

# Watching Aliens

By C.E. Giugno

When Vagus was young, his grandfather sat him down on the broken down stoop in front of their house and told him the truth.

*You don't get far in life watching aliens, my child.*

To this Vagus gave a brief nod, and then resolved to completely disregard the advice. At the time, he was just old enough to have some inkling of what his grandfather was saying-- terms like income tax and electricity bill which before had seemed intangible became concrete. But Vagus still didn't really care for the advice-- perhaps because he remained not yet old enough to truly understand these fragments of adulthood. Or more likely because he thought the aliens were more important.

Either way, after his grandfather had fallen asleep on the sagging center of the couch, halfway through an episode of *Cosmos*, Vagus crept away into the backyard to point his face at the stars. Though it couldn't have been possible, the boy felt the Earth spiraling hundreds of meters a second through the vacuum of space. Perhaps another would have found the observation terrifying but Vagus thought it was beautiful. So he continued to watch. And as any remaining light slipped below the horizon, the child finally caught the first glimpse of his aliens as they swarmed into view.

First came the flashiest, neon saucers that whizzed across the sky like intergalactic frisbees. As always, Vagus couldn't help but reach out his hand as though to pluck them from the stars. The ships though were never quite close enough-- one of those things, he

supposed, that children could look at yet not touch. And while this thought was unsettling, it vanished quickly as it came--

For then Vagus, spectator to the sky, saw a fleet of space galleons prance into view. Each shone a brilliant silver and was furnished with rows and rows of oars, long as interstates, that propelled the ships through the galactic expanse. This couldn't be the way space travel worked-- Vagus had been in school long enough to know *that*. And yet-- it felt truer than any explanation that science could provide.

Last were the space dragons.

Their very existence could only be the most defiance of reality. And yet they still were the part Vagus enjoyed the best-- crimson heads, scaly tails whipping furiously across the summer sky. Aliens didn't have to be little green men, he thought to himself. They could be large and regal and venomous too.

Then as the beautiful menagerie was finally completed, Vagus would clasp his fingers together and pray that they might come down to lift him up as well.

Earth couldn't be so far, could it? Not when you were a space dragon.

But not once yet had the spaceships come, so Vagus resigned himself as usual to remain just an observer, watching the array of lights dance and glow. Were they fighting? Racing? Dancing? Each theory seemed just as unlikely. These were aliens, after all. Vagus knew he couldn't fathom into any part of their minds. And yet... he always tried. Despite everything, some small part of the child believed that he could understand anything if he put his mind to it. So eyes pointed toward the swarm in the sky, Vagus believed and thought and understood until his mind faded into a deep slumber...

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The universe did not grant Vagus the gift of a peaceful awakening-- instead an galaxy-rending screech jolted the boy awake.

He opened his eyes. Across the dips and curls of Midwestern prairie grass, the boy thought he could see the faint outline of something new taking its place between heaven and earth. Vagus knew that it could only be one of his aliens, come at last to answer his prayers.

But before he could go any further, the child felt something gnarled and cold grasp his shoulder. A familiar voice, like drums of war, rang out through the night. "Stay back, my child. I'll look first to see whether it's dangerous--"

For a second time, Vagus ignored his grandfather's words, wrenching himself free to sprint headlong into the grass until he was standing a few meters away from his intergalactic frisbee. He couldn't believe his eyes-- quite literally-- so he reached out a few fingers to brush the ship's metallic skin.

Suddenly another voice split the night. But this one was softer, gentler-- and most certainly not familiar.

"Child of the stars," it said to Vagus, "Why do you touch something that is not of your world?"

The boy turned his head wildly but still could not find the source of the sound. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once-- another impossibility. And yet Vagus answered it. "You're wrong. I'm touching it because it *is* part of my world. I watch it fly every night."

The child thought he could hear a soft chuckle on the wind. “Indeed you do. But to see is not to own, small one. To possess a starcraft, you must pay its price.”

“I would,” Vagus declared to anyone who was listening. “I’d pay anything.”

Again the quiet laughter. “Brave child. *Foolish* child. But your words ring true. So I will wait. And if you so choose, you may join me in the stars.”

Vagus could feel his heart leap in excitement. Indeed, how could it not-- for soon he would have everything-- a place among the aliens that he loved, a starship of his own. After all, what in his life, indeed what on *Earth* would he not sacrifice to--

“Vagus? Vagus my child, where are you?”

The words cut through him like a chill wind.

“Please come out. Vagus? I’m sorry for what I said about the aliens. But listen my child, it isn’t safe out there.”

Through haze of the night, the boy could see his grandfather’s shadow cut across the field. He grew closer minute by minute. Meanwhile the earth itself seemed to whisper “*make your choice, make your choice, make your choice...*”

Slowly Vagus inched his hand back up to the spacecraft. It glowed in the night like a metallic firefly. Hypnotizing. Luminous. The closest thing to perfection that he had ever seen.

But was it truly? Memories rushed into the child, unbidden: nights spent at his grandfather’s side watching Carl Sagan wax poetic about the stars, the old man’s habit of calling Vagus “my child,” how much those words sang...And that one summer night, when he had sat down with his grandchild and cared enough to tell him the truth.

*You don't get far in life watching aliens.*

Vagus still didn't know if he believed this--but the recollection was enough to keep him still until his grandfather's arms were wrapped tight around him. "My child...*oh* my child."

Tears ran down the wrinkles of the older man's face like stars falling from the sky. And Vagus couldn't help but cry a bit as well-- though for what, he wasn't sure.

The only thing that the child knew for certain was that if he turned around now, the aliens would be gone.