Land of the Dead by Thomas Harlan

Excellent Alternate History

It’s a small change in our history: imagine that the Japanese made contact with the Aztec Empire. Instead of small-pox and Christianity, they brought an Imperial alliance, samurai ethics, and technology. By the time of these books, the Emperor in Mexico City rules not just the entire planet Earth, but a growing interplanetary Empire. But the Galaxy is not a hospitable place, and there are other powers, both new and very very old, who would stop the spread of the power in Anuhuac. A weapon of the Old Ones, from the time of the First Sun, has been found in a region of space. It must be investigated, then tamed or destroyed to keep it from the hands of opposing powers. Gretchen Anderssen, freelance archeologist and specialist in First Sun artifacts, has been hired by her old mentor Green Hummingbird, agent of the Mirror Service, to join him in the study. They will be joined by old friends, and some old enemies as well.

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My Personal Review:
Something unknown to Imperial science is lurking within the dust of the Kuub nebula.

Something ancient and deadly, holding a legacy from the distant past.

Something discovered by a doomed squadron of survey ships.

Land of the Dead is the third of Thomas Harlans Sixth Sun series, and follows some of the consequences of the events of House of Reeds. On the surface, Land of the Dead involves the discovery in deep space of an enigmatic artefact of one of the most powerful long-vanished civilisations of the Galaxy -- something vast, dangerous and mysterious -- and the conflict between those who would possess it.
Land of the Dead can be read and enjoyed on multiple levels: as fast and furious space opera, but it is also the darkest so far, with treachery, betrayal and revenge at its core (leading to a confrontation vaguely reminiscent of that at the Reichenbach Falls) countered by redemption, loyalty and the relationship of a parent to their child. The story stretches from the cold lonely streets of Shinedo on the Pacific coast of North America, to intrigues in the Imperial capital of Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico, to the absolute zero of a hazardous nebula. All is not as it seems, and politics and ambition on Earth and beyond drive a deadly conflict, with revelations of the true status of the Méxica Empire and an ancient forgotten doom. One of the human factions will be a surprise (though foreshadowed early on in Wasteland of Flint), and the semblance of Imperial solidarity is fractured by the intrigues within and between the Imperial Clan, the Mirror secret police, the Fleet and the Judges.

The series has a shifting cast of characters, and the interweaving threads of this novel feature the disgraced officer Mitsuharu Hadeishi, Susan Koshô at the helm of her first command the battlecruiser Naniwa, the Swedish-Russian xenoarchaeologist Gretchen Anderssen and the Méxica judge Green Hummingbird. An Imperial Prince, Xochitl, is a major character and a complete contrast to his brother Tezozómoc (who appeared in House of Reeds). Sadly, Parker and Magdelena are firmly off stage; it can only be hoped they will appear in a future volume.

Of all the characters in this volume, Hadeishi is the perhaps the most complex, and a primary thread follows on from the loss of his ship in House of Reeds. His recollections of old television episodes of The Book of Five Rings featuring the sword-saint Lord Miyamoto Musashi (in this time line involved in the Restoration of the Home Islands of Japan from the rule of a Mongol oppressor) give both an insight into Hadeishi's character and his earlier actions, and a window into the history of this alternate past/future history. Hadeishi, the son of a violin-maker and a shop-clerk, though the descendant of samurai, lacks the high clan status to survive the disgrace of the loss of the Corneulle, but childhood memories of the adventures of Musashi (fighting Mongols, Maori, Iroquois and bandits - with a nod to the Seven Samurai) inspire him to struggle against the fate decreed by Admiralty and Emperor.

Although Gretchen and Hummingbird are pivotal to the plot, and Koshô shows her mettle, this is very much Hadeishi's story, as he follows the teachings of his childhood hero, enacting the role of a samurai turned ronin in the depths of deep space.

Land of the Dead includes major battles, with warships tens or hundreds of thousands of kilometres apart manoeuvring at high g as swarms of missiles accelerate in and particle beams and lasers excite the dust of the Kuub: time and distance contracting in lethal combat. The impressions of space warfare are a vividly drawn backdrop to the heart of the mystery within the Kuub.
On the surface, Land of the Dead is a classic tale of space combat and adventure, and it can certainly be read as a story of high adventure and peril. Behind this are wheels within wheels, with clues scattered throughout. Without giving any spoilers, the most obvious clue is what happens to the scout ships, why they just happen to be exactly *where* they are, and who may have sent them there. There are layers upon layers, and after reading the final chapter, the reader would be rewarded to re-read the first few chapters.

Each of the novels of the Sixth Sun lies within a slightly different genre: Wasteland of Flint - explored the relationship between science and mysticism; House of Reeds - colonialism and political intrigue; `Land of the Dead - space combat and . All three share the underlying theme of xenoarchaeology and the quest for the secrets of alien technologies. This volume strongly hints as to why the Empire is so desperate for ancient alien tech.

With searing antimatter detonations and catastrophic revelations, Land of the Dead sets the stage for future volumes.

[Declaration: Having spent time proof-reading the text of penultimate drafts I have a non-financial interest.]