

**Tales of the Vuduri:
Year One**

By Michael Brachman

TALES OF THE VUDURI: YEAR ONE

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The Rome's Revolution Series

Rome's Revolution
The Ark Lords
Rome's Evolution

The Vuduri Universe Series

Tales of the Vuduri: Year One

*Tales of the Vuduri: Year Two (not yet in publication)

Entry 1-012: January 4, 2013

Dyson Spheres and Stareaters

The Dyson Sphere concept was invented by physicist Freeman Dyson in the late 1950s. The idea was that intelligent species could build a partial or complete sphere around a star. This would allow them to capture all of the energy emitting from the star and simultaneously create a semi-infinite amount of living space on the interior. Larry Niven took a slice of a Dyson Sphere and used it as the basis for his Ringworld series.

While the concept is fascinating, why bother? Who needs infinite energy or infinite living space?

Regardless of the reason, I was still enthralled with the idea of a gigantic sphere encapsulating a star so even with the first draft of *Rome's Revolution* (called *VIRUS 5* back then), the "villain" was the Stareater, called Asdrale Cimatir in Vuduri. The people observing this would be in awe and terror. If it happened to your star (the Sun!!!) all life outside of the Dyson Sphere would cease.

[Click here to see my teaser/trailer illustrating a Stareater "swallowing" a star.](#)

My hero, Rei Bierak, was able to figure out how to "defeat" the Stareater by using VIRUS units. A neat invention back in 1973 when I first came up with it but now nanotechnology is sort of old hat.

As I pushed on with Part 3 of *Rome's Revolution*, I wanted a double climax and the return of the Stareaters, especially to eat the Sun, seemed very exciting. You'll see how Rei and Rome defeat it in the book but suffice to say, you will be shocked as to the how and the why.

Pretty neat stuff.

Entry 1-040: February 2, 2013

How did the Arks land?

Well, a better question would be how were they supposed to land?

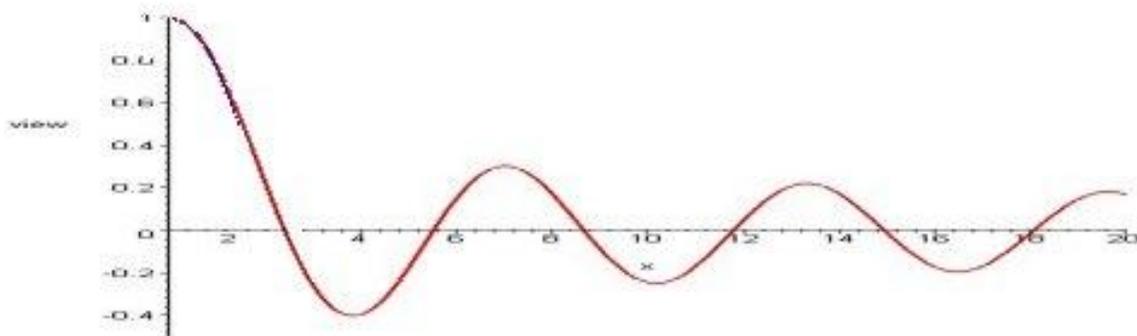
Let's take Ark I because it was textbook. When the Ark I arrived at the Alpha Centauri star system, the AI examined the habitable world orbiting the B-star (later called Beth) and the one orbiting the A-star (later called Aleph) and decided the A-star planet was the better choice.

After circularizing its orbit around the target planet, the AI awakened the Captain who, in turn, awakened the Pilot and Co-pilot. Two of the men performed a two-step space-walk. Step one was going all the way to the back and jettisoning the propulsion module as it was no longer needed. After that was complete, the two men separated the cargo compartment in the back from the crew compartment in the front.

The command module and SSTO booster remained attached to the crew compartment.

Using solid rocket fuel retros, they began to descend into the atmosphere. As the hull began to heat up, they used their gigantic delta wings to force the ship to begin ascending again until it stalled nearly back at the edge of space.

With their velocity reduced by gravity, they began a second descent into the atmosphere, going much lower this time before re-ascending. They did this several times until they were going slow enough to stay within the atmosphere. The technique is a form of aero-braking. If you plotted the altitude as a function of time, you would see that it resembles a mathematical Bessel function.



Once they had shed enough velocity and were able to glide safely within the atmosphere, they studied the planet and selected a landing spot, glided in and landed on the belly of the craft which was made of a much stronger metal than most of the ship. After landing, the three command crew members were then tasked with awakening the 500+ members of their crew.

Once the new colonists were settled, the command crew climbed back into the command module, ignited the Single Stage To Orbit (SSTO) booster and went back into space. They docked with the orbiting cargo compartment and brought it down near the colony using the same aero-braking technique.

As I mentioned earlier, this was how it was drawn up on paper. Of the five Arks, only three were able to land this way. We all know about how Ark II landed; after all this was the subject of *Rome's Revolution*. However, how the Deucadons got there first is a story for another day.

Entry 1-048: February 10, 2013

Reema - The first Onsira Queen

Reema was the first Reonhe ever born and is called Ombare (Empress). Her mother gave birth to her in a birthing clinic and gave her up to be raised in the crèche right away. Reema's eyes were different from the other Vuduri children. One was dark, almost flat black. The other was light blue and had the standard Vuduri optics, complete with reflective tapetum. Like all Vuduri children, Reema was born already self-aware. But the other side of her brain heard a whisper. It was MASAL calling to her. Telling her she was his first-born.

While a regular Vuduri samanda would require many Vuduri gathered nearby to begin building an Overmind, Reema had no such requirements because MASAL was already formed. MASAL's plan for her was to act like a regular Vuduri but to scour the Earth, looking for other Reonhe and eventually Zengei. Zengei children were often abandoned by their parents early on since they could not join the Overmind. Most Vuduri assumed they were mandasurte but they were not. They simply had no mind of their own and answered to MASAL. As soon as MASAL detected one, he put Reema on alert and right after they were born, Reema spirited them away to their nest in Social.

As Reema matured, her growing hoard of Zengei and Reonhe became vibrant. They organized and built the secret base beneath Kilauea. They organized and sent Estar to accompany the Skyler Base crew. They created the artificial mission and sent Sussen along to Deucado to supervise the internment of the mandasurte there.

We will get to meet Reema in the upcoming novel *Rome's Evolution*.

Entry 1-049: February 11, 2013

Why did the Vuduri erase our cities?

When Rei first arrived at Skyler Base, he was sorting through the image archives and noticed there was no evidence that our culture ever existed. Not New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Paris, London - all were gone. During their first trip back to Earth in Part 3 of *Rome's Revolution*, Rei asked, "Is there anything left of our cities, you know, from my time?" "No," replied Rome. "I am not sure of the proper word. They were...erased."

Later, in *The Ark Lords*, Rome did choose to expound upon this a bit further. Rome said, "You will recall you once asked me what happened to all your cities and I told you they were erased. So, too, it was with the Erklirte's settlement. What I did not tell you was that this was Hanry Ta Jihn's dying wish. He was a martyr but he was so revered that every person on Earth tried to honor that wish. It took centuries. It wasn't until the Vuduri came into being that they finally accomplished his goal. Every trace of the Essessoni civilization was razed, burned or buried. In the end, it was to be as if your people never existed."

Finally, in *The Ark Lords* we were provided with a little glimpse into the past. We saw the death of Jack Henry (Hanry Ta Jihn in Vuduri) and in this little vignette, the Battle of Chicago is now over and Jack Henry lies dying on ground. Red June, Jack's most trusted lieutenant, had Jack's head resting on his thigh:

"Did we get 'em?" Jack whispered.

"Yeah, Jack," Red replied. "They're all dead."

Jack grunted. "You have to..." His voice was so quiet, Red couldn't hear him. He bent over so his ear was next to Jack's mouth.

"What is it, Jack?" Jack Henry spoke but his breath barely stirred the air. Red had to strain to hear his words.

"Use their cannon and level this place. Then go back home and get the rest of them. No matter how many men it takes. Bury them and their vehicles and their spaceship and their weapons. Bury every place they've ever been on the Earth. They may have other disease weapons stashed somewhere else."

Jack coughed and blood spurted out of his mouth but he went on. "Someday, there may be others, more spacemen. Make it so they can't find a trace, not a hint, that their race was ever here. Swear to me."

"I vow it, Jack," Red said. A tear formed in the corner of his eye. "Even if it takes us a thousand years, we'll erase everything. It'll be like they never existed."

Jack Henry was satisfied and then he died. And that is why all our cities were erased.

Entry 1-095: March 30, 2013

Vuduri Spaceships and Starships

The Vuduri have a variety of spaceships and starships but all use the same fundamental principles. All use EG lifters to get them off the ground and to the edge of space. All of them use plasma thrusters as their main impulse engine and PPT tunnels for hopping long distances. All use trim-jets to adjust their pitch, roll and yaw. All have small airfoils, insufficient to produce lift but aerodynamically sufficient to produce a control surface within the atmosphere.

For short excursions, the Vuduri use a variety of space-tugs. In *Rome's Revolution*, we saw several of these in use in the Tabit system. One of them crash-landed on Deucado and evolved into MINIMCOM the starship.

Other ships are small crew ships. They are just for getting people from one place to another. They have cargo ships as well.

The Algol was one of their most sophisticated designs. At its heart, it was a large, very powerful starship for transporting a crew of 80+ to a star system 26 light years from Earth. On the trip out there, the rear of the ship was fit with a set of cylindrical containerized storage units for transporting the tugs, construction materials, scientific equipment and so on.

The cylinders could be detached. One of them was cut in half and used as the staging area between the Algol and Skyler Base on Dara. For the return trip, the storage cylinders were left behind.

All Vuduri spaceships use a landing technique called aero-braking which was covered in an earlier post. The Vuduri determined it was the most efficient way to return to the surface of a planet. So set in their ways, that is why they selected Dara as their stellar observatory; because it had an atmosphere which would allow them to aero-brake. Admittedly, it was also easier to build a base on a world where there was some atmosphere but that was secondary.

Once the Vuduri had come up with what they considered the optimal design elements, they never varied from that. It took MINIMCOM to invent the continuous PPT-tunnel projector which allowed him to travel at nearly 100c. It took him several years but he eventually shared this design with the Vuduri who started building a fleet of what they called fast-ships.

Not to be outdone, (with OMCOM's help), MINIMCOM implemented the null-fold drive which boosted his top end by a factor of 15X. In the next book in the series called *The Milk Run*, OMCOM rolls out an improvement, the null-fold Drive II which can go twice

as fast allowing Aason and Junior to move along at 30,000 times the speed of light. That is pretty damned fast!

Entry 1-116: April 20, 2013

Secrets Revealed: Guns and Ramps and Sunglasses

One of the running jokes of the whole *Rome's Revolution* universe is that every time Rei and Rome fly to a new place and walk down (or up) a ramp, there is horde of people waiting to attack them.

- The first time Rei and Rome land on Deucado, there is a group of Ibrassati waiting for them with clubs, maces and other evil looking objects.
- When they land at the Vuduri enclave on Deucado, when Rome was experiencing respiratory distress, they were greeted by Vuduri with standard issue Vuduri weapons.
- When they land on Earth, they are immediately taken into custody by a group of Vuduri soldiers as Rome is place under arrest.
- When they arrive back on Deucado, at the end of Part 3 of *Rome's Revolution*, they are greeted by a large group of people but at least this time it was joyous.
- When they first land on Helome, walking down the ramp appears to be an innocent act. However, the two women accompanying Virga are carrying hidden weapons and it is their intent to kidnap Rei for use of his genetic material.
- When Rei, Rome and Ursay walk up the ramp beneath the Tevatron, they are "welcomed" by a heavily armed contingent of the Darwin group, aka the new Ark Lords.

Why enumerate each of these incidents? Because in all of them, Rei is leaving the cool, dimly lit interior of a starship (or the Tevatron) and, unlike Rome who has a second, internal iris, had to put his hand up to block the sun until his eyes get adjusted to the brighter light. Why didn't he just bring a pair of sunglasses with him from Earth?

The answer to that question will finally be revealed in the first Intermezzo of the upcoming novel *Rome's Evolution*.

Entry 1-148: May 22, 2013

Dual Protagonists

This is an extreme no-no in the world of writing. You are supposed to have a single protagonist.

But *Rome's Revolution* is not about one person. Sure, Rei is sort of the hero but it is really his interaction with Rome that makes them special. Watching her literally reborn and grow into an autonomous human being, later mother, saver-of-the-universe and finally a true telepath is part of the strength of the novels.

Rei doesn't actually grow all that much. He was a little goofier in the beginning but he retained his sense of humor throughout. Meeting Rome and bonding with her gave him a little greater sense of urgency and he does grow into a man of action.

A fact only hinted at throughout the entire books is that while Rei was very smart and resourceful, even before he was frozen, when he used the bands with Rome, they actually unlocked portions of his brain. He started thinking faster, had greater insight and eventually learned to act quickly and decisively. The bands actually changed his brain physiologically, not just psychologically.

However, back to my original premise: I maintain that these books are not about Rei and not about Rome but about the Rei and Rome *system*. Two people, from different eras, different cultures, who throw their fortunes in together. The Rei and Rome system has the ingenuity and self-confidence to navigate their way around a future society. Just Rei or just Rome could not accomplish all that they did by themselves.

Rome says it out loud. She says they are their own samanda now. And several times I explicitly state they are one.

So I claim to you this book is not about dual protagonists. There is only one. It is the loving, dynamic couple called Rei and Rome. What do you think?

Entry 1-149: May 23, 2013

How to freeze human beings

The biggest problem about freezing human beings and sending them to the stars was not the freezing process. Anybody can freeze anything. It's just the thawing and preserving that is the tricky part.

I needed a viable way to send people to the stars and even at the impossible speeds I postulated, 1/20th the speed of light, it would still take Rei 240 years to get to Tau Ceti. This was at the core of my science fiction trilogy *Rome's Revolution*.

My research had revealed it was not the freezing process, per se, but rather the side effects of freezing that made it a problem. Water expands as it gets colder and occupies its highest volume at 4 degrees Celsius. That means that ordinary cells will burst when they freeze. So if you froze a human being while they were still alive, technically, they'd be alive the whole time. But when you thawed them out, they would die because their cells had burst.

So I invented this thing called the dehydration protocol. In a story in the upcoming *The Vuduri Companion*, you will learn about Sven Ausland, also known as the Ice Man, who survived for 17 years frozen solid and was thawed successfully. The only reason Sven survived was because he was severely dehydrated before he was frozen solid. The scientists behind the Ark program were smart enough to put the two items together and create the dehydration protocol which allowed humans to be frozen solid and reanimated years later and survive the process.

Entry 1-150: May 24, 2013

Freezing humans, part 2

I reduced the importance of this in the modern version of *Rome's Revolution* but there was a second component to freezing humans and thawing them that was crucial to their survival.

In a short story that will never see the light of day, I explored the ramifications of the experiments where they froze living human beings and thawed them five years later. Most died. The few remaining survivors were brain dead or close. The only person that survived reasonably well was the one person that had a fissured disk in their back.

The nucleus pulposus, the jelly-like substance that fills the inner portion of the vertebral disks, has been shown to express Tumor Necrosis Factor/Alpha when exposed to interstitial fluid. This substance is so toxic, so inflammatory, that it causes back pain all by itself. There are some that say that a substantial portion of back pain is chemical in nature only. And it can be treated medically with biologically active drugs like Embrel, Humira and the like.

So I took that little known fact and made it the basis of how humans could be frozen and thawed. Demoted in the current story, almost to the point of being invisible, I built the sarcophagi with tiny needles that extended upwards and punctured the backs of the soon-to-be-frozen colonists and allowed the Tumor Necrosis Factor/Alpha to ooze from the disks into the blood system.

The only overt evidence of this procedure was that Silas Hiram, Rei Beirak and the vast majority of the colonists aboard all of the Arks experienced back pain upon being reanimated.

OMCOM incorrectly assumes this was a by-product of the freezing process and produces the pills that a) turns Rei into a superhero and b) saves humanity from devolving into the Onsiras. But nonetheless, it is an integral part of the plot early on. Later, the pills that OMCOM produced become crucial.

Entry 1-156: May 30, 2013

Who is Rome?

The other day, I mentioned that I liked Rome but who is she?

As the heroine of the book, I had to make her pretty and smart but she is not my type. She is Rei's type, of course. You can see that if you read the first Intermezzo in *Rome's Evolution* and got the connection between Sally Reynolds and Rome.

I cannot say I had a clear vision of what she even looked like until I saw an episode of *Smallville* in 2002. The actress playing Lex Luthor's girlfriend Victoria Hardwick, is named Kelly Brook and when I saw her, I said that is Rome. Here is her picture:



Unfortunately, in real life, Kelly is too tall (5' 8" although some have her at 5' 6") to play the part but her face helped me describe Rome's face so thank you Kelly.

After that, I started picking out actors and actresses who represented each of the parts (Kevin Costner for Fridone?) and used that as a crutch to help me with physical descriptions. My selections will help when it comes time to cast the movies! ;)

Entry 1-195: July 8, 2013

It's always sunny on Deucado

Weather is boring. The only reason you would introduce it would be for dramatic purpose. A rainstorm always portends an ominous event. Snow creates survival issues. I did bring up how hot it was in Illinois in *The Ark Lords* but that was about it. I used a technique called "follow the sun" so that it was always daylight out. I don't even like writing about night.

I did deviate from this in the middle part of *Rome's Revolution* because the action takes place over a 72-hour period. I couldn't avoid it. It is night time occasionally. So I had to figure out the rotational period of Deucado (22.5 hours), how many moons (2 - Mockay and Givvy) and then I was stuck.

One of the fundamental principles of good writing (not that I always follow it) is show don't tell. But how do you show what is happening if it is pitch black out? Answer: give Rei sonar-vision so he can see in the dark. It turns out this was useful later on in the story when Rei and Rome were deep underground beneath Kilauea and also when they were in the dark woods in *Rome's Evolution*.

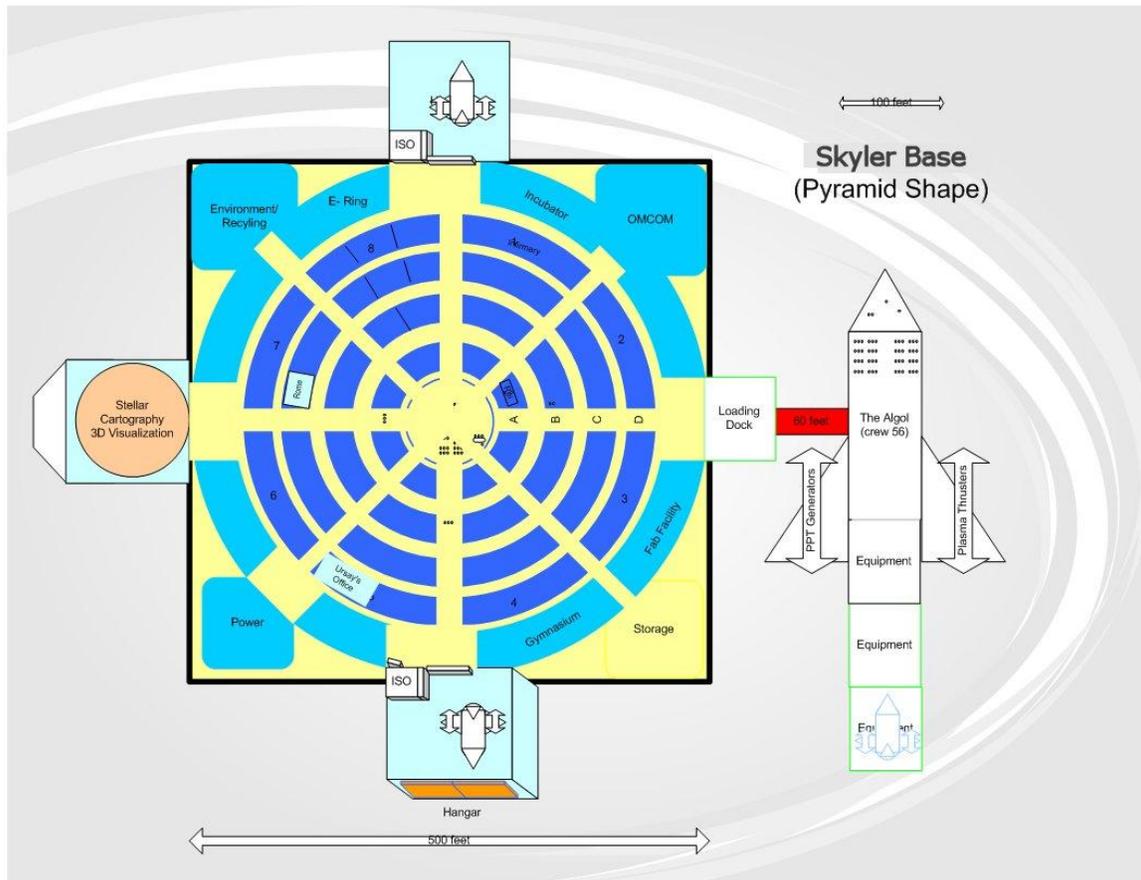
It does rain on Deucado but it served no dramatic purpose so I left it out. Hence the title of this article: It's always sunny on Deucado.

Entry 1-199: July 12, 2013

Skyler Base: A new series

Skyler Base, located on the moon Dara, is the main focus of the action in *Rome's Revolution*. The base, also called a star-base (since it was created as a stellar observatory), sits on a moon orbiting Skyler's World (originally called Schuyler's World) which in turns orbits Tabit. I pretended that Rei called it Pi³ Orionis but in *Rome's Evolution*, we find out Rei does call it Tabit as well.

The base was built from the ground up using a combination of aerogel generators as well as the molecular synthesizers augmented by equipment and supplies transported there aboard the *Algol*. Here is a picture of the base (you can click on the image to see a much larger copy):



The base is strictly utilitarian and built upon the only design the Vuduri ever use: concentric circles. It would never occur to them to deviate from that plan although the Vuduri on Deucado build Vuduri City resembling a Star of David in *The Ark Lords*. We

also learned that the Vuduri on Helome deviated from the plan slightly but not in any significant way.

In this series, I will review the features of the base that may or may not have been explained or even introduced in the current version of *Rome's Revolution*.

Entry 1-212: July 25, 2013

Why does everybody wear those stupid white jumpsuits?

I've said it many times but I'm not 100% sure I've said it this way: we humans are not only capable of learning history but also predicting future history. This was the fundamental premise behind Isaac Asimov's Foundation series. We have a racial (read: species) knowledge of the future. So when I built the universe behind *Rome's Revolution* my assumption was that whatever we see in common among many science fiction novels and movies has predictive value.

When you watch *2001: A Space Odyssey* and especially *THX 1138* you see everybody dressed in white and speaking in muted tones, there is something to that. My mission was to discover the underlying principles behind such commonalities.

So... everybody in the future wears white. Why? My future people, the Vuduri, wear white because a) they are not slaves to fashion and b) they do not want clothes to be anything they ever need to think about. When Rei is awakened, it never occurred to them to give him anything else to wear other than a white (and ill-fitting) jumpsuit. Unfortunately, even when he got an opportunity to retrieve his "regular" clothes, they got ruined because Estar wanted to kill him.

So what about those stupid, white jumpsuits? Are they thick? Are they thin? Do they have buttons? Zippers? Velcro? The answer is yes, no, no, no and yes. They are not particularly thick. They clasp together using a velcro-like fastener and that is that. I'm not even really sure why the Vuduri wear clothes. Maybe that's just one habit that did not die when they upgraded to having the Overmind in charge.

The thickness of the material is important is because Rome is built (like her mother) in a spectacular fashion and if the jumpsuits were too thick, nobody would notice. Rei notices. She is the complete package even though the Vuduri cannot appreciate it. If you have taken the time to read *Rome's Evolution*, you will see that Bonnie Mullen tells Rome that if she had Rome's body and face, she'd rule the world.

I guess the bottom line is, everybody wears those stupid white jumpsuits but they are not particularly unflattering and it makes it easy to figure out what to wear in the morning (see Albert Einstein).

Entry 1-232: August 14, 2013

The Domes

As mentioned in yesterday's post, the Earth in 2067 AD was not a very pleasant place. For our purposes, *Rome's Revolution* really begins on this date. It was at this point in time that global warming had gotten so bad that scientists had to up the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale to acknowledge Category 6 and Category 7 hurricanes.

Category 4 hurricanes are rated from 130-156 mph and Category 5 hurricanes are currently measured as 157 mph or higher. Taking the simple 26 mph boost as the rating, a Category 6 hurricane would be from 183 mph to 209 mph and a Category 7 hurricane would be 210 mph and higher. In addition, the diameter of such storms would larger than a continent and go from the North Pole all the way down to the Equator.

The storms were larger and more frequent so finally, the governments of the world had to take action. They started building 300 mph-proof domes over major cities. The domes were not air tight but were meant to protect against the destructive force of the winds. They were transparent and would allow for rain to fall using a louver system.

I have not watched the TV show "Under The Dome" but I imagine the domes would be much larger. After the major cities were domed in, society as a whole began to experience some relief from the cost of reconstruction after major storms. The excess funds were used to finance the construction of domes over smaller municipalities and in *Rome's Evolution*, Intermezzo 1, you can see that Rei is headed toward West Chester, Pennsylvania and the dome there is partially complete.

I've seen other TV shows, like the short-lived *Terra Nova*, that portray American cities as domed but that was because of pollution, not planet-sized storms.

Entry 1-254: September 5, 2013

Can people really survive freezing?

In next year's *The Vuduri Companion*, you'll read how Alex Haynesworth invented the Ark program. One of his inspirations came from Sven Ausland aka The Ice Man. Sven was a human who fell into a crevasse, froze solid for 17 years and when he was found, they thawed him out and resuscitated him. Since this takes place in 2040 AD, clearly I made this up. However, the entire backstory of *Rome's Revolution* requires that a viable method of freezing humans be discovered in the next thirty years. So...is it possible? No one can prove or disprove it right now. However, we have tantalizing pieces of evidence that hint it may be possible.

It isn't the freezing part that is hard. It's the successful thaw. Scientists found some seeds in Israel that were confirmed to be 2,000 years old and were successfully germinated. Other scientists have claimed to have germinated 10,000 year old seeds called *Lupinus arcticus*. The world's record so far for reviving an ancient plant is sitting at 30,000 years. In the article, they cite that "the plant is of the species *Silene stenophylla*, and radiocarbon dating says it is 31,800 years old." Amazing, huh?



However, the most fascinating fact we have so far is the strange habits of the common wood frog in Canada which, according to reports, freezes solid in the winter and thaws out again in the spring.



According to the article, "the frog's metabolism slows to a crawl, and its body temperature drops to between 21° and 30° Fahrenheit (-6° and -1° Celsius). The amphibian's heart and brain cease to function." Further, according to the article, there are numerous examples of insects and turtles that also freeze solid and thaw again. Sperm and egg banks have been freezing living human reproductive cells for two decades.

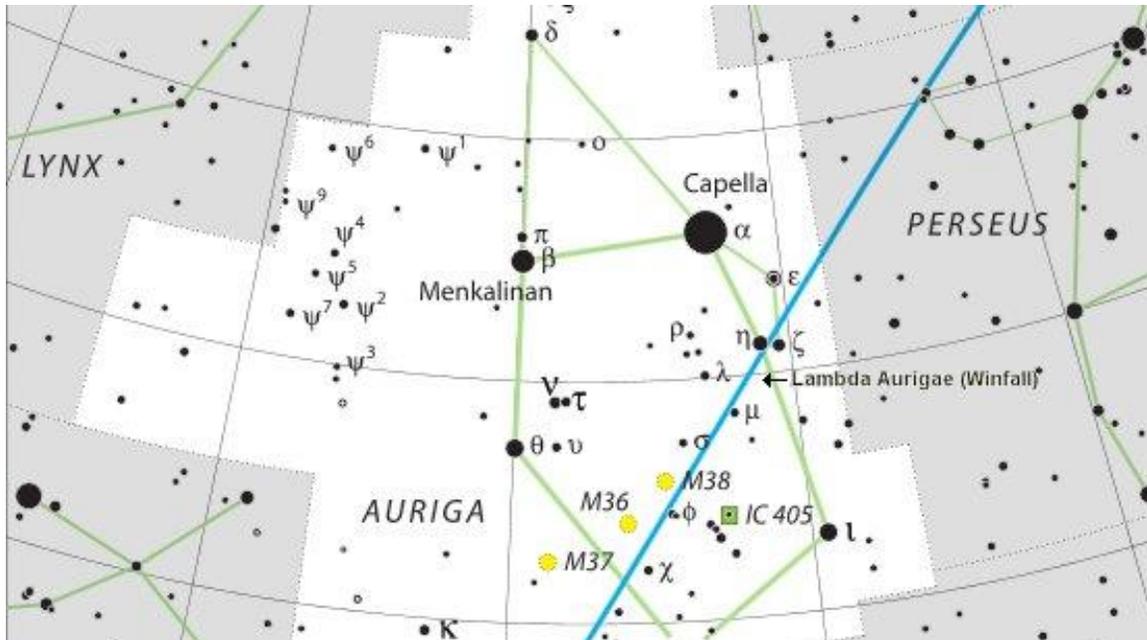
So far, so good. No proof of the negative. I know that is not the same as proof but this lies at the very heart of believable hard science fiction.

Entry 1-348: December 8, 2013

Ah, Capella!

While the events that occur in *Rome's Revolution* center around the disappearance of Winfall (first observed in 3418 AD), it was the dimming of Capella in the year 3420 AD that caused the Overmind to dispatch a research team to Tabit in the first place. Why? First a word of explanation.

Capella is the brightest star in the constellation of Auriga. You will recall from a previous post, I mentioned that Winfall was the made-up name for Lambda Aurigae which is in the same constellation as Capella.



So why would the dimming of a star cause the Overmind to scramble? It is because while Capella appears to be a single star to the naked eye, it is actually made up of **four** stars in two binary pairs.

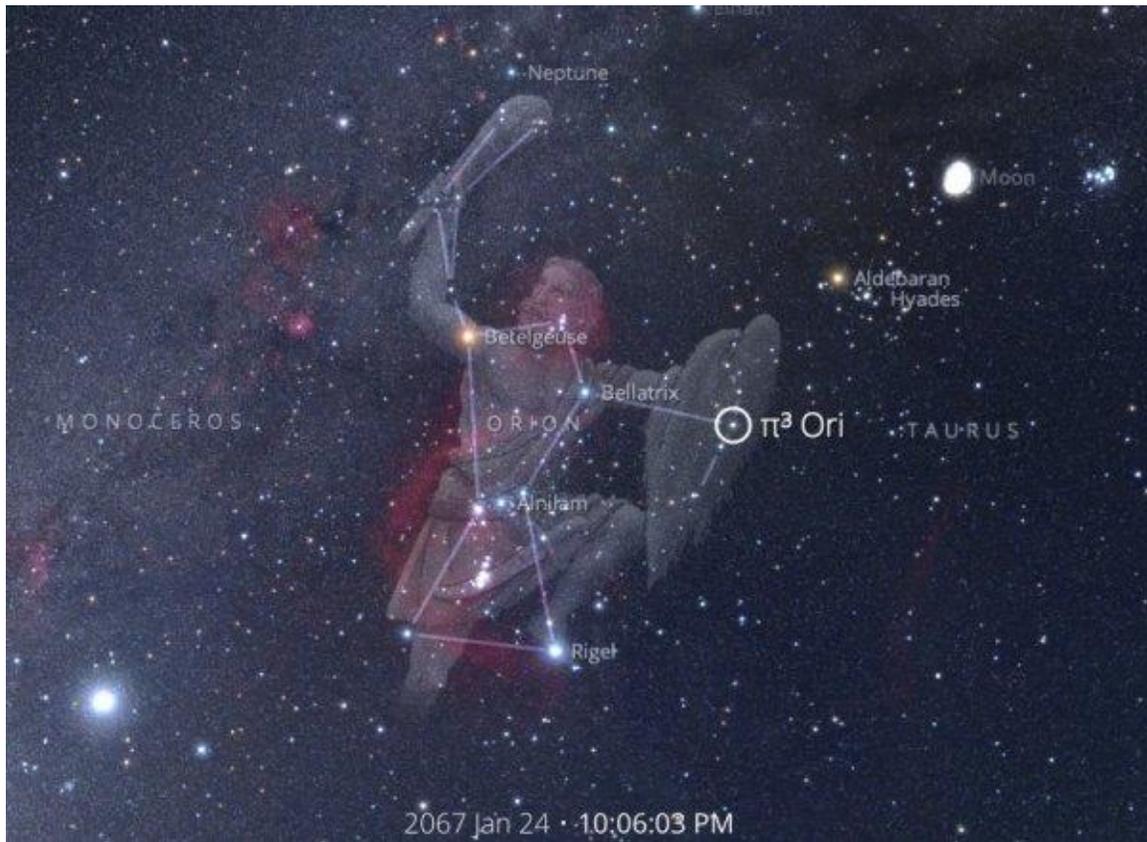
The first pair is made up of Capella A and B. Capella A is a G5-class star and Capella B is a G0 star both of which are very large. The other pair, Capella Ha and Hb are smaller, dimmer, M-class stars. Capella B was the star that disappeared which we now know was caused by the Stareater. So what looked like a single star got dimmer. The Vuduri scientists had theorized that Winfall's disappearance was caused by an optically opaque gas cloud. The fact that just one of the four stars of Capella disappeared and not all of them meant it was something else. Something scary. Since the Capella system is only 42 light years from Earth, the Overmind finally got off its incorporeal ass and decided to investigate.

Entry 1-363: December 23, 2013

What Sally Saw

As part of the back-story of *Rome's Revolution*, I've mentioned Sally Reynolds numerous times. Sally was Rei's ex-girlfriend and he thought she was the love of his life. She spent the evening with Rei on his last day on Earth in Intermezzo 1 of *Rome's Evolution*. In another post I described what went into the calculation of that date which was January 24, 2067 AD.

The good news for you is that an upgrade came out for an app called SkyGuide that runs on the iPad. One of the improvements is that it allows you to see the sky on any given date and time. So I went ahead to January 24, 2067 and used the app to show the sky as Sally viewed it on that fateful night. I used the iPad to take a snapshot of the sky on that date. Tabit is circled and labeled π^3 Ori in the image:



Here is the exact passage from *Rome's Evolution*, Intermezzo 1:

Rei focused on where Sally was pointing. On this night, the constellation Orion the Hunter was just to the southwest of the Moon. Light pollution from the city drowned out many of the stars that would have been seen in an earlier age.

But Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka, the three stars in a row marking Orion's belt, were still very recognizable.

"The star you're pointing to is the grip on Orion's shield," Rei said, trying to be analytical. "I don't remember its name... Tabit maybe? But we're not going anywhere near there."

Well Rei was right about the name of the star but dead wrong about not going there. The true love of his life, the beautiful Vuduri woman named Rome, was waiting for him there.

Read more in
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