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מועדון הקריאה.

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Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Hidden Empire – The Saga of Seven Suns – Book 1 by Kevin J. Anderson (2002), 637 pages

Kevin J. Anderson (born 1962, making him one of the youngest sf writers around) is an American science fiction author with over forty bestsellers. This is the first book in the series *The Saga of Seven Suns* which now numbers seven books. One for each sun? It's a fabulous space opera written by a man who has written *X-Men* novels, *Star Wars* novels, *Dune* novels, *Superman* novels, and many other *New York Times* bestsellers. It's a mixture of interstellar empire, human-like aliens, fantasy tropes, and a wide-variety of characters of all types. Not so far in Earth's future, an attempt was made to send generation ships to other stars using slower-than-light travel. These ships were spotted by an ancient powerful alien empire, the Ildirans, who had faster-than-light travel, and who then gave the secret of such travel to Earth. The aliens helped the generation ships to quickly get to their destinations.

The book has numerous threads. Some relate to subgroups of humans living in various space environments. There are the Terran Hansa, the largest and most powerful of human empires.

And there are the telepathic Green Priests, who care for a kind of magic tree, native to the planet Theroc. These trees can communicate instantly to their fellow trees anywhere there are such trees. They can send messages instantaneously. This is one of the fantasy threads in this book. Here is a passage about a priest of these trees, Beneto, who has been asked to observe an event and communicate the story. The priests are called "green priests" because those who are genetically capable of communication with the trees, and on adulthood voluntarily take on that task, turn green like the trees themselves:

"Beneto watched, marking every detail, which he would pass on through prayer to the eager and curious worldforest. Though he was the second son of the Theron ruling family, he served little purpose here at Oncier other than to send instantaneous news of the ambitious test via the world trees, much faster than any standard electromagnetic communication, which even at the speed of light would have taken months or

perhaps years to reach the nearest Hansa outpost.

“Using the interconnected trees, any green priest could communicate with any of his counterparts, regardless of location. Any single tree was a manifestation of the whole worldforest, identical quantum images of each other. What one tree knew, they all knew, and green priests could tap into that information reservoir whenever they chose. They could use it to send messages.” [p. 15]

Then there is the alien interstellar civilization, the Ildirans. Their home world, the planet of Ildira, is constantly lit by seven suns, so that they never sleep. Here is a little about Ildira:

“At the fringe of the sparkling Horizon Cluster, Ildira basked under the varying light of seven suns. The Empire's home planet circled a warm orange K1 star that was situated near a close binary pair - the Qronha system - composed of a red giant and a smaller yellow companion. More distant, but still dazzling in the Ildiran sky, hung the amazing trinary of Durris, a closely tied white star and yellow star with a red dwarf orbiting the common center of mass. Finally, also distant, the blue-supergiant Daym shone like an intense diamond.

“Night never fell on Ildira.

“Mijistra, capital city and jewel of the ancient empire, glittered under brassy skies. Its spires and domes were made of crystal and colored glass, freeform architecture fashioned out of ultrastrong transparent polymers.

“Prime Designate Jora'h, eldest son and heir to the MageImperator, drew a deep breath of air perfumed with mists

from the upward-tumbling waterfalls that climbed to the Prism Palace.

“As was his duty, the Prime Designate waited to meet the human representative from Theroc. The young man, Reynald, was Jora'h's ostensible counterpart, but in a much-diminished capacity. The human prince would become the ruling Father of a single wilderness planet, whereas the Prime Designate would eventually control the vast Ildiran Empire.

“Jora'h raised both hands to greet the smiling man. ‘Prince Reynald, I bid you heartfelt welcome to Mijistra.’” [p. 37]

Then there are the human starship-dwelling Roamers, who harvest and sell to the rest of humanity (and to the Ildirans) the spaceship fuel ekti, and who try to retain their independence from the Hansa. Here they are on one of their sky-mines, in the atmosphere of the gas giant Golgen:

“They climbed through hatches, took a lift, and finally passed through a set of Wind doors to a broad observation deck. The deck could be surrounded by an atmosphere field, but for now it was open to the sky itself. Ross frequently took the Blue Sky Mine down to an equilibrium level where the clouds were thick enough to be breathable and Golgen's atmosphere was warmed by internal thermal sources.

“Jess drew a deep breath of the alien air. ‘This isn't something I get to do every day.’

“‘I do,’ Ross said.

“The Blue Sky Mine, like all Roamer-designed factories, was composed of three main segments: the intake/feed tanks, the processing reactors and exhaust

funnels, and the ekti storage spheres. As the skymine plowed through the atmosphere, open nozzles sucked in raw gases and delivered them through processing machinery. After passing through the catalytic reactors, the rare hydrogen allotrope was siphoned off, while the waste gases spilled back out from the hot stacks.

“Ekti was the only known allotrope of hydrogen, though other elements had varying molecular forms. Carbon manifested itself as powdery graphite, crystalline diamond, or exotic polymer spheres of buckminsterfullerene. Long ago, the Ildirans had discovered how to reconfigure hydrogen into a fuel that allowed their star drives to function.” [p. 63]

And here is more about the green priests. Nira is a young Theron who hopes to become a priest:

“Barefoot and bare-chested acolytes wore only loincloths, exposing as much skin as possible to the trees. Human skin was a sensitive receptor, an interface with the world trees. Whenever Nira climbed to the canopy for her daily work, she stroked the fronds, pressed her chest against the trunk. She had shorn her dark hair close to the scalp, as most acolytes did, leaving only a fuzz on the crown of her head. All her hair would fall out as soon as she took the green.

“Since childhood, she had recognized her destiny to become part of the ecological web of the worldforest, which grew year after year. Before the *Caillié* [the generation ship which had brought humans to Thero] had been brought here long ago, the worldforest had been only an isolated group of semi-intelligent

trees on a single planet. There, because it had no way to grow intellectually, or experience new things, the worldforest had languished in isolation for thousands of years.

“However, when the settlers came, a girl named Thara Wen had learned to commune with the forest, and she taught other sensitive individuals. These early ‘priests’ had discovered how to tap into the ponderous memory that was capable of storing and recalling vast amounts of information. The world trees were a living database, hampered only by a lack of experiences and outside knowledge. Thara Wen and her followers had taken care of that problem.

“As the worldforest began to learn from its human companions, the relationship blossomed into a beneficial symbiosis. Green priests explained mathematics and science, history and folklore. Once its appetite was whetted, the worldforest wanted to absorb all human knowledge, from the dullest facts to the most sweeping legends. The arboreal computer could assimilate and assess a thousand tangential pieces of information and make brilliant and accurate projections, almost like prophecies from a benevolent earth spirit.” [p. 77]

And here is more about the resourceful and creative Roamers:

“These meetings with engineers and clan speculators were the most enjoyable of Cesca's duties. All Roamers were encouraged to develop new concepts and consider different techniques for exploiting resources, however unlikely they might seem. Inventors modified

standard equipment and vessels already in use, improving them to incredible efficiency, far beyond anything the Hansa had achieved. Nor would the Big Goose [the Hansa] ever know.

“The curly-haired engineer Eldon Clarin sat in a low-gravity seat, controlling his enthusiasm as Jhy Okiah and Cesca stared at his beautifully drawn plans for two new spacecraft designs. Clarin and his team of specialists had done their work admirably well, and he waited for the old Speaker to either make suggestions or grant him approval to pursue his new concepts.

“Jhy Okiah looked over at Cesca, waiting to see her protégée’s assessment. The young woman bit her lower lip, putting her mind into sharp focus. ‘As clearly as I can understand it, your modification increases thrust efficiency, minimizes ekti consumption –’

“Eldon Clarin interrupted. ‘Yes, yes, and still we retain navigational accuracy. That has been a problem in the past.’ He sat back and looked at the two women, hoping for their acceptance. He scratched his curly hair, which hovered like a corona around his head.

“Because Roamer society had been built on interconnected families, strong women often dominated their politics. Throughout human history, politics had usually been based on warfare, strength, and blustering testosterone. Roamers, however, found that female politicians were much better in the peaceful resolution of disputes. Women could talk through problems, get to the root of a conflict and ferret out the real cause for

disagreement, which was often an illogical emotionally based slight. Maternal leaders were better at exchanging subtle favors that kept the society running smoothly.” [p. 136-137]

Some Earthmen are somewhat contemptuous of those Ildirans despite their advanced technology, seeing them as a decadent interstellar civilization that no longer advances but has remained a stable non-changing society for thousands of years.

Each of the threads in this first book in the series is fascinating, varied and complex. It’s a pleasure to read Kevin Anderson’s imaginative plot lines.

However, some serious problems develop in this interstellar universe. Archeologists have found ancient robots from a race of aliens that have vanished, the Klikiss. The archeologists succeed in waking up the intelligent Klikiss robots, who say that they have no idea of what happened to their makers in the distant past. These robots travel throughout human space, quietly observing but never interfering. While remains of the cities built by these aliens still exist, there no clues even to the aliens’ appearance. Not a single pictorial representation of them has been found.

Besides the robots, the archeologists find some advanced Klikiss technology, so powerful that it can convert a gas giant to a small sun. Here is a technological challenge the humans cannot resist. They cheerfully convert one such gas giant to a star. Surprise! There are hidden alien beings living deep in the gas giant, called “hydrogues”, and they are furious at the human attack on them. As Book 1 ends, these hydrogues (from “hydrogen”?) have declared war on all aliens, not only against the humans but also against the Ildirans.

They have tremendous technological power, and usually in battle can defeat any enemy. Here the human General Lanyan learns of the first such defeat:

"An EDF [Earth Defense Force] geological specialist looked up from his technical station. 'The first scans have given us some information, sir. All the rubble displays the same degree of cooling. Therefore, the destruction occurred over a very short period of time -- inconceivably short, in fact. My guess is that the four moons and our station were destroyed within hours of each other.'

"Hours!' The General felt a sinking sensation. 'What could possibly demolish four whole moons in mere hours?' *What are we up against?*

"The pilot looked over at Lanyan. 'There's no way any help

could have arrived in time, General, even if Dr. Serizawa had access to telink [green priest instantaneous communication]. Top speed with the stardrive from the nearest EDF deployment would still require the better part of a week. Just no way we could have helped.'

"And then we would have lost a green priest, too,' Lanyan admitted. *But still, dammit, we could have known what was happening!* He hated having his hands tied by the arrogance of treetalkers on one hand and the speed of light on the other." [p. 247]

So as Book 1 ends, all interstellar civilizations are in danger. I couldn't put the book down for long, and I plan to read Book 2. But I doubt I will read all seven.

Quote of the Month: Oh the noise! By Sacha Vignieri

Cities and highways are noisy. Such anthropogenic noise causes substantial interference with the acoustic communication of many species. Most urban noise is low in frequency, and birds that live in noisy areas have been shown to alter the frequency of their songs, shifting from low to high frequencies in order to be heard above the din. This may seem like a reasonable solution to the problem; however, Halfwerk *et al.* show that singing higher-frequency songs has fitness costs. They recorded the songs of pairs of great tits (*Parus major*) in a Dutch forest and found that low-frequency song is related to female fertility and that the mates of low-frequency-singing males are less likely to stray. In fact, males with higher-frequency songs were less likely to be the sole father of their mate's offspring. When they experimentally exposed the birds to sound similar in frequency to urban noise, males shifted to singing high-frequency songs. This shift allowed them to be heard, but also placed them at frequencies less preferred by females. These results suggest that species facing noisy conditions are faced with a trade-off: Sing high and be heard or demonstrate your quality by singing low and be drowned out by ambient noise. Such a trade-off demonstrates the divergent selection pressures of anthropogenic environmental changes.

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