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ARCTURUS - THE NEW OMICRON SUBVARIANT AMIDST COSMIC VIBES

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Arcturus (Arktouros) meaning "Guardian of the Great Bear"; is a giant red star in the Northern Hemisphere of the Earth's sky, the brightest star in the constellation Boötes which will dwindle off as a white dwarf at the end of its life [1]. The Greeks considered it heralding the return of the spring. Around 460 B.C., the Greek physician Hippocrates believed that the position of Arcturus in the sky influenced human health and with its rising in the early spring "diseases often prove critical" [2]. Since then Arcturus has been the subject of close scientific scrutiny denoting a new cosmology of convergence of spiritual and scientific understanding.

According to astrology the clash between mutable signs Pisces (known to rule religion), Virgo (which rules epidemics), Gemini (ruler of short journeys) and Sagittarius (that rules foreigners) has often been a harbinger of problems [3]. The year 2023 shows the storm of Pisces cycles in opposition to Virgo (that rules health and wellbeing) which is rare along with Pluto in Aquarius and is crucial in giving indications of protection from COVID [3]. Retrograde Mercury in Taurus after the full moon on March 7th points to difficult news about COVID [3]. Coincidentally, the period predicted in astrological calculations coincides with

international and domestic travels taken up by people due to the Chinese New Year in China [4]. After facing protests against the Zero COVID policy, China had to drop out its restrictions thus permitting international travel in January which accrued the cases in the country [4]. Following the sudden rise in cases, on March 22nd, 2023, the Arcturus (officially titled XBB.1.16) subvariant of Omicron was classified by the WHO as a Variant Under Monitoring (VUM) [5].

Ever since its origin, the SARS-CoV-2 is mutating, playing games of dodge and duck, evading the hosts' immune system, with its every new variant causing the previous one to dip and dive and gradually wane off. From the Variants of Concern (VOC) viz. B.1.1.7 (Alpha), B.1.617.2 (Delta), B.1.351 (Beta), and P.1 (Gamma) to the Variants of Interest (VOI) B.1.427/B.1.429 (Epsilon), B.1.526 (Eta), and B.1.525 (Kappa) the path of the different SARS-CoV-2 variants can be traced to diverse geographical distribution. The geographical location may have played a pivotal role in the evolution of the viral variants [6]. Owing to its RNA genome, the virus has been evolving and mutating faster [7].

The Omicron (B.1.1.529) which was first reported in November 2021 from South Africa was

designated by the WHO as a Variant of Concern as many labs reported the S gene dropout or S gene target failure thus resulting in improved immune tolerance by the variants and evasion from previously developed antibodies that were circulating in the hosts following vaccination [8]. It is one variant that has mysteriously shown many mutations.

Various theories have been put up regarding the origin of the heavily mutated Omicron strain. Firstly, it might have evolved in a hidden population where it was difficult to conduct nucleic acid tests. Owing to its origin in South Africa from its ancestor variant (EPI_ISL_4652284) discovered on 28 July 2021 showing an extremely rare mutation N856K. [9]. The N856K along with N764K generate two potential cleavage sites for SKI-1/S1P serine protease which is absent in human lung tissues but present in the bronchus and nasopharynx, thus explaining the change of tissue tropism in Omicron and opening wider channels of destruction for the variants in terms of host range and pathogenesis [10]. Secondly, the Omicron may have originated from adaptation in animal reservoirs and transmitted back to humans [9]. Thirdly, its prevalence among the People living with HIV (PLHIV) is suggestive of slower clearance of the virus hence facilitating its continuous mutation [9]. Thus the two synergistic pandemics are exacerbating the damage. The Omicron which was known to have the highest number of mutations had wiped off the Delta variant in 2022 and with the beginning of the new year, the Kraken subvariant of Omicron (which originated in New York between November and December 2022) was held responsible for the maximum infections in the US due to its property of immune evasion [11].

However, later in March, this Kraken subvariant which got its name from the northern European sea giant was spun off by the Arcturus subvariant which may be more infectious than its predecessor.

From being first identified in Mumbai, Maharashtra on the 11th of January 2023 it has now been reported in about 40 countries [12]. As suggested by the scientists at the University of Tokyo it could be about 1.17 to 1.27 times more infectious than the Kraken variant [13]. Arcturus has been responsible for more than 17% of new COVID 19 infections in the U.S. [14] Besides the symptoms caused by the previous strains, the most striking feature of Arcturus infection is the 'pink eye' (conjunctivitis) and high-grade fever along with cough, vomiting and loose stools especially among children [15]. Going by the history of the COVID 19 variants, especially the property of immune evasion and the target population being young and unvaccinated infants, Arcturus subvariant may be a threat to this group of the population.

When Saturn is in Pisces, the energy of the two is known to juxtapose each other and there's difficulty in creating boundaries and structure. The last time Saturn was in Pisces around 29 years back, AIDS had surfaced as the biggest killer of mankind, and the cigarette companies were hit by massive US class action lawsuits [3]. People realized that if they had to survive they had to bring lifestyle changes, getting serious about passive smoking, practicing safe sex by using protective barriers, etc. It's like history repeating itself, passive inhalation of the infectious COVID 19 virus, unless one is protected with N95 masks. Saturn will sail in the Piscean seas from September 2025 through February 2026 before bidding a final adieu to the watery sign [16].

Retrograde Mercury indicates rescheduling and reversals from the first week of April to June first week 2023 in Taurus which is a sign ruling the National and world economy and would fit the aftermath of the wave maybe sending the economy for a toss. As per the latest data, the India-China trade has shown the first signs of a slowdown by a drop of 0.9% in the first half of the year [17]. Despite the border disputes the Indo-China trade had risen sharply over the years. The data indicates China's sputtering post-pandemic economic recovery [17]. Even the Global real GDP is forecasted to come down from 3.3% in 2022 to 2.6% in 2023 and further fall to 2.4% in 2024 [18].

Though the Arcturus is known to show alarming immune evasive properties and transmissibility, the consolation is that the patients have shown milder symptoms that did not require hospitalizations [12]. Even the recent report from the WHO highlighted a decreasing trend in deaths and COVID-19-related ICU admissions and determined COVID-19 to be no longer a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) [19]. Though, the astral calculations indicate its presence till the year 2026. As the virus has shown a tremendous scope of mutations, it may show incidences of outbreaks with new strains which are more infectious due to immune evasion but may not be as fatal. If proper protocols are followed in public places and the use of masks etc. is continued, widespread of the virus can be curbed.

When SARS-CoV-2 hit the world, it gave the feeling of an apocalypse. There has been overwhelming destruction of lives, businesses and education. For those who survived, the memories of the scars they left behind will linger on for a lifetime. However, the pace at which its structure,

pathogenesis, and mutations have been studied is no less. Though, vaccines have been available, the virus has the property of mutating and changing its configuration very fast which has been the major problem in establishing herd immunity and is a domain to be handled yet. The first two waves of the pandemic have taught lessons of cleanliness, avoiding the crowd and bringing lifestyle changes that need to be practiced throughout. According to Delaware Gazette, Arcturus, the "orange giant star", has reached the end of its life [20]. Is it the light at the end of the tunnel and true for the pandemic too? Or it's just the tip of the iceberg? It seems to be a wait-and-watch situation.

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