

(No) Escape

“Control, this is Alpha-One-One-Eight-Three. Sector appears cleared.” Ryan heard Mika sigh with relief over the powersuit’s comms. This sector was worthless. This whole planet was worthless. The best way to search for ziggs was to use heat mapping, and they were in a desert. Mika was right, control sucked.

“Alpha-One-One-Eight-Three, confirm, did you say appears?”

“Sector is a desert, Control. Heat mapping is impossible. Without orbital scanning support, it is impossible to clear.”

“Bravo, how long will your fuel cells last?”

“Approximately two thousand years Control.” Mika answered.

“Estimated lifespan of your food replicators?”

“Seven hundred years.”

“O2 replenisher?”

“Eight hundred.”

“Assorted life support?”

“Shortest lifespan is about six hundred and fifty on the sanity control module. Of course, being human, we’ll be dead long before that.”

“How long have you currently been there Alpha?”

Ryan sighed. Control were real assholes sometimes.

“Two months.”

“Continue searching. Next orbital scan is available in twelve months. That’s the earliest we can get you a ride anyway.”

The slight static of an FTL radio connection faded. Control had forcefully terminated the connection.

Ryan sighed.

“Well, what do you want to do?”

Turning to Mika, Ryan shrugged instinctively. Remembering his powersuit would obscure the gesture, he vocalized his frustration. “We could search every nook and cranny of this desert and find nothing.”

“If Control ever checks our logs, we’ll be in trouble.”

“We could go mad searching all of this.”

“That’s why we have sanity modules.”

The sanity module was more accurately called the entertainment module. A bunch of psychiatrists and engineers had managed to put an MRI into the suit’s helmet, and then determine the absolute limit of what the human mind could take. In downtimes it would turn the suit into a fully immersive VR, but only when you needed it.

It had taken soldiers less than three weeks to figure out how to turn it on manually.

Mika walked up in front of Ryan, staring out at the desert. “Seeing all this really does make you feel like you are going mad doesn’t it.”

“You can’t check out Mika. Mika? Mika dammit.” Ryan stepped forward to grab Mika and shake her out of sanity mode, when the sand erupted in front of him. Six legs. Claws. Electric blue line down the back.

Ziggs.

Ryan leveled his gun and fired. Of the five to burst from the sand, four went down. One landed on Mika. Ryan aimed, then cursed. His Rapier Three rifle would punch through the zigg, and then through Mika’s armor and out the other side. The suit was designed to withstand zigg weapons, which were weak but plentiful. Dropping his rifle, Ryan charged forward. The zigg meanwhile ignored him, doing something to Mika’s suit. Grabbing it, Ryan ripped it off and used the suit’s enhanced muscles to crush it with a satisfying crunch.

“Mika. Mika respond.” Stepping in front, Ryan looked through the blue forcefield visor at Mika’s face. It was vacant. She was in sanity mode, locked in. Ryan stepped back around and looked at her suit.

Manual override. It's here somewhere.

Ryan found it where the zigg had been. Attached was a small bronze box. Ripping it off, Ryan yanked the manual release.

“Mika?”

Nothing. Ryan pulled again, then inspected for more damage. The suit appeared fine. Stepping back in front, Mika’s face had the same empty expression. She was gazing off as if into the distance, focusing on nothing.

Gathering his wits, Ryan stepped back towards where he had dropped his gun, only to find it missing.

“Oh that’s just fucking perfect.”

Spinning, Ryan saw the desert appeared perfectly still. Ryan flicked on his speakers.

“I know you’re out there.” Ryan shouted, his voice projecting out over the desert loud enough to burst eardrums. “Show yourselves you damn cowards.” Ryan spun, then spun again. They had attacked Mika when her back was turned.

Why aren't they attacking now?

Ryan stopped spinning. He was getting dizzy anyhow. *Run through the events.* He had been on an FTL call with Control. They had given them orders to keep searching for signs of ziggs. Control had hung up, then he had discussed what to do with Mika. She had blown them off, entered sanity mode and...

And now she is locked in sanity mode.

That was it. The bugs had found a way to lock her in sanity mode. Life support systems were incredibly hard to hack except sanity mode, which was a last minute addition. This was a new form of attack, and Control needed to learn of it.

The second realization hit him harder. The electric blue hadn’t been glowing, it had been a duller tone. It had been skin. These ziggs weren’t wearing armor. Glancing around, Ryan considered. Satellite scans indicated the desert sand was miles deep across much of the planet's surface. Could this be the ziggs homeworld? The ziggs colonized in a chaotic way, making guessing where it was difficult at best. This sector of space didn’t seem to be a zigg stronghold, but that meant nothing.

Ryan snapped on his FTL radio. Control needed to know about this. In front of him, the sand exploded. Dozens of ziggs came at him at once.

“Fuck! Get off! Fuck you! Die!” Ryan shouted incoherently at the ziggs while grabbing at them. They were overwhelming him even as he crushed a new one every second.

“Control. I found the zigg homeworld. Control. Come in.”

Silence. The ziggs were retreating. Ryan made one last dive at one as it sunk beneath the sand, then sank down, defeated. They had managed to break his FTL radio somehow. It didn't matter how, he didn't have the parts to repair it, and if he did they would just attack again. He was stuck here. Turning back to Mika he considered. Help wouldn't arrive for twelve months, at which point he could contact via lightspeed radio if the ziggs hadn't broken that too. If he did contact them he may not survive until they landed to pick him up.

In twelve months sanity mode would activate at least once.

Eight years on the front line. Most soldiers racked up lots of zigg kills. Ziggs were more numerous than humans, but also weaker. Ryan outstripped his whole unit in kills. He had joined Strike Team Zeta, and then excelled there as well. When ziggs overran Harenell, he had ordered his team to retreat, seeing that they couldn't win. So he had been assigned to several scouting missions as punishment. He suspected this was supposed to be the last one. Now it seemed it would be his last mission ever.

Ryan started a patrol. Twenty meters. Turn. Twenty meters. Turn. In a box around Mika he marched, head on a swivel. His suit fed him stimulants. It indicated when he should introduce a random

alteration to keep the enemy from becoming too familiar with his route. It engaged night vision. It blocked sunglare. The first day passed easily. By the end of day two the painkillers were kicking in, blocking out the muscle aches he was feeling. By the end of day three, stimulants were running low. More importantly, the sanity module was cutting them off, demanding he find a safe location to sleep. Ryan sat down in defeat, gazing at Mika's unmoving suit.

If he let sanity mode engage, he would die. If he slept, he might die. He had no way of knowing. If he continued on, he would pass out anyway, sanity mode would engage when he woke up, and he would die. He needed to do something drastic if they were going to survive this.

Ryan stood up. Marching over to Mika, he locked his suit and engaged sentry mode with self destruct protocol. After making sure his speakers were still on, he started speaking. "I'm engaging sanity mode. You know, the thing my friend did before you attacked her. I know you can understand me, or at least have someone to translate. I have engaged the self destruct. If my armor detects one of you within five meters of me or Mika, it will blow up. The micronuke inside will kill any zigg within six hundred meters. You have a choice to make. Attack us and die, or leave us and live."

He flicked off his speakers. In his mind, he pictured the two of them, standing there, one in front of the other, for centuries. Millennia. He pictured their suits holding in their corpses, rotted away to the bone, still standing, still active, still on guard. *The suit will keep you alive. One year. They will be here in one year.*

Ryan turned on sanity mode.