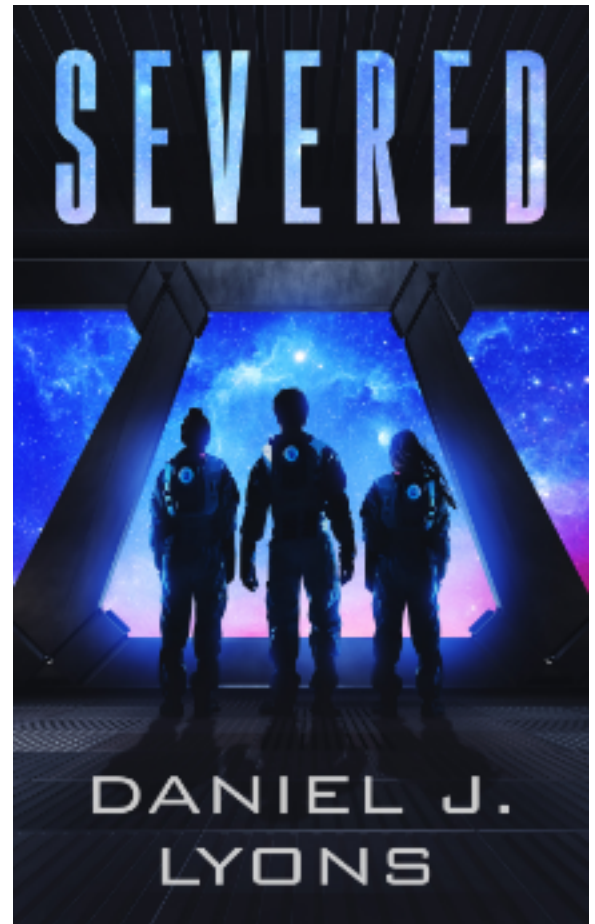


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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

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“On the stars” living is the ultimate in privacy with modern technology providing a comfortable connection to civilization. When that connection is suddenly severed, three unprepared private vessels must deal with true isolation:



Chapter 1

The quarterback paused, cocked back her arm, and scanned the field while two opposing players converged on her position. Her arm snapped forward, the ball arced towards the end zone, then the screen went blank.

A moment later, “no signal” appeared across the screen beneath an animation of a shrugging squirrel.

“Aaaaug!” Violette Hamilton looked up from where she was sprawled across the sofa. “The feed cut out!”

Across the room, Violette’s father, Eric Hamilton, was shaking his screen. “I was in the middle of grocery shopping!”

Both screens flashed red with an incoming override communication from Dianne Hamilton, the captain (also mother and wife respectively) of the PCV *Hamilton* where they resided. “The feeds just went offline, and support is not responding. Can one of you pop through the Door and see what’s going on?”

“I’ll do it,” Violette shouted, as she rushed out of the room. “You know Dad’s useless with tech!”

Violette ran into the foyer and, without pausing, punched the Pad on the left side of the Door’s frame. The Door blurted a response and, caught by surprise, Violette bounced off the blank and unyielding back of the Door’s frame.

“Sagged!” she shouted, pinwheeling her arms in an attempt to recover her balance.

“Language!” her father said, chastising her from just outside the room as she finally crashed to the floor.

“The Door didn’t open!” She pointed at it accusingly as her father entered the room.

The Door’s frame looked much like an old-fashioned doorframe (although the left side of the frame was much wider to accommodate the control Pad) but without a physical door and with a lightly padded grey panel covering the opening from the back.

The Pad, which Violette hadn't thought to glance at before this point, was currently configured as a raised red triangle on a grey background. Normally the variable surface of the Pad oscillated between two states: a raised blue disk indicating that the Door was open and a green version of the disk that indicated it was closed but ready.

After her father helped her up, Violette flipped out a small panel located just above the Pad—then yelped as a drenk fell out, spread its wings, and flew loudly towards the doorway.

Eric swatted at the insect. It bounced off his fingertips and disappeared into the corridor. "I thought we got rid of those pests!"

They returned their attention to the Door and the status screen built into the back of the newly opened panel.

"Status report," Violette ordered.

The screen lit up. In large white letters on a red background, it displayed:

**Portal disabled - Unsafe conditions detected at terminus
Please contact technical support**

"Technical support," Violette said.

The Door blurted again, and the message changed to:

**Communication failure - Channel sync did not respond
Please contact technical support**

"Thanks," she grumbled.

Eric lifted his left arm and tapped his plain black wristband, which chirped softly then projected an image of a middle-aged redheaded woman in the air above his forearm.

"No go here," he told his wife's image. "The Door's fully busted."

Now pacing the room, Violette was aggressively tapping a control panel projected onto her forearm by her own wristband, a two-tone whistle sounding in response to each tap. "I can't get *anything!*"

Violette, suddenly realizing that she was tapping controls like someone her parent's age, quickly moved on to shouting commands at her wrist instead.

Ignoring his daughter, Eric continued. "What if we can't get the Door open?"

A look of concern crossed the image of his wife's face. "I'll be right there."

"Dad, grab a wipe out of the cabinet," Violette said, swiping closed the control panel on her forearm and moving back towards the Door at the back of the narrow foyer. "I want to clean the contacts."

Violette started to release the first of four clamps on the outside corners of the Door, which held it securely in the mounting port built into the wall. As she released the clamp, the status screen went dark and the raised triangle smoothed out, fading to the same grey as the rest of the Pad's surface.

"Help me with this," she said, grabbing her side of the Door.

Her father tucked the container of wipes he just retrieved from a cabinet under his arm, then grabbed the opposite side. After a firm pull, the Door frame came away from the mounting port. They carefully leaned the Door against the cabinets that covered the fore side of the room.

Along the left edge of the newly exposed recession in the wall were two round sockets, a blue one near the midpoint, just behind where the Pad had been, and a red one just above the bottom.

"Here." Her father handed her a moist wipe from the container.

"Thanks." Violette carefully wiped out the blue socket. "Okay, let's put it back."

They both took hold of the Door again, carefully lining up ridges in the mount with matching indents built into the sides of the Door frame. Once it was properly aligned, they pushed hard until there were several loud clicks.

"Let's fasten the clamps and reboot it," Eric said, as he reached up to fasten the top clamp on his side.

After Violette snapped the last clamp back into place, a yellow disk raised up out of the Pad. A moment later, the Door blurted. The disk turned red and reshaped itself into a triangle.

Violette sighed. "Let's try the Conduits and see if we have better luck."

Her father pulled another wipe from the container and joined her at a panel at the midpoint of the aft

wall of the room.

The panel contained six sockets arranged in three columns. Populating the left two columns were the family's four Conduits.

The Conduits were six-inch-long cylinders, each containing one end of an entangled quantum tunnel. On the inner end of each conduit was a standardized plug, which had been inserted into the wall panel. Common to each Conduit was a small round data port and a status light, both positioned side-by-side across the middle of their flat outer end. Two of the Conduits in the panel were metallic silver and, along with the single green Conduit, currently displayed red status lights. The final red cylinder's status light was yellow.

The two silver Conduits, both plugged into the center column of sockets, also featured white rectangles on the lower half of the outer end, which had been used to add handwritten labels. The one in the bottom socket was labeled "data," and the one in the top was labeled "system."

The green cylinder, plugged into the lower left-hand socket, was embossed along the top with the two silver overlapping rectangles that formed the Prosperity Portal System's corporate logo and had "SECURE ID P90-00192" engraved along the curving bottom edge.

The red Conduit, in the upper left-hand socket, was the ship's emergency receiver and had no markings.

"Don't touch your mother's," Eric warned, at the sound of his wife's footsteps in the corridor.

"I'm just going to try data," Violette replied, while reaching for the silver Conduit with the corresponding label. She pushed it back into the panel and twisted it counterclockwise. There was a click, and she pulled it out of the panel.

As she removed the Conduit, a green version of the Prosperity logo became visible on the upper side next to a black label reading, "Class A Conduit - Model 439."

She took the wipe from her father and applied it to the contacts on the end of the Conduit, then carefully wiped out one of the previously empty sockets before plugging the Conduit in there—

pushing and twisting again until it clicked.

The status light flashed yellow for a moment before changing back to red.

“Nothing,” Violette said, disappointed.

A moment later, Dianne Hamilton, dressed in her usual baggy overalls, stepped into the foyer.

“Anything?”

“No,” her husband replied. “Violette cleaned the contacts on the Door and moved the data Conduit, but neither of them reconnected.”

Dianne grunted in response, pulled a worn technician’s screen from her pocket, then wiped lint off it with her sleeve.

Glancing at her daughter, she said, “How many times do I have to tell you, cleaning the contacts is an urban myth. Besides, the Door contacts are only for triggering disconnect alarms and uploading to the beacon, they don’t affect functionality.” She widened her glance to include her husband. “Now, clear a path so I can get a look.”

They both stepped aside to allow Dianne to get to the Door. She pulled a cable out of the back of her screen and plugged it into a port in the Door, which had previously been covered by the closed status screen. As she did, the red triangle on the Pad smoothed out and a white numeric keypad rose in its place. She typed in an access code, and the display on her screen changed to show a technician status readout.

“I still don’t see any errors on our end,” she said, swiping on the screen. “The other side is responding, so the quantum tunnel is fine. Wormhole generator reports ready, backup battery engaged, no network... This can’t be right...”

“What?” Violette asked, craning her neck and attempting to read her mother’s screen.

“They must be spoofed,” Dianne said, with quiet disbelief before continuing in a normal tone. “The sensors read no atmosphere and, frankly an impossible level of radiation. The Door will never engage

under these conditions, real or not.”

Dianne unplugged the cable and turned to the Conduit panel as Violette shuffled back out of her way.

She plugged the cable into the red Conduit. “The other end of the emergency receiver’s on internal power, no transmissions received—nothing that I couldn’t see from the bridge.” She moved the data Conduit back to its original position. “Since a different socket didn’t work, I’m just going to put this back where it belongs.”

After the status light illuminated, passing again through flashing yellow to solid red, she plugged in her cable. After a moment, she repeated the process on the other silver Conduit, then finally the green Conduit.

“No local errors or response from any of the remotes,” she said, sliding the cable back into her screen. “The power’s out.”

“Maybe someone broke into our Location and unplugged everything when they spoofed the sensors,” Violette suggested.

Her mother rolled her eyes.

Her father looked at her with disbelief. “Who would do that?”

“I can’t imagine,” her mother answered, not entirely kindly, “but at this point, all we can do is wait for support to respond to the disconnect alarms.”

* * *

Over an hour later, Violette was angrily pacing again, this time in the Hamilton’s family room.

“It shouldn’t take this long! We should have been up and running in less than half an hour! That’s why we paid for the level two support package!”

“We paid?” her mother muttered under her breath.

“Even if they smashed everything,” Violette said, oblivious to the commentary, “they should have had the tunnels remounted and installed in an alternate Location by now. We should have heard

something!"

"Well," her father replied, "at least there isn't anything coming through the emergency receiver so it can't be all that serious."

"Unless the station is just gone," Violette grumbled, making an exploding sphere gesture with her hands.

"Don't say that again!" Dianne glared at her daughter with a dark look. "Prosperity is the largest station in the sector. It can't be just gone!"

"Then why haven't we heard anything!?" Violette responded in frustration.

"Both of you calm down!" Eric said. "It's probably a big outage, and they just haven't gotten to us yet."

After taking a deep breath Dianne replied, "Your father's right." She forced a weak smile. "Remember when we first moved in and they screwed up our power bill? We were offline for nearly two hours."

Violette's glare was unconvinced.

To prevent his daughter's retort, Eric changed the subject. "Okay, let's watch something and give them time to work. I bet we hear back before it's over."

"Uh, the feeds are down," Violette replied condescendingly. "There's nothing to watch!"

"There's got to be something in the cache." Dianne walked over to the large entertainment screen on the fore wall of the room and plugged her technician's screen into a port on the side. "Here, look, there's plenty of stuff."

The default fine art slideshow faded from the entertainment screen and a list of media options appeared.

"But we've already watched those!" Violette shouted in exasperation.

"Pick something that you'd like to watch again," her mother responded tersely. "I'm going to lock the cache so that they don't get deleted, just in case."

Violette loudly told the screen, “Weekly Sports Highlights,” then grudgingly planted herself on the couch.

Chapter 2

The young couple were lost in each other's eyes as they danced to their favorite piece of classical music, spinning together as the long-dead singer's voice screeched out the catchy refrain.

They were dancing in the middle of a tiled dance floor at the back of a large hall. Ornate columns spaced along the outer walls supported the high arched ceiling and separated large windows that let in the fading sunlight. Several large tables were arranged around the room, along with one smaller table, positioned right near the edge of the dance floor, that had a large tray half full of slices of wedding cake.

The couple's dresses flared as they spun again, his lifting to reveal a large scar on his left calf, which he refused to have nano-scrubbed away and referred to as his "keepsake."

As the oft-repeated story went, eager to impress, he had agreed to join Maria, his current dancing partner, for a day of rock climbing on their first date. Having done very little climbing in the preceding years, he spent nearly a week practicing to make sure he wouldn't embarrass himself.

When the day arrived, he walked to her apartment with great anticipation and complete confidence. That confidence faltered when a step gave way and his foot fell through, a sharp edge opening his calf along the way, until his bodyweight wedged his leg into the hole to just above the knee.

After he was extracted by emergency services, Maria spent the remainder of the day with him in the emergency room. An uncomfortable portion of that time was spent with the skin on his leg held tightly in place by a medical clamp as the skin-join compound stitched the ragged edges back together.

Maria helped him pass the time by maintaining conversations about anything and everything.

Upon his release, they finished the day with a late dinner at his place before she tucked him in for a solid night's rest and kissed him goodnight.

After that day, neither of them had eyes for anyone else.

Other couples danced past, several pausing to congratulate the newlyweds, their voices lost in the

pounding music.

The newlyweds paused at the clinking sound of cutlery tapping on wine glasses. They turned to each other just as Captain Alvin Faro's wristband vibrated for his attention.

Reluctantly, he pressed a button on the top of the holographic memory album that sat on the small table just to the left of his command chair. The kissing couple faded, leaving behind a dull, grey-walled room.

The grey room was the bridge of Alvin's ship, the PCV *Faro*, a cargo vessel that had been in his family for three generations. Taking up most of the curved front of the bridge was a large window looking out into space. The squared off back wall was broken only by a single, centrally located arched entryway. His command chair was positioned in the center of the bridge and, aside from the small table, was the only furnishing in the room.

With a sigh, Alvin double tapped his silver wristband, prompting a tall virtual screen to appear in front of him, immediately followed by two curved holographic control surfaces, which grew from either side of the screen and wrapped around Alvin.

The grey of the room faded to black. Beneath the new control panel and the command chair a blue, circular platform with a low silver railing appeared. To Alvin's right, his virtual assistant, currently in the guise of a tall, silver robot, faded into place.

Around the platform, a detailed, but not to scale, view of the space between the vessel's current position and its intended destination began to appear, starting with a large red sphere for their destination, followed by individual stars that appeared in the exact order in which they had been born.

Above his head stretched a thick dotted line that started somewhere behind him and ended at the red sphere in the distance. Each segment of the dotted line had a thinner line extending from its closest edge at a ninety-degree angle, which was surrounded by three figures. The first figure, positioned above the line, was labeled "Time to Destination" and decreased as the lines moved forward, as did the second "Distance to Destination" number directly below the line. The final figure, positioned off the

end of the line, was a countdown clock that indicated when the vessel was expected to reach the start of the connected line segment.

A message appeared on the screen, character by character, as if being typed by hand:

Data feed disconnected - no response from support

The message was redundant, mainly appealing to Alvin's love of turn-of-the-technology dramas and the days of command line computer hacking. A red status indicator on the virtual control surface by his right hand had already provided the same information.

Another red status indicator, labeled **POWER**, had a yellow strip of virtual paper sticking out from its right side reading, in block letters, "Mike - Thursday 8 am" and below that, in handwritten script, "Remember to pay for the parts *before* Wednesday!"

"Jeeves," Alvin said, addressing the robot, "diagnostic report."

A bulky, old-fashioned screen appeared in the robot's right hand. It raised it towards its flat face. A series of whirring noises sounded from inside its holographic arm as it did so.

"My scans indicate that our Location has been compromised." The robot's harsh metallic voice reported, "There is no response from the Conduit, emergency receiver, or Door."

"Check the logs," Alvin commanded, tapping several virtual controls as he cross-checked the robot's findings. "What happened?"

"Searching..." the robot said, its square blue eyes displaying scrolling lines of black pseudo-code. "Just before we lost contact, the Door went into emergency lockdown."

A virtual sheet of red paper suddenly appeared directly in front of Alvin, floating between him and the screen. It was titled "Critical System Failure" and contained a list of warnings:

Primary Zero-Point Generator offline
Secondary Zero-Point Generator operating at 97% capacity
Multiple flares detected - filament failure immanent
Immediate load reduction required
Immediate generator maintenance advised

Alvin flicked the warning away for the thousandth time and asked, "What triggered the lockdown?"

“According to the log,” the robot replied, more code scrolling through its eyes, “high radiation levels.”

“How is that possible?” Alvin glanced at the robot for the first time.

“Unknown.” Its arm emitted more whirring noises as it lowered its screen. “There is no additional data.”

“Dismissed,” Alvin said with disgust.

The robot faded.

The only reasons that Alvin could come up with to explain why the remote receiver would stop responding so quickly were if it had been tampered with, which he thought highly unlikely, or if it had been completely destroyed, which he thought to be even less likely.

Alvin focused on the virtual control panel in front of him and attempted to connect with the remote end of the emergency receiver, certain that he would have better luck than the virtual robot.

* * *

Emergency receivers were part of the legally mandated equipment manifest for any registered spacecraft and were required to operate for at least a year after being disconnected from their normal power source. To achieve this, they were powered by class 5 Zero-Point Generators, which, despite being the smallest and least expensive versions available, made up ninety percent of the cost of the expensive devices.

Although ZPGs were, by far, the safest source of power available, with the damage caused by even the most catastrophic failure being completely contained within the generator’s casing, their manufacture was quite the opposite.

The dangerous point occurred during the stage where the Casimir filament aperture was connected between the two ends of the compressed quantum tunnel—a process that was successful only half the time even with modern manufacturing techniques. The danger was in the roughly one-third of these failures that were exothermic.

Although the vast majority of these exothermic failures were fairly minor, ranging from burning out

the aperture or quantum tunnel plate to small explosions that destroyed the partially assembled generator, one in ten held the potential for catastrophe. Humanity had learned just how catastrophic in the very early days of human interstellar expansion.

After a failure during early development work aboard Quantum Power Systems' research station in orbit around Mars destroyed a lab and killed several researchers, all ZPG development was moved to the planet Detroit.

Detroit was one of the first planets colonized by humanity and had been wholly funded by private corporations with the intention of establishing a fully industrial planet that would allow for nearly unlimited mining as well as hazardous manufacturing facilities.

Quantum Power Systems set up their new lab on the most remote part of the planet in two parts, positioning the build room and the control room on opposite sides of a mid-sized mountain. Slowly, and after replacing the build room several times, progress was made, and a manufacturing process was established.

The final build room was torn down to make way for a factory so they could move from individual builds to a proper assembly line. The factory included many precautions, including separate and heavily armored rooms where the aperture was to be connected, but the researchers had greatly underestimated the potential yield of a failed connection.

Disaster struck just after the first test run units had been shipped out for review, and the resulting explosion vaporized the mountain and most of the surrounding countryside.

During the literal fallout, the planet's backing corporations collapsed, including Quantum Power Systems.

The explosion was an extinction-level event, with the debris polluting the air and thickening the atmosphere enough to drop temperatures well below the human comfort level. The surviving population had to be evacuated and the planet abandoned.

The test units were positively received and demand for more grew steadily.

Under increasing pressure, the patents and research were finally sold after two decades of legal wrangling. They went to a consortium under the condition that they follow strict guidelines, later incorporated as laws, to prevent future disasters, which limited manufacturing to deep-space stations remotely controlled via secure quantum tunnels.

Due to the costs involved in building these factories, very few ZPGs were manufactured in the early years, mainly large and profitable units destined for military and deep-space use. These costs finally began to fall after Prosperity Portals commercialized a much cheaper generation of secure quantum tunnels, their trademarked Conduit.

* * *

After a fourth failed attempt, Alvin finally accepted that the emergency receiver must somehow have been destroyed. It was a hard acceptance because it also meant that his Conduit and Door end points must have met the same fate and that his connection to the rest of humanity was truly severed.

Unless another craft happened to pass the *Faro* in the Prosperity-Ginhard shipping lane, there would be no way to call for help.

Alvin called up the most recent shipping schedule, then closed it quickly after reading that the PCV Xavier was not scheduled to depart on its return trip to the station for nearly three months.

The critical system failure warning appeared in front of him again.

He flicked it away and shouted, "Jeeves!" The robot reappeared. "Engage battery power to reduce generator load."

"That is not advised." The robot consulted its screen again. "Battery power is intended for use as an emergency backup."

"This is an emergency. Battery power will lower the load on the remaining generator."

"True," the robot was swiping at its screen, "however, severe load reduction would be the most advisable course of action."

"Do both, but maintain full power to any room I'm in."

Looking up from its screen, the robot acquiesced with a nod. “Acknowledged. System power distribution set to follow mode, engaging battery power.”

Alvin leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and said, “Maria, I have a bad feeling about this.”

Several minutes later, he tapped another control to dismiss the robot and virtual controls, levered himself out of his chair, and slowly shuffled out of the room.

* * *

His shuffling took him to the midpoint of the *Faro* where the vessel’s foyer and cargo elevator were located on opposing sides of the central corridor. Alvin opened a cabinet adjacent to the elevator doors and removed a portable screen containing the current cargo manifest, a small knife, and an extension cord, which he slung over his right shoulder.

Stepping into the elevator car, he tapped the control Pad, which changed from a raised blue down arrow to a raised green square with a recessed down arrow in the center. The rarely-used elevator creaked its way down to the base of the single deck of the attached cargo container.

As the doors rattled open, lights flickered on to reveal long rows of plastic-wrapped pallets containing a variety of packaged Doors ready for market.

Alvin activated the screen, scrolled through the index, then tapped on the “Endpoints” entry.

He groaned as he read the “Y” in the entry’s location field. “Of course they’re at the back.” He made a few more taps on the screen to move the container’s starboard cargo arm to the Y section.

Alvin spent several minutes walking down the corridor between the stacked cargo and the cold-wall of the hold, passing through each alphabetical section until he finally reached his destination one section away from the large loading doors. Above his head and nearly to the roof of the container on its main horizontal track awaited the large, articulated cargo arm.

He spent several more minutes leaning against the wall to catch his breath.

The packages on the pallets in the Y section were thinner than the ones in the forward sections and only contained one-half of a Door set with the other half in storage back on Prosperity Station waiting

for the new owner to rent a Location on the station to install it in. While both ends of a Door set were technically endpoints, the one containing the emergency beacon was referred to as a terminus and was intended to be installed at the far end of the doorway.

Back to breathing normally, Alvin started to scan the labels on the endpoint packaging, ignoring the white basic configurations as well as a spattering of yellow custom configurations, until he found a pallet filled with packages with the gold labels of deluxe models.

The deluxe models were so named due to containing a class 4 Zero-Point Generator that allowed them to operate without being connected to external power.

Alvin pulled out his screen, called up the cargo arm controls, and entered the pallet number. The arm descended along a vertical track until it reached the first pallet in the stack containing the deluxe Doors. It inserted its cargo forks into the pallet and moved it to an adjacent stack, repeating the process until it reached the requested pallet.

After the cargo arm placed the requested pallet in the corridor, Alvin pulled out his knife and slashed the plastic wrap that held the packaged Doors in place, then pulled out the closest one. After another short rest, he freed the Door from its packaging and leaned it up against the wall.

Despite having an internal power source, the Door endpoint needed to be attached to external power for the initial setup. Alvin grabbed the extension cord, which he had dropped to the floor during his first recovery session, and plugged one end of it into the closest outlet and the other into the lower left-hand corner of the Door.

He flipped out the status screen and pressed the power button on its side, but nothing happened.

After a moment, he cursed himself, then started sorting through the packing materials that he had tossed carelessly aside while freeing the Door. Finally, he found a small box labeled "Mount-free installation kit" and tore it open. Inside the box were two large round plugs, which he left in the box, and four small rectangular plugs, which he removed and inserted into the mount clamp slots at the top and bottom of either side of the outer casing.

He pressed the power button again, and the screen display lit up with:

Auto-configuration in process

A minute later, the screen turned red and displayed:

**Terminus not found
Please contact technical support**

He tapped on “technical support,” and the screen changed to:

**Communication failure - Channel sync did not respond
Please contact technical support**

Alvin groaned, then started pulling out the next deluxe Door.

After going through every Door on the pallet with the same results, he forced himself to accept that there would be no help coming from the station.

Chapter 3

The PLV *Rockhard* had started out as a municipal passenger shuttle before being retired and sold at auction to, as he loved to remind anyone within earshot, *Captain* Lawrence “Bud” Nesmith. His father had promised him a vessel of his own for his eighteenth birthday, and Captain Bud, as he now preferred to be called, decided that converting the shuttle to his needs would be a fun project.

First, he hired a mechanic to upgrade the shuttle into a long-range vessel suitable for use as an “on the stars” residence. This entailed replacing the original fusion reactor with a Zero-Point Generator to eliminate the constant need for refueling. As part of that process the fuel tanks were removed and the resulting voids converted into storage space.

Next, he brought in a contractor to pull out all the passenger seating and put down flooring to cover the attachment points, remove the larger bathroom with the changing table that he would never need, build an ample bedroom, then upgrade the snack bar and bridge.

Feeling a little left out by this point, and running out of birthday money, Captain Bud decided to finish the last few parts of the job himself. He converted the original data closet into a shower for the adjacent bathroom, relocating the conduit connections into some cabinetry that he acquired for free from a contractor friend, and installed his new Door.

Finally, the *Rockhard* had been registered out of Prosperity Station, and Captain Bud had started his much-anticipated bachelor lifestyle.

* * *

Captain Bud was pleased with his latest overnight guest. They had met at a late afternoon “Linner” party thrown by one of his friends. He had been reluctant to attend the party when first invited but, in his typical fashion, he had made the best of it and put his best face forward. His best face had hit it off with a gorgeous woman who had accompanied it, and him, back to the *Rockhard* immediately after the meal.

The *Rockhard*’s bedroom was the largest and most plush space aboard; ornate trim work separated the swirled plasterwork ceiling from the trendy wallpaper, which ended at a highly polished hardwood

floor. A series of discrete brass light fixtures were evenly distributed around the ceiling, which, at the onset of the previous evening's activities, had been set to provide minimal illumination. Aside from the bed, there was very little in the room: one nightstand on Captain Bud's side of the bed topped with an antique lamp, a large armoire, and a high-quality materials printer.

Beside the printer stood the sizing rod, a thin, eight-foot-tall sensor that could gather all measurements necessary for the printer to create perfectly tailored clothing—presuming there was enough raw materials in the recycling queue or an equivalent amount of used fabric had been inserted into the direct recycle chute located beneath the print-bed. Despite being capable of printing almost any basic object, as well as simple machines, like an adjustable spanner, Captain Bud utilized it exclusively to print out the fashions that were required to maintain his social standing.

He rolled out of bed with practiced caution, making sure that he didn't disturb whatever her name was.

Before leaving the room, he spent a long moment appreciating the view of her muscular leg sticking out from beneath the twisted silk sheets of his emperor-sized bed.

Finally, sighing with contentment and scratching his privates, he turned, left the room, and crossed the *Rockhard's* central corridor to the small bathroom. After closing and locking the door behind him, he stepped into the even smaller, and not quite square, shower to start his daily grooming routine.

An hour later, he reluctantly stopped primping his spiky hair to answer a loud call at the door.

"I'm due at work in twenty and your Door won't open!" a female voice shouted. "I can't even connect to your feed!"

"Chill," he said confidently, as he opened the door, "the *Captain* is on deck."

Wrapped in nothing but a towel, he strutted past her and into the main living area of the vessel.

This living area was the second largest space on board and was open to the *Rockhard's* central corridor. It was split into two undivided areas according to flooring type: carpeted on the aft end and tiled on the fore.

The tiled half of the room contained a battered dining table and three mismatched chairs. Past the forward wall was the kitchen, accessible through a squared off entryway and a large serving window with a small shelf beneath it.

The Door was located in the carpeted section, squeezed between the aft wall (which was covered by an irregular collection of cabinets, drawers, and open nooks) and a large top-of-the-line entertainment screen. All the nooks in the aft wall contained framed screens displaying Captain Bud participating in, what he felt to be, an impressive variety of activities.

Opposite the entertainment screen, with the two legs placed just past the raised edge of the carpet to give it a slight backwards tilt, was an ancient and heavily patched red couch.

Captain Bud approached the Door; it was attached to the cold-wall of the room by four short lengths of grey tubing. One end of each tube was flattened and inserted into a mounting clamp slot in the Door's frame while the other end was embedded into a small grey blob stuck to the wall. Two ratty cables snaked from behind the Door frame and out of the room through a roughly cut hole.

"Where did you get this thing anyway?" She gestured towards the Door. "I've never even heard of Archer Engineering."

"They mainly make industrial screens. A good friend of mine works for them and got me an amazing deal." He toggled the open switch a few times, *hmm'd* thoughtfully, then said, "I've never had any problems with it before. I'll run some diagnostics from the bridge."

Captain Bud left the room, slightly quicker than would seem necessary, and headed towards the front end of the corridor. She followed but was brought up short when he shut and locked the door behind him.

She sighed, "I'm so gonna be late."

Twenty minutes later, still wearing just the towel, Captain Bud returned from the bridge.

"Okay, the skinny is that there's some sort of communications disruption. I've set course for the station at top speed, *just as a precaution*, but I'm sure we'll be reconnected long before we arrive." At her

concerned look, he added, "There's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about?" she said angrily. "I've got a *job* to get to!"

"Now you have a vacation to get to!" he retorted with a wide grin. "*With the Captain!*"

"I don't think that's quite the treat you imagine it is," she replied coldly.

"You're such a kidder," Captain Bud said, with a dismissive gesture and a laugh.

"I'll *kid* you if you don't start taking this seriously!" She balled her hands into fists as she shouted, "What kind of *disruption* blocks Doors and Conduits? What *the hell* is going on?!"

"C'mon, Aria, *chill!*" Captain Bud said, with a hurt expression as he started to make his way towards the bedroom.

"Ariel, it's *Ariel*," she responded, in an even colder tone.

"Uh, meant like a nickname," Captain Bud attempted, while paused in the bedroom doorway.

"I'm not big on *nicknames*," she snarled back, "so stick with Ariel."

"Sure, we're chill!" He closed the bedroom door behind him.

She rolled her eyes, sat down on the couch, and addressed her red wristband, which was coordinated with her now rumpled party attire. "List all local content."

A display was projected above her forearm with a disappointingly short list of items.

"Bring up tomorrow's presentation." At her command, the screen moved farther away and expanded.

"Let's start on page six. I wasn't happy with that anyways."

* * *

Over an hour later, Captain Bud stepped out of the bedroom.

Ariel looked up. "Reconnected yet?"

"No, I don't think so," he replied, pulling at his shirt in discomfort.

"Maybe you should *actually check*."

"Sure, sure," Captain Bud said, turning towards the bridge. "That's what I was *going to do*."

Ariel grunted and turned back to her presentation. "Next page."

Captain Bud returned a few minutes later. "Nothing yet, but I set the diagnostic scan to run continuously, so we'll know immediately when they get everything back to normal."

"And how long are we going to be stranded out here?"

"Stranded is hardly fair," Captain Bud said, with a theatrical hurt expression. "I'm sure we'll be connected again before we know it."

"Okay," Ariel said struggling to keep her voice calm. "What's our ETA to the station?"

"Not long."

Ariel gave him a dark look that had little effect.

"Only a couple of weeks *at the most*."

Ariel looked disappointed for a moment before returning to her presentation.

"Ooh," Captain Bud said, to dispel the quiet, "is that for work? You never told me what you do for a living."

"I'm a sales associate for Prosperity," Ariel said woodenly, before continuing in an annoyed tone. "At least I *was back* when I was actually *showing up for work*."

"I'm sure you'll be there by lunch," he said with a grin. "What does a 'sales associate' do anyways?"

Ariel gave him a hard stare. "I convince people to buy things from us that they were planning to purchase from someone else."

"Cool, cool. How long have you been doing it?"

"An hour less than I was *supposed to be doing it*."

After a few seconds of silence, Captain Bud's face lit up, and he opened his mouth. At her angry look, the unexpressed thought retreated to the far side of his brain and hid quite effectively.

"Uh," he started, searching for a replacement thought, "I should probably conduct my daily inspection."

Captain Bud jumped up and fled to the back of the ship, where he let himself into the airlock for the docking hatch.

After ten minutes of looking out the small, round window in the center of the hatch, he returned and, with exaggerated casualness, walked to the bridge.

An hour later, Captain Bud finished his "inspection" and started pacing back and forth along the corridor.

* * *

"I usually break for lunch around now," Ariel said from the couch where she had spent nearly the entire morning. "Do you have anything to eat around here?"

"Lots!" Captain Bud jumped up from the best of the three dining room chairs (the blue one with the ample padding) where he had finally settled. "I'll grab some meal kits from the kitchen."

"Meal kits? Aren't those way more expensive than just using regular cartridges?"

"Not if you know where to buy them," Captain Bud replied, as he opened a cabinet attached to the cold-wall of the kitchen. "Besides, it's so much easier—one cartridge and you're done!"

The inside of the cabinet had no shelves and contained four brown boxes, along with a haphazard selection of loose meal kit cartridges.

"Four cases of chili fries?!" Ariel said, after reading the red labels stuck to the sides of the brown boxes.

"Got them on clearance after they changed the potato recipe," Captain Bud said proudly. Then, looking suddenly uncomfortable, he added, "There's some burgers and fish and chips in here, too." He pulled out two appropriately labeled kits to illustrate his point.

"It doesn't look like there's enough in here to last all that long."

"Don't worry," he replied with confidence. "There's plenty more below deck."

"Oh, then I'll just go see if there's anything more to my liking down there. Or maybe I can make something good out of the emergency supplies..."

"Not necessary!" Captain Bud said quickly. "Besides, it's just an unfinished half-deck crawlspace, totally unsuitable for guests. And, as your host, I should be serving you!" At her incredulous look, he added, "If it will make you feel better, I'll go below, pick up a better variety of kits, and double-check the rest of the supplies."

"It would make me feel *much* better," Ariel said ingenuously, grabbing the burger kit cartridge from Captain Bud's hand and roughly tearing off the seal.

"Sure, sure." Captain Bud placed the fish and chips cartridge down on the counter and started through the corridor entryway. "Make your lunch while I check the supplies. But, starting tonight, I'm *Chef Bud!*"

Ariel groaned, then focused on inserting the pre-programmed cartridge into the kitchen printer.

"Plates are in the cabinet just above the printer," Captain Bud said, with a sense of relief before heading towards the bridge where the hatch to the utility and storage deck was located.

He returned a short while later with two boxes full of cartridges, mostly burgers but also including more fish and chips, as well as a variety of pasta and noodle dishes.

After a painfully long afternoon, broken up by two more failed attempts by Captain Bud to strike up conversations with his unhappy companion and a catered kit dinner of fish and chips (with a side of chili fries), the day finally came to a welcome close.

"It's late, let's turn in." Captain Bud smiled suggestively.

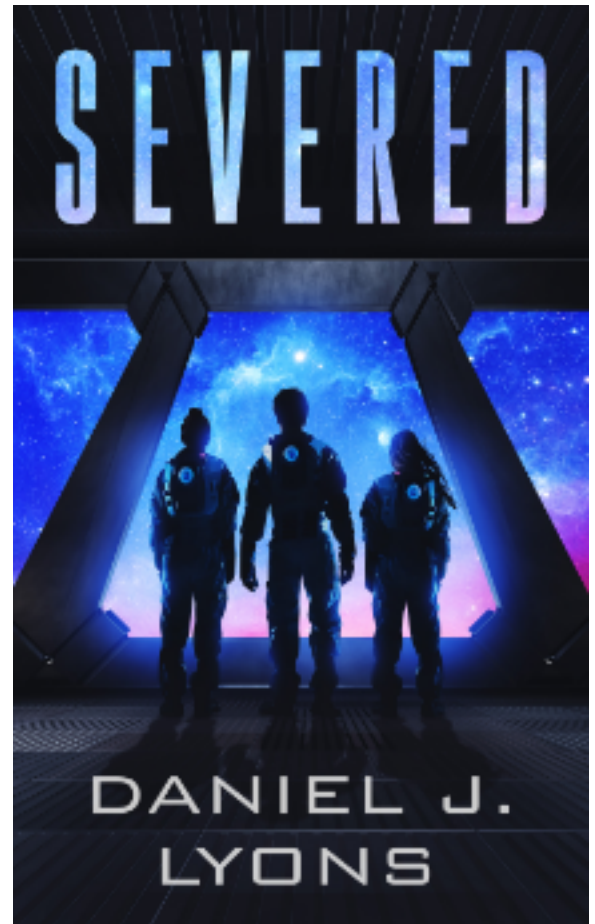
"I'm so ready to turn in." Ariel got up quickly and moved across to the bedroom doorway. "But, one thing's for sure." She stepped back into the room and slapped the Pad beside the door. "You're sleeping

on the couch, *Captain!*"

The door shut and locked with a loud, simulated click.

Thank you for reading this sample of [Severed](#)!

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