

Vegamuamua

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~ *Earth A.D. 1258* ~

Ryurik loved gazing at the stars.

On this cool, clear January evening, he imagined he could see past the curtain of uncountable pinpoints of light into the very threshold of heaven itself, the abode of almighty God, creator of the universe. The heavenly angels were up there too, looking down on him and on everybody else living here in the greatest city in the world. The angels were hovering just beyond his direct vision, but sometimes he caught a flash of light in the corner of his eye, glimpsed a momentary trail of luminescence, and knew he had seen a sight normally forbidden to mere mortals, especially to a ragged slave boy from a distant land who could hardly remember the time when he lost his parents in exchange for a vicious and frequently drunken master.

“Boy!”, a voice grated behind him. “I told you to carry out the slops!”

Ryurik looked around, his eyes instantly wide with fear, the distant celestial serenity forgotten. “I done that, Master.”

The old man had a long beard and had pulled out a long cane from under his shabby robes. The elaborate embroidery on his coat was dirty and faded. He pointed the cane at Ryurik. “Then why didn’t you put the bucket back?”

“Right now. Doing it right now, Master!” He picked up the evil-smelling container and was about to run off with it.

“Stop! What were you doing?”

“Nothing, Master. Just looking. At the stars.”

“You’re a fool, boy. A stupid fool. What business is it of yours, to look at the stars?”

Ryurik straightened up defiantly. “*You* look at the stars, Master.”

The cane twitched in the old man’s hand, and Ryurik backed away from him.

“I look at the stars, because I can read them. I know their secrets.”

“Yes, Master. Can I go now?”

“The stars are telling me this spring the Caliph will win a great battle against the infidels.”

Ryurik was curious despite himself. “Are they coming here, Master?”

“Their army’ll be here within the week. Think they can force the Commander of the Faithful, His Excellency the Caliph to submit once again to the Great Khan. They’re wrong.

God's on our side. He lets us know his will through the movements of the stars. And you, you little idiot, gaze stupidly at them and haven't the slightest idea what they mean! Do you!"

"No, Master."

"But you want to learn, don't you, Boy?"

Ryurik nodded, darting wary glances at the old man.

"Put the bucket in its place, and then come straight back to me!"

The cane twitched in the old man's hand.

Ryurik ran off.

Reluctant to return to face his master's idea of a lesson, unsure of where to go to escape the old man's attention and suddenly taking fright when he heard the growling of his voice somewhere nearby, Ryurik ascended a flight of stone steps that led up into the circular tower that topped the house. He thought he might slip out of a window and climb back down outside to safety. He paused for a moment at the top of the steps and listened in order to check whether the voice was following him. There was a heavy wooden door nearby that he knew was always kept shut and locked, and Ryurik was surprised to see that on this occasion it was standing ajar. Cautiously he slipped inside, and found himself in the old man's study.

Shelves lined the walls with more papyri and manuscript books than Ryurik had ever seen before in his life, and strange brass astrological instruments stood under the arched window that admitted light from the lanterns in the street below and from the stars above. On the opposite side a large wooden table was covered with glass bottles, and he approached this alchemical laboratory in fascination. There were more shelves above it with dishes containing dried mushrooms and jars of unknown powders. The table itself held a retort flask that was simmering over a candle flame, giving off a sickly bittersweet smell as it bubbled its ruby-red contents into another glass vial. He reached out a curious hand to finger the apparatus, but suddenly jerked it back as he heard a footstep behind him.

"Don't touch it, Blondie!", the housekeeper snapped. "You shouldn't be in here!"

"Maria, what is it?"

"It's forbidden! Out, quickly!"

"What's the red stuff in the bottles for?"

"It's a preparation the Master's making. It gives eternal life. He's going to present it to the Caliph himself."

"It smells funny."

"Run along, Blondie, quick! Don't let him know you've been in here, or I'll catch it, too!"

Ryurik nodded and scampered out again.

~ Vega Colony 13 ~
~ Galactic Calendar Year 1,242,000 ~

The crowd of demonstrators advanced cautiously down the broad street. Some of them were holding banners reading “Equal rights for Integrals”, “No more segregation”, and “All Vegans equal under the Constitution”.

“They won’t dare”, Chiutikawa said to his companion. He nodded towards the militons lining the street ahead of them, their electric stunners visible but not yet poised for action. “Not when the whole world’s watching.”

“I don’t like it”, Ksaagru replied, glancing around nervously. “We shouldn’t have come here.”

“They know we’re in the right”, Chiutikawa tried to reassure him. “We’ve just got to hold our nerve and look confident.”

They continued their march towards the Parliament Building. In the distance beyond it Chiutikawa could see the offices of the Financial District, and then the green foliage and blue lakes of the Park of Culture and Peace, with the high-rent residential areas to either side of it. Beyond that he could see no further, as the upward curve of the cityscape took more distant regions behind the vaulted ceiling.

To a terrestrial eye, the mass of inhabitants of the planetary system of the star which humans call Vega would at first sight have looked like a flock of birds, as large as ostriches but as elegant as swans. An imaginary human observer would have felt surprise at the cygnoid beings’ colourful clothes loosely draped over their white feathers, their graceful movements, their long arms and humanlike hands, their large heads and the intelligence in their glittering eyes. The militons by contrast had not bothered to adorn their uniformly dull grey carbon-fibre exterior surfaces, and were built for utility in combat, not for grace or beauty.

The militons stationed fifty metres in front of the demonstrators now stirred and began to take up new positions. By the time the flock of cygnoids had gone halfway towards them, the militons had formed into a line across the street, blocking their progress.

One of the demonstrators started to sing the Song of Harmony. The tune was taken up by others, all following their harmonising parts with effortless accuracy so that the whole assembly resembled a well-drilled marching choir.

They halted a handful of metres in front of the militons and finished their song. Then they started to look anxiously at one another.

“Now what?”, Ksaagru asked.

“We just have to ask them politely”, Chiutikawa replied, and walked forward to face one of the militons.

"We've come in peace", ve said.

"This demonstration is illegal", the militon rasped back in a monotone. "You are ordered to disperse immediately."

"We're perfectly legal, and you know it", ve responded. Despite vir attempt to remain calm, ve felt the crimson crest feathers on the top of vir head rise to their display position. "The Attorney General made a judgement in our favour. You're required by law to let us through."

"It is not our function to enter into legal discussions. You will turn back and disperse immediately. Peacefully or... not peacefully, as you choose."

"We choose peace. And we choose to exercise our rights under the Constitution."

"The Constitution has been suspended by order of the President."

"The President doesn't have any such power!"

"It is not our function to enter into legal discussions. You have ten seconds to obey. One... two..."

Chiutikawa looked around at the others, but the knowledge was already feeding itself into vir mind. *We're with you*, the demonstrators were saying, *we're united in determination to face down this tyranny!*

Ve turned back to the militon. Ideas were swirling through the ether, being discussed and modified and voted on with the speed of thought, until they illuminated vir consciousness with decision. "Let me propose a compromise...", ve began.

"...ten!", said the militon. It raised its electrostun, as did all the other units to left and right. At the same time they all took a step forward, stamping in unison on the ground as if on parade.

The militon fired directly at Chiutikawa. Ve had not been expecting the shock of pain. Chiutikawa staggered back, saw out of the corner of vir eye that others were falling to the ground, while those standing further back were panicking, breaking away from the mass of demonstrators and trying to escape with cries of panic. Ksaagru was standing and staring in horror.

"Ksaagru, run!", ve shouted.

Ksaagru reached out his hand to vim. Just as their hands touched another blast hit Chiutikawa and blew vim off vir feet. Feeling dazed and disoriented, ve opened vir eyes in a spasm of pain to find vimself sprawled on the ground. Twisting around and looking up, ve saw the militon's expressionless sensory apparatus gazing down at vim.

I'm down, ve thought, *surely the monster's not going to hit me again?*

It pointed its electrostun at vim a third time. There was a crackle of electric current, and everything went black.