

# **Silversands**

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**a PDF sampler of the first chapter from the  
forthcoming debut novel published by**

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# Chapter One

## *Transponder Handshake*

**A**vril Bradley's hands were shaking as she unfastened the straps holding her to her bunk. The trip through the wormhole had been rough, like a rollercoaster ride through a furnace, and she could hear the ship's heat shield creaking and groaning as it cooled. She slipped on a lightweight leather jacket and pulled her shoulder-length hair into a short ponytail. During the trip, her foil pack of cigarettes had fallen onto the deck. She picked them up and lit one, catching her reflection in the mirror above the sink. Her eyes were pale blue like an autumn sky and her features were sharp, as if etched by the quick strokes of an impatient sculptor.

There was a groan from the cabin's other bunk. It was Nina Doroshkow, the *Pathfinder's* middle-aged Lithuanian navigator, a tall muscular woman with a platinum crew cut and a lopsided frown.

"Do you have to smoke?" she said, waving a hand in front of her face. "My stomach's still doing cartwheels. This is worse than morning sickness."

"Really?" Avril took a last drag and mashed the half-finished butt into a plastic cup. To avoid straining the air recyclers, she was limited to five cigarettes per day. "And exactly how many times have you been pregnant?"

"Not once," Nina said. "But I've heard stories. Did I tell you about my cousin? Triplets. She was sick for months."

Avril reached over and tapped the softscreen taped to the bulkhead above Nina's bunk. It brought up an external rear view. On the screen, the gate they'd just emerged from was a barely visible ring of black against the stars. Its distance was almost impossible to judge with the naked eye, but a shifting digital readout in the corner of the view showed that it was slowly falling behind them as the *Pathfinder's* gentle acceleration carried them forward.

"Do you think we'll ever discover who built the gates?" Nina asked, sitting up.

Avril shrugged. It was a favourite topic of conversation amongst the crew, and everyone seemed to have his or her own pet theory. She reached into her jacket and pulled out the brooch that she habitually carried in the inside pocket. She fixed it to her collar, and then clipped her commcard to her lapel.

“Beats me,” she said.

They stepped out of the cabin and made their way along the narrow gangway between the crew’s quarters and the chill ranks of storage tanks where the refugees from River Fork were stored. At the end of the gangway, they took the glass elevator forward to the command deck.

The levels they passed through were ergonomic and utilitarian, laced with ducts and corridors. Decorative plants covered every available surface. Nanofilters in the ducts absorbed carbon dioxide and other toxins from the air. They passed small cargo modules holding priceless mineral samples, astronomical apparatus and cryogenically preserved samples of flora and fauna; and larger modules, which held emergency supplies and homesteading equipment.

Avril and Nina, like the rest of the crew, wore simple olive green one-piece shipsuits. Laced with nanotech, these garments could serve as pressure suits in an emergency, stiffen to provide splints for broken limbs, and store energy that could be tapped later to increase the wearer’s strength. They were also capable of monitoring body functions and providing support during high-G manoeuvres. The pastel triangle of the Tanguy Corporation logo was prominent on the left breast beside the blue star insignia of the New United Nations Space Agency.

“You okay?” Nina asked.

Avril nodded and clutched the handrail as the floor of the elevator surged under them. She still felt a little sick and the uneven motion wasn’t helping. “I’m just looking forward to finding out where we are.”

Nina consulted her commcard. “Don’t get your hopes up,” she said. “According to the ship we were in the hole five and a half years this time, which means we could have travelled that many light years in any given direction.”

She put a hand on Avril’s shoulder and spoke in a gentler tone. “And even if we found him, it’s been over sixty years since he left Earth; there’s no guarantee that this man you’re searching for is still alive. I’ve seen you disappointed twice now.”

Avril shrugged her off as the elevator slowed. Her hand went to her thigh pocket and her fingers brushed the creased edge of the photograph inside, tracing the familiar cracked and curled texture. She pulled it out and smoothed the creases with her thumb. The picture was of a man in his late twenties standing on a pebbly beach. The wind ruffled his hair and chopped spray from the surf behind him. He was caught in the act of turning toward the camera, as if about to speak.

“I know,” she said, tracing his face with a fingertip as the elevator doors sighed open. “But perhaps this’ll be third time lucky.”

The *Pathfinder*’s command deck was a complicated multi-level array of virtual sensor readouts and flat data screens. Nina picked up an old plastic cup from her navigation console and grimaced at the cold, curdled liquid inside. She passed it to Avril. “Better get rid of this mess before we reach turnover,” she said. “We don’t want it floating all over the place when we cut the thrust.”

Avril dumped the cup into the recycler. “The maintenance program must have a glitch,” she said, squeezing into her acceleration couch. The effects of wormhole transit were wearing off, leaving her insides feeling like a clenched fist, and her stomach growled in protest as she lit another cigarette. As she began activating the instruments on her communication console, automatic air conditioning systems cut in, unobtrusively extracting the smoke.

The first thing she opened was a damage report. Some of the ship’s more delicate systems had suffered vibration damage during the transit and a couple of hull plates had buckled in the heat – but otherwise, there was nothing serious. Behind her, Mission Commander Henrik Charbonneau stepped onto the bridge, ducking to avoid the overhead screens as he edged up behind Nina’s couch.

“What’s our status?” he said. He had a thick French accent and his close-cropped hair was grey at the temples, adding to his natural air of grizzled authority.

“All stations report green, all crew members fully recovered from the jump,” Nina said, without looking up from her monitor. “We began automatic acceleration as soon as we cleared the gate. Ship’s systems are running smoothly and the medical suite reports no problems with any of

the storage tanks. All sixty-seven refugees are still in suspended animation, alive if not exactly healthy.”

“Have you any idea where we are?”

Nina touched a button and a revolving three-dimensional star chart appeared on one of the larger overhead screens. The *Pathfinder*'s course of random jumps was represented by a jagged yellow line. “From initial observations, the ship's almost one hundred percent certain that we're here.” She illuminated a star five and a half light years from Epsilon Eridani. “Tau Ceti. Nearly twelve light years from Earth. It's a main sequence, yellow-orange dwarf with about ninety per cent of the mass of Sol but only sixty per cent of its luminosity.” Her voice took on a clipped, professional quality as she shifted into a routine made familiar by years of training and repetition. “We're accelerating outward from the gate at one gee. There are a couple of unremarkable gas giants on the edge of the system, and one rocky planet in the habitable zone. Estimated time of arrival: three days, fourteen hours and twelve minutes.”

Charbonneau leaned over her shoulder and frowned at the displays, then spoke to Avril: “Any sign of life?”

Avril glanced down at her board. “We're picking up some radio chatter from the planet,” she said. “And there's some evidence of point-to-point laser communication in the system's asteroid belt.”

“Excellent.” Charbonneau rubbed his hands together. “And what do we know about the planet?”

Avril called up a sub-window on the display. “It's at approximately the orbital distance of Venus. Size is point nine of Earth, mass about point nine five. The length of the year is two hundred and twenty-eight days, and the days are just under thirty standard hours. The air is thin but has a high oxygen content, which suggests the existence of indigenous life.” She made an adjustment to her screen. “And I'm picking up a signal from orbit.” She frowned. “I think it's a ship.”

Charbonneau narrowed his eyes. “Who are they?”

“I have access to their commnet,” Avril replied. “I'm initiating transponder handshake. At this distance, it'll take about eight minutes before we get anything.” She punched up the relevant menu and information flickered across the space between the *Pathfinder* and the distant transmitter.

When the reply came, she transferred the incoming data to one of the larger softscreens and began scrolling through it.

“What have we got?” Charbonneau said.

“All the usual stuff: crew and cargo manifests, ship specifications.”

“Skip it. Tell me who she is.”

“Aye, sir.” Avril accessed the sub-channel that contained the ship’s identity and flight log.

As she read, her mouth dried. She swallowed and ran a hand across her tied-back hair.

Nina looked over her shoulder and grunted in surprise. “Third time lucky,” she said.

Avril laughed, still unsure if she should believe her eyes. Deep down, she’d never believed they’d find the *Anastasia*; the odds against it had been too great. But now, there on the screen, she could see the old ship’s call sign.

“Do you think it’s really her?” she said.

Nina leaned toward her. “Just because that’s the ship he left on, it doesn’t mean he’s still alive,” she said.

Before Avril could reply, a thin, high-pitched alarm sounded on Nina’s console. The older woman slid back into position and scanned her emergency displays.

“We’ve got a pressure spike in one of the deuterium tanks.”

“Can you control it?” Charbonneau asked.

Nina shook her head. “There’s some sort of malfunction in the containment field.”

“Then jettison it.”

“I can’t!” Nina slapped a palm against her console. “The controls are frozen. I’m completely locked out.”

“Bradley!” Charbonneau barked. “Run a diagnostic. We need to trace that malfunction, fast.”

“Aye, sir.” Half a dozen emergency lights started blinking for Avril’s attention. She pulled up enough menus to realise that whatever was causing the malfunction in the fuel containment pod was also affecting the comms system. Allowing her reflex training to guide her fingers, she opened an emergency diagnostic routine but, before she could initiate it, the whole ship shook with the force of an explosion and the lights went out.