a Steel Inquisitor would have been sent here in my place."

Tresting nodded slowly. Inquisitor. He'd never seen one of the inhuman creatures, but he had heard...stories.

"I have been satisfied regarding your actions with the skaa women," the obligator said, looking back over the fields. "What I've seen and heard here indicate that you always clean up your messes. A man such as yourself—efficient, productive—could go far in Luthadel. A few more years of work, some inspired mercantile deals, and who knows?"

The obligator turned away, and Tresting found himself smiling. It wasn't a promise, or even an endorsement—for the most part, obligators were more bureaucrats and witnesses than they were priests—but to hear such praise from one of the Lord Ruler's own servants...Tresting knew that some nobility considered the obligators to be unsettling—some men even considered them a bother—but at that moment, Tresting could have kissed his distinguished guest.

Tresting turned back toward the skaa, who worked quietly beneath the bloody sun and the lazy flakes of ash. Tresting had always been a country nobleman, living on his plantation, dreaming of perhaps moving into Luthadel itself. He had heard of the balls and the parties, the glamour and the intrigue, and it excited him to no end.

*I'll have to celebrate tonight*, he thought. There was that young girl in the fourteenth hovel that he'd been watching for some time....

He smiled again. A few more years of work, the obligator had said. But could Tresting perhaps speed that up, if he worked a little harder? His skaa population had been growing lately. Perhaps if he pushed them a bit more, he could bring in an extra

harvest this summer and fulfill his contract with Lord Venture in extra measure.

Tresting nodded as he watched the crowd of lazy skaa, some working with their hoes, others on hands and knees, pushing the ash away from the fledgling crops. They didn't complain. They didn't hope. They barely dared think. That was the way it should be, for they were skaa. They were—

Tresting froze as one of the skaa looked up. The man met Tresting's eyes, a spark—no, a fire—of defiance showing in his expression. Tresting had never seen anything like it, not in the face of a skaa. Tresting stepped backward reflexively, a chill running through him as the strange, straight-backed skaa held his eyes.

And smiled.

Tresting looked away. "Kurdon!" he snapped.

The burly taskmaster rushed up the incline. "Yes, my lord?"

Tresting turned, pointing at...

He frowned. Where had that skaa been standing? Working with their heads bowed, bodies stained by soot and sweat, they were so hard to tell apart. Tresting paused, searching. He thought he knew the place...an empty spot, where nobody now stood.

But, no. That couldn't be it. The man couldn't have disappeared from the group so quickly. Where would he have gone? He must be in there, somewhere, working with his head now properly bowed. Still, his moment of apparent defiance was inexcusable.

"My lord?" Kurdon asked again.

The obligator stood at the side, watching curiously. It would not be wise to let the man know that one of the skaa had acted so brazenly.

"Work the skaa in that southern section a little harder," Tresting ordered, pointing. "I see them being sluggish, even for skaa. Beat a few of them."

Kurdon shrugged, but nodded. It wasn't much of a reason for a beating—but, then, he didn't need much of a reason to give the workers a beating.

They were, after all, only skaa.

Kelsier had heard stories.

He had heard whispers of times when once, long ago, the sun had not been red. Times when the sky hadn't been clogged by smoke and ash, when plants hadn't struggled to grow, and when skaa hadn't been slaves. Times before the Lord Ruler. Those days, however, were nearly forgotten. Even the legends were growing vague.

Kelsier watched the sun, his eyes following the giant red disk as it crept toward the western horizon. He stood quietly for a long moment, alone in the empty fields. The day's work was done; the skaa had been herded back to their hovels. Soon the mists would come.

Eventually, Kelsier sighed, then turned to pick his way across the furrows and pathways, weaving between large heaps of ash. He avoided stepping on the plants—though he wasn't sure why he bothered. The crops hardly seemed worth the effort. Wan, with wilted brown leaves, the plants seemed as depressed as the people who tended them.

The skaa hovels loomed in the waning light. Already, Kelsier could see the mists beginning to form, clouding the air, and giving the moundlike buildings a surreal,

intangible look. The hovels stood unguarded; there was no need for watchers, for no skaa would venture outside once night arrived. Their fear of the mists was far too strong.

*I'll have to cure them of that someday*, Kelsier thought as he approached one of the larger buildings. *But, all things in their own time*. He pulled open the door and slipped inside.

Conversation stopped immediately. Kelsier closed the door, then turned with a smile to confront the room of about thirty skaa. A firepit burned weakly at the center, and the large cauldron beside it was filled with vegetable-dappled water—the beginnings of an evening meal. The soup would be bland, of course. Still, the smell was enticing.

“Good evening, everyone,” Kelsier said with a smile, resting his pack beside his feet and leaning against the door. “How was your day?”

His words broke the silence, and the women returned to their dinner preparations. A group of men sitting at a crude table, however, continued to regard Kelsier with dissatisfied expressions.

“Our day was filled with work, traveler,” said Tepper, one of the skaa elders. “Something you managed to avoid.”

“Fieldwork hasn’t ever really suited me,” Kelsier said. “It’s far too hard on my delicate skin.” He smiled, holding up hands and arms that were lined with layers and layers of thin scars. They covered his skin, running lengthwise, as if some beast had repeatedly raked its claws up and down his arms.

Tepper snorted. He was young to be an elder, probably barely into his forties—at most, he might be five years Kelsier’s senior. However, the scrawny man held himself with the air of one who liked to be in charge.

“This is no time for levity,” Tepper said sternly. “When we harbor a traveler, we expect him to behave himself and avoid suspicion. When you ducked away from the fields this morning, you could have earned a whipping for the men around you.”

“True,” Kelsier said. “But those men could also have been whipped for standing in the wrong place, for pausing too long, or for coughing when a taskmaster walked by. I once saw a man beaten because his master claimed that he had ‘blinked inappropriately.’”

Tepper sat with narrow eyes and a stiff posture, his arm resting on the table. His expression was unyielding.

Kelsier sighed, rolling his eyes. “Fine. If you want me to go, I’ll be off then.” He slung his pack up on his shoulder and nonchalantly pulled open the door.

Thick mist immediately began to pour through the portal, drifting lazily across Kelsier’s body, pooling on the floor and creeping across the dirt like a hesitant animal. Several people gasped in horror, though most of them were too stunned to make a sound. Kelsier stood for a moment, staring out into the dark mists, their shifting currents lit feebly by the cooking pit’s coals.

“Close the door.” Tepper’s words were a plea, not a command.

Kelsier did as requested, pushing the door closed and stemming the flood of white mist. “The mist is not what you think. You fear it far too much.”

“Men who venture into the mist lose their souls,” a woman whispered. Her words raised a question. Had Kelsier walked in the mists? What, then, had happened to his

soul?

*If you only knew*, Kelsier thought. “Well, I guess this means I’m staying.” He waved for a boy to bring him a stool. “It’s a good thing, too—it would have been a shame for me to leave before I shared my news.”

More than one person perked up at the comment. This was the real reason they tolerated him—the reason even the timid peasants would harbor a man such as Kelsier, a skaa who defied the Lord Ruler’s will by traveling from plantation to plantation. A renegade he might be—a danger to the entire community—but he brought news from the outside world.

“I come from the north,” Kelsier said. “From lands where the Lord Ruler’s touch is less noticeable.” He spoke in a clear voice, and people leaned unconsciously toward him as they worked. On the next day, Kelsier’s words would be repeated to the several hundred people who lived in other hovels. The skaa might be subservient, but they were incurable gossips.

“Local lords rule in the West,” Kelsier said, “and they are far from the iron grip of the Lord Ruler and his obligators. Some of these distant noblemen are finding that happy skaa make better workers than mistreated skaa. One man, Lord Renoux, has even ordered his taskmasters to stop unauthorized beatings. There are whispers that he’s considering paying wages to his plantation skaa, like city craftsmen might earn.”

“Nonsense,” Tepper said.

“My apologies,” Kelsier said. “I didn’t realize that Goodman Tepper had been to Lord Renoux’s estates recently. When you dined with him last, did he tell you something that he did not tell me?”

Tepper blushed: Skaa did not travel, and they certainly didn’t dine with lords. “You think me a fool, traveler,” Tepper said, “but I know what you’re doing. You’re the one they call the Survivor; those scars on your arms give you away. You’re a troublemaker—you travel the plantations, stirring up discontent. You eat our food, telling your grand stories and your lies, then you disappear and leave people like me to deal with the false hopes you give our children.”

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. “Now, now, Goodman Tepper,” he said. “Your worries are completely unfounded. Why, I have no intention of eating your food. I brought my own.” With that, Kelsier reached over and tossed his pack onto the earth before Tepper’s table. The loose bag slumped to the side, dumping an array of foods to the ground. Fine breads, fruits, and even a few thick, cured sausages bounced free.

A summerfruit rolled across the packed earthen floor and bumped lightly against Tepper’s foot. The middle-aged skaa regarded the fruit with stunned eyes. “That’s nobleman’s food!”

Kelsier snorted. “Barely. You know, for a man of renowned prestige and rank, your Lord Tresting has remarkably poor taste. His pantry is an embarrassment to his noble station.”

Tepper paled even further. “That’s where you went this afternoon,” he whispered. “You went to the manor. You...*stole from the master!*”

“Indeed,” Kelsier said. “And, might I add that while your lord’s taste in food is deplorable, his eye for soldiers is far more impressive. Sneaking into his manor during the day was quite a challenge.”

Tepper was still staring at the bag of food. “If the taskmasters find this here...”

“Well, I suggest you make it disappear then,” Kelsier said. “I’d be willing to bet that it tastes a fair bit better than watered-down farlet soup.”

Two dozen sets of hungry eyes studied the food. If Tepper intended further arguments, he didn’t make them quickly enough, for his silent pause was taken as agreement. Within a few minutes, the bag’s contents had been inspected and distributed, and the pot of soup sat bubbling and ignored as the skaa feasted on a meal far more exotic.

Kelsier settled back, leaning against the hovel’s wooden wall and watching the people devour their food. He had spoken correctly: The pantry’s offerings had been depressingly mundane. However, this was a people who had been fed on nothing but soup and gruel since they were children. To them, breads and fruits were rare delicacies—usually eaten only as aging discards brought down by the house servants.

“Your storytelling was cut short, young man,” an elderly skaa noted, hobbling over to sit on a stool beside Kelsier.

“Oh, I suspect there will be time for more later,” Kelsier said. “Once all evidence of my thievery has been properly devoured. Don’t you want any of it?”

“No need,” the old man said. “The last time I tried lords’ food, I had stomach pains for three days. New tastes are like new ideas, young man—the older you get, the more difficult they are for you to stomach.”

Kelsier paused. The old man was hardly an imposing sight. His leathered skin and bald scalp made him look more frail than they did wise. Yet, he had to be stronger than he looked; few plantation skaa lived to such ages. Many lords didn’t allow the elderly to remain home from daily work, and the frequent beatings that made up a skaa’s life took a terrible toll on the elderly.

“What was your name again?” Kelsier asked.

“Mennis.”

Kelsier glanced back at Tepper. “So, Goodman Mennis, tell me something. Why do you let him lead?”

Mennis shrugged. “When you get to be my age, you have to be very careful where you waste your energy. Some battles just aren’t worth fighting.” There was an implication in Mennis’s eyes; he was referring to things greater than his own struggle with Tepper.

“You’re satisfied with this, then?” Kelsier asked, nodding toward the hovel and its half-starved, overworked occupants. “You’re content with a life full of beatings and endless drudgery?”

“At least it’s a life,” Mennis said. “I know what wages malcontent and rebellion bring. The eye of the Lord Ruler, and the ire of the Steel Ministry, can be far more terrible than a few whippings. Men like you preach change, but I wonder. Is this a battle we can really fight?”

“You’re fighting it already, Goodman Mennis. You’re just losing horribly.” Kelsier shrugged. “But, what do I know? I’m just a traveling miscreant, here to eat your food and impress your youths.”

Mennis shook his head. “You jest, but Tepper might have been right. I fear your visit will bring us grief.”

Kelsier smiled. “That’s why I didn’t contradict him—at least, not on the troublemaker point.” He paused, then smiled more deeply. “In fact, I’d say calling me

a troublemaker is probably the only accurate thing Tepper has said since I got here.”

“How do you do that?” Mennis asked, frowning.

“What?”

“Smile so much.”

“Oh, I’m just a happy person.”

Mennis glanced down at Kelsier’s hands. “You know, I’ve only seen scars like those on one other person—and he was dead. His body was returned to Lord Tresting as proof that his punishment had been carried out.” Mennis looked up at Kelsier. “He’d been caught speaking of rebellion. Tresting sent him to the Pits of Hathsin, where he was worked until he died. The lad lasted less than a month.”

Kelsier glanced down at his hands and forearms. They still burned sometimes, though he was certain the pain was only in his mind. He looked up at Mennis and smiled. “You ask why I smile, Goodman Mennis? Well, the Lord Ruler thinks he has claimed laughter and joy for himself. I’m disinclined to let him do so. This is one battle that doesn’t take very much effort to fight.”

Mennis stared at Kelsier, and for a moment Kelsier thought the old man might smile in return. However, Mennis eventually just shook his head. “I don’t know. I just don’t—”

The scream cut him off. It came from outside, perhaps to the north, though the mists distorted sounds. The people in the hovel fell silent, listening to the faint, high-pitched yells. Despite the distance and the mist, Kelsier could hear the pain contained in those screams.

Kelsier burned tin.

It was simple for him now, after years of practice. The tin sat with other Allomantic metals within his stomach, swallowed earlier, waiting for him to draw upon them. He reached inside with his mind and touched the tin, tapping powers he still barely understood. The tin flared to life within him, burning his stomach like the sensation of a hot drink swallowed too quickly.

Allomantic power surged through his body, enhancing his senses. The room around him became crisp, the dull firepit flaring to near blinding brightness. He could feel the grain in the wood of the stool beneath him. He could still taste the remnants of the loaf of bread he’d snacked on earlier. Most importantly, he could hear the screams with supernatural ears. Two separate people were yelling. One was an older woman, the other a younger woman—perhaps a child. The younger screams were getting farther and farther away.

“Poor Jess,” a nearby woman said, her voice booming in Kelsier’s enhanced ears. “That child of hers was a curse. It’s better for skaa not to have pretty daughters.”

Tepper nodded. “Lord Tresting was sure to send for the girl sooner or later. We all knew it. Jess knew it.”

“Still a shame, though,” another man said.

The screams continued in the distance. Burning tin, Kelsier was able to judge the direction accurately. Her voice was moving toward the lord’s manor. The sounds set something off within him, and he felt his face flush with anger.

Kelsier turned. “Does Lord Tresting ever return the girls after he’s finished with them?”

Old Mennis shook his head. “Lord Tresting is a law-abiding nobleman—he has