

## Excerpt #2

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Monday, 09 April 2012 02:22 - Last Updated Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:25

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### Chapter 42: The Devil's Skull

Uranium: Its usefulness to mankind shifted, but never went away. The advent of fusion reactors reduced its importance to the power industry, but its importance to the scientific and military communities never waned. It was the stuff of magic; billions were affected by it in one way or another, but only a small percentage of people were qualified to use it. Anything that fits that definition is always highly sought after.

Roughly thirty years ago, the Stuttgart Mining Consortium discovered uranium in the Junkyard of the Janus system. It was an unexpected discovery, as the rest of the rocks had only trace amounts of the stuff. But in one part of the field, there was a area of rocks that contained high concentrations of the heavy metal. The company scientists theorized that the Junkyard might have been the remains of a shattered planet, and that the small field of super-dense rocks was either the core of that planet or the means by which it was shattered. The company management didn't care if the Easter Bunny had put the rocks there, as long as there was a profit to be made.

They sent in mining units, and set up convoys of transports to move the goods out of the system. It didn't take long for word to spread that a valuable commodity such as uranium was being mined and transported in the Janus system and pirates from every system swooped down on the SMC operation. This was the impetus that set SMC on the path of militarization, and eventually sent them into the Turf Wars. For over two years SMC fought off the attacks, and eventually stabilized its uranium mining operations. The profits were exorbitant, even given the difficulty of the mining and the dangers posed by pirates.

Then they made their biggest strike. It was an asteroid almost one hundred miles in diameter. Over half of the material that made it up was uranium ore. Scientists were baffled by it. Over time Uranium undergoes radioactive decay. It was nearly inconceivable to think this much could survive in once place. Wild theories were concocted; the rock could have been ejected from a supernova at speeds high enough to cause relativistic effects. On the rock, time slowed down because of the tremendous speed, and the uranium was preserved until the massive impact in the Janus system that created the Junkyard. It even looked like a bullet after impact. The top of the rock was flattened; mushroomed over the bottom of the asteroid.

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Robotic Mining began at once—the protective suits required to allow for human mining made that approach cost prohibitive. Three mines were set up on one side of the asteroid, so that the operations could be observed from one control craft. The control craft that was dispatched was the eighteen hundred foot long *Gewinnenwunder*—or “Mining Wonder” in German. It didn’t just carry the mining equipment to the site. It manufactured the equipment from raw materials. It was a floating factory and control center, and the home town for all the workers on board.

As massive robots drilled into the asteroid, it began to resemble a skull. This wasn’t by accident. The lead engineer, Richard Wulfram, had a dark sense of humor and a bad temper. He was the sort of person that drained the life out of people just by being in their presence. He wrapped himself in other peoples’ anxiety and contempt the way a child wraps himself in a blanket at bedtime.

He was a tall man, but that didn’t matter. Had he been a leprechaun he would still have looked down on people. He had a strong build, with little fat; he had no uses for excess anything. He was exactly fifty when he stepped aboard the *Gewinnenwunder*. He’d been with SMC since his early twenties, and the company valued him. SMC was all about production and the production schedule. Richard Wulfram made sure that everyone under his direction adjusted their priorities to match those of SMC. There was no sacrifice too great for the company—no sacrifice to great to help him meet his goals.

People took vacations, got married, had children, all based around his production schedule. They hours they worked, the tasks they undertook, the risks they dared—every aspect of their lives was determined by Wulfram’s will. Refuse to tow the line, and you were dropped off on Janus-5 unemployed.

If you hadn’t saved enough to buy a ticket to another planet, you were at the mercy of the Janus-5 economy. The cost of crossing Richard Wolfram meant destitution and possible starvation, or a life of crime. Many turned to piracy, attacking the ships of the company that turned against them. But this didn’t show up in any corporate reports, so it was of no concern to Wulfram. Such malcontents made sure that the turret gunners and fighter pilots of the *Gewinne nwunder* earned their pay. If death was their final punishment for not following his will, so much the better.

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SMC credited him with the rapid success of the mine, and backed him to hilt. Even the captain of the *Gewinnenwunder* bowed to his wishes; for fear that a word from Wulfrum would end his career.

He did not inspire respect. None respected him. All feared him. He wanted that same reaction when people looked at his creation. More than a mine, this was his work of art—projecting his black spirit onto the radioactive rocks themselves. He was working to turn a gift—a resource that could benefit millions—into something tainted. If it gave the men and women who worked the control ship chills, then he would sleep a little better at night.

Some tried to understand him, but he would reveal nothing. What drove him to be this way? Was it the unrequited love of a woman that left him for another? Was it the nature of his childhood? Some quoted Dickens and others quoted Freud, but it was a wasted effort. At best such attempts would kill the boredom of life in space for a few extra minutes. None could reach him, and some that tried were sent packing for their efforts.

After ten years of mining, his creation was taking shape. Two deep eye sockets were evenly spaced above a gaping, frowning mouth. Two smaller mining robots were now forming the nostrils between the main mines. The bigwigs of SMC had noticed he was making mining decisions somewhat “artistically” a year into the program, but the mine locations didn’t matter to them. The rock was reasonably homogeneous, so the locations of the mines couldn’t affect their bottom line.

Ten years after he arrived at the asteroid, Wulfrum was about to commence a comfortable retirement. There was no party for him aboard the *Gewinnenwunder*. The “Good-bye Dick” party was scheduled for two hours after he left—no one shared that information with him of course. Until he stepped on his transport, he wielded the rod of poverty over his underlings—and he considered everyone beneath him. His transport was scheduled to leave in twenty minutes, and he was taking one last look from the observation deck at his tribute to the productive use of fear.

As he gazed wistfully out at his creation, no fewer than twenty heavily modified pirate freighters flew out of the rocks behind the asteroid. Wulfrum would never know—at least in this life—that these were all people driven to piracy by his own cruel hand. He taught them evil, and now they were back to show him what good students they were.

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There had been no pirate attacks in over three years, and only two fighters guarded the ship. Both were shattered by the initial attack, and the escape pods were turned molten by energy blasts. The *Gewinnenwunder* rocked as its weapon systems were blown from their mounts. People rushed in panic to the lone docked transport, only to die as gunfire ruptured its fusion core.

The control ship was bleeding air, fluid and flames from a dozen places, but the observation deck was fine. Richard Wolfram had quickly realized that his incomplete masterpiece would be his last sight in this world. What he didn't realize was that the pirates were about to finish the work for him.

Four freighters broke off from the main attack, and approached the mine. They dropped four fission bombs, made from pirated uranium. One struck the left eye, another struck the right. One struck the mouth, and the other the left nostril. The massive heat quickly melted the walls between the two smaller mines, and fire poured from the right nostril as well.

The mining equipment was vaporized; the mine was destroyed. But something new was created. Persistent nuclear reactions were ignited in the asteroid. Light, heat, and deadly radiation poured from the openings in the skull. A lot of mass was simply superheated and ejected, creating a radioactive haze of rocks and dust.

Tears flowed from Richard's eyes, as he saw the completed monument to the Devil he didn't know he was worshiping. He loved having power and exercising it to make people fear him. The creation in front of him would continue doing that in his stead long after he was gone.

Ten seconds later, he *was* gone. As the pirate ships retreated, they fired one last fission bomb at the *Gewinnenwunder*. It struck the observation deck, utterly destroying the vessel. The dust and vapor that remained was left mixed with the dust and smoke that poured from the asteroid.

The asteroid became known as the Devil's Skull, for the smoke, flame and radiation that spewed from it incessantly. And the cloud of radioactivity and dust that surrounded it, that

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glowed with the light that poured from the skull, became known as the Devil's breath.

### Chapter 43: The Devil's Laugh

"It looks like the trail just ends here." Mischief noted. "So what do we do now? Lean out the window and yell until she hears us?" The Preacher's needled her back, but gently. "Why Mischief, does driving in the fog put a stress on your nerves?" Mischief had danced with death too many times to be baited by that line. "Not at all; I'm just getting a bit bored with the view."

"Just stay cool. There's nothing out here that can hurt you that won't show up on your tactical—not much anyway." The Preacher's voice sounded practiced and relaxed. "You've been staring at a bright tactical screen for too long. Close your eyes for a minute or so, switch back to the visual spectrum, and then look out." She did so. When she opened her eyes she saw...darkness.

She readied her next retort when she began to notice a faint glow ahead of them, and shadows moving through the glow. "The shadows are asteroids, right?" she asked. "Or wrecks," came the response. "Normally you can't go by the scanners out here. There's too much radioactive dust. But our new scanners have a few tricks left. Go to mode twenty-seven." She did so, and suddenly a large path appeared glowing in front of her. "What's that?" she asked. "Mode twenty-six shows the gamma radiation intensity of the surrounding dust. Twenty-Seven takes the inverse. What you are looking at," he paused for effect, "is the wake of a big ship. It's drifted over time, but look what happens when we adjust for drift." The Preacher took control of her screens, and had the computer factor in drift. Slowly, the glowing path narrowed and pointed towards another glow—off in the deadly fog that was the Devil's Breath. "That is what the wake looked like two weeks ago."

Without waiting for the next comment from Mischief, the Preacher set course for Wulfam's masterpiece.

From a distance, it looked like a bright spot in the faint glow of the Devil's breath. As they drew nearer, the distorted features of the glowing skull became more distinct. "They say it's not as bright as it once was. No one is entirely sure of the makeup of the asteroid. It seems to have veins of boron that prevent the entire asteroid from exploding," the Preacher explained. "Some

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don't believe it occurred naturally. It's as if some alien race formed the asteroid to store their fuel, and lost track of it. Others say it was put here by supernatural forces to tempt and trap miners."

Mischief wasn't listening. She'd never been here before, but she'd *seen* that thing—in nightmares she had after the bombings. With fires still burning outside her bunker, she'd seen that horrible skull in her sleep. Not just

*a*

skull, but

*that*

skull—even though she'd never heard of the ruined mines before she ventured into space. Night after night, nightmare after nightmare she'd see that floating image of death—as clearly as she did now. She took stimulants from the medical storage lockers and stayed awake for a week so she wouldn't have to see it, and then slept dreamlessly for three days straight. By then the temperature was dropping, and she started to have more normal nightmares.

"What do you think it is?" she asked the Preacher, in a quiet voice. Chris could tell she'd been moved somehow by the sight, and answered carefully. "Even if it's just the core of a destroyed planet, as some believe, that doesn't mean it wasn't placed here as a test."

"A test?" she whispered.

"Sure; all wealth is a test of character for those who receive it. If they're generous of spirit, a lot of good can come from wealth. If they clutch it to themselves, or hurt others to acquire it, they fail the test, and destroy themselves. That rock was a huge source of wealth. A lot of people failed the test." Chris paused, to see if she understood him.

"So they all got rich and went to hell," she stated flatly. "They had their fun, and paid for it in the 'next life.'"

"That's not at all what I meant—though it may be true," the Preacher explained. "In this case, the bosses exploited their employees so badly the employees armed themselves and destroyed the mine. No one can approach that rock now. It's lost to everyone."

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He paused before continuing. "There are consequences for doing the wrong thing that are built into the nature of life. Hurt enough people and you'll push some to hurt you back."

"So do you think all that's going on with Mayhem is her just desserts?" she asked, an edge in her voice. "Hey, hey—we're talking about the skull." he replied. "Would I be out here in the rocks and dust if I wasn't on your side with this?" There was a pause that Mischief chose not to fill, so the Preacher continued. "Speaking of which, it would appear that the ship we're trailing went around the other side of the asteroid—to the back of the head as it were."

"OK, let's go then," she replied, about to accelerate. "Hold up a second," the Preacher cautioned. "I've been jumped by pirates here before—the scanners can't penetrate that hunk of junk and tell what's behind it. We'll take it wide and slow."

They flew in a wide, slow arc to the left of the skull, eyes straining to make out anything in the clouds of dust and rock. On the dark side of the skull, they found nothing but rock. "There's no sign of a crash or wreckage, but if I read these patterns correctly..." the Preacher paused.

"What? Spit it out," she prompted. "It looks like the ship just disappeared into the back of the skull."

"Could there be a base on that rock?" she asked. "Look for an entrance."

"Nothing—it's just solid rock...but then how..." his thoughts were cut off by a tactical alarm. "Incoming hostile ships." The computers warned in tandem. From the bright side of the skull, four Marauder class fighters suddenly appeared, and sent missiles hurtling towards the two BMC ships. Mischief and the Preacher split left and right, crisscrossing their paths while targeting the missiles with interceptors. With the immediate threat destroyed, they turned their attention to the enemy ships. "Only four? I'm insulted," the Preacher said calmly, firing his guns in to the lead ship. Mischief fired at the same ship from the other side, and it exploded in a brilliant globe of fire. She was immensely relieved to be able to focus on the moment, rather than the past. They crisscrossed again, dumping a quartet of mines into the faces of the remaining pilots. Two ships exploded, and one bled fire.

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As they shot around to the face of the skull, he shot around to the back of the head. Chris checked for escape pods and found none. "He might be our only lead! Let's go!" They rolled, ducked under the chin, and came up on the other side--only to find themselves alone.

"A late explosion?" Mischief asked? "The scanners aren't buying it. Something is definitely up here. Scanning..." The preacher said. "Son of a gun...he flew right into the back of the Skull."

A feeling of danger and dread welled up inside of Mischief. She had a lot of practice at stifling such feelings, but she wasn't having much luck doing it today. "Preacher?" was all she had to say. "Don't worry—we're going. Lock your nav onto my ship, we'll head back over to our original patrol route, and pick up the probe. Perhaps there's another lead."

The two ships accelerated away from the burning rock, and Mischief locked her navigation systems in sync with the Preachers. He knew the quickest way back to the probe anyway, and she needed to collect herself.

She looked behind her at the right side of the Skull as it receded. The pale glow from the other side seemed to pulse in the dust. Was it laughing at them? *Girl, you've got to pull yourself together,* she thought. She settled into her seat and closed her eyes, letting her mind drift. *It's like that skull is a portal...a gateway to...where?* A chill ran through her as she pondered the most obvious possibilities, and opened her eyes, anxious to have something else to think about.

"Hey Preacher? What's the plan after we pick up the probe?"

"We're going to download the probe data, and go through it in detail. But first were going to need to get something to eat...perhaps I'll buy Greg that beer. I don't know about you, but I could use one about now," he sounded earnest. "While we're discussing the plan, I think we're going to have to stop using our call signs for a while. The ship to ship transmissions are encoded against eavesdropping, but we won't have that luxury anywhere else."

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Mischief shuddered again. The decision had been made for her to use her real name. "Mischief" was too recognizable and few people knew her real name. She hadn't gone by her real name since she was a child. "Mischief" was born from two parents—Loss and Loneliness. As far as she was concerned, "Rachael Sheridan" died with her parents during the turf wars...along with her sister Rebecca. She felt a spike of pain every time the name was mentioned, but decided it was a reasonable sacrifice for the cause at hand.

"OK, Chris...I guess we should practice before we go someplace public," she said without enthusiasm. "That's the spirit, Rachael," Chris replied. Again, she felt just a bit sick for a moment, before she turned her attention back to the scanners. Just then, the probe's tracking signal disappeared from her display. "Chris..." she started. "I see it," he replied, and she felt her ship accelerate. "Shall we investigate?" he asked. Rachael rolled her eyes. *Do we have a choice?* She asked herself.