

WILDCATTER

by Dave Duncan

The Novel

“As long as there is money to be made, there will be Wildcatters” — Dave Duncan

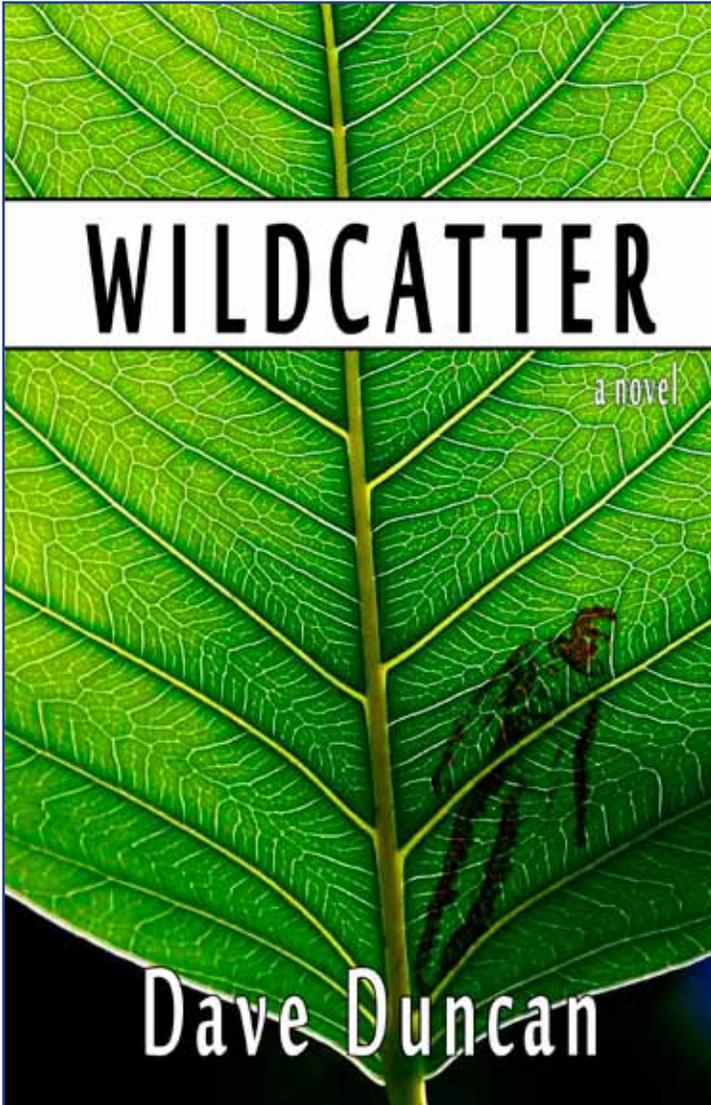
Throughout human history wildcatters, the first great explorers and prospectors to lay claim to newly discovered lands, have marched to the beat of a different drummer — motivated by a deep yearning to be the first to walk on uncharted land and benefit from treasures yet to be discovered.

In the future, wildcatters in space will travel to exoplanets, located in The Big Nothing, to search for new chemicals which, when transformed into pharmaceuticals, might bring untold wealth and fame to the individuals and corporations that stake their claim for exclusive exploitation rights.

Such is the quest of the crew of the independent starship Golden Hind, whose mission is to travel a year and a half to “Cacafuego”, beat the larger corporations to the exoplanets’ resources, and strike it rich for themselves.

But will a yellow warning flag, already planted above the planet, stop them? Or will the Golden Hind’s prospector foray to the planet’s surface, possibly never to return alive?

Wildcatter is a raucous tale of mystery, greed and passion, told by master story teller Dave Duncan, once himself a real wildcatter!



The Author

Originally from Scotland, Dave Duncan has lived all his adult life in Western Canada, having enjoyed a long career as a petroleum geologist before taking up writing. Since discovering that imaginary worlds are more satisfying than the real one, he has published more than forty novels, mostly in the fantasy genre, but also young adult, science fiction, and historical.

Duncan makes his home in Victoria, British Columbia.

He is available for blog tours and interviews.

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Dave Duncan interview:

FROM ICEBERG INK (icebergink.blogspot.ca)

Dave Duncan is a Canadian science fiction and fantasy author. He's also an incredibly prolific writer with over 40 books to his name in the last 30 years. Duncan is one of the few authors that I mercilessly push on others and one of a remaining handful whose books I continue to buy in a physical format. When his latest novel, *AGAINST THE LIGHT*, was published I took advantage of the opportunity to request an interview with Duncan, to pick his brain about some aspects of his writing that I've been ruminating about for years.

Iceberg Ink: Your bio suggests that you made the leap to writing professionally later on in life. Was writing something that you were always working at or did you pick it up as time went on?

Dave Duncan: As a kid I used to scribble stories in notebooks—never finishing them, needless to say. I do recall trying to write on my grandfather's old Remington 4, which I found in the attic, and getting furious because I couldn't make the right margin align the way it did in real stories. When I had to think of a career, it never occurred to me to try making a living as a writer.

For the last twenty years or so of my life as a geologist I was largely reporting to non-geologists, so I got rather good at expressing complicated ideas in simple language. In fact my biggest problem when I switched to fiction was padding it out. Some authors write big and cut (Kipling used the Victorian equivalent of a black marker pen to edit) but I mostly add. I never write a sentence that I don't change somehow.

I tried an evening writing course in my forties but couldn't spare enough time. My first attempt at a novel came when I was in my fifties: the kids had left home; the house was complete; I had my own business and could sneak time off when I felt like it. I found novel writing vastly preferable to short storytelling. And the rest as they say is His Story...

II: You've primarily written fantasy but you've dabbled in science fiction from time to time. What is it about these genres that appeals to you?

DD: They are what I enjoyed reading. I couldn't manage "literary" writing or westerns or detective stories (at least police stories; I do slip mysteries into fantasies once in a while). Nowadays I find I rarely read any fiction, having stories of my own on the go. I read history and science, and that ought to answer your question. Fantasy sells better than sci-fi and is easier to write and I have a

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reputation as a fantasist. **POCK'S WORLD** in 2010 was my first sci-fi in almost twenty years. **WILDCATTER**, coming out this year, will be another.

II: I think your affection for history comes across strongly in a lot of your books. What is it about history that you find so compelling, is there a particular period that interests you?

DD: I never thought about it, but maybe it's because history comes with answers. Should Napoleon invade Russia – well, we all know the answer to that question, don't we? And yet there are always mysteries. I know one of my ancestors was a ferryman, but what did he do? Row? Reef? Splice mainbraces? And there are always What-Ifs. Suppose Wolfe hadn't taken Quebec in 1759, and thus removed the American colonies' need for British protection from France? Would there have been a revolution 17 years later?

And no, I don't stick to one period. The Bronze Age is fascinating – Troy and Mycenae – and before that, even, the coming of the horse people, with their chariots, conquering everywhere from Greece to India and possibly even as far as Britain, because the woad-painted Britons used chariots against Caesar. Venice, the first World War. I've spliced all of them into my stories.

II: While we're on the subject of inspiration, I'd be curious to know what writers you read when you manage to find the time to read fiction.

DD: I prefer not to answer that one.

II: Hmm. Now you've piqued my curiosity. Two of your latest books, **POCK'S WORLD** and **AGAINST THE LIGHT** have been printed through smaller publishers, is this a result of the changing publishing landscape?

DD: You're into complicated matters here. I admit that my numbers have fallen off lately, but almost everyone's have. Not many years ago **LOCUS** magazine was proclaiming a 2000-book year. Last year they tracked 3000, and **LOCUS** is perversely bogged down in the twentieth century, ignoring e-books and Print On Demand. The real total must be thousands more. Furthermore, there's no secret that long fantasy series sell very much better than standalone fantasy novels, and I feel too ancient to start in on any more multi-volume sagas. I've been there, done those, and had good fortune with them. That's the bad news.

The good news, for me, is that I have a huge backlog of out-of-print books which are now available as e-books, and bring me into a healthy royalty income. So now I dabble at writing as a hobby and get by on my pensions

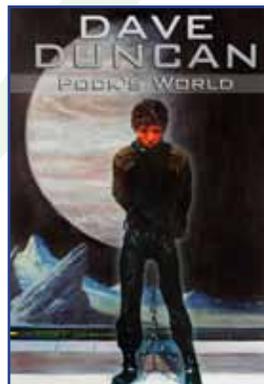
and royalties whether the books sell or not. (I do like to see them selling, though!) In the case of **POCK'S WORLD**, Brian Hades of Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing is a personal friend and I have been promising him a book for a long time, so I was happy when he accepted a sci-fi book from me, my first in 20 years. I was very shocked at how small presses are treated, though. **POCK** was well received by those who read it (see the Amazon comments) and ignored by reviewers who had frequently given me starred reviews in the past. There seems to be a major snobbery at work there.

AGAINST THE LIGHT was a standalone fantasy, and I sent it to my agent as usual. It was he who suggested that he try Amazon. I would never have thought of submitting a book to them, but I must say they have treated me very well in editing, cover art, and promotion. I am proud to be one of their first authors in the genre.

II: Has the transition towards digital books changed the way you get your stories out to readers? I imagine having your back catalogue available in perpetuity can only be a good thing.

DD: I've already answered most of that. The answer to both questions is YES. In my first career, as a geologist, I saw the science turned on its head by plate tectonics. It blew our minds as half of everything we'd learned in college was turned upside down. Now I am watching the same thing happen to the publishing business. At the time I am answering your questions, **AGAINST THE LIGHT** is unavailable in many cities, including the one I live in, because the booksellers are supporting the publishers, who are in a snit about Amazon because Amazon won't issue the e-book in any medium except Kindle. This

Pock's World



Pock's World, long settled by humankind, is accused of being infected by humanoid aliens. It has been quarantined. Five people are chosen to examine the evidence. Nothing is what they expect. They discover that the clock is ticking and the fate of humanity itself is at stake.

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is a sort of juvenile suicide pact, kindergarten kamikaze. Amazon is begging to have its books pirated, and the merchants are driving buyers to buy from Amazon. I am hopeful that cooler heads will prevail soon.

II: It just seems like its publishing's turn to go through the digital revolution. Music and film and television are further along in the process but so far publishing, for the most part, seems to be holding onto traditional business models.

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You mentioned that you've pretty much finished writing multi-volume fantasy but you've got a new book due out shortly, *THE DEATH OF NNANJI*, which picks up on your first published series, *THE SEVENTH SWORD* books. What made you decide to check in with Wallie and Nnanji? What was it like visiting the World so many years later?

DD: I feel sorry for writers who strike it rich early on and then have to keep digging in the same hole all the rest of their careers. Either they lack imagination or they are only doing it for money (and writing should be a labor of love). The *Seventh Sword* series was my first success, my previous two standalones having been strictly midlist. In fact it was the first thing I ever wrote in long form, although it went through several re-writes before becoming publishable. At the end of Book Three, the deus-in-machina predicted that there would be no more miracles, which I thought tied a pretty good knot in the tale/tail. My publisher then was Del Rey, and Lester Del Rey insisted a fantasy must have magic in it, which in the World of the Goddess meant miracles, so I staunchly refused many requests for sequels and played Alexander, seeking new worlds to conquer.

In due course the books went out of print, and then were resurrected as e-books by E-Reads. In the fall of 2010, Amazon ran a loss-leader on them and they were a terrific success. That did sort of catch my attention, and I rationalized that a surprising event is only a miracle if a god says it's a miracle, and I could weasel, I mean justify, another book that way. And besides, it would be fun to go back and revisit the world, even if I never published the results. (Self-deception is not uncommon among mortals.)

So, am I prostituting my art to Mammon? I honestly don't think so in this case. I found that the book almost wrote itself, the characters I needed were all happy to come out of retirement, a few new ones volunteered (remember Vixini? he's grown up a lot)

and in the end I felt I had contributed a better ending to the series – it truly fits. My first-reader friends agreed that I had even caught the tone of the original, which really did surprise and flatter me. I shall be interested to see if my larger group of fans agrees with them.

E-Reads has the original series, so it was natural to offer Richard Curtis the book, and he accepted it sight unseen, which was flattering also. I think it will be well received.

(And while we're on the subject of sequels, my latest, *AGAINST THE LIGHT*, is NOT the first of a series, no matter how many Amazon reader-reviewers say so. The characters have played their part and at the end of the book they go offstage. The basic problem remains, and always will. In the real world you can't just kill Sauron and live happily ever after.)

II: I wonder if that's because, as readers, we've been conditioned to think that any genre or fantasy novel that isn't wrapped up neatly must have plans for a sequel.

But I'm glad that you mentioned magic because I have a question for you about that. One of my pet peeves about fantasy is that 'magic' is used too often as a get out of jail free card. Its limitations are poorly defined and it serves as a convenient out for authors who may have written themselves into a corner.

Yet, in your writing, the characterization of what magic is and the restrictions behind its usage are different in every book. How important is it to you in your work that magic is specifically quantified and understood?

DD: Very! One of the few things that can be taught (as opposed to just learned) about writing is that fiction must be about people. Whether human or not, characters must want, fear, hope, love, etc. in a way that furniture does not. But Speculative Fiction is also about worlds. Fantasy is defined as the deliberate use of the impossible, so in that sense it must include Science Fiction, which is almost invariably about the future, or faster than light travel, or time travel or possibly all of the above. Much of the pleasure I get from writing is devising a world where the impossible seems possible or at least plausible.

The *Pandemia* series was born when I wondered how politics would work in a world of magic, and so came up with the *Wardens*. (And had many a headache working out just how the words of power could function: if just knowing a word gave you magical power, why weren't the words passed around like jokes?) So logic is very important, for without constraints, magic will dissolve plots.

Another way of looking at this, and perhaps a better way, I learned from Orson Scott Card on the only occasion when he and I shared a panel at a convention: magic must have a price.

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When you look for it, you'll find that any well-constructed and satisfying system of magic obeys that law: the ring corrupts, Gandalf laments that he had to use a word of power (not the same as my words of power).

I went home from that particular convention and wrote *THE CURSED*, where a nasty disease either kills you or leaves you with one of seven types of magical after-effects, and every one of those powers is a two-edged sword. The power to heal includes the power to blight; the ability to "premember" the future means that you can't recall your life before the present, even your childhood and parents. And so on.

The system of magic defines the story, and vice versa. In sci-fi of the spaceship variety, the limits of star travel serves the same purpose. In Hollywood the Millennium Falcon goes Whoosh! and nobody ever bothers about refueling. But the dilithium crystals can overheat and she's going to blow any minute, Captain.

I expect you've guessed by now that I enjoy writing fiction more than I do reading it. That may be the secret of my success, such as it has been.

Thanks for the interesting questions!

II: Thanks for the interesting answers!

Author's Note:



I was a wildcatter once. To say that this book is based on my own experience would be obvious rubbish. Nevertheless, many years ago, I worked for a succession of small "independent" oil companies, which explored for petroleum, competing against "majors," meaning multinationals with vastly greater resources. Strangely, the Goliaths did not always win. There was a lot of luck in wildcatting, which originally meant hunting for oil and gas "out among the wildcats", far from any known fields.

I had some modest success, and the money I made then helped support me when I left geology for a writing career. I met a lot of fascinating characters. I saw some of the bare-knuckle gold-rush style towns that grew up near any important discovery.

The tie-in to this story is that people do not change. If interstellar travel ever develops along the lines I suggest, then it will surely attract the same sort of gamblers. If there are riches to be found among the stars, then wildcatters will be out there.

Praise for Pock's World:

"What an excellent read! This book is fast paced and gripping. It is set in a well thought out world with interesting and complex characters in a challenging situation. It is a feast for the imagination - thoughtful with parallels in modern life on the nature of race and prejudice." — Wayne Harris

"...when you're looking for a good adventure, Dave Duncan is a sure thing. Mostly in fantasy, but he can certainly do SF as well, & Pock's World is a good example of his sly & fast paced plotting, his ability to construct intriguingly different worlds, & his knack for quick & entertaining characterization & dialogue. All in all, it's a fun read, with just a little hidden kick of ethical philosophizing about the future of post-humanity (although he'd never use such a term)." — Eclectic Ruckus

"Prolific Canadian author Dave Duncan provides an interesting view of people and landscapes in Pock's World. Some aspects resemble human adaptations of Paul McAuley's *The Quiet War* and *Gardens of the Sun*. Duncan adds his own touch with super intelligent aliens created from human genomes. Because of one discovered on Pock's World, the galaxy space agency, STARS, plans to sterilize the planet and kill all the people on it to stop the aliens polluting the galaxy." — Mel Jacob

"Dave Duncan writes rollicking adventure novels filled with subtle characterization and made bitter-sweet by an underlying darkness. Without striving for grand effects or momentous meetings between genres, he has produced one excellent book after another." — Locus

"Dave Duncan has long been one of the great unsung figures of Canadian fantasy and science fiction, graced with a fertile imagination, a prolific output, and keen writerly skills. With this new novel, Duncan again forges a bold new world, populated with varied and complex characters, distinctive cultures, and a complex system of mythology and science." — Quill and Quire

"Duncan writes with unusual flair, drawing upon folklore, myth, and his gift for creating ingenious plots." — Year's Best Fantasy and Horror

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Day 401

We ignored the protesters shouting slogans outside the gates. Back in those days a lot of kooky people were convinced that every star traveler was going to bring back some weird virus that would wipe out life as we know it. Well, that was fifty years ago and it hasn't happened yet.

— Gregor Fonatelles: *My Life in the Big Nothing*
Gogbok 2364.EN.56789

"All hands on deck! All hands on deck!"

That urgent call failed to disturb the syncopated rhythm of two persons breathing in a darkened cabin.

"We've been screwed, dammit!"

Certainly somebody had been. Seth was heavily entangled in soft, smooth arms and legs, two of each, in a soft, warm bed. Whoever it was smelled nice, was alive, gently breathing. Do it again soon, not yet... He sank back into sweet nirvana.

"Captain, hear this!"

"Captain here," Jordan muttered in Seth's ear, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Jordan, there's a freaking flag on the planet!"

That was the voice of First Officer Hanna Finn, who had the watch. Who was so virginally prim that she never, ever used words like "dammit" or "screwed." Was unheard-of. Seth forced open one eye: the wall display showed 401:01:14. Made sense.

On Day 400 there had been a party, which explained why someone was kicking his head with hob nail boots. A fantastic, riotous, bacchanalian celebration of triumph, victory, sugarplum riches in sight at last. All the work and tedium, tension and danger had been forgotten as the Holy Grail of success shone there in the darkness. ISLA's General Regulations prohibited alcohol aboard starships, a law impossible to enforce when synthesizers could convert plant and animal waste into gourmet food. So the party had been memorable, but when it began to grow quirky, Seth had scooped the captain up and carried her off over his shoulder to the cabin they currently shared.

That same Jordan was now making protesting noises and punching him in the ribs. Seemed he had been sleeping more on top of than with. He parted stickily from her and rolled off. From what he remembered, it had been a rollick to die for, which is what his headache now made seem both likely and devoutly to be wished.

"I'm coming." Jordan threw aside the cover; lights came on; she grabbed her clothes from the chair.

They couldn't have slept more than thirty minutes and Seth was due to relieve Hanna in less than an hour. Whatever could be exciting First so? He slid hairy legs over the edge of the bed and reached down for the shorts and top he had dropped while in too much of a lusting frenzy to think tidy. He went reeling at Jordan's heels as she sped along the corridor into the control room. The control room was the second largest space in Golden Hind's living quarters but fourteen months ago he had considered it poky. His appreciation of size had changed since then. Its walls, ceiling, and even padded floor, could be made to display the surrounding starscape of the galaxy, or scenes such as a boat trip along the Amazon or the hubbub of a Chinese dancing team at a country fair. They were mercifully blank beige now. Hanna sat alone in her place at the long table. Jordan slid into hers at the head, and Seth hurried around to his, at the far end.

Woe betide anyone who dared sit in the wrong chair. As Commodore JC Lecanard never tired of pointing out, rank was important when six people were confined for a long time in cramped quarters; it produced a necessary minimum of formality and respect, he said. Top dogs thought like that. Seth was bottom dog, even if he was the captain's current bed partner. He called her "ma'am" when they had their clothes on and rarely needed to talk at all when they didn't.

Hanna looked as if her headache was even more fatal than his. Her long auburn hair, normally a glory, was now a tangled fishing net, her emerald eyes floated in seas of blood. Poor Hanna was so repressed that this might well be her first-ever hangover. Prudish or not, she had proved to be a superb navigator and first officer.

She said, "Look at that awful thing." She meant a 3-D projection of the local Cacafuego planetary system that was currently floating above the table.

The hologram was not to scale, but it showed the central G-type star with one close-in hot gas giant planet whirling around it every three days. Far out the two ice giants marched in eccentric, retrograde orbits. It was this unusual combination that had confounded the Doppler trace of the planets' gravitational action on the star, the main reason that Cacafuego had escaped detection for so long. Cacafuego itself, the world of their dreams, was a shining blue gem right where it ought to be, in the habitable suburbs, neither too hot nor too

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cold. With a single small moon, as they had discovered yesterday. Veteran wildcatters insisted that planets with a single moon were lucky.

But the Cacafuego icon was disfigured now by a glowing, flashing halo that indicated someone had put a radio beacon in orbit around it. That somebody must be presumed human, because a hundred years of stellar exploration had turned up no other species with a knack for technology.

Jordan sighed, did not comment. She was fair, fine-boned, and short of stature. Like most herms, she wore her hair short, but it was still rumpled from sleep and vigorous bed-rumping. Her ludicrously smudged eye makeup made her look like a drunken panda.

In stalked JC himself, tucking top into shorts. JC was a huge man, wide, tall, and hairy. At sixty-two, he was easily the oldest person aboard, the originator, sponsor, organizer and leader of the expedition. He slumped into his place on the captain's right, opposite Hanna, and scowled horribly at the holographic display.

"That wasn't there an hour ago. Did they detect us and turn it on?"

—No, Commodore, Control said. —Two-way response time would be too great at this distance. We have just come within range, and even now the signal is only detectable because we know where to look and can apply sophisticated filtering.

Astrobiologist Reese Platte entered and took his seat between Seth and Hanna. He glanced around the company with a sneer, which was his usual expression, aided by an overlong nose and chin, a face of bone and angles. Either he had drunk less than the others at the party, or he just found other people's hangovers amusing. Reese was independently wealthy back home and so had less to lose than anyone else.

Lastly came a sleepy Maria Chang, the planetologist, who had obviously taken a moment to brush out her hair. Even sleep deprivation and a hangover could not rob Maria of her poise or seductive walk; her gaze was still sultry as she assessed the others. Maria had no lack of interest in the mission, but she was a people-first person. She took her seat on Seth's right, and then all twelve eyes were directed at the display.

This was Golden Hind's full complement, each of the six having specific skills and duties. Off-duty all that mattered was that they were two men, two women, and two herms. That allowed a lot of different combinations.

Seth waited for someone else to say something. The silence was the sound of crumbling dreams. They had spent fourteen months bottled up in this starship, fourteen months cut out of their lives, with the return trip still to come. Wildcattering

was the most dangerous of all legal occupations other than military combat, but it could be the most lucrative. Even Seth, the lowly gofer, could hope to become wealthy on his tiny share in the Hind's voyage.

Back on Day 0, when Golden Hind left Earth orbit, Hanna had estimated 425 days out. She had beaten her estimate by twentyfive days. Yesterday she had plotted the last jump, promising it would take them right to the destination system. The crew had been gathered in the control room, tense with excitement. She had reported, "Ready to jump, ma'am."

Jordan had laid both hands on the table and ordered the jump.

Everyone had checked the star fields around them. Those had barely changed, but above the consol appeared the holograph with Cacafuego shining blue, the color of water and oxygen and life. No further jumps required — four days' coasting and they would be there. Even JC, ever cagey with praise, had complemented Hanna on an incredible feat of navigation. In minutes Control had reported that close scanning of the system showed no significant variation from predictions, and that neither ship or crew had suffered damage. JC had opened his secret hoard of champagne, and the ship had erupted in frenetic celebration.

That had been last night. This morning Seth was not the only one with a pounding headache, which was a bad condition for dealing with disaster. He jumped as needle claws dug into his thighs, but it was merely Ship's Cat Whittington seeking a friendly lap. She turned around and settled down, tucking her tail in carefully. A happy soul was Whittington, unconcerned by the total absence of mice within 1500 light years. Seth stroked her and she rumbled, flattering the Big One who fed her, ignoring the other Big Ones' confrontation.

"Time slip!" Reese growled. "Welcome to the twenty-fifth century."

Time slip was always a danger. It could not be predicted. People had returned decades after they had been given up for dead, finding the world they knew changed beyond recognition and their friends aged. Had Golden Hind lost a century or so on the way here?

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“Flaming shit,” JC said at last. “We don’t need that. Control, who staked that planet?”

—No planet in this system is presently staked, Commodore.

“Then who planted the flag?”

—Beacon’s originator’s key is registered to DSS De Soto, exploration vessel owned by Galactic Inc., a company incorporated under the laws of...

Of course it would be Galactic. Galactic was the billion-ton gorilla of the stellar exploration business. Galactic ships had brought back scores of fantastic chemicals that could be synthesized into pharmaceuticals, supplying all humankind with herm drugs, cancer drugs, Methuselah drugs, and hundreds more. Galactic was Goliath, bigger and more successful than the next three exploration companies combined, thousands of times the size of a startup independent like Mighty Mite Ltd.

“De Soto was still in dock orbit when we shipped out,” Jordan said. “So the time slip may not be very great.”

“It could be a hundred years,” Reese countered. “Those beacons are built to last.” He enjoyed being devil’s advocate.

“We don’t know there’s been any time slip at all,” JC said. “We told Hanna we’d rather get home alive than be rich and dead. Galactic has better hazard maps than it ever releases, no matter what ISLA regulations say. It’s notorious for putting its crews at risk by cutting corners.”

If the planet had not been staked, what did the beacon mean? Seth was always careful not to trample on the experts’ toes. Either they all knew the answer already, or he was the only one who had noticed. Possibly they were all afraid to ask a stupid question. The gofer had no status to lose.

“I thought staking flags were green,” Seth said. “Control, what does yellow stand for?”

—Yellow beacon indicates danger, will be recommended for proscription.

Nobody looked in his direction. The death rate among wildcatters was notorious, but most casualties were among the prospectors, the heroic few who actually set foot on exoplanets. If even Galactic thought a planet was too dangerous to visit, then it must be boiling radioactive snake venom.

Galactic sent out entire fleets, not solo vessels like Hind. Galactic included dozens of specialists in its expeditions. A tiny start-up company like Mighty Mite had to crew a ship with jacks-of-alltrades, people with multiple skills. Golden Hind carried only one prospector, Seth Broderick, who was also porter, janitor, and general gofer.

“I never heard of quarantine, or proscription,” he said.

“Quarantine’s from ancient marine law,” JC said. “When a sailing ship had plague or yellow fever aboard, it had to fly a yellow flag. In the early days of space travel, everyone feared that life-bearing worlds would harbor bugs or viruses that would be brought back to infect the Earth. So far as I know... Reese, has any wildcatter ever been infected by a local disease on an exoplanet?”

“Very rarely,” the biologist said. “It has happened, but exoplanet bacteria and viruses are usually so alien that you would be more likely to catch Dutch elm disease from a lobster. You are in less danger from the infection than from your own immune system over-reacting, but we can control that.”

JC grunted agreement. “Control, confirm that Cacafuego is virgin territory.”

—ISLA had no record of any previous exploration, Commodore.

Which meant only that the ship’s files had not been updated since first jump, and so were fourteen months out of date. The evidence showed that someone had beaten them to it.

Seth would kill for a cup of coffee and a long glass of orange juice. Sitting with his back to the mess doorway, he was in the path of all the stale scents of last night’s party treats wafting by: wine, chili, ripe cheese, onions, and a few recreational materials not listed on the official manifests. It was his job to tidy up. He should fetch and serve refreshments for the others. To hell with duty, this meeting was too critical to miss.

Jordan was drumming fingernails on the table. “Is there a posting date on the beacon?” she asked.

—Beacon is still too distant for us to query, Captain.

“Any ships in orbit there now?” asked JC.

—No transmissions being detected, Commodore. Target is too distant for visual detection.

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Jordan said, "If they're still there, they must have seen our jump flash when we arrived."

"Not necessarily," JC said. "Control, there must be a text message included."

—Still too distant even for that. We are presently receiving only the wideband alarm signal, barely distinguishable from galactic background noise.

"If we left ahead of De Soto," asked Reese, the biologist, "how far ahead of us could they have gotten here? I mean, how long, in time? Without allowing for any time slip?" Somehow his questions always sounded like sneers.

"A physicist would say that there was no answer to that question," Hanna snapped, her temper glinting again. She must be blaming herself for this catastrophe; she had lost the race. "When you jump, you twist both space and time, so the uncertainty principle cuts in. We took fifteen jumps. If De Soto has better maps of the safe havens, as JC says, they may have relied on those without confirming the jumps were still safe. In theory you could travel the whole distance in no time at all."

"And get your gonads fried by radiation somewhere," JC said. "Or ram a brown dwarf star. Better safe than sorry."

The Big Nothing was not truly empty. It hid radiation belts, dust clouds, gas clouds, solitary comets or planets, and even black holes. They all shifted unpredictably in space-time. Running into any of them at supra-light-speed was normally fatal.

Reese made a snorting noise, an annoying habit of his when male. "Never mind theory. How long in practice?"

"As much as two or three months, maybe," Hanna admitted.

The mood of gloom deepened. Four hundred days ago they had greeted the data on Cacafuego with wild rejoicing. Remote sensing by the trans-Neptunian observatories had indicated a highly promising candidate for a life-bearing world, a mere 1,500 light years away, but there were limits to what remote sensing could detect and many things that could make a planet hostile to humans. Now De Soto had made a close appraisal and been scared off by what it saw, or what had happened to its prospectors.

Reese curled his lip. "Finders keepers; first come, first served. Even if we discovered something they missed, could they just take it from us?"

Seth thought not. The rules for staking were very specific. There were no Wild West shootouts in the Big Nothing. Battles were fought back home in the courts, where Galac-

tic could outgun Mighty Mite by a million lawyers to one. Returning explorers had to hand over their ships' memory banks to ISLA, and Golden Hind's now recorded the detection of Galactic's beacon. There must be penalties for ignoring a quarantine.

"Not so," JC murmured, speaking unusually softly for him. "It's who plants a flag first that matters. De Soto didn't want it. If we stake it now, it would still be ours."

It would not be his job to plant the flag.

"Danger I do not understand," said Maria, the planetologist. "What danger? Poisonous atmospheres, yes. Lots of worlds have that and are still profitable. Monsters, rarely, and nothing worse than tigers."

She noticed Seth's eyebrows rising and smiled an apology. "Nothing you can't shoot or keep out with an EVA suit, I mean. No little green men or long blue women. Diseases, yes; bacteria, viruses, fungi, all sorts of nasty things have tried to infect us, but none of them could penetrate an EVA suit or withstand our medicines. In a hundred years! So what can be more dangerous about Cacafuego than risks already met and dealt with on explored worlds?"

No one offered a suggestion.

Jordan said, "We have two choices. We can go on in the hope of finding something that Galactic missed. They may have done us a favor, saved us from blundering into disaster. Or we can set course for the backup target." She looked to JC.

Who growled. "Not so fast, Captain! Control, how many planets have ever been proscribed?"

—Either six or seven, Commodore, all in the very early days, when records were not so well kept. None in the last seventy years.

"Seven! How many planets have been explored, even briefly?"

—Recorded 7,364, but numerous others never registered.

JC leaned back and wrapped his ugly face in his fearsome but unconvincing grin. He looked triumphantly around the table. "They're bluffing! The odds

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are only one in a thousand that Galactic really has found a killer world. What better way to chase others away than to post a yellow flag? They can change it to green as soon as they decide the rewards are worth the staking fee. They're probably down there now, working away like busy beavers. Maybe they do this all the time, but nobody has chanced along to catch them at it."

Now he wasn't talking of braving a killer world, he was talking of challenging Galactic as well, and perhaps even ISLA.

Jordan opened her mouth and then closed it without speaking. She seemed absurdly outmatched in a shouting match with JC. He was almost forty years older and at least fifty kilos heavier. Seth suspected he had chosen her for the job precisely because she was unassertive and avoided confrontations. That did not mean she would let herself be bullied into a wrong decision, though.

Jason Christopher Lecanard had first gone into the Big Nothing at twenty-four, the same age Seth was now, on a Bonanza expedition — Bonanza being a major company, one of Galactic's rivals — but he'd signed on as an IT engineer, nothing risky like prospector. Back then even large companies had rewarded crews with royalty interests, and that expedition had struck it rich by staking Nirvana, in the Aquila Sector. Nirvana biology had poured out a torrent of novel antivirals and antibiotics over the next ten years. While JC's share had no doubt been a minute percentage, the payoff had been huge. He'd invested his wealth in other ventures, eventually buying into a middle-sized exploration company, and there his luck had held again, with the discovery of the algal textile that had later been synthesized and sold as starsilk.

Two years ago he had founded Mighty Mite Ltd. and started rounding up investors to help him go wildcating for himself. Those tightwad money-men would have insisted he put both his own life and fortune on the line too. A billion dollars barely showed in the cost of a starship, and the belief among the crew was that JC was betting the farm, risking every cent he had, on Golden Hind and Cacafuego. If it failed, he would be as penniless as Seth.

"Does a yellow flag have legal status as a prohibition?" he growled. He was asking Control, while looking thoughtfully at Seth.

—No, Commodore. But it is a serious caution.

Hanna said, "Control, what will ISLA say if we ignore the beacon?" There spoke red hair and Irish ancestry. Hanna stood up to JC better than the captain did.

Computers would not speculate. —It would largely depend on the results, First. If the Authority judges that you put lives at risk, then you and the captain might lose your licenses, and face other penalties.

JC didn't like that. He regarded laws as war games for lawyers. "We don't know if they're still there. Even if they are, they don't need to know about us." He laid a hairy hand on the table. "Control, turn off all external transmissions, acknowledge no signals until further notice."

—Orders in violation of ISLA regulations require confirmation by a licensed officer.

"Flaming shit!" JC muttered, almost but not quite under his breath.

"I'm not convinced we need to go that far," Jordan said.

"Me neither," said Hanna, more forcefully.

So here it came, seconds out of the ring, the sponsor versus the executive officers. Seth was careful to keep a poker face as he waited to see what happened next. Reese and Maria were doing the same, and the room was silent as vacuum.

Without question, Jordan commanded the ship. If she refused to knuckle under to JC's bullying, he would be powerless to overrule her. Control and the rest of the crew would back her up. On the other hand, JC represented the owners, and was expedition leader. When they got home he could destroy Jordan's career, probably ruin her with a civil suit. But now he leaned back and smiled with feline confidence, veteran of a million boardroom battles.

He wheedled. "What have we got to lose? They may be long gone. Even if they aren't, provided we go in under radio silence, there isn't a chance in a million they'll notice us, and even if they do, how can they identify us? Even visually — you know interstellar gas will have stripped all the paint off our hull. We'll take a closer look at this planet they want to steal, and if it seems like a winner, we'll send the shuttle down, and young Seth there can plant the flag and claim a world for honor and justice. How does that sound, Prospector?" He peered at Seth around the Cacafuego icon.

Only Control ever addressed Seth by his rank. Usually the crew called him gofer, which was supposed to be funny, or cabin boy, which wasn't.

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"I'll obey orders, Commodore." The bottom beaver on any totem pole must always keep his head down and never talk back, but he meant orders from the captain and JC knew that.

"There you are, Captain," JC said, all reasonable-like. "Even our hunky hero is in favor."

Jordan said, "Reese, once we go into orbit, how long will it take you to come up with a preliminary appraisal of Cacafuego's potential?"

Reese closed his eyes to activate eyelid implants. His lips and throat moved as he sub-vocalized. "Need to know our trajectory."

While Jordan was telling Control to plot an approach that would minimize the chances of being detected by the Galactic fleet, Seth went back to studying the display. That small moon that JC had named Turd... Most natural satellites orbited above their primaries' equators. There were exceptions; some even moved in retrograde orbits, and Luna was offset as much as twenty-eight degrees. Yesterday Turd had been almost lined up with Cacafuego, and now it was well above, so it must move in a polar orbit, or else... The only satellites that wandered so far from the ecliptic, so far as he knew, were those of the solar planet Uranus, and Uranus itself was tipped over about ninety degrees. Cacafuego might be a very odd world. As planetologist, Maria ought to have noticed that. It wasn't his job to point it out to her.

Even if Cacafuego was severely tilted, why should that make it any more dangerous? Humans needed a twenty-four hour day to satisfy their circadian rhythm, but darkness could be supplied, just as air and temperature could be supplied.

"Very well," Jordan said, offering a compromise. "We can certainly spare four days to enter orbit and four or five days to assess the planet. On Day 409 or so we'll decide whether to stay or set course for Armada. Control, observe radio silence. All plans subject to change due to circumstance. Acceptable, Commodore?"

"Acceptable, Captain." JC rose up on his hind legs. If a grizzly bear could grin, it might look like that. "Hanna, love, it certainly wasn't your fault that those rascals got here first. Come along, you deserve some sleep." Without waiting for her, he headed out the door.

For a moment Hanna's lips and fists clenched. She was currently JC's roommate, so he had been dropping the sort of hint she detested. Seth's early efforts to woo her had met with no success at all, and he doubted very much that the commodore's had. When the party had started to turn kinky last night, Hanna had been the first to leave, just before Seth had draped the captain over his shoulder and carried her off to

the cabin to pursue their fun in private. Whatever the other three had indulged in after that was their business.

She rose and started to walk out, then hesitated. She was still on watch and ISLA rules required that one human be awake at all times. Visibly blushing now, she glanced uneasily at Jordan and then Seth, who nodded agreement and laid a hand on the table.

"Prospector taking the con," he said. That expression always amused him, because it meant steering a ship and no human could steer a starship.

Hanna said, "First Officer going off duty."

—Confirming Prospector Broderick on watch.

Hanna left. Even the backs of her ears were red. Reese held out a hand to Maria.

Now Seth could head into the mess to clean up the, um, mess.

Jordan said, "Wait, please, all of you."

The captain came around the table. Seth deposited Whittington on the carpet and rose to accept her outstretched hands. She had trouble meeting his eye.

"He's a lout," she said. "And a bully. But in his way he's also a great man. Nobody knows the Big Nothing better than JC, from the boardroom, all the way down to years of utter boredom. He's made more money in his career than any of us can dream of; he's risking every cent of it. He put this thing together, Seth. Without him none of us would be here. We certainly can't deny him a look at his world. But I am not going to let him send you downside to fry in some sort of planetary hell, no matter what he says. Understand?"

Yes, Seth understood, perhaps better than she did, because he knew exactly how JC could make the prospector dance to his tune.

Continued.....

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Other Books by Dave Duncan

"The Dodec Books"

Mother of Lies
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"The Alchemist"

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The Alchemist's Code
The Alchemist's Pursuit

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Hero!
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Writing as

"Sarah B. Franklin"

Daughter of Troy
Writing as "Ken Hood"
Demon Sword
Demon Rider
Demon Knight

Marketing Plans

- Review copies sent (May).
- Ads: Online, LOCUS magazine, On Spec magazine, and the World Science Fiction Convention program. (August, September, October).
- Book launch events in Calgary, Chicago, Toronto. (August, October, November).
- Blog tour and interviews. (July - November)
- Direct mail postcard campaign to libraries, bookstores, readers. (September).

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