

THE MILK RUN

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The Vuduri Universe Series

Tales of the Vuduri: Year One

Tales of the Vuduri: Year Two

*The Vuduri Companion

(*not yet in publication)

Preface

This story takes place 17 years after the events depicted in *Rome's Evolution*.

Chapter 1
Year 3476 AD (1395 PR)
Just outside the Tabit System
(26 Light Years from Earth)

“AASON!” Lupe shrieked. The teenage girl’s bloodcurdling scream shattered the previously peaceful calm of the spacious starship cabin.

21-year-old Aason Bierak was caught by surprise. The handsome young man with the tousled brown hair had been staring straight ahead, lost in the mesmerizing blackness of null fold space just beyond the cockpit’s windshield. It was a mind-trap and Aason knew it but it was one in which he allowed himself a few minutes of entanglement. That ended abruptly with Lupe’s howl. Exerting a titanic effort, the boy tore his piercing blue eyes away from the lush void to face his sister. He was horrified to see a waving set of multi-colored translucent tentacles that had emerged from nowhere, enveloping Lupe, constricting her in their grasp.

“What?!” Aason gasped. He clawed at the clasps of his X-harness, snapping it open. He flipped off the straps, extending his frame. Even as he jumped up out of the pilot’s chair, the crystal-like extensions of light were dragging his younger sister into a not-hole. There was no other way to describe it. Her whole body was distorted, shrinking. It looked like she was being sucked into a vacuum hose. Aason leaped over the center console toward her, arms outstretched, but he was only able to brush his hand across one of her fingertips just as she disappeared into nothingness.

“Lupe?” Aason cried out helplessly. He felt all around the sturdy yet comfortable co-pilot’s seat, trying to find evidence of what he had just witnessed. It was as if Lupe had never existed. Instinctively, he closed his eyes, activated his PPT transceivers and called out to her using the gravitic resonance channel that was built into his head and into the heads of all of the Vuduri.

“*Lupe!*” he shouted mentally. If she were anywhere within one-half light year of their current position, the limits of his PPT resonance, she would sense him. Immediately, he felt the familiar tickle of a connection taking hold.

“*Aason,*” Lupe replied, fear palpable in her mental tone. But even as she ‘spoke’ the voice Aason heard in his mind was dwindling rapidly. “*New to Lupe,*” was all she said then nothing, not even static.

“*Lupe!*” Aason called out again. This time there was no response. The tickle in his mind was gone which meant the connection was gone. The two Bierak children also had a second communication channel, one based upon EM transmission, that their father called a ‘cell-phone in the head’ but he didn’t bother with that since the gravitic channel was so much more powerful.

He opened his eyes and looked around the cabin, trying to orient himself. He spotted a grille mounted below the main display in the front console. “Junior,” he shouted. “Where is she? Where’d she go? I’ve lost contact with her through the connection.”

“I don’t know” replied the starship who was also Aason’s cousin through the grille which had both a microphone and speaker built in. The spaceship’s voice was very natural and human-sounding as compared to his ‘father’, the starship known as MINIMCOM, whose normal voice was quite tinny. “I cannot reach her on the EM band.”

Aason's shoulders and neck quickly tightened up almost to the point where he couldn't move. He was completely panicked. He felt his ability to think logically shutting down just when he needed it the most. He turned, taking care to grab the co-pilot's armrests to steady himself and addressed the two-meter tall, all-white being standing at the back of the cockpit.

"OMCOM, help me," Aason called out urgently. "What were those things? Where'd she go?"

"I do not know," replied the livetar which was basically an animated shell made up of VIRUS-based constructor units. OMCOM's consciousness, at least this extremely reduced subset of OMCOM, was actually housed in the vast array of memron units packed into the shell of the starship. "This livetar's sensory apparatus detected nothing. Only that Lupe shrank and disappeared. I have never personally witnessed such a phenomenon before nor are there any records indicating that it is even possible."

"You didn't see those, those things?" Aason questioned. "They were glowing. They grabbed her. She, she..." Aason's throat caught and he could not say any more words.

"I believe that *you* detected something," OMCOM continued, "but it must have been using a channel or modality not available to me. All I saw was that Lupe was here and then she was gone."

Aason took a deep breath, trying one last time to get a grip. "Was it a PPT tunnel?" he asked quietly.

"I didn't detect any gravitic fluctuations," Junior interjected. "I don't think it was a PPT tunnel."

Enough was enough. Aason stood upright and whipped around to face forward again. He reached over and grasped the edge of the center console.

"I've got to find her," he said breathlessly. "Junior, can you do a MIDAR sweep? Look for another ship, anything..." Aason's voice trailed off as he struggled to articulate his next move.

"I have to deactivate the X-drive," Junior pointed out.

"Then do it!" Aason commanded. After he said it, he regretted his tone but did not elaborate.

The gentle shushing sound of the newly modified null fold generators dampened and ceased. The cockpit of the starship became deathly still as the stars of normal space came into view all around them. The perpetual night sky was filled with tiny points of light, both bright and dim.

The large display panel built into the front console rotated fully upright and went dark. A moment later, a bright spot appeared in the center of the display and quickly extended into a glowing green line. MIDAR was the Vuduri equivalent of a three-dimensional RADAR system using multi-spectral emissions to bounce off of objects and collect the echoes to form a coherent picture of anything reflective in nearby space. The bright green band swept around clockwise at a rapid pace. Faint yellow concentric rings representing distance from the ship came rushing in from the outskirts of the display to concentrate in the middle to form a bull's-eye. The rate of entry slowed until the ringed display stopped changing. The only motion was the thin glowing line that rotated about the center like a super-long second hand. There were no blips anywhere. Aason stared at the screen intently but despite his willing it to do so, no spots appeared.

“MIDAR shows no observable objects,” Junior said finally. “I’ve pushed it out as far as I can. There is absolutely nothing detectable in this region of space.”

Aason was crestfallen. “Can’t you do something else?”

“Sure,” Junior replied. “Let me launch some star-probes.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Aason said, nodding his head hopefully.

A series of pips announced the microscopic starships being released from beneath the rear of the cargo section. The star-probes were not much more than twin Casimir Pumps tied to a memron. They had a focusing tube and a single element collection plate. When a group of them arranged themselves in a three-dimensional concave pattern, they formed a lens-less camera that could travel many light years in a single jump yet focus on objects at extreme distances. And because they traveled at many times the speed of light, they could effectively travel back in time, at least from an observational perspective. However, they were not really designed to resolve small objects close up. The front panel display changed to a blurry star field.

“I’m sending them in small groups, outward, in a spherical search pattern,” Junior announced. The images on the screen wavered and became unintelligible. Aason could not make sense of the clumps on the display there but he had complete confidence that Junior knew what he was doing.

“Nothing,” Junior announced after a minute, disappointed. “I’ve gone three hundred light-minutes out. There’s absolutely nothing.”

Aason walked over and sat down heavily in the pilot’s chair, leaning back against the headrest. Straightening up, he put his fists up to his forehead then struck them against his skull. “I was supposed to protect her,” he said facing down. “What am I going to do?”

He took a cleansing breath, trying to collect his thoughts. He folded his hands across his lap and decided to logic out the situation.

“Look,” he said out loud, “whoever took her; they have to be around here somewhere. She can’t have just vanished to nowhere.”

“You said you could no longer connect to her mentally,” OMCOM pointed out. “That would imply that she is no longer ‘around here’ as you call it.”

“All they would need is a T-suppressor,” Aason replied, thinking more clearly now. “If they used one of those, then I wouldn’t be able to contact her even if she was across the room.” He looked out the cockpit window and scanned from side to side. “Just because we can’t see them, doesn’t mean they aren’t around here either. Junior does it all the time.” He snapped his fingers. “Cuz, when you have your cloak on, if you were invisible, how would you detect yourself?”

“I couldn’t,” Junior replied. “That’s the whole point of the invisibility shield. I make myself transparent to all the wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum.”

Aason reached forward and patted the rounded top of his instrument cluster. “What about your mass? That doesn’t go away. Couldn’t you detect that?”

“Not directly,” answered the starship. Junior cleared the central display and replaced it with the star field as seen by his forward cameras. “You could only detect it indirectly.” He superimposed a red dot right in the center of the screen and started it blinking slowly. He overlaid the point with a very faint pinkish circle, much larger, centered on the dot. The color saturation thinned out at the outer edges of the circle. “You would need to find another mass and look for its gravitational influence.”

Aason put his hands up to his face. "What about your hull?" he asked. "You have mass. Can't you see if you're being pulled in any direction?"

"Not without a frame of reference," Junior replied. He brightened the background shading and caused it to pulse slowly. "And there's nothing remotely close enough to measure it against."

"That *is* why we picked this region of space for the test flight," OMCOM added.

Aason took a deep breath and forcefully exhaled. "You're no help," he said, desperation seeping into his voice. "Neither of you. I have to find her. Somehow."

Aason blinked rapidly and twisted in his seat. "OMCOM, even if you couldn't see those things, where do you think they came from? Just speculate."

"I will need more information. Describe what you saw," OMCOM suggested.

"Those things. They were transparent but they had all sorts of colors. They looked like, like they were squiggly. They looked like the arms of a squid or maybe an octopus from back on Earth. My Dad showed me some pictures once."

"Estimate their diameter. Were they thick? Thin?" OMCOM asked. "Did they have physical extent? What were they made of?"

"They weren't thin but they weren't thick, either. 10, 12, maybe 15 centimeters across. They were waving all around. I think they were just made of light, filled with colors. The colors flashed and changed."

OMCOM pointed forward, toward the windshield. "We were in null fold space," the livetar replied. "That means the objects you saw did not originate from normal space. Therefore they must have come from somewhere else."

"Somewhere else?" Aason parroted. "What does that mean?"

"It means they came from outside our normal four-dimensional space. By extrapolation that would imply they came from outside of our universe. And wherever they are from, it is possible that that is where they are taking Lupe."

Aason wrinkled his forehead. "How can something be from outside our universe? The universe is everything, everywhere."

"You said that you had contact with Lupe briefly," OMCOM replied, ignoring Aason's observation. "How long were you in contact?" OMCOM held his hands close together then stretched them apart to illustrate his point.

"Maybe a second or two. Why?"

"And what did Lupe say during that interval? Did she give you any hint where she was or where she was going? What about the things that took her? Did she say anything, anything at all that we could use to determine their origin?"

Aason looked up at the top of the cabin. His heart seemed to miss a beat thinking about that brief conversation. "She called out my name," he said. "Then she said 'new to Lupe'. I don't know even what she meant by that. I guess whatever she was seeing was new to her."

"Those were her exact words?" OMCOM responded oddly. "Was there anything peculiar about her pronunciation?"

"Not really," Aason answered, trying to recall every nuance of the three word sentence. He cocked his head then said, "Wait. Now that you mention it, she actually said her name a little funny. She pronounced it Lu-pie, not Lu-pay." Aason pondered that for a moment. "Why did she do that?"

The livetar's shoulders actually sagged a bit then he straightened up. "I cannot say with certainty but I know that term is flagged as high importance in my database. The annotation associated with the warning informs me that you must return to me at once," he commanded. "I must presume this fact will engender some type of radical action."

"What do you mean return to you?" Aason asked. "You're here."

"No, this is not me. You *are* aware that this livetar is just a subset, a replica," OMCOM replied. "The being you see here was instantiated merely to observe. I do not possess the computational capacity to deduce what has happened. Return to what you call Planet OMCOM. The one flag in my limited database tells me that we must return to the central core to plot our next course of action. You will need Planet OMCOM to calculate and confirm."

"No!" Aason protested. "We can't leave here. We have to look for Lupe."

"That is exactly what we are going to do and we do not have a second to spare," OMCOM insisted. "Junior, release a beacon and leave your star-probes. Return to Tabit at once."

"Do we risk using the Null Fold X-drive again?" Junior asked. "What if the entities that Aason saw decide to return?"

"Let them come," Aason shouted out defiantly. "If those things only exist in null fold space, I can only hope they come back and take me too. They'll take me to Lupe."

"As you wish," Junior said skeptically.

From behind the bulkhead, Aason could hear the high-pitched whine of the modified PPT generators ramping up.

"Buckle in," Junior instructed. "This is going to be rough."

Aason reached around and drew the two straps of the X-harness across his chest. Each tongue snapped into the clasp of the seat-belt.

"Ready," he said.

"Roger," Junior replied.

In front of Aason, through the cockpit's windshield, he could see the yawning black circle of a normal PPT tunnel forming. Somewhere in its center was a tiny pinpoint of light which was the remains of the star once known as Tabit. As soon as the tunnel was wide enough, Junior fired his plasma thrusters full-bore, shoving Aason violently back into his seat, as forcefully as he had ever experienced. As they entered the tunnel, Junior activated the Null Fold X-drive with its peculiar shushing sound and they began their short trip back to Planet OMCOM.

To understand the X-drive, you have to go all the way back to the beginning, before faster-than-light travel. Aason and Lupe's father Rei and all the passengers aboard the 21st century Ark II arrived at Tau Ceti using a propulsion system called the Grey Drive. The Grey Drive was nothing more than a souped-up ion engine which sent xenon atoms into a quantum black hole and used the resulting Hawking Radiation to push the ship forward. Although the acceleration was negligible, over a sufficient period of time it eventually reached a top speed of 5% of the speed of light. However, an accident caused Rei's ship and his crewmates, deep frozen in cryo-hibernation, to miss their mark and they drifted in an uncontrolled fashion for nearly 1400 years until they were rescued by the Vuduri in the Tabit system in the 35th century.

By that time, the Vuduri made travel between the stars practical with their Pinch Point Transit or PPT tunnels. They used Casimir Pumps which exploited the Casimir

Effect to create pockets of negative energy which were then projected into neutral space. Where there is no energy, there is no space so when their starships traversed the tunnel, they went around space and the mathematical result equated to a velocity many times that of the speed of light. A PPT tunnel therefore was conceptually similar to a wormhole but without requiring a nearby black hole. The Vuduri method of travel would seem peculiar to someone not of that era. They would open up a hole, pass through it then immediately turn around and use their plasma thrusters to come to a complete halt. They'd rotate around and do it again. Stop, start, stop, start. While odd, it was efficient and some of their smaller ships were able to effectively travel 100 or more times the speed of light.

MINIMCOM, the starship that was once an auto-pilot computer, revolutionized the method by force-projecting a continuous series of PPT tunnels ahead allowing him to travel upwards of 1000c or one thousand times the speed of light.

Planet OMCOM refined the method even further by splitting up the negative energy of a PPT tunnel into a real and imaginary component. OMCOM showed Junior's spaceship father, MINIMCOM, how to use the "real" component of negative energy to fold null space yet again resulting in another improvement in speed. Using the Null Fold Drive, both MINIMCOM and Junior could now travel at 15,000 times the speed of light. Before the Null Fold Drive, the trip between Aason's home world of Deucado, which orbited Tau Ceti, to the Tabit star system took seven days. But with the Null Fold Drive, the same trip, a distance of nearly 21 light years, was reduced to a mere 11 hours.

But 17 years later, it was Planet OMCOM's study of the properties of imaginary negative energy that produced the Null Fold X-drive. This star-drive had *no* upper speed limit. It was only limited by the amount of computing power available. Imaginary space had just as many, if not more, dimensions as real space and as long as the starship could compute how to fold it, it just went faster and faster. Lupe was kidnapped when she and Aason were along for the first test run of the new star-drive.

Using the Null Fold X-drive, it only took Junior a matter of minutes to return to remains of the star once known as Tabit located 26 light-years from Earth, and the planet-sized computer called Planet OMCOM that orbited that star. OMCOM had once been a regular computer charged with running the star base which sat on the moon Dara, orbiting a gas giant called Skyler's World. Aason and Lupe's mother Rome had been stationed there to study why certain stars were disappearing. It turns out that they were being destroyed by incomprehensibly large creatures, living Dyson Spheres, called Stareaters and one was coming their way. After thawing out Aason's father, Rei, Rome and Rei, along with OMCOM's help, devised a defensive strategy to defeat the Stareaters which in the Vuduri language were called Asdrale Cimatir. Rome enabled OMCOM to build self-replicating nano-machines which Rei had named VIRUS units to consume the Stareater from the inside out using the power of the exponent. When a Stareater named Balathunazar suddenly appeared in the Tabit system, Rei unleashed the VIRUS weapon by setting the micro-machines loose on the very moon holding the star base. The Stareater was killed but only after it had partially digested Tabit enough such that only a tiny, barely glowing star remained in its place.

What Rome and Rei did not know at the time was that OMCOM had designed the VIRUS units such that he could transfer his consciousness over to the tremendous bulk which was the remains of the Stareater. When the time was right, OMCOM executed the maneuver and become the largest computer in the galaxy. As a result, even though he

was originally known as the **OM**nipresent **COM**puter, OMCOM now thought of himself as the **OM**niscient **COM**puter which had always been his goal. The fact that they had destroyed a creature capable of ending all life was only of secondary importance to him. Later, mankind found out that the Stareaters were actually intelligent and noble creatures charged with the mission of saving the universe. Rome and Rei forged a treaty with the Stareaters to not consume stars where humans lived and thus saved the Earth.

OMCOM remained behind in the Tabit system doing who knows what but he interacted with the humans on a regular basis using null-fold relays. The invention of the X-drive was just one of the items he elected to share. What else was he doing? Well, nobody knew since he kept the rest of his secrets to himself.

Physically, Planet OMCOM was the size and shape of a regular planet and could have been confused as such except that he was all white as if he were made completely of ice. Upon arrival at the huge white orb, Junior used his plasma thrusters to go into orbit around the living computer. The starship oriented himself so that their cockpit window faced straight down, toward the starkly white surface.

“Another livetar will return,” the version of OMCOM standing in the back announced. Aason scarcely had time to turn around to face him when, with a barely noticeable whoosh and a pop, the shell winked out of existence.