05:55
05:54

Sirens wailed as flashing emergency lights strobed overhead. Sam ran out of the control room into the corridor of the underground complex. There he saw the trail of destruction Solaris had left in his wake. Among the huge chunks of concrete that littered the ground, Sam saw several Marines sprawled on the floor, their bodies at jarring angles. Closest to the door, Mac was slumped over, motionless, his hand still clutching his chest.

Is he out cold? Or is he . . . ?

Sam put his fingers to Mac's neck. No pulse. He struggled to latch onto one emotion as conflicting thoughts ran through his mind.

Mac deserved this end, but still . . .

What about the others?

A severe, robotic voice rang out above the wailing sirens—

"T-minus five minutes until detonation."

"Sam!" a voice called out.

Sam could just make out Cody at the other end of the long corridor, staggering forward with his parents. Despite the smoke haze, their faces were clearly etched with shock and fear. Cody pointed meaningfully toward the outside wall and then waved at Sam, gesturing for him to look at the wall where he stood. He shouted something but Sam couldn't make it out. Sam turned to see a line of doors next to him.

What's behind these doors?

Sam took a small, cautious step forward to read a sign at the nearest door. Two words were printed above an electronic control pad, illuminated by a bright red light:
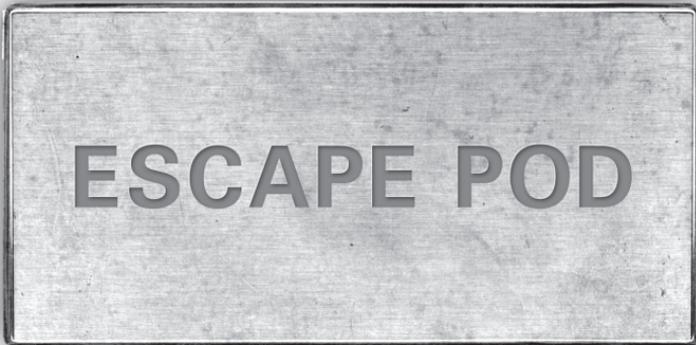
He looked back to Cody and his parents and saw that the light next to their door was green.

An escape pod must still be in there, ready to go . . .

"Go!" Sam shouted to Cody without thinking, waving wildly. "*Go!*"

Cody hesitated for a moment, then gave a quick nod and hurriedly followed his parents through the open doorway. Sam scanned the corridor. The sirens echoed through the deserted complex. All security personnel had disappeared what seemed like a long time ago, even though only minutes had ticked by.

All the doors close to him showed red lights. If he squinted to see down the still-smoky hallway in the other direction, he could just make out a few tiny green lights in the distance.

Sam went to sprint toward them but suddenly felt a tight grip around his arm.

"No," Solaris said. "*We* stick together."

Sam jumped. He slowly turned back to look at Solaris, fear rising in his throat.

I thought he'd gone, left me for dead.

Sam stood straighter to counter his fear. "To go where?" he said.

Solaris paused, evaluating Sam for a moment. A chunk of rubble near Sam's feet tumbled farther down a pile of blasted concrete. Sparks spat erratically from where live electrical cables dangled from the ceiling.

Without answering, Solaris started to walk down the corridor, dragging Sam behind him.

They navigated around the shattered slabs of concrete

toward the green lights indicating the available escape pods, until they reached a tall mound of collapsed wall, the site of the main explosive impact, which blocked the corridor.

"You first!" Solaris said, pushing Sam ahead of him to climb over the obstruction.

Sam shook off Solaris' grip and started to slowly crawl up and over the pile. Pieces of concrete and debris shifted and slid under him as he tried to make his way over. A live wire sparked and hissed near his face as he made it to the other side.

"Stop!" Solaris commanded, raising his weapon to reinforce the command. Then, as Solaris scaled the rubble with little effort, time seemed to stand still for a few seconds as Sam ran through his options.

There's no way I can outrun him here. I wouldn't make it to the closest pod . . . the live wires . . .

Tobias' science class had the answer—*conductive electricity.*

Sam looked down at his rubber shoes, then back at Solaris, fully clad in his metal body armour, covered in high-tech weapons circuitry.

In one quick motion, Sam took a step toward Solaris, grabbing the wire as he moved to bring it into contact with his enemy's mask—

ZAP!

On connecting with Solaris, a bright blue spark arced in

the air and ran up Sam's hand and arm. He was sent flying backwards with such force that he slammed into the wall several metres away.

Sam scrambled up, trying to move as fast as he could despite being dazed and unsteady on his feet. He looked at Solaris, who had been sent flying even farther in the opposite direction back up the corridor. There was now a sizable distance between them. Sam could see the shimmering black form of Solaris slowly starting to rise . . .

"T-minus two minutes until detonation."

Sam saw another door with a green light. He hit the door release. Inside was a cylindrical-shaped pod, with a bench seat running around the inside. He stepped into the small space, feeling as though he were inside a missile.

The corridor door hissed shut, and Sam heaved the inner pod door closed, spinning the locking wheel as fast as his shaking hands could manage. As the lock slid into place, a tiny screen inside lit up with a command option:

ENTER DESTINATION CODE

Huh? What?

Panicked, knowing Solaris would be at the door in a matter of moments, Sam punched in the first four numbers that came into his head: 1 3 1 3.

CODE ERROR

ENTER DESTINATION CODE

Sam tried again with a set of random numbers.

C'mon! Please work!

DESTINATION CONFIRMED

PRESS TO LAUNCH

Sam exhaled in relief. He leaned over to the launch button and pressed it. Numbers began counting down from ten. As he watched the digits flick by on the screen, he strapped into a four-point harness fastened to the pod wall, his still-shaking hands making him fumble as he did up the clips.

Got no idea where I'm going, but anywhere is better than here.

. . . 5

4

3

2

1

The noise of the launch was deafening. Sam put his hands over his ears as the escape rockets ignited and the pod shot upward with great speed. There were no windows so Sam had no idea what was happening outside. All he could make out was the immense noise and the feeling of motion as he was pushed down into his seat.

Sam counted the seconds from launch, while trying to remember back to another of Tobias' science classes where they had watched a space rocket launch.

How many kilometres per second was it that they travelled?

He could hear Tobias talking about angles and direction and velocity in his head . . .

Inside the windowless rocket, he kept counting the seconds but then gave up. It was impossible to tell how fast or how far he was travelling.

This is designed to get survivors away from any catastrophe, including a nuclear blast. I'll be a long way away by now . . .

Suddenly, the roaring of the rocket engines petered out, with the pod continuing to glide in a smooth trajectory. Sam tried to relax. He looked around and waited, and listened. There was an odd moment of being suspended mid-air, where he felt weightless.

CLUNK, CLUNK, CLUNK.

Sam heard what he guessed were the rocket booster packs separating from the body of the escape capsule. For the first time the thought of landing entered his mind.

How does this thing touch down? And how will anyone ever find me when it does?

"OK . . . that's OK, I'm sure I'll figure it out when the time comes," Sam said to himself. He felt the speed of the pod starting to increase again. "Except . . . now I'm not flying, I'm just—"

Falling.

Sam froze upright in his seat for a few seconds, listening carefully to the muffled sounds outside the walls. The speed of the dropping capsule continued to pick up until—

BOOMPH!

He felt the jolt of arrested motion as what must have been parachutes were deployed. Immediately, the

free-falling descent slowed. Sam relaxed a little back into his seat. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe steadily again.

Nothing to do now but wait . . .