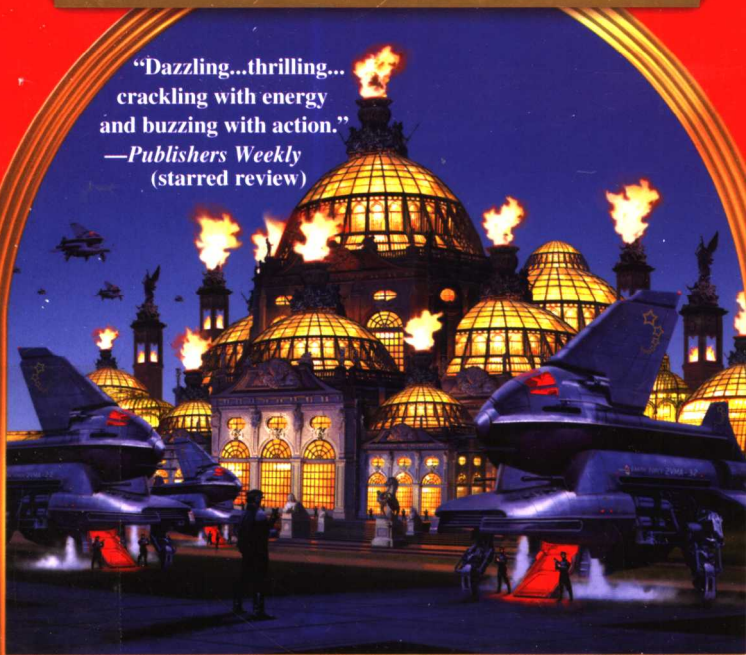


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KEVIN J. ANDERSON

• THE SAGA OF SEVEN SUNS  BOOK 3 •

"Dazzling...thrilling...  
crackling with energy  
and buzzing with action."  
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HORIZON STORMS

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## THE STORY SO FAR

**F**or the first test of the Klikiss Torch—a device discovered in the ruins of the ancient alien Klikiss civilization—the Terran Hanseatic League (the Hansa) ignited a gas-giant planet, creating a small sun. The Hansa's suave CHAIRMAN BASIL WENCESLAS intended to terraform the gas giant's frozen moons into new colonies. Humanity had spread across many available worlds under the benevolent but reticent watch of the alien Ildiran Empire and its godlike leader, the MAGE-IMPERATOR. The Ildirans, represented by their Solar Navy commander, ADAR KORI'NH, were skeptical about the Torch project, but came to observe.

When the gas planet was ignited, instant reports were transmitted around the galaxy by BENETO, a "green priest" from the forested planet Theroc who had a symbiosis with semisentient "worldtrees." Like living telegraph stations, green priests provide the only form of instant communication across vast distances through the forest network. Back on Earth, OLD KING FREDERICK, a glamorous figurehead ruler, led a celebration of the successful test.

Unknown to anyone, though, this and many gas planets were inhabited by a powerful alien species, the hydrogues.

The Hansa had just destroyed one of their populous worlds and unwittingly declared war on an entire hidden empire.

On Ildira, the Mage-Imperator's firstborn son, PRIME DESIGNATE JORA'H, welcomed the human REYNALD, Beneto's brother and heir to the throne of Theroc. As a token of friendship, Jora'h invited Reynald to send two green priests to study the grand Ildiran epic, the *Saga of Seven Suns*. On his way home, Reynald met in space with the Roamers, fiercely independent space gypsies led by old SPEAKER JHY OKIAH and her beautiful protégée CESCA PERONI. Since both the Roamers and Theroc were technically independent of the Terran Hanseatic League, Reynald discussed a possible alliance, even suggesting marriage with Cesca, but she was already betrothed to a skyminer, ROSS TAMBLYN (while secretly in love with his brother JESS).

The merchant woman RLINDA KETT came to Theroc in the *Voracious Curiosity*, hoping to open trade between Theroc and the Hansa. She was supported by ambitious SAREIN, sister to Reynald and Beneto, but MOTHER ALEXA and FATHER IDRIS were happy with their isolation on Theroc. Rlinda agreed to deliver two green priests—old OTEMA and bright-eyed young NIRA—to Ildira at the invitation of Prime Designate Jora'h.

On Earth, Chairman Wenceslas secretly began searching for a replacement for King Frederick. Basil's henchmen kidnapped a scamp, RAYMOND AGUERRA, then staged a terrible fire in his dwelling, killing his mother and three brothers, leaving no evidence. The Hansa then altered the young man's appearance, told him he was now "Prince Peter," and began brainwashing him, using the Teacher "compy" (a companion robot) OX to instruct him in his new role.

After the success of the Klikiss Torch, the archaeologists who had discovered the technology, MARGARET and LOUIS COLICOS, began a new excavation on the desert planet of Rheindic Co, where ancient Klikiss cities remained untouched. The only functional remnants of the alien civilization, their hulking beetlelike robots, explained that their memories had been erased long ago. To learn more about their own past, three of these antique robots accompanied the Colicoses to the excavation site. The archaeology team also included a compy, DD, and a green priest. While Louis studied the ruins, Margaret worked to decipher Klikiss hieroglyphics in hopes of finding answers.

Meanwhile, angered by their near genocide, the hydrogues began to attack human facilities around gas giants. One of their first targets was a skymine—a huge cloudtop facility that skimmed gas giants for ekti, vital stardrive fuel—owned by Cesca's fiancé, Ross Tamblyn. Roamers and their skymines are the main suppliers of ekti to the Hansa and the Ildiran Empire. The hydrogues also destroyed the space station left to observe the new sun at the Klikiss Torch site—never demanding terms, never showing mercy. These unexpected attacks stunned both the Hansa and the Roamers. Chairman Wenceslas met with the commander of the Earth Defense Forces (EDF), gruff GENERAL KURT LANYAN, to discuss the threat. Old King Frederick worked to rally the populace, recruiting new volunteers for the EDF.

Vowing revenge for her brother Ross, spunky Roamer TASIA TAMBLYN heard the call and ran off to join the military, taking her compy EA and leaving her brother Jess in charge of the family water mines. Although Ross's death left Jess Tamblyn and Cesca Peroni free to profess their love,



they couldn't bring themselves to take advantage of the tragic situation for personal gain.

Meanwhile, Raymond Aguerra continued training to become the next King, watched over by OX. At first he enjoyed the change from the rough streets to the opulent Palace, but soon he began to resent the rigid control imposed upon him. To his horror, he discovered that the Hansa had arranged the deaths of his family.

On Ildira, the green priest Nira spent a great deal of time with Prime Designate Jora'h, who was destined to become the next Ildiran leader. Though he had many assigned mates, he genuinely fell in love with Nira. Another son of the Mage-Imperator, the grim and intense DOBRO DESIGNATE UDRU'H, interrogated Nira about her telepathic potential as a green priest, then reported to the Mage-Imperator about secret Ildiran breeding experiments on the planet Dobro. Udru'h suggested that Nira might have the DNA potential they needed for the breeding project.

- Digging through supposedly perfect and indisputable records of their past, an Ildiran historian uncovered documents proving that the hydrogues had appeared long ago in a previous war, but that all mention of the conflict had been censored from the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Before he could reveal his shocking discovery, the Mage-Imperator killed him, saying, "I *wanted* it kept secret."

Solar Navy commander Adar Kori'nh promoted ZAN'NH, the firstborn son of Prime Designate Jora'h, and took the fleet to the gas giant Qronha 3, the site of an old Ildiran skymining facility. When hydrogue warglobes rose from the clouds to destroy the ekti facility, the Solar Navy engaged in a furious battle. Although hydrogue weaponry proved far superior, one Ildiran subcommander crashed his

battleship into the nearest sphere, destroying it and giving the Solar Navy time to retreat with the rescued skyminers. In the thousands of years chronicled in the *Saga of Seven Suns*, no Ildiran had ever experienced such a terrible and humiliating defeat.

On Earth, the EDF built new ships and commandeered civilian spacecraft to mount a defense against further hydrogue attacks. Rlinda Kett was forced to surrender all of her merchant ships to the war effort, except for the *Voracious Curiosity*. Newly enlisted Tasia Tamblyn excelled in military training, besting spoiled-brat Earth recruits. Her particular bane was PATRICK FITZPATRICK III; her closest friend was fellow trainee ROBB BRINDLE.

In an uproar after the repeated hydrogue attacks, many Roamers ceased all skymining, but Jess Tamblyn decided to strike the enemy aliens himself. He gathered loyal workers and went to where the hydrogues had destroyed his brother Ross's sky mine. They sent giant comets plummeting down to batter the gas planet with the force of atomic warheads.

Upon learning that the Ildirans had also been attacked by hydrogues, Chairman Wenceslas went to meet with the Mage-Imperator to propose an alliance. The hydrogues had neither acknowledged nor responded to requests for negotiation. While Basil was away on Ildira, however, a giant war-globe appeared at Earth and a hydrogue emissary demanded to speak with flustered and incompetent King Frederick. Contained within a pressure vessel, the alien emissary informed the King that the Klikiss Torch had annihilated a hydrogue planet, slaughtering millions of their people. Frederick apologized for the inadvertent genocide, but the hydrogue demanded that all skymining cease. This would mean no ekti fuel for the Ildiran stardrive, the only viable

method of space travel. As Frederick pleaded with him, the hydrogue emissary detonated his containment tank, killing the King and all observers in the Throne Hall.

Basil rushed back to Earth and told royal trainee Raymond that "King Peter" must take the throne immediately. Peter gave a carefully scripted speech, defying the hydrogue ultimatum and declaring that humans would take the fuel necessary for their survival. He dispatched a battle group, including Tasia Tamblyn and Robb Brindle, along with commercial ekti harvesters to Jupiter. For several days all was quiet, but then warglobes engaged the EDF in a terrible battle. Tasia and Robb survived, although the battered human ships limped away, beaten. . . .

Before anyone learned of the humiliating defeat, Basil presided over King Peter's coronation, designed as a show of hope and confidence. Peter, hiding his hatred for Basil, was drugged into cooperation. Feigning paternal pride, Basil promised the new King that if he behaved, they would find him a Queen. . . .

On Ildira, Nira discovered that she was pregnant with Jora'h's child, but before she could tell him, the Mage-Imperator dispatched Jora'h on a diplomatic mission. Then, in the stillness of a sleep period, brutal Ildiran guards captured Nira and stabbed to death her mentor Otema, who was too old for the breeding pens. Nira was turned over to the evil Dobro Designate for genetic experimentation. . . .

At the Roamer capital of Rendezvous, Speaker Okiah challenged the resourceful clans to find alternatives to skymining, then abdicated her position in favor of Cesca. Jess watched the woman he loved take her place as a strong leader, realizing she was farther away from him now than ever before.

On distant Rheindic Co, the Colicos team discovered an arcane transportation system, a dimensional doorway controlled by complex machinery. Though the Klikiss robots insisted they remembered nothing, Margaret was able to translate archaic records. Apparently the robots themselves had been responsible for the disappearance of their parent race and were also involved in an ancient war with the hydrogues! Surprised by this news, Margaret and Louis rushed back to their camp, only to find that their green priest had been murdered and all communication cut off.

Working with their faithful compy DD, Margaret and Louis barricaded themselves in the cliff city, but the sinister Klikiss robots broke through. Although DD attempted to defend his masters, the robots captured him, taking care not to hurt a fellow intelligent machine. At the last moment, Louis got the "transportal" functioning, opening a doorway to an unknown alien world. He urged Margaret through. Then, before he could join her, the gate closed—and the robots were upon him.

For five years, the hydrogue war continued; the human race and the Ildiran Empire struggled to cope with the loss of stardrive fuel. King Peter announced strict rationing schemes, taking public blame for the act while Basil Wenceslas made all the real decisions. Roamer daredevils led by Jess Tamblyn and DEL KELLUM—a clan head who ran shipbuilding operations in the rings of the gas planet Osquivel—made hit-and-run sweeps on gas giants, grabbing ekti before the hydrogues could strike them; many missions ended in tragedy.

Prime Designate Jora'h was told that his beloved Nira had been killed in a fire; the Mage-Imperator kept the Dobro

breeding scheme secret from him, along with the fact that Nira was alive and well, being used as a test subject. After bearing OSIRA'H, Jora'h's own daughter, Nira gave birth to several more half-breed children. She had no choice but to perform the slave labor imposed on her and other human captives taken generations ago from a lost colony ship, the *Burton*. To ensure that no one from the Hansa discovered the breeding camp, the Dobro Designate ordered the destruction of the derelict *Burton*. Adar Kori'nh reluctantly followed his orders, but was disturbed to get rid of such a historic relic. The breeding program had to remain secret.

On Nira's home planet of Theroc, Reynald searched for a suitable wife, accompanied by his younger sister ESTARRA, since he would soon replace his parents as the leader of his people. Their grandparents urged them both to choose a good match, since Reynald and Estarra had plenty of responsibility on their shoulders.

Cut off from the traditional business of skymining, the Roamers developed new schemes for obtaining fuel—from breaking down cometary ice to flying huge nebula sails. Eccentric engineer KOTTO OKIAH established a risky metals-processing colony on the extremely hot planet of Isperos. At the shipyards in the rings of Osquivel, Del Kellum showed Jess all he had done; his daughter ZHETT was clearly interested in Jess, but he was still in love with Cesca.

Jess's sister Tasia was sent with a group of battleships to the rebellious Hansa colony of Yreka, where settlers were hoarding ekti. The EDF cracked down hard, first isolating and then raiding Yreka, confiscating all stardrive fuel for military uses; Tasia was uneasy that the EDF chose to turn their might against their own struggling colonies, instead of the real hydrogue enemy.

Chairman Wenceslas, who had been hoping that Margaret and Louis Colicos might unearth another weapon as useful as the Klikiss Torch, discovered that the archaeologists had vanished without a trace. Although their scholar son, ANTON COLICOS, had sent repeated inquiries about his missing parents, his letters vanished into the Hansa bureaucracy. Before Anton could learn anything, he received a surprise invitation from an Ildiran historian, REMEMBERER VAO'SH, to study the *Saga of Seven Suns* on Ildira. He eagerly accepted.

Chairman Wenceslas sent the merchant woman Rlinda Kett to Crenna to pick up an undercover spy, DAVLIN LOTZE, and take him to Rheindic Co in order to discover what had happened to the Colicos team. While on Crenna, Rlinda also met with her favorite ex-husband, BRANSON "BEBOB" ROBERTS, who had been drafted to fly EDF recon missions against the hydrogues but chose to go AWOL instead. Leaving BeBob behind, Rlinda took Davlin to Rheindic Co, where they found the bodies of Louis Colicos and the green priest, but no sign at all of Margaret or their compy DD.

Hapless kidnapped DD watched the evil Klikiss robots perform horrific tests on captured compies to "free" them from the programming that forced them to obey humans. DD also discovered that thousands of Klikiss robots, buried in a sort of hibernation, were being reawakened as part of their insidious schemes. The robots took little DD to the bizarre high-pressure cities of the hydrogues on a gas giant. There, DD learned that the Klikiss robots were forming a deadly alliance with the hydrogues against humans, but the little compy was helpless to stop their plans.

On Earth, King Peter and Basil Wenceslas were surprised

when a Klikiss robot, JORAX, unexpectedly volunteered to let himself be dismantled for science. Jorax claimed that the Klikiss robots wanted to assist humans in the hydrogue war, and that the robotic technology could be used to create highly proficient Soldier compies. Peter was suspicious of the offer, but Basil saw too many possible benefits to turn it down. The robot was dissected, and many of the Klikiss robot programming modules were immediately copied, adapted, and put into production.

While sleeping with Sarein, Basil complained that the aloof green priests would be extremely valuable as communication tools in the war, but they refused to help. Sarein suggested a plan to strengthen ties between Theroc and the Hansa: Her sister Estarra should marry King Peter. When they attended Reynald's coronation ceremony on the forested world, Basil and Sarein offered this plan to the new leader of Theroc, and he accepted. When Estarra learned the news, she was at first surprised and alarmed—she had never met Peter—but her friend, the eccentric green priest ROSSIA, encouraged her to give the alliance a chance. Estarra communicated with her brother Beneto, serving as green priest on Corvus Landing, and he wished her well. Sarein then spoke to the gathered green priests and convinced nineteen of them, including her uncle YARROD, to volunteer to help the EDF.

After his little sister's engagement to the King, Reynald sent a marriage proposal to Cesca Peroni. Though she was in love with Jess and continued to meet him for secret assignments, they had never formalized their plans. Now, for the good of her people, she considered the proposed alliance with the Therons. Jess urged Cesca to accept the offer, regardless of her feelings for him. To make the choice easier

for her, he signed up for a long and lonely voyage to collect *ekti* in one of Del Kellum's nebula skimmers; he launched from the Osquivel shipyards and flew off alone into space, leaving Cesca to do what she must.

On Ildira, the Mage-Imperator revealed to Prime Designate Jora'h that he was dying and that Jora'h would soon have to take the throne. Adar Kori'nh escorted Jora'h to the pleasure planet of Hyrillka to retrieve his eldest noble-born son, THOR'H, who was destined to replace him as the next Prime Designate. Thor'h resented his change of status from his soft life and pouted when his father told him he must prepare for his new duties. The Adar's warliners put on a spectacular performance for hedonistic DESIGNATE RUSA'H.

Before they could depart, a group of hydrogue warglobes swept in to destroy Hyrillka. Designate Rusa'h was seriously injured as the citadel palace collapsed around him. Although Adar Kori'nh and his warliners were resoundingly trounced, he managed to escape with Jora'h, Thor'h, and the unconscious Rusa'h.

When they returned to Ildira, the dying Mage-Imperator instructed Kori'nh to abandon weaker colonies in the Ildiran Empire to consolidate their strength. Kori'nh saw this as a devastating blow: For the first time in millennia, the Empire was shrinking—and under his watch! While Rusa'h remained in a coma, the Mage-Imperator revealed to Jora'h details of an ancient hidden war, in which the hydrogues had been allied with fiery beings known as *faeros* against watery entities called *wentals* and a forest mind called the *verdani*. Jora'h realized that the sentient worldtrees on Theroc must be the *verdani*, and he began to suspect that his beloved Nira might not have died in the convenient way his father described.



In the Ildiran breeding barracks on Dobro, Nira told the prisoners stories about what life was like for free humanity. Unfortunately, they had been experimental subjects for so many generations that they could not imagine freedom. Designate Udru'h trained Nira's daughter Osira'h to enhance her mental powers. Udru'h brainwashed the little girl to believe that she was the savior of the Ildiran race in the struggle against the hydrogues. When Nira and other prisoners were put to work fighting a brush fire in the hills, Nira tried to escape, rushing to scrub trees and attempting to use her green priest abilities to call for help. But the trees were silent, and she was captured, beaten, and dragged back to the camps.

General Lanyan went on a survey cruise with Tasia Tamblyn's old nemesis, Patrick Fitzpatrick III. They encountered a lone Roamer cargo ship; after confiscating its load of *ekti*, Fitzpatrick quietly destroyed the ship and its captain, careful to leave no witnesses. Later, the EDF battle group responded to a distress call from a planet under attack by hydrogue warglobes. Aided by an innovative idea from Tasia, they rescued many of the colonists, but they could not fight the hydrogues. Tasia's lover Robb Brindle chased after the departing enemy, tracking them to the ringed gas planet Osquivel, the site of Del Kellum's secret Roamer shipyards. When Robb reported his find of the debris to the EDF commanders, General Lanyan decided to make an all-out attack on Osquivel. Knowing that the hidden Roamer facility would surely be found, Tasia sent her loyal compy EA off to warn Speaker Peroni. Meeting with the EDF commanders, Robb proposed a risky scheme to go down in an encounter vessel in a last attempt to communicate with the hydrogues