

Send a message to Gaia, wherever she might be. The air is getting thin. The finer points of oxygen are all but lost on us, who spend our lives out among the stars.

But who would choose this life, you might wonder? And why? For years, you look at the starlit night vistas, and wonder. You ask any number of retired freelancers, retired free traders and retired men who used to be free. And none of them can give you a satisfying answer. Some don't answer at all. Most of the time, they just shake heads and shrug shoulders, and shuffle away. But should you happen to look back somewhere in between the third and the sixth second after turning away, you will see them lifting their heads towards the stars. And had you been close enough, you would have seen the silent, hopeless longing in their eyes.

So you join a small crew, or rent a shuttlecraft of your own, and set out. Just to try. Just to know. Just in case.

After the first trip, you'll be bored, or possibly terrified, if you had the luck, good or bad, to end up in the middle of a fight between raiders and lawmen. Most probably both, in a bizarre dance of conflicting emotions, but with a strong emphasis on the bored.

After the second, you'll be less afraid, and bored to the point of apathy.

After the third, you'll be thinking that if this was your life, if this was all there is, if you did not have secure investments on your home planet, and secure employment to return to after the end of your leave of absence to try your wings, those long hours and days between the stars would be spent contemplating suicide.

During the fourth and fifth trips, a soothing apathy sets in. A nothingness as vast and impossible to bridge as the stars themselves. Even the boredom is subdued, hidden beneath a blanket of void and vacuum that settles like burned-out ashes on the skin of your emotions.

And then, during the sixth trip, something goes bump in your mind. And you begin to wonder. You spend those three days between the celestial bodies actually looking at the emptiness and the stars, not just seeing them in the periphery out of the corner of your eye every time you pass by on your way to the dry-toilet in the cargo hold, but actually looking. And wondering.

And during the seventh trip, that wonder has turned to expectancy. You could not say for why or for what, but the feeling is there. All through the leap between Arta Celestis and Dau, you keep your eye on the scanner and radar readouts, and your mind is sharp, in a way it has never been before.

And then, during the eighth trip, after something compelled you to plot a course just a tad too deep into gray space, just out of range of the long-range guns and sentries, the fabric of space, and possibly time, is torn asunder as the pirate jumps in, less than a fraction of an AU away. The LEDs and HUD indicators dance in spirals of electronic joy, and you cannot even begin to separate all the beeps and alarms from the silent but oh, so powerful thunder of the first positron rounds striking the hull of your ship. And yea, verily, there is a firefight.

That night, you find yourself in the shittiest bar you've ever ordered a bottle of tequila in, just two corridors down from the hangar where your trashed and

dented shuttle transport is slowly falling to bits and pieces, without a clear recollection of how you managed to escape and reach safety. And you look at the locals, people who have never travelled farther than the shuttle distance between the space station and the planet below. And you can't understand how they can be happy living their lives in the confinement of just one station, just one planet, just one starlit sky. And you have forgotten that you ever did.

And then you know.

Man bridged the nothingness between the stars for the first time over 2600 years ago. So much for the imagery of impossibility.

-- lon