

Space Psychosis

Table of Contents

<u>About this story</u>	1
<u>Copyright</u>	1
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	1
<u>Space Psychosis</u>	2

About this story

This story is about a deadly affliction – worse than SMS (Space Madness Syndrome), which is easily treated with Zat Solo's anti-SMS pills – the terrible affliction that is space psychosis. The stress of the constant danger out on the Frontier has caused more than one person to come completely unhinged in a highly destructive manner. This story is told by a young Frontier trader, who witnessed a case of space psychosis first hand.

Copyright

This story is © 2000 by Dylan Smith. The story may be freely redistributed for non-commercial purposes, provided that this copyright notice is kept intact. This and other stories set in the Frontier-Elite Universe about James Winston and others may be found at <http://www.alioth.net>. Contact the author by email: dyls@alioth.net. Contact me at this address if you wish to redistribute this story in any kind of non-commercial environment, because I would like a cut of the obscene profits you are bound to make [0]

Acknowledgements

David Braben and Ian Bell for providing the universe and the inspiration for these stories.

The denizens of #alt.fan.elite on Starchat for openly mocking me ;-)

Easy Software Products for their excellent GPLed (opensource free software) HTML to PDF (and many other formats) tool.

Suggestions about this or other stories from alioth.net are welcome.

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

Space Psychosis

[Editors Note] This story is told by Josh Smith, a Frontier tradesman. It was the first time he witnessed "space psychosis" – a bounty hunter's condition.

This is an experience I'll never forget. These events happened during February 3292. At the time I was a 19-year old crewmember on a Lanner II that did the trade rounds on dangerous, frontier systems.

Firstly, a little background. I had lived 'planet side' on Landfall in the Wolf 630 system for all my life. I was expected to go out and earn my own living when I turned 18, so I went to Sol and got myself a job with a frontier trader at what was called the "cattlemarket". This was where prospective crewmembers would mill around (like cattle), and commanders would pick out one they thought would work out well. You'd haggle over your wages, and hopefully get hired. At the time, I had no clue what a "Frontier Trader" was. Well, I had the sort of idea that they go to the further flung systems, but I didn't realise that these systems were crawling with pirates. I couldn't believe my ears when my commander, Alice Robbins, told me that I would be making over CR 10,000 per year. That was an enormous amount of money for a crewmember who ranked somewhere between amoeba and pond-scum on the crew roster. So of course I signed up immediately.

It wasn't long after this that I started meeting bounty hunters. Our trade route was pretty much fixed – we made our way to the southern Edge, taking in such wonderful systems such as Riedquat, Tionisla, Olquack and Aenze. There is one constant about these systems – they are crawling with pirates, and you'll get attacked. I almost quit after our first circuit around the edge. My nerves were shot to pieces, we'd had so many close calls. However, I saw how my bank account had increased in size, and decided it was worth the risk. I realised it wouldn't be long before I could put a downpayment on my own ship, and start in business myself.

But I digress. Bounty hunters and Frontier traders have a sort of symbiotic relationship, like those birds that live on the backs of bison. The birds eat the ticks, keeping them fed, and in return free the bison of parasites. It benefits both species. Similarly, bounty hunters stick around and escort traders. This gives the bounty hunter kills and cargo to scoop up, increasing their bank accounts and Elite ratings. In return, the trader is protected from pirates. Our normal practise was to hang around for several days in the bounty hunting hangouts, getting to know the different groups. Eventually we'd get one to tag along with us, and by that time we would usually be loaded up and ready to go. The bounty hunters would usually stick with us for the entire circuit.

Normally, we'd join up with a group at Aenze. We would dock at Francis Orbiter, and go to Jeng's Bar, which is the local bounty hunter hangout. I always enjoyed it when we stopped here. I love people watching. I soon realised that bounty hunters tended to hang around in small social groups who would go out and hunt like a pack of wolves. I also noticed that there were three main distinct personality types amongst the groups.

Firstly, there were the laid back ones. A very good friend of mine, a young lady named Victoria Wells was one of these. She was very quiet, and never seemed to get stressed out about anything. In fact, you wouldn't think she would hurt a fly until you saw her Cobra Mk.3 in action. The bounty hunters with this type of personality all seemed to have a razor sharp wit. Victoria was no exception – she was extremely intelligent and had a fox-like cunning.

Then there's the Type-A personality ones. They tend to have huge egos, and are obviously in bounty hunting not because it helps rid the galaxy of pirates, but because they get their delicate egos regularly stroked. They tend to be very touchy if they perceive any sort of criticism. They are also what I call "drama queens", a term which I hope is sort of self-explanatory. One of the groups we regularly flew with had an individual named Jack Caleb who absolutely matched this profile to a tee. He was a reasonable combatteer, but

Space Psychosis

I would try and avoid getting too deep into conversation with him. He tried to make out that he lead the group, but this was patently untrue.

Finally, there was the quiet but volatile type. I actually only thought there were two main personality types for a while, because on the face of it, these guys seem just like the laid back ones, but with one important distinction. They will suddenly and inexplicably – and very unpredictably snap when the stress gets to them. Mack Vines was one of these types. He was a couple of years older than me, and a fairly new bounty hunter. I had the misfortune to find out that he'd reached breaking point when I jokingly told him he was a crap pilot (after he collided with an Asp and had to eject). I had found that bounty hunters often joke about their more embarrassing moments, so I was just playing along. Suddenly and without warning, he exploded at me and beat the living daylight out of me. He then proceeded to start shooting me with his handgun set to the 'maximum pain' setting, until some other people in the bar restrained him. About half an hour later, whilst I was recovering over a half-litre of beer, he apologised profusely.

Of course it was this last type of bounty hunter that was most at risk from what psychologists call space psychosis. This is a mental condition where too many dogfights and too much stress eventually drives the sufferer berserk, usually in a fairly destructive manner. It's different from when an individual just snaps – like I said, when they snap, people tend to get beaten up but no one gets killed. However, once the psychosis sets in, the end results are usually very deadly.

We docked the Lanner at Francis Orbiter after a particularly harrowing circuit around the edge. All of us had taken some damage, and it looked doubtful that once the Lanner was repaired that we'd actually make any money. The only good of it was that everyone's Elite rating got a pretty good boost. However, it wasn't a member of the bounty hunting group (the aforementioned Mack, Victoria and Jack) who we were to witness suffering from this condition. Instead, it was a very experienced bounty hunter.

We wearily entered the bar. It was pretty quiet – perhaps only a dozen people were already there. Over at one end of the bar, sitting alone with an empty beermug was a bounty hunter I knew from our stays in this system. He was Miguel Perez, an extremely experienced and extremely deadly combateer, and he didn't look very happy. He seemed to be intently studying the surface of the table, and his jaw looked set rigid. Normally, he was quite a sociable fellow, but it didn't look like he was joining in with everyone else tonight. I had got to know him from about half a dozen stopoffs in this system. He was in his mid 40's, and I had picked up many pearls of wisdom about space combat in general from talking to him. He had a great deal of time for anyone who wanted to learn. I think he really wanted to give up bounty hunting at some time and become a combat instructor.

I thought I would go and have talk and see what the deal was. I learned a lesson here – when someone is furious, let them safely let off steam and don't get in the way. I sat down at his table and asked a very simple question.

"What's up? You don't look too happy there", I said.

Miguel looked up. The expression on his face shocked me. I've never seen anyone with an expression of such fury. I could almost feel waves of anger being emitted from his being. Suddenly, Miguel got up and without warning, grabbed me by my jacket and slammed me up against the wall!

"It's people like YOU who are the problem!"

I was about to ask 'what problem'. However, I didn't get that opportunity. He dropped me, and I rubbed the back of my head where it had smacked the wall I had just been thrown up against. Miguel stormed out of the room. By now, everyone was watching. A couple of his own group got up and went after him, but he spun

around and smacked both of them with his fist in quick succession. They both looked as stunned as I felt. The silence in the bar could be cut with a knife. Everyone else in the room was intensely curious as to what the heck was going on.

He had actually gone directly to his Imperial Courier. He didn't have his crew with him either. Traffic control will deny any launch requests without the right number of crew, but I've got a feeling he said something pretty forthright to the controller who tried to stop him departing. Once we realised that he was leaving the station, a few of us gathered at the window of the observation lounge to see what he was going to do, or where he was going to go. We were all thinking he would probably go down to the planet and cool off in the fresh air. However, what happened next was another surprise for us all.

There are always several long range cruisers parked close to Francis Starport. On this day, there were three in close proximity, loading up with agricultural products produced on the planet below. A steady stream of Lifters were moving to and from the huge craft, all loaded up with cargo canisters. Amidst all of this, Miguel's Courier hurtled towards one of the cruisers, and opened fire. The powerful 20MW laser made short work of the cruiser's hull, since all the cruiser's systems were powered down and it had no shielding. The powerful laser sliced into the drive section, and there was a blinding flash of light as the drive overran and exploded, destroying the cruiser. We all watched in horror as the carnage went on silently around us. Miguel was already working on the second cruiser as the few police on the station were suddenly spurred into activity. The Courier quickly spun around, and Miguel started picking off the Vipers. It wasn't long before half of them were destroyed, and the other half were fleeing the carnage. Frontier systems rarely had the cash to train the police to anywhere near the level to deal with this kind of incident.

By now, some of the bounty hunters were running to their ships. The crew of our Lanner were soon the only ones left in the observation lounge. There wasn't a lot we could do – for us to go out would be suicide. It wasn't long until we saw the bounty hunters hurtling out of the space station. The second cruiser exploded just as the first hunters were leaving the station. Miguel's Courier turned around, and the 20MW laser was soon bearing down on the people who had been his good friends, but not for long. All of a sudden he stopped firing. We thought that maybe he had come to his senses, and maybe he'd come quietly, but we were wrong.

The Courier slowly turned around to face Francis Starport. We watched as the ship started to accelerate towards the docking port.

"Grab something solid, quickly!" yelled Alice at the top of her voice.

She had realised that Miguel was on a suicide run for the station. Despite the station's size, we would certainly feel a Courier slamming into us. I dived down and grabbed a piece of the station's structure for dear life, not knowing what to expect. The accelerating Courier disappeared from view, and about half a second later, there was a tremendous explosion and the station shook violently. We could hear glasses crashing in the adjacent bar. The station's gravity took on an odd vector as the force of the impact altered the station's spin. The next sound was that of the airtight hatches slamming down as the station's air supply started rushing out of the hull breach. Finally, we heard another explosion as the Courier's drive finally failed in an uncontrolled manner, and the station's power system failed. We were briefly plunged into darkness before the emergency lighting came on.

We spent a day trapped in the observation lounge. The station's engineering team patched up the hull breach fairly quickly, but the Courier had impacted the station's main power reactor. The backup reactor failed to come online, and it was a couple of days before the engineering team could get it online. This meant we were unable to leave as there was no power for the docking mechanisms. The station also got extremely cold as the emergency batteries started to run out. We spent the two days in the Lanner since at least it was warm. The whole incident spooked everyone for weeks.

Space Psychosis

I've only seen one case of space psychosis since, and fortunately we recognised it the next time and managed to restrain and sedate the person involved. It's something bounty hunters have to be on guard for. After that day, I was certainly a lot older and wiser. Of course, Francis Orbiter was repaired completely shortly afterwards, so people new to the station have no idea what went on that day. All of those who witnessed it will never be able to forget.

© 2000 Dylan Smith.