The background features a dark, textured sphere in the upper right quadrant, surrounded by intricate, swirling, and overlapping lines in shades of gray and black, creating a sense of motion and depth.

Space Trippers

Book one

Trippin'



Books By A. Lightbourne

~Space Trippers Book 1~

Trippin'

The adventure begins when Valesque's unfinished ship is commandeered by the enemy, with her on board! To make matters worse she is getting blamed when her long lost device is found on the ship and strands them in uncharted space. Can she figure out what is happening in time? Or will they all be destroyed by her own hand?

~Space Trippers Book 2~

Just Passing Through

After the disaster in the hydroponics lab the ship needs more food supplies. But the trade aliens seem a little too interested in Valesque for Tim and Sanic's comfort. With the addition of a new, sifting alien girl, they set out to rescue her.

~Space Trippers Book 3~

A Frosty Farewell

The ship needs water, so they are off to the nearest water trade planet. Valesque has found some disturbing secret files on one of the Upper Crewmen. Will they get the water they need? And if they do will they be going home with one less crewmate?

~Space Trippers Book 4~

Will Work For ~~Food~~ Parts

As the ship makes its first jump home, the tracker Valesque found points her to a nearby planet. Making an excuse to stop for repair supplies, can she find her contact on the mysterious supply planet where all the technology keeps disappearing?

~Space Trippers Book 5~

Don't Even Ask

Valesque is on a roll, only one step away from meeting her mysterious contact! All she has to do is follow a map to a certain planet and talk to a guy named Melwesúl. Sounds simple enough, right? But how do you find someone on a planet where the answer to every question comes from the barrel of a gun? Our heroine's only chance is to butter up the planet's chauvinistic leader. But can no-nonsense Valesque, who couldn't even manage to flirt with peaceful Skmead, really fool the macho gunslinger? Or will she end up as just another notch on his well-worn hilt?

~Brass Hearts~

A Steampunk Fairytale

All Dulcy Spry wants in life is to inherit her father's small, family business, and help run it while she waits. But after a fateful encounter with the snobbish Mr Pridget on the roadside Dulcy's best friend, Alise, and younger sister, Rosa, drag the reluctant Miss Spry into high society, where lies, manipulations and family secrets threaten to ruin her peaceful life and cast her into the dismal prison of an unwanted marriage.

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This Book is dedicated to

all my readers, I hope you enjoy the story as much as I do.

Special Acknowledgment to:

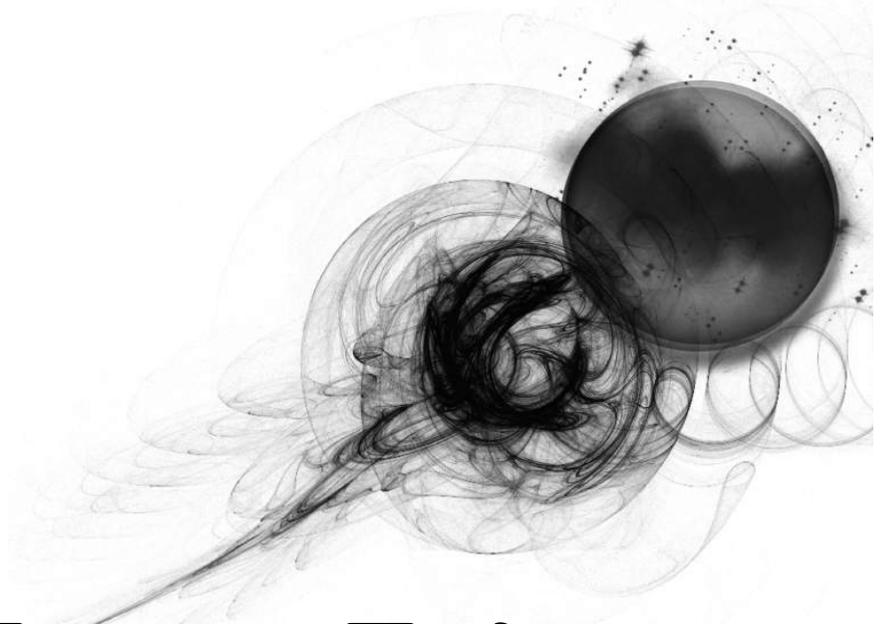
My sweet, supportive Hubby who is the best thing in life!

About the Author:

A. Lightbourne lives in Florida with her husband and menagerie of animals.

Her love for writing started at an early age, writing stories in her 1st grade journal.

She is a certified PC tech and artist, with a deep background in designing and building her own electronic devices and computers, knowledge she uses to bring Scientific Engineer Valesque and all of her creations to life.



Space Trippers

Book one

Trippin'



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Chapter One:

- Battle Lines -



Valesque Rhaugh could not help but smile, she smiled at everyone, all of the engineering teams that were preparing to leave the project for lunch, all of the hard-hatted inspectors as they passed her in the hall. Everyone got the same big, toothy grin from the Chief Scientific Engineer.

She could not stop smiling, everything was wonderful, everything was perfect. Not quite finished, but perfect.

She loved her work. She loved this ship. She loved the look of it, the luxurious feel of it; she even loved the sharp 'new' smell of it. But most of all she loved it because it was hers, she had designed it, she had planned it, she had even helped build it! It was her most fantastic dream, which had now become her most precious reality.

This was finally one thing she had done just for herself and not out of an attempt for reconciliation. Being as she was from a pure line of Virrilians it was expected that she would follow the old traditions. Instead she followed more in her great grandmother's footsteps and challenged the rules of her people in deciding for herself how to live her life. In return she was, of course, disowned by the family circle and was considered a disgrace to her family name.

To Virrilians true honor does not come from the talents you were born with but from the achievements you make that are against your natural inclinations.

Therefore, Valesque was to be a warrior, a military officer, not that Virrilians are a warlike race but because it was the one thing that was totally against her scientific nature. She had tried for a while to comply by attending, though very briefly, the 'Corseccan Galactic Military training school'. She was soon kicked out however for 'non-military conduct' and went into her natural field of expertise, scientific engineering.

She had traveled to many places that others had never dared dream to go. And had done many things in her life she was not very proud of, some of which had been done in her scientific attempt at appeasing her family.

The latest and worst fiasco in this department had been the 'Space Tripper', a device she had built to aid her people in the ongoing galaxy wide war in their sector. But her attempt had once again been denied and even scoffed at.

A device that would not kill but just send enemy ships through a space warp never to return, it was absurd!

At least it was to the Virrilians. But it had not appeared so absurd to some other party it would seem, for a few nights after her proposal to her people the contraption had vanished from her high-security lab. By this time Valesque was more relieved than alarmed at its disappearance, she hated the idea she had even made such an ominous weapon, and she did not really care much where it had gone.

The Virrilians did care however and when the rumors got around that the Space Tripper device had been sold to their enemies Valesque quickly became her home world's most wanted war criminal.

Valesque thought the whole thing very hypocritical. If they honestly believed she had sold the horrible device to their enemies, they should have considered her very accomplished and honorable.

After all; building war devices and then selling them to the other side was certainly not in her nature.

So with her last attempt at honor with her family falling into smoldering ruin she turned her back on the whole idea and started the construction of the first major accomplishment in her life that had nothing to do with her family, nothing to do with her people, nothing to do with anyone but herself. The I.S.A Magellan was the glorious product of her selfish desire to succeed just for the sake of succeeding.

She had finally been left up to her own devices and she had done one heck of a job, even if she did say so herself. And she did.

Of course, technically speaking it was really Dr. Warner's project. He had obtained permission to start it. He had gotten the significant grant from the Intergalactic Scientific Association for it. He had even helped with some of the detailing and had put in a few of his own experimental gadgets. Nevertheless, it had been her dream, her planning, and her soul that had gone into it.

Now as she walked the gleaming corridors of the Recreation Deck she felt a deep sense of pride and satisfaction in her accomplishments. This deck in itself was one of the crowning achievements of the whole design. Developed as a recreational and exercise facility it could also boast of being among the most beautiful areas of the ship. The deck was four stories high with a generously wide three-tone corridor, encircled in row upon row of exterior facing windows all around the deck, and was luxurious enough to have been on any of the first class civilian pleasure cruisers. But it wasn't.

On the Recreation Deck there were three separate Hydro-lift areas, placed at convenient intervals along the deck.

In between these were numerous well equipped, and improved, holographic recreation rooms. Two large park-like areas were on either end of the rows of Holo-rooms, at the front and rear of the

Recreation Deck, complete with walking tracks, artificial greenery and a pool filled with an experimental thicker-than-water liqui-gel that would stay put in its containment but would feel like pure water to swim through. The shallower wading type pool had been placed by the spacious and well-supplied childcare facility at the rear of the deck; where trained personnel would care for the non-school aged children, while their parents were on duty. A wonderful way to continue your child-psychology studies!

The entire ship had been designed and constructed with the health and happiness of the scientists and crew in mind. Being as it was an exploratory vessel where veteran and up-and-coming scientists and engineers alike could work, develop and discover, it had been built as a community within itself. Able to satisfactorily accommodate, entertain and educate large numbers of people for prolonged periods of time.

As Valesque continued toward the last Hydro-lift bay, she began to notice a fairly steady stream of people coming and going along the opposite side of the deck. Not just people, non-personnel, non-engineering people! Talking, laughing, and carrying what appeared to be large duffel bags over their shoulders.

Crew commission duffel bags!

Ever since her brief, but educational, military experience Valesque had a deep loathing for anything military. She had dealt with them during several of her morally challenging projects and had always found them to be obnoxiously callous and irritating. She had sworn to herself when she had first drawn up the plans for this vessel that not one military officer would ever step foot on her decks. And here there were throngs of them!

Chief Engineer Valesque quickened her pace; these people were definitely not here to admire her ship. She passed a group of them that were checking some papers in their hands as they crowded around a ship location map near the Hydro-lifts while a chime

sounded and a male voice boomed over the ship's communication system. "Attention please, the ranking Captain of the I.P.A Vortex is now on board, all members of the flight and control crew are to report immediately to the Control Deck. Repeat: All members of the flight and control crew are to report immediately to the Control Deck. That is all."

"A ranking military captain on myControl Deck, we will just see about that!" Valesque spat hatefully, giving the obviously confused crowd an unnoticed scowl as she forced her way through to the lift. Hitting the emergency close button with a ferocious punch of her finger before anyone else could join her.

Valesque Rhaugh was no longer smiling. Her ship was crawling with a military regulation crew. She hated commissioned personnel of any rank or graduating class. Outwardly, she was enraged but inwardly she was just hoping it was all a mistake; that the Warmongering General had not won. She directed the lift to head for the Control level, hoping to find some answers and fast.

Valesque was not happy as she made her march to the control room.

Somebody was messing with her ship and she was not going to take it lightly. She found herself wishing as she rounded the last corner that Dr. Warner was there to back her up, but there was no going back now as the automatic doors slid open to the ship's Command Center. Valesque was surprised at what she found there, but not enough to slow her.

The room was very large, over two stories in height. The double automatic doors led onto the upper floor of the Command Center. To the right on the far wall was the door to the Control Deck's conference room. To the far left of the entrance was the door to the Captain's Observation Room.

Immediately to the right and left, on the same wall as the door she entered were several computer stations all facing ahead; these were for the many ships operations, such as scanners, weapons, communications, engines etc.

The Captain could order these stations to perform any tasks that needed to be done, such as scan the area or target and destroy an obstruction ahead.

Straight ahead to the right and left were two long counters inlaid with computer panels. The Operations Commander and his coordinators used these posts. They oversaw all the critical operations of the ship including the power supplies, engine conditions, weapons system operation, scanner operations, communications and so on. Their job was to correlate all the information on the ship's operating functions and relay them to the Captain if there were any abnormalities, as well as figure out ways to fix or work around any ship's function problems that came up.

Between the two operations stations was a long narrow gangway with rails all around it. From here, you could oversee the flight crew below. From the very end of the observation point, you could look straight down on the pilot at his control panels. To his right and left were several key flight stations that gave him all pertinent information on space conditions that were fed to them by the control crew at the scanning and communications stations above. In front of the pilot was a very large open area that dropped down another half storey and ended in a two-storey-tall and deck-wide outer facing window that showed where the ship was heading.

These outer facing, clear panels wrapped back around to where the Flight Deck ended, behind the pilot's peripheral vision field, giving the flight crew a panoramic view of where they were heading.

But none of this is what Valesque was interested in, for straight ahead of her on the end of the observation point above the Flight

Deck was a lone man, looking out over the Command Center in perfect ease.

“Fazar!” the Engineer exclaimed upon catching sight of the familiar figure. “What are you doing here, who ordered this crew on board my ship?!” she demanded of him furiously.

The man calmly held up a hand to stop her. Fazar was a middle-aged, non-military Captain that had been handpicked for the Magellan’s maiden voyage. Which was a good two months away maybe more seeing as construction had been slowed by some unwelcome military attention, namely a General snooping around and causing trouble.

However, Dr. Warner had gone out to put an end to it today so everything could proceed on track. Now with Warner gone and the presence of the milling crew along with their future Captain invading her ship, she more than wondered at the connection.

“If you looking for Captain,” came Fazar’s heavily accented and carefully calculated reply, “she over there”, he said, nodding his graying head in the direction of an auburn haired woman clothed in full regulation uniform as he looked at Valesque through his heavily lidded eyes. He had been expecting this confrontation ever since he had received the orders to launch, and he was obviously taking it in his usual calm manner. After all, there was no arguing with the Intergalactic Planetary Alliance, not if you wanted to live anyway.

“Oh, she is, is she?” Valesque murmured, squaring her shoulders for battle as she turned heel and walked briskly toward the indicated quarry. Virrilian Corseccans are not known for their tact or decorum and, as Valesque proceeded toward the unwary Captain, she was living up to that reputation to the letter.

"Remember," he called out to her in his proverbial way as she changed targets, "if you too quick to boil over you may get into hot water."

Valesque paid no attention to his warning; she was used to him always having some adage to say in every situation and generally just ignored them.

“Who put out the order to commission this ship?!” Valesque demanded again as she approached the uninvited Captain.

The woman who at closer range appeared to be a good ten years older than Valesque turned very slowly toward her assailant, appalled at such an outburst. Captain Fairbanks was a very strict military captain. She did everything by the book and she expected each member of her crew to do the same. She regained her composure however upon discovering it was not a crewmember but an outraged Tech-Labs Engineer who had verbally assaulted her.

“I demand to know who gave orders for my vessel, and I demand to know now!” Valesque continued bitterly.

The Captain looked her over quickly and ascertained that although the girl’s nails were neatly squared off at the fingers, she was indeed a Virrilian.

“If you will follow me,” she began patiently, noticing that part of the arriving Control crew was beginning to stare, “I will discuss the matter with you privately”, she said, ushering the younger woman into the Observation Room. The Observation Room was behind an automatic door to the left side on the Control Deck. From here, the ship's Captain could view the control crew through one-way glass walls that faced the control deck, while getting away to themselves. Straight ahead as you entered the room was a large outer facing window with automatic privacy blinds, before it sat a large smooth, glass top desk. To the left was a wall with a built in display unit, to the right was a wall filled with rows of computer screens, each one showing the data on one of the control center's stations. From here, the Captain could oversee everything the crew was doing, down to the information on their screens.

The Captain had not been in this room before and she tried to hide her surprise as she entered it, but she was never very good at hiding her feelings, she supposed it due to her red hair. And there were many surprises on this ship.

“So,” Valesque erupted as soon as the doors had closed, “who authorized this?”

“I don’t see what concern it is of a Tech-Labs worker”, the Captain responded calmly, as she walked about the room trying to remain unalarmed as she surveyed its unfinished state. “But I receive my orders from my commanding officer, the same as you.”

The young Scientist scowled, “I receive orders from no one”, she hissed, narrowing her eyes at the intruding Military Captain. In the dim light of the room, the girl’s eyes shone brightly as her naturally pale, Virrilian skin took on an almost eerie glow.

“I see”, the Captain replied softly, not really paying attention as she pondered the presence of the large cables that cascaded from the open ceiling panels.

Valesque tried to remain calm. “Just what did ‘your Commanding Officer’ tell you about this ship, anyway?” she finally asked, noting how the other woman regarded the incomplete state of the room. It was obvious she had not been briefed on the Magellan’s present state, and maybe when she was she would see the mistake and disembark the vessel with her crew.

“I was informed that the Vortex was undergoing some minor . . . refurbishing”, the woman replied, her red hair shining in the dim light as she glanced up the web of cables she was nearest to. “But that their completion was not necessary for our mission.”

Valesque laughed aloud, so loud the Captain thought for sure the crew outside could hear her. “First of all, lady,” the young scientist began, regaining her composure. The Captain glanced at her

coldly. "Captain", Valesque corrected, conceding. "First of all, this is the I.S.A Magellan, S as in Science, and not the `Warpact' or whatever military ship you are looking for. And secondly, this ship is NOT being remodeled, it is being built! As in constructed, created, assembled, put together originally, finished!" she exclaimed in her usual thesaurus way, stepping forward and grabbing two cables out of the tangled mess the Captain had just been puzzling over and snapping them together as she uttered the last syllable.

"And furthermore," she continued not even pausing for breath, as the Captain regarded her in amazement, "the Magellan is not, has never and won't be, for quite a while, on any `Mission'! And now I would suggest, Captain, that you and your crew get off my ship!" the young scientist added forcefully, enraged at the woman's obvious lack of decorum, for she just kept staring over the Scientist's shoulder and glancing back at her amused.

Valesque wished then and there she had waited and let her partner talk to this obnoxious Captain. She could never keep her temper, she hadn't even been with her five minutes and she already felt like killing her!

Captain Fairbanks calmly stepped across the room to the large, slick, if not entirely clean desk, grinning all the while like the cat that ate the canary.

Which after further reflection, and after she had settled herself down in the exquisitely comfortable desk chair, she decided was not such a good idea with a Virrilian and immediately wiped the smile from her face.

"I see", she began coolly, addressing the hot-tempered young woman before her after a moment of silence. "But, it is my understanding . . .", she continued, pulling her Vid-screen from its holder on her waist and punching up a data screen, "that the I.P.A Vortex, Omega S-Class Intergalactic Battle Cruiser, has been, will

be and is commissioned out for battle. So it seems that one of us has the wrong ship", she mused, looking up at the enraged young scientist and then beyond her, gesturing toward the wall on her far right. "And it seems it is you... uh, what is your name again?"

Valesque turned slightly to see what the woman was alluding to, realizing then what she had been staring at so smugly before.

The cable Valesque had snapped together was the power supply for the ship's registry display that she herself had designed and built.

The wall the Captain had noted was recessed and covered with a three-dimensional mural of the galaxy with shimmering stars, solar systems, comets and the like. Complete with man-made orbital moon Saturna 3, the ship's birthplace, and a scale model of the ship itself in the foreground.

All set off by the antique replicas of pioneering telescopes that gave humans their first glimpse into space. Usually the sight of her best work come to life would have made her spirits soar, but as she glanced at her masterpiece of engineering and programming her blood ran cold. Instead of her meticulously crafted name plate for the I.S.A Magellan hung the menacing, rough-hewn, and quickly done replacement, the 'I.P.A Vortex'.

Valesque was not sure which amazed her more, their sheer gall or their amazing speed in overtaking her ship.

The Captain, quite sure the argument was now over, repeated her last question as she punched up the crew registry to assure this volatile woman she was where she didn't belong. "What was your name again?" she repeated patiently.

The young scientist turned back to her impatiently, her lips in a full snarl, showing all four of her sharp white fangs, while her naturally pale face flushed red in her building fury.

“My name is Valesque, Chief Engineer of this project”, she replied bluntly, through clenched teeth, trying to keep herself from lunging over the desk and ripping the Captain’s throat out.

“No, no,” the Captain corrected, hating to use any title so civilian, “your ranking title.”

Valesque grew indignant; straightening up to her full height she replied very clearly, “I am not a classified military officer”, she replied so vehemently that she almost spat the last few words.

The Captain was astounded by her proclamation; she could have sworn the young woman sounded almost proud of her non-ranking standing. Never the less she punched in the name just to assure herself it wasn’t in the ship’s registry, and grimaced to see it just a moment later as the computer located her. ‘Great’, she thought, ‘this is not good.’ Outwardly, she said, “Well, non-classified Valesque it seems you are assigned to this ship.”

Valesque grinned smugly, supposing the woman had finally found her mistake.

“As maintenance Ensign, second class.”

“What!” Valesque shouted, grabbing for the handheld screen, which the Captain deftly snatched from her reach as she continued: “According to this you are a classified military ensign, Ensign.”

“Since when and by whose orders!!” the young woman snapped, disbelieving. Nothing like that was possible; you cannot just go around classifying people. “Who is the commanding officer of this outrage?!”

“According to the records you became an Ensign second class, just over two hours ago”, the Captain replied. “Congratulations.”

For some reason she just seemed to enjoy irritating this young woman, although she knew it probably was not a wise thing to do. Especially seeing as the young Virrilian was beginning to go into hunting mode, her eyes filming over, but at least her nails were cut.

“And in answer to your second question, which as I remember was also your first,” she continued, looking up at her new Ensign calmly, “the commanding officer of this mission is General Gorbok. My superior and friend, who has assigned this ship to report to the Corseccan Galaxy as a military defense vessel.”

Valesque gaped in disbelief, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't stand, all she could do was stare. “General ‘Warlord’ Gorbok?!” she asked in shock and alarm.

The same General who had been snooping around the project for the last few months? The same General who had felt it necessary to infiltrate a construction crew with spies?

The same General who her partner had just this morning gone to get a restraining order and injunction against, that General Gorbok?

She could not believe it. It could not be true, why would anyone in their right mind hand over a science vessel to the ‘Warlord’ General?

“Insubordination will not be tolerated on this ship, Ensign. I suggest you refrain from referring to your commanding General as ‘Warlord’. Do I make myself clear? Because as of . . .”, she checked her screen, “two hours and twenty minutes ago General Gorbok became your commanding General, and I was given command of this vessel. If there is any more discussion on this point I will throw you into the brig, Ensign, is that clear?!”

Valesque was steaming now as she crouched low over the Captain's desk, placing both hands before her on the smooth hard surface, her brown eyes glowing silver as she spat, “Let me make

myself clear, Captain. I am not, have not and will never be an Ensign on any ship and certainly not on my own ship. And as for your Commanding officer, well, we will just see about that!" she seethed, "But for right now, let me just say that your taking this ship into Corseccan space would be a grave mistake, you would be destroyed in an instant. If you even made it there to begin with."

"I don't know what you could possibly mean," Captain Fairbanks replied defensively, relieved to see that the Virrilian had at least backed off just a bit, "this ship is equipped with weapons far superior to anything the Corseccans have. It should be an easy victory."

"Ha!" Valesque laughed, "Victory? Do you have any idea what state your weapons systems are in? Or even how to run them? I don't think you do. What's more, I don't think your dear old General had enough time in those two hours he used to take over my ship to get you an optimal crew. Just how many poor souls did he manage to round up for this death march?" she asked sarcastically.

The Captain was not sure she entirely liked what this young engineer was alluding to. "In case it is any concern of yours, we have a crew of over two hundred and fifty. More than enough to run this ship for the short time we will be needing her", Fairbanks responded curtly. She was beginning to get a little tired of this girl's belligerent attitude and cross-examination.

"More than enough", Valesque sneered. "Whatever you say, Captain. As for me, I'm getting off this ship and I'm going to do everything in my power to stop you from taking it into the Corseccan Galaxy if it's the last thing I do. Even if I have to press criminal charges against old General 'Warlord' himself!" she swore adamantly.

"I'm afraid that won't do you any good", the Captain warned her, opening up the automatic blinds. "You see, we are already

preparing to leave space dock. We are scheduled to launch in four hours. And believe me Ensign, one way or another you will be on this ship when it leaves", the Captain said smugly.

The General had wasted no time.

"You can't! You can't do this. There is a forty-eight hour clearance rule at Tech-Labs. They would never let a ship in this condition get clearance to leave space dock", Valesque argued.

"Well, in this case, with the war effort needing our emergency assistance, they seem to have made an exception. In addition, as much as I hate to say it, it looks like you are stuck with us. At least until we reach Corsecan space, I am sure since you come from that area you will have someone who would be willing to retrieve you."

"No, no, no", Valesque breathed, her eyes widening at the thought. Her people had sworn to kill her if she ever entered their space again. "You can't take me back there! I cannot go in there. It is impossible! You cannot just come in here and fly off with me like that! Kidnapping is still a crime here you know!" Valesque reasoned feverishly, but the Captain refused to be understanding.

"Kidnapping is hardly the case; you seem to have forgotten you are an ensign on this vessel, Miss Valesque. You will be with us and since you don't seem to have any way of getting off, I guess you will have to go to battle with us as well."

Valesque panicked, foreseeing the disastrous consequences of that action, "Oh, no. I most certainly am not! I am not going to be a party to your suicide mission. If you all want to go and get yourself killed you will have to do it without me!" the Engineer barked ferociously. No matter what these people had planned she was not about to die. She could always find another station and get funding to rebuild the Magellan.

But then again, after this one is destroyed, it might be difficult to get any takers.

“I really don’t see where you have any other choice”, the Captain remarked. “And seeing as you refuse to be a part of this crew, you will just have to stay confined to quarters until we return to Star Base. Is that clear?!”

Valesque glared at her defiantly, “I’ll tell you what’s clear!” she growled. “You are going to die! You are all going to die! And I intend to get off this ship using any means in my power before that happens!” she finished, her temper near its peak as she turned sharply on her heel from the unnerved woman before her and strode across the room, unsnapping the power cables to the display as she stormed out the door.

The entire control crew stopped to stare as the raging Virrilian erupted from the Captain’s Observation Room. Fear gripping them as they saw her turn back sharply on her heel, pointing one immaculately manicured finger toward the Captain as the automatic doors began to hiss shut, and say, “You will live to rue the day you tangled with me, Captain, you’ll rue the day you were even born! If you live.”

And with that the livid scientist stalked out of the Control Deck, not even casting a glance upon her observers. Among whom was a young ensign in charge of Operations Command named Sanic; who had been a long time admirer of the beautiful Tech-Labs Engineer.

Ensign Sanic glanced around to assure himself there was no duty he was about to shirk before he quickly followed her out of the Command Center.

Meanwhile the Captain sat sighing relief at her near escape with the younger woman, she should have known better than to antagonize her. But she had never been one to back down from a fight. Her Irish temper always got the better of her.

She glanced down at her finger, stroking the tattooed clan ring that encircled it. Sometimes she wished the Irish-Scott colonies had taught her a little more control and a lot less contention.

She more than hoped, as she gazed out the huge observation window, that the woman would be able to get reassigned off the ship. Yet, there wasn't much chance of that seeing as the I.P.A never changes it's mind and especially since they were already being prepared to leave space dock.



Chapter Two: - Traitor? -



“Well,” Valesque began to herself as soon as she had cleared the automatic doors, “that had gone well; after all, no blood was spilled.”

But some was going to be, she thought as she suddenly sprang into action, sprinting down the corridor. She was determined to find her lost partner and give him a good going over for leaving her alone with that woman. After finding out what had gone wrong at the proceedings, of course.

Moments later Valesque was darting across the hard steel flooring of the construction bay, this was the first time she could remember being out here in well . . . weeks anyway.

Since they had gotten the food duplicators on line and had shipped in a few extra cots, she had not found it necessary to venture outside the ship and had continued working steadily on several secret projects of her own, along with her usual construction workload.

Now as she sprinted the few hundred yards to the exit door, she took a moment to scan the large open area between the ship and her destination. The ground crews were busy, almost all of the larger equipment and building supplies had been cleared away, it had to be because once they opened those airlock doors space would take care of the clean up itself.

Valesque reached the small metal door leading to the web of streets outside and flung it open, rushing through the portal and straight into the arms of a very surprised young man.

The young man laughed and then smiled broadly as he pulled her from him, "Well, hello Beautiful!"

Tim Baine was a first class pilot, in a single engine fighter, and was also the Academy's Ace flirt.

He had what it took too: boyish good looks, gorgeous blue eyes, a smile that could set the world on fire and a casual over-friendly teasing manner that made him hard to ignore. And worst of all, he knew it.

Valesque regained her footing, shaking free of the pilot's unwelcome embrace as she pushed her hair back out of her eyes and gave him a good hard look.

He was standing before her quite amused, dressed in a dark-grey flight suit with black striping.

Obviously some lost space jockey.

She then took a quick glance behind him at what was obviously his vehicle, a low slung highly aerodynamic little number. She was about to comment on the 'no hovering' law for this area when she noticed something else which made her glance back at him not sure which was worse: being a jockey pilot or being a jockey POLICE pilot!

Valesque looked him over again disapprovingly. "You're with the Intergalactic Police Force, huh?" she asked in a voice of forced civility.

The I.P.F is called a policing force but it had always been more of a mercenary organization; it had loyalties to no government or solar

system and would take any kind of job from any source. It claimed neutrality to all conflicts and would work for either side.

Although the I.P.F claimed to be a separate and distinct entity from the I.P.A it was actually a secret division of the military. It was the Intergalactic Planetary Alliance's way to get more money and to stick its fingers in to every crack it could find.

About the middle of the 23rd century, the Earthians had finally stopped fighting against themselves. Actually, they had been forced to stop, due to the destruction they had caused to their planet from centuries of pollution and war. The remaining nations of Earth joined to form one all encompassing military organization, the Intergalactic Planetary Alliance.

The name itself was a huge joke, as there was nothing intergalactically allying about it. The entire organization had been formed for one purpose and one purpose only, to expand Earthian control and gather for themselves more resources and more power. Planets and galaxies brought under the I.P.A were usually there from threat of violence or all out war. The I.P.A subjugated the people to their will and set up an I.P.A acceptable 'interim' government they could control.

Everyone joked that the I.P.F's slogan was "A friendly little division of I.P.A", that is if you consider being hit men and mercenary fighter pilots for hire 'friendly'.

Valesque was not sure she liked the idea of the I.P.F being around and she was especially hoping it was not anything to do with her or another surprise from the General.

She knew the Military had severe ways to ensure all crew members were aboard at time of departure but she had another four or five hours left at least.

The Lieutenant liked her voice, it had a very rich pleasant sound, even in the angry tone. "Yes I am well . . was, anyway. I was

just reassigned, and none too soon as I can see", he replied flirtatiously, looking her up and down. Noticing with pleasure how her thick, dark hair shimmered with blue and red in the overhead light.

"I assume you are on this crew too? This certainly promises to be a very nice mission. Let me guess," he continued smiling broadly, eyeing her simple green uniform and white lab coat, "nurse, right? Hmm, I will definitely have to make it a point to get sick on this trip!"

"Crew?" she questioned him peevishly, totally ignoring his impertinent question. Irritated beyond belief at his very unwelcome presence. He was obviously not here in a legal capacity. "Look, exactly who are you anyway?"

The Lieutenant was not to be dissuaded, he just shrugged, and gave her one of his luminous smiles. Maybe she was just having a rough day.

"Lieutenant, Timothy Baine. First class pilot extraordinaire. At your service", he began with a flourishing bow. "I have been assigned to the helm of this ship."

"Not of this ship you weren't!" the young woman exclaimed, her defenses up, obviously not enchanted. "I think you have the wrong vessel, Flyboy. The I.S.A Magellan is not ready for commission, as I have already explained in there", she snapped, indicating the door from which she had just emerged.

"I don't know about the Magellan," the Pilot replied, giving her a small sympathetic smile, feeling what her embarrassment would be at finding herself at the wrong ship. "But the I.P.A Vortex is. Which is the name written on the side of this housing bay, and it fits my orders."

"Then the paint is so wet you could write in it", she snarled back, not even giving the building a look, furious that the General had

gotten so much past her. Maybe she should have left the ship more often in the past few weeks. "Let me see your orders."

Lieutenant Baine casually handed over the paper he had been carrying in his otherwise free hand.

He had never refused a beautiful woman anything and he was not about to start now. Because grumpy or not he was determined to get on this woman's good side.

Valesque snatched the sheet from his hand and looked it over in quick disapproving glances, her annoyance showing ever more each second as her fist crumpled the side of the paper in her grasp.

The Lieutenant meanwhile ran a hand carelessly through his light blond hair as he watched her, pushing back the wave of forelocks that stubbornly fell over his right eye, in the way that all the girls thought so charming, except of course for this one.

Chief Engineer Valesque was totally oblivious to the man's charms as she scanned the document in hand. "How dare they?" she muttered angrily. "How could they? My ship! How dare they classify her as a Battle Cruiser!" she seethed, spitting out the name as if it were a piece of putrefied fish.

"To my knowledge Captain C. Fairbanks will be on board exactly, . . . now", Lieutenant Baine replied cheerily, gazing at his wrist-com, completely unfazed by her anger. He was really beginning to like her in an antagonistic kind of a way. "If you want you can always go discuss it with her, or the commanding General. I believe his name is on that paper as well", Tim suggested helpfully.

"I was just going to see about that!" she snapped, shoving past the bewildered pilot, and continuing swiftly down the dark, drizzly street; murder on her mind.

“Hey, wait”, the young Lieutenant called out, as she quickly disappeared down the alley. “You still have my papers! . . . Why does this always happen to me?” he sighed, still trying to catch a glimpse of the enraged woman.

Slinging his satchel over one shoulder Tim Baine turned back to the housing bay door and strolled casually into the Battle cruiser’s airlock. He then stopped in his tracks awe struck as his eyes adjusted to the lighting for the ship just kept going and going and going. He half-wondered if he had the right ship after all.

Yep, I.P.A Vortex, that is the name that had been written outside and it was on the side of the ship.

The ship was in the shape of a very large pointed oval, with the exterior measurement of one mile long and one-half of a mile across at its widest point.

With thirty decks and all the exterior walls, including the transparent ones, being five feet thick, the ship had over one hundred and three million square feet of space.

'Omega S-Class Intergalactic Battle Cruiser.' And they expected him to fly this barge! Well one thing is for sure, he thought to himself as he looked up at its towering thirty-storey frame, this is going to be one exciting ride.

Readjusting his belongings, the young pilot strode toward the first well-marked entrance he could find. Hoping it would take him to deck B-2 and his quarters. At least he was sure to like this assignment better than flying solo like he had been doing on those fighters. Especially after having met one of his new crewmates, or so he hoped.

Lieutenant Baine stopped short of the lighted gangplank to take one last look at the exterior of his new ship. And new it appeared to be. The entire exterior hull was cleaned and buffed to a gleaming finish so that the entire ship shimmered like a giant faceted gem. In fact, with the shape of the ship resembling a Marquee cut stone

and the encircling metal rim with the tall, tapering array arms, the ship looked remarkably like a Tiffany set gemstone.

He could not have known the designer of the ship had based it on a Virrilian royal jewel, all he knew was the ship was a truly breathtaking spectacle and he could almost envy those who had the privilege of viewing her exterior. It was too bad she would soon be battle scarred and the gleaming hull seared by laser fire.

As he was taking this moment for these deliberations, the young Pilot was once again waylaid by a crewmember rushing from the ship.

"This is becoming quite a habit", he mused, freeing himself again. This time however it was not a beautiful girl but a young Ensign that had run into him.

"Oh, excuse me. I beg your pardon, Lieutenant", Sanic fumbled hurriedly, as he noticed the other man's rank insignia. "You didn't by any chance just see a beautiful, dark haired woman come through here did you?"

Tim looked a little confused, why was the crew in such a hurry to get away from this ship? "Uh... yeah, I did, Ensign. I... we just ran into each other."

The Ensign's eyes widened with alarm, he must be way behind her by now. "Which way did she go, do you know?"

"I believe she had some notion of seeing the General. I'd tell you which one, but she took my papers", Tim explained as obligingly as he could.

"Thank you", the Ensign replied, mentally filing the information as he quickly started away. "I mean, thank you, Sir", Sanic said, turning back to his superior briefly before bounding toward the exit door.

Lieutenant Baine shrugged, pressing his lips together in puzzlement. Then turning and checking to be sure no one else was about to come flying off the ship, he made his way up the ramp toward the lighted interior of the base deck.

Valesque made her way quickly along the puddle-strewn walkways toward the side of town she knew Dr. Warner to frequent. The air was thick, cool and damp making her wish she had worn something warmer than a lab coat.

The advertisements for this man-made, 'Earth Orbiting', planetoid had boasted of its high-tech Environmental Atmospheric Weather Controls. But ever since she had arrived the modern wonder always seemed to be on the blink. Valesque quickened her pace and tightened her thin white coat around her, trying to ward off the now common dreary drizzle.

Technological concepts, she had often noted, were only as good as the people hired to run them.

As she neared her destination, a sleazy looking bar on the corner of two equally sleazy looking streets, Valesque slowed her pace as she suddenly felt an eerie twinge like someone was following her.

She glanced behind her cautiously, then peered quickly down the dingy streets on either side but nothing looked out of place. She shrugged off her insecurity, supposing it to be just over-exposure to bad weather and entered the bar.

Moe's Place, the sign read that blinked on and off at the passers by on the street, the few there were. Not many arrivals or launches were taking place here lately; the Corsecan War was putting a damper on most Earth traffic these days.

Valesque shuddered involuntarily upon entering the moodily lit warmth of the bar, the change of temperature was instantly

noticeable upon her entrance. She slipped off her damp lab coat and made her way to the back of the building.

Walking past the long slightly curved faux wood bar, past the huddling clientèle who had come here seeking refuge from the cold as well as from the I.P.A.

For they heard an unscheduled launching was taking place today and they knew what that meant: involuntary crew assignments.

Valesque was in search of one man in particular, the proprietor, a guy named Moe. Who just happened to be Dr. Warner's closest pal. She caught sight of him about half way through her trek and called out to him as he sat at a high table at the far end of the place.

He seemed to have heard her but kept on talking to the man seated opposite him, only stopping long enough to give a split second glance at who had called. Valesque was in too much of a hurry to let that stop her or to care that he was in conversation with someone else as she approached. "Moe," she interrupted urgently, "have you seen Dr. Warner today? This morning?"

Moe gave the other man a nod of dismissal as he turned his attention on her, "You just interrupted a very important business opportunity here, Val", he grumbled in his deep Old New York accent.

"I'm sorry Moe, but this is urgent," Valesque implored, leaning heavily over the table, "I've got to find Dr. Warner", "Urgent, eh?" he queried, giving her a contemplative look as he scratched his two day growth. "Yeah, I heard you's was launching today. Kinda sudden ain't it, I mean ya finished up awful quick didn't ya?"

"Yeah, finished, right. We're about as done as the food you serve here", she joked bitterly. "Listen, Moe, do you know where he is? I have to find him and quick, they are about to launch our ship! They

will destroy her if I don't find him! He's bound to know what's going on."

"I've seen him", Moe replied thoughtfully. "But I don't think it was today. What time is it?" he asked, checking his wrist chronometer. "Nope it wasn't today. Yesterday I saw him, came in here late, and seemed a little edgy if ya ask me."

"But you don't know where he is now?" she pressed.

"No I don't, you might try down at the Military building though, he said he had a meeting with that General you were havin' trouble with, ya know the one."

"Yeah, Moe, I know the one. He was supposed to meet with him four hours ago, though. And now that General seems to have subterfuged his way into taking over my ship. He even managed to assign me to it as an ensign. Can you imagine, me an ensign? I know one thing though, I am not going to sacrifice my life on his mindless journey to Corsecan space! One way or another I am not launching with that ship today", the Engineer fumed.

Moe had known both John Warner and Valesque long enough to have grasped a little of her situation with her home world, but he could not help her now. Like it or not, what she was contemplating was not only dangerous but downright impossible.

"I'd like to help you out, Val, but you know my rules: When the I.P.A is involved I am out of it. I mean, I like you and all and John is my best bud but I draw the line at vaporization. That just don't sit too well with me, ya know?"

"I know, Moe, I know. But I do not, can not and will never happen to like the idea of being kidnapped onto my own ship either. This has never come up before; I have no idea how to get out of it."

“If I may make a small suggestion,” Moe interrupted, “go along with it and get out of it later. Your chances of escape here are much smaller than they would be out in open space, a lot less troopers out there too, if I may add. You designed the bloomin’ ship I am sure once you are out there you could figure your way off. If you don’t get blasted tryin’.”

“Thanks, Moe, that’s really . . . comforting”, Valesque replied slowly, seeing she was not about to get any help here.

“And if I may make a further suggestion for the immediate future,” Moe continued, his round face darkening with concern, “may I suggest you hurry on your way? I mean, not that I would ever push away a friend or nutt’n but uh . . . the nearer we are getting to the launch time the more likely some I.P.A men will be tracking you down. Not that I doubt your success, Val, I mean you’re one smart cookie, ya know. But, uh . . . I kinda like my place the way it is, in one piece if ya know what I mean.”

“Hint noted and taken”, Valesque replied, gathering up her lab coat and heading for the door.

“Remember, Val, if you are ever this way again my door is always open. I’ll tell John ya were looking for him, if I ever see him again”, the man called warmly as she left.

Valesque stopped suddenly just outside of the entrance, she had almost forgotten how frigid it had been. She slipped on her lab coat and felt that same eerie chill, as if someone was watching her.

Virrilians were especially adept at sensing their surroundings, a Virrilian in hunting mode even more so. In hunting mode, a Virrilian could sense a quarry’s heart rate, nervous system and feel any little twitch it made. Valesque almost went into hunting mode now, but thought the better of it, she was just being paranoid after all. She was always paranoid in situations she was not familiar with, and this one was very unfamiliar.

She decided just to keep moving, if anyone was following her she would at least make it difficult for them.

She made her way over to the business side of the satellite; it was a more upscale, well-to-do area of the planetoid. Large office buildings held various company representative offices, one of which being the Military Branch.

She went over to the large secretive looking structure to inquire of the General, but was refused admittance. The receptionist informed her that the General had left early that morning and was not to return for several weeks. Valesque knew this could not be true because Dr. Warner did not have his appointment with him until 10 am.

But she also knew that it was futile to argue with a reception android.

Reception androids always said exactly what they were told to say. Their boss could be standing directly in front of them, but he would still be classified as `not in' if they had not been ordered otherwise. This was probably why most business men preferred the mechanized secretary to the live version.

Well, that and their wives did not complain as much.

So either the General was avoiding her or had skipped town, either way she wasn't getting anywhere. She decided to try Dr. Warner's apartment. He had been given one of the more upscale Scientist allocated condos by the Scientific Association: the ones who had funded the ship.

She, on the other hand, had taken a small studio style place on the construction side, and therefore scummy side, of the planetoid. She figured it did not really matter to her since she was determined to live aboard ship as much as possible once the hull had been sealed and the life support system activated.

Dr. Warner's place was not far from the Military Building; she had been there on several occasions, mostly to celebrate the finishing of major hurdles during construction, so she knew where to find it, which was good considering she was getting low on time.

The apartment was located on a third floor, interior. Valesque pressed the door chime several times but no one answered. She waited a few minutes, looking around the hall critically, before trying again.

The place looked like it had not been re-done since it was first built, very chrome and rigid. Out-dated really, since most newer buildings went into the more plush, natural material look; with carpets and non-metallic paints. She waited five more minutes after she rang the chimes before deciding to leave, he obviously had not returned home. Or he wasn't answering.

She tried several other places on this side of town that she knew him to frequent but search as she might, she could not find the good Doctor anywhere. Nor did he answer any of her frequent calls to his personal communicator.

It was as though he had just . . . vanished.

She soon found herself back on the construction bay side, heading toward her apartment to see if maybe he had gone there to wait for her, knowing she would come looking for him.

She was two blocks away from her destination when she heard a noise behind her and spun around quickly to see what it was. All she saw was the slight flutter of fabric as whomever it had been disappeared back down the alley.

Valesque knew it had not been the I.P.A since she still had a good hour left until take off, and they would run forward not away. She started down the alley again in pursuit of whoever it was, turning corners and glancing down side streets in hopes of catching another glimpse of the fleeing figure.

She began to notice familiar looking buildings and landmarks, they had been snaking around to the street where her apartment was. It had to be Dr. Warner! Only he knew where she lived.

She picked up the pace, using all of her Virrilian speed and rounded the last corner, coming out almost directly in front of her building. She stopped in her tracks, as she perceived a familiar looking silhouette in the darkness ahead. "Dr. Warner?" she breathed, squinting against the mist to make out the figure ahead. "Is that you? What's going on?"

The person seemed to be advancing slowly toward her in the dim light, she could still not quite make out who it was but she did begin to recognize the object they were raising from their side.

Valesque's eyes widened, she could not believe what she was seeing. "John?" she whispered hoarsely, as the weapon took aim. "What are you . . .", her voice cut off in mid-sentence, her question ending in a thud as her stunned body hit the cold, wet ground. She saw a white light come toward her just before her world turned black.



Chapter Three:

- Allies -

Valesque awoke to find herself lying in one of the over 2,000 pods in the large life-pod holding room of her ship. She was tired and ached all over. Her vision was still a little black around the edges as she tried to acquaint herself with her position. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on remembering how she had gotten here, when she felt a light touch on her shoulder.

She had not heard anyone approach and was so startled by the touch she involuntarily jumped. Turning her head quickly around she found a slightly less startled young man standing behind her in the dim light of the holding bay.

“Uh, hi!” he began hesitantly; finally face-to-face he was not sure what to say to a top Tech-Labs Engineer, and a beautiful one at that. “You’re awake?” he asked grasping for something to say. He struggled to sound friendly and easy as her fine-featured, pale face showed her annoyance at his sudden intrusion.

“Did you not expect for me to be?” replied the Scientist alarmed that he might be in on the General’s schemes and had followed her to ensure their plans expedience.

“Oh, no, no”, the young man said nervously. “I was just... uh, you have been out of it since you were brought back aboard your ship. I was beginning to worry, but I guess . . . you are....alright”, he finished, losing his edge toward the end and wondering what he had just said, his dark eyes glancing around nervously.

"Oh", she replied slowly, not sure what to make of him. He looked pleasant enough, with his warm grey eyes and schoolboy jitters. But he was still military personnel and from what he'd said, an intruder on her ship. "Who are you, some guard the Captain has ordered to keep track of me? How long have I been here? And what do you mean by my ship?" she queried quickly, attempting to sit up.

The young man smiled a big beautiful smile, not one of the Lieutenant's charming smiles but a true genuine grin. "I am Ensign Sanic," he began happily noting her interest and detecting a bit of friendliness on the subject, "and you are the Chief Engineer of the Magellan project, right? It is such a pleasure to finally meet you", he gushed, excited at finally being face to face with the beautiful scientist he had been admiring all these months.

And he was especially glad to see that close up she did not appear to be much older than he was. In fact, her thick, short cropped, dark hair and creamy, ivory complexion coupled with her large brown eyes seemed to reveal her to be no more than two or three years his senior. Not an unbridgeable difference.

Sanic had always been rather brainy, he was especially adept at electronics, figuring out sequences, logic puzzles and the like. He also liked smart women. And Valesque was both smart and beautiful, the perfect combination.

The Ensign had been planet-side on the orbital moon for quite a while so he had plenty of time to admire the building, as well as the builder, of the ship. He had always hoped to meet her, but it seemed rather difficult since she rarely left the project and he did not have the clearance to enter. Now here she was, and all his braininess seemed to have turned to sloppy mush as he realized the situation he was in.

Valesque of course knew nothing of the young man's aspirations or feelings. She only perceived his nervousness and most of all his

last remark to her. "The Magellan? You know about the Magellan?" Valesque repeated shocked at his knowledge of the ship's true name. Suddenly she seemed to like the shy young man who stood before her.

He was roughly as tall as she was if not a bit taller. Certainly not as old or manly looking as the Lieutenant she had met earlier, but cute in his own young, dark-haired, Etherian sort of way.

Although Etherians strongly resembled Earthians there was one distinguishable difference, Etherians had naturally multicolored hair. Each hair actually grew in layers of color; this one's grew dark on the bottom lightening in bands as it went up until finally ending in blonde tips.

He had an open, friendly look about him and seemed to epitomize Etheria, his home planet. It was a college planet, known as the "party planet", and he seemed very Etherian with his upbeat expressions, tan skin and blonde-tipped spiky hair. She smiled at him, and he began deeply hoping she would not take the position that he was 'just an Ensign' like all of the other upper crew did.

"I must tell you, I am just, well, thrilled for the lack of a better word, to at last be on this ship!" he continued, glancing around appreciatively at the large dark room with its huge exterior viewing panels before training his eyes back on her. "I must say I never expected it to be as magnificent as it is. Or to be aboard her so soon. I thought we had a good two months left at least."

"What are you talking about?" Valesque asked suddenly, pushing aside all of the flattery and striving to see this military ensign's motive. More ranking-military conspiratorial gloating?

"Why would a military crew be scheduled for the Magellan's maiden voyage? Of, course," she added, coming to terms with reality, "why

are they here now.”

“Military?” the Ensign laughed. “I am not military. I am a Scientific Class -Two Operator, assigned to the I.S.A Magellan. I have been planet-side for nearly three months now, watching the construction of my next assignment the `Magellan`. Well, me and a few other guys”, he replied avoiding telling her what else he had enjoyed watching.

“Let me get this straight, you are not military”, the Scientist repeated slowly, trying to understand. “And yet you are on a, shall we say a `confiscated` and now military ranked vessel with an also very military Captain and crew?”

“We are not all military; I just became 'reclassified' as an ensign a few days ago”, Sanic informed her hurriedly, seeing her confused look. “Some of us are science officers, like me. Some are low ranking engineering personnel and some are space jockeys who just happened to be planet-side when the orders were given. Mostly I guess you could say they scraped the bottom of the barrel to get this crew. Except for some of the upper class officers, of course”, he continued quickly. “Like the Captain, the Commander, our Pilot and of course, you”, he added blushing slightly.

“What makes you think I am a top ranking Officer, Sanic?” she asked with a sarcastic laugh at the irony of it.

“Well, I saw you leaving the Captain’s Observation Room”, he began a bit flustered, wondering what had been his mistake, and liking the way she dispensed with his Ensign title. “Who else but a very high ranking crew member could get away with that?”

Valesque laughed at this remark. “A very peeved Virrilian, that's who, and one that is going to be getting off this ship as soon as

possible if she knows what's good for her.”

“But, you can’t”, the Ensign exclaimed concerned with this sudden plan. It was not just the idea of her leaving just when he had finally met her, but it was the sheer danger of such an attempt.

Valesque looked at the young man coldly. So he had been sent to stop her. Well, they would have to do better than that. She could easily overpower him, although she hated to have to do it, he seemed like a nice kid.

"And why is that? Did that conniving Captain send you down here to detain me?" she asked irritably.

She was getting tired of being hampered at every turn. She would get off this ship, even if it meant over the young Ensign's body.

“No, you don’t understand,” the young man continued, rubbing his forehead as he tried to figure out the best way to say this, noting her apparent irritation at being stopped, “you can’t get off the ship, nobody can. You have been unconscious for nearly three days. We are out in deep space now. Even if you could get a hold of a Scuttle Craft there is no way you could make it out of the dual shield without proper authorization. You would just crash up on the electro field.”

“Three days?” Valesque returned shocked. “I have been down in this hold for three days?!” she continued, glancing down at the panel of her vid-screen and pressing the chronometer button to verify the exact time.

Sanic strained to see what she was looking at, “We are leaving the Milky Way as we speak. I am sorry you had to stay down here but I had been trying to find you on Saturna 3 when you went to look for the General. Unfortunately I didn’t catch up to you until after you had been shot”, he informed her apologetically.

"You saw who shot me?" the Engineer asked urgently, leaning forward out of her pod in anxious suspense.

"Well, sort of", he replied hesitantly, his dark eyes avoiding hers. "I followed from quite a ways back as they carried you to the ship. I had assumed it was the I.P.A but then you were brought here", he continued, looking around at the unorthodox area. "I startled them when they were placing you in the life-pod. I tried to act as if everything was normal, I did not want to get shot too. The one guy who seemed to be in charge said to leave you here until you woke up. I figured it would only be a few minutes, I didn't know he meant three days! It was a good thing you were in here though," Sanic added, patting the lid of the pod, "I would never have been able to tell if you were alive or dead without the heart monitor. You had me pretty scared for a while there."

Valesque looked troubled, "You say two men brought me here? Do you remember what they looked like? Did one of them have brown, curly hair and blue eyes, sort of Earthian looking?"

"I. . .I honestly couldn't say", the young Ensign answered, upset at having to disappoint her. "It is pretty dark in here, you know", he looked around, as if to prove it to himself.

"And they were pretty well covered up, like they didn't want to be recognized. If I had to say one thing though," he continued thoughtfully, "I would have to say that the accomplice seemed almost... luminous."

"Luminous? Oh, that helps a lot", Valesque grumbled as she swung her legs over the side of the bed, trying to ward off her achy feeling.

Sanic handed her a flask of water he had been carrying as she slid forward off the bed. "Any idea of what they hit you with?" he asked finally, it was something he had often wondered about these past few days.

Valesque took a sip of water, swishing it in her mouth before spitting it back out. Her palate had become acidic from the liquid. She grimaced, shaking her head and trying to dispel the sharp metallic taste in her mouth. "Ugh," she groaned, "a taser."

"A taser did that to you? Knocked you out for three days? Wow," he marveled, "that must have been some charge, what did they set it on, 'coma'?"

"Probably 'death'", Valesque replied, stretching out her shock treated limbs. "If it was who I think it was, he knew the highest setting was the only thing that would knock me out. But I just can't figure what would make him do it, and then dump me back here again when he knew they had taken over the `Magellan."

"You mean you didn't authorize the use of this ship?" Sanic asked shocked. He had assumed the engineers on the project had been aware of the orders.

"Authorize? Ha! They even had the nerve to assign me to this death mission", Valesque scoffed, like they would ask her permission.

"Are you saying this ship isn't equipped?" the young man asked worrisomely. He could not imagine them assigning him to a non-working vessel. Especially one that was assigned to Corsecan space.

"No, I have already said that. I told that stubborn and irritating Captain up there, before they launched, that the ship was not finished. However, all she did was babble on about orders and refurbishing. I do not think that woman would believe anything unless it was in an order and signed in triplicate. You said you are the operations person right?" she asked him simply.

"Well, all I can say is plan on having a lot of time on your hands because as far as scanners and things of that nature go, you are pretty much in the dark. And that goes for weapons, off ship communications and just about everything else. The only things working on this vessel are the engines. But I wouldn't be too sure about those either.

Experimental power sources and non-tested engines can be somewhat tricky. But I suppose General Gorbok knew that before he sent her out."

"Are you saying that the General is knowingly sending out a completely unequipped vessel? Is this the same General who has been seen sneaking around the science wing of Tech-Labs?!" the Ensign cried, realizing what she was implying.

"That would be the one", she agreed. "General `Warlord' we call him. But don't tell the Captain that, she is friends with him. He has been slinking around here for months trying to figure out a way to get his hands on this ship," she informed him.

"Why do you suppose he would want a science vessel?" Sanic puzzled, trying to get a picture of the situation.

"It's not really the ship as much as her capabilities", Valesque responded thoughtfully, striving to make her suspicions plain. "This ship is loaded with new experimental gadgets. One of which you have already seen, the foursquare weapon's system, located in the lower array disk and the four upper array arms. That system coupled with the dual oscillating shield would make this ship virtually impenetrable and therefore very much to be desired by the power hungry General.

That is of course, depending on its actually working or not. It has never really been successfully accomplished. This would be the first ship to be designed to handle it, if it handles it", she concluded hurriedly, unsure of which way the final test would turn out.

"It seems he must not have known how incomplete the ship was then. Otherwise, he never would have sent it out. Especially not with Captain Fairbanks and our pilot, Lieutenant Baine", Sanic mused.

"What is so special about this Captain C. Fairbanks and the jockey Pilot?" she queried.

"Captain C. Fairbanks? I guess being a scientist, you would not know, but she is one of the top ranking military captains of all time. Except of course for her husband, who is right now out there getting a good beating in the war. But do you know who introduced them?" the Ensign asked, looking at her out of the corner of his eyes like a gossiping old woman. "General Gorbok, that's who. So why would he want one of his most prized prodigies to be sent off to her death? It just doesn't quite fit. So there must be another reason."

"Well, I for one am not waiting around to find out!" Valesque exclaimed figuring she had already wasted enough time talking. "The General's reasons aside I know what will happen to this ship, and if you are smart you will come with me, because I intend to get out of here! And if not all I can say is: Good bye, Good luck! And I hope to be off this ship before it happens", she replied dispassionately, standing up and heading for the double, automatic doors.

He may not know a lot about Virrilians but he knew a lot more than she obviously did about ship relations and politics. He quickly grabbed up his gear, put on the anti-gravity disks he had shoved in his pockets and slid hastily after her.

"Wait," he called as he hurried to catch up to her, "what about the shields? And the Scuttle? The Captain isn't likely to just hand one

over to you. Besides it would take two programmers to work it all out, one on board and one in the Scuttle."

"I think I could figure a way out", she replied curtly, after all she had designed it. And besides, only half of the shields were operational at the moment.

Sanic was not to be deterred. "Look," he continued as they neared the exit, "you know nothing on this ship works and I know nothing on this ship works, so all we need to do is wait until the Captain realizes it and comes crawling to you for help, right? She would have to listen to you then. And if it doesn't work . . . then, I will help you get your Scuttle craft and make it through the shields. Deal?" he asked seeing her skeptical look.

"Whatever, but I am out of here before we reach Corseccan space", she warned, not about to be stuck on this death trap any longer than necessary. She would do just about anything to get her ship back in one piece, aside from dying.

"Agreed. We will get you off before then. Now," he said proceeding with her down the hall, "since you are the brain behind this ship perhaps you could help me find my quarters, because I just can't make any sense out of these papers", he shrugged pathetically, handing her the small sketchily drawn map he had been carrying.

The young Engineer took it in her hand, pushing back her dark, shimmering locks before glancing up at him amused as she slowly turned the map over. "Come on", she laughed at seeing him blush, leading him to the nearest Hydro-lift bay.

"I am really sorry about your ship", Sanic said softly, trying to piece together what had happened and what a shock it was to her. "I am also sorry about your loss in your engineering team", he continued trying to be of some comfort to her. He had meant to get to tell her that in person ever since he had witnessed the accident.

“Loss?” Valesque queried dazed. Could he mean Dr. Warner?
“What loss?” she asked more urgently. Was that what had happened to him? Maybe he wasn’t the one who shot her?

“The hull worker who was soldering on the upper array arm. The one that fell to his death a few weeks ago. I was watching the work from the Tech-Labs park balcony when it happened. Since then I have wanted to tell you how sorry I was for your loss. And now it seems you have two of them”, the dark-haired boy said, wondering at her confusion.

“Someone working on the upper array arm?” she puzzled. “I don’t remember anyone on the upper array arm. Oh, wait a minute,” she continued, clutching her side in remembrance, “yes I do. I was on the arm, fixing a wiring short.”

“You?” he asked unbelievably. “No, but, this person fell . . .”, he corrected.

“Yep,” she replied assuredly, “that was me.”

“Twenty stories?”

“Oh, yeah,” she agreed completely, nodding her head, somewhat embarrassed, “but it was more like twenty-two. I remember, it felt like a very long fall, at least twenty-two stories.”

“But, you are alive?!” he exclaimed, nearly pouncing on her in his surprise. “No one could have lived through that! Not twenty-two stories.”

“You obviously don’t know Virrilians”, Valesque laughed. “We are a very sturdy brood. I will admit, I had never been on a twenty-two storey drop before, and I got a few cracked ribs doing it, but I have survived worse. You would be amazed.”

"I already am", he replied, somehow both fearing and respecting her more. "I guess I am going to have to do some research on Virrilians, huh? Since you will be on the crew and all, I like to know the equations I am working with."

"Well, I am not crew, and I hopefully won't be here very long. So I think you can put off studying Virrilians", she replied optimistically.

Sanic was silent after this. He was not too thrilled with the prospect of her leaving and was busy contemplating how he could make the Captain see the condition of the ship without appearing insubordinate or mutinous.

Valesque did not notice his silence for she was busy with thoughts of her own as she led her new friend up to his assigned quarters, trying to remember why the cabin number sounded so familiar to her as they went. She checked her Vid-screen panel as they exited the Hydro-lift on the designated deck. Sure enough, there it was D-3 room 351. "Uh, I hate to tell you this, Sanic," Valesque said apologetically, as they advanced down the corridor, "but I don't think you will like your quarters."

"What are you talking about?" he gushed, enjoying every nuance of Delta Deck 3's hall.

Each housing deck of the ship had been built with a large garden area in the center of the wide corridor with the housing entrances off to either side. Unlike the normal ship quarters, this one's housing was not laid out in straight rows with sterile hallways but they were made to resemble urban planet-side neighborhoods. In the very center of each deck was the Emergency Shelter area and around this and up and down the generously wide corridor were various garden areas of faux plants and trees, each one representing a different culture's style or planet's fauna. Each of the housing fronts was slightly different as well, giving them a more homey appearance, with windows facing out onto the hall

with views of the gardens and any visitors, plus they could keep an eye on their children as they played 'outside' in the corridor. The quarters were designed like regular houses, just all in a row, and even the smallest of them had two bedrooms. These decks were meant to be home for many people and families for long periods. With the gardens and park-like areas, the people could enjoy the 'outdoors' even when they may not get to be on actual ground for years.

"Look at this place!" Sanic said in pure wonder as he gazed at the corridor, feeling like he was outdoors in a quaint housing block. "I am sure I will love it."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that", the Engineer cautioned, hating to ruin his fantasy.

Just then Sanic noticed someone approaching from the opposite direction and quickly walked ahead of Valesque so as not to embarrass her by being seen socializing with an ensign. Valesque did not notice this however; she just stopped and started on some calibrations on the Vid-screen mini-computer she always carried at her waist.

"Well, hello there Mr. Sanic", the Lieutenant called out upon catching sight of him. "I find you home at last. You know I have been by your quarters several times in the past few days but you just never seem to be at home", Tim remarked playfully.

"You were looking for me?" Sanic asked, bewildered at the attention.

"Well, of course I was, Sanic, old buddy, old pal", Tim replied, giving the younger man a friendly slap on the back. "After all, we're old friends, right?"
Actually, Tim would have been friends with anyone who seemed to have some sort of contact with the mysterious, moody woman he

had run into over three days ago. He had wandered everywhere on the entire ship in the past three days trying to locate her, buttering up everyone he thought might have a lead.

He had finally figured Sanic as his only clue. Not that there were not other beautiful women on board, he just enjoyed the challenge that this one seemed to give. Besides, she had a strange eternal beauty about her that he could not quite place, and would not rest until he had.

“So,” Tim began, “I am finally off duty. It seems like I have been up there for days. I don’t know about yours, but whoever designed my flight panels must have been a complete idiot! It has taken me every waking hour since we left space dock until now to figure out those controls. You know what I mean?” the Lieutenant complained, wondering as he finished why the Ensign looked so edgy.

“Well, actually I haven’t been able to use any of my panels yet. But they look great”, Sanic added in praise.

“Sanic”, came the calm feminine voice behind the Ensign, as Valesque interrupted the conversation.

Sanic was a bit flustered at her not having used his ranking title in front of the Lieutenant, thinking it might show a degrading intimacy on her part.

Tim gave Sanic a knowing look. “Ah, caught you entertaining, huh? I beg your pardon, Miss. Well, hello again, Beautiful”, the Lieutenant adjusted, shocked at the sight of her, as she came around in front of the Ensign.

Sanic flushed red at the inappropriateness of the meeting. “Uh, Lieutenant Baine, this is, uh,” Sanic glanced over at the Engineer

helplessly, unsure of how to introduce her ranking title.

Valesque stepped forward confidently. "What is wrong with your panel, Lieutenant?" she asked bitterly, she did not handle criticism well.

"Nothing that a competent engineer and some major rebuilding couldn't fix", Tim smiled.

Valesque blinked at him coldly. "Those panels are a Virrilian design, made specifically for use by all known life forms. Perhaps you neglected to input your species..... whatever it is", she muttered under her breath.

"Ah, that explains it!" the Pilot exclaimed. "Virrilians are not the best engineers, actually they are not the best anything. Nice people though", he added, seeing her and the young Ensign get a bit upset.

"But you have to admit, they have lousy job skills. My last assignment was on the Corsecan boarder, ensuring that no unauthorized vessels came or went from the war zone. And I got to see quite a few of those Virrilian 'pilots'.

Virrilians are terrible fighter pilots if you ask me... well, I take that back, those 'rebel' pilots as the Virrilians called them were pretty good.... no, excellent pilots " he corrected himself, remembering. "I never could understand why the main Virrilian force wanted to keep them out of Corsecan space. The 'Rebel' pilots never shot at the regular Virrilian forces; they were all on the same side as far as I could see. But those Virrilians tried to shoot down the 'rebels' with no mercy if they happened to catch them assisting in the war. Good thing they were such bad shots or it could have been a real blood bath. They actually tried to get me to do the same, but I refused, shooting down good fighters is not my style.

Of course, that is probably how I ended up here", he laughed, shrugging at his lot. "But that isn't all that bad either", he added,

giving Valesque a wink.

Valesque's eyes narrowed at the man before her. "Virrilians are as good if not better than any other race at any occupation. Maybe you should do a little more research before you go judging others! For instance, I don't see where a species that has not only continually fought amongst itself, but also killed off just about all animal and plant life as well as the very planet they inhabited has any cause to judge another species that is still on their first planet, and no where near depleting it!" she seethed.

"If we are still talking about Virrilians, I can see why their planet is doing so well. They are depleting other planets instead. Isn't that what this whole war is about?"

"Uninhabited planets. Virrilians mine uninhabited planets, unlike you Earthians who destroy people's worlds and solar systems just to make yourselves more money and suck up more resources. If you had taken care of your planet to begin with you wouldn't have to be destroying everyone else's.

And as I recall the whole war started over you humans trying to strip mine a planet in our sector and enslave its inhabitants. Virrilians had been trading with that mining planet for generations without the destruction you people were planning! Is it no wonder they wouldn't let you get away with it?"

"Uh, oh", Tim grimaced; taking note for the first time of the four sharp fangs that showed in her scowl and the inch long points that had grown on her hands over the past three days. "You are Virrilian, aren't you?" he almost hated to ask.

"Whatever gave you that impression?" she returned sarcastically as she touched the tip of an upper fang with her tongue. "I am Virrilian, but I went to the Intergalactic University in your sector. Where did you go to school? Perhaps if you had listened more and flirted less, you would have learned about other people instead of

just yourself", she taunted.

"I went to school in New New York. I didn't really attend the University though; I dropped out and was recruited by the I.P.F", Lieutenant Baine replied, hoping she didn't get the wrong impression.

She did.

"Ohhh, N.N.Y, huh? Excuse me, poor little rich boy! I didn't know you were a Yorkie", Valesque scoffed. She had been to New New York a few times. It was a large city built above the ruins of what had been Old New York.

The new city was very upscale, shiny and elite. Encased in a dome with its own oxygen environment, the only way in or out was by way of ramps that ran down each side, past the hoverport and into the remains of the old city. The entire planet had become this way; the larger more affluent cities were rebuilt on hovering platforms and encased in environmental bubbles with the older ruins lying underneath. Only the rich and affluent citizens could live in the new cities, the rest of the declining population had to live on the planet's surface, ravaged by radiation, heat and desolation.

The lucky ones could find work as maintenance personnel for the new city and therefore enjoy the ruins of the old cities, shaded from the sun by the new cities above them. The less fortunate vied for jobs in the energy farms.

Which were large fields of solar panels placed out in the barren wilderness beyond the glistening city's shadow. These farms supplied the power needed to run the huge new metropolises. The remaining class was left to the wastelands, the sun and wind ravaged areas beyond the solar farms.

All in all the Earth was no longer a wonderful place to live and not even a safe one to visit, unless you enjoyed radiation burns.

"I wouldn't exactly say I was a 'Yorkie'", Tim defended, but sure she wouldn't listen, she already had her back up about being Virrilian. "Maybe we should get off this subject, Beautiful", he advised, a little upset.

Tim had been raised the only child of two elderly solar farmers in Old New York. He was shown interest by a friend of his parents, General Gorbok, who had him sent to a posh NNY school. But, of course the kids in NNY looked down on him and his solar farming parents and would not include him in their groups.

He ended up developing a rebellious, devil-may-care attitude and drove a souped up hoverbike he had rebuilt from a ruin in ONY.

His dangerous reputation with fast machines and his carefree attitude towards authority made him a popular attraction to the girls but even more of a nuisance to the other guys. Now that he was out of there he always hated when people started talking about his past.

Because one way or the other they always ended up prejudice, either because of his posh schooling background or because of his solar farming family life.

"Fine by me", Valesque shrugged a bit embarrassed by his flustered look. She had lost her temper again and she was not too happy about it.

"How about we start over?" Tim said, suddenly friendly again and determined to get on her good side, "I am Timothy Baine, Pilot and Earthian."

Valesque smiled smugly. "And I am the Virrilian idiot who designed this ship."

Now it was the Lieutenant's turn to be embarrassed. "Oh, did I say that?" he fumbled, his calm, cool charm eluding him. "I meant to

say, `who ever could have been the brilliant, beautiful genius behind those flight controls. They are just pure heaven!” he gave her a brilliant, semi-sheepish smile. “I’m not getting out of it am I?”

Valesque gave him a bold, unaffected look. “The flight panels are perfect, if you know how to use them. Don’t worry about it, Yorkie”, she assured him as she casually handed the young dumbfounded Ensign the key card she had made.

“Oh, thank you, most benevolent, most irresistibly desirous among women!” Tim exclaimed, about to grab her hands and acting like he would fall to his knees.

“Oh, cut it out”, Valesque retorted, sure he was teasing her, and hating to be played with.

“Welcome to my quarters, Lieutenant!” Sanic exclaimed happily, as the key-card signaled the door to open.

Lieutenant Baine turned from Valesque and peered into the room. “Wow, you’re quite a messy little camper aren’t you?” he exclaimed upon viewing the interior.

Sanic, baffled by his remark, moved beside him to view the room himself. “What the? Am I missing something here?”

“Not that I can see”, Tim returned playfully, “There is a bed, over there against that wall, under what I suppose is the carpet, and over there I can sort of make out a pile of what I assume are counter tops and drawers? Looks like just about everything to me.”

Valesque peered over Sanic’s shoulder trying to ascertain the condition of the room.

Tim put an arm around her and led her to a better viewing area, directly in front of him.

He pretended to ignore her attempts to push away from his embrace as he stood there quite casually, with his arm about her waist, surveying the wreckage.

Valesque had seen flirts before but this one took the cake.

"I tried to tell you, this room isn't finished yet", Valesque explained, accidentally slicing the Lieutenant's hand with her three-day nail growth as she tried to pry herself free of his hold. "We have only completed Delta Decks one through two and half of deck three."

"Yeow!" Tim yelped, sucking on his injured hand, sure she had hit a major artery with her claws. She did not play nice.

"Well," Sanic murmured, trying to look at the bright side, "at least I have my own room."

"Actually, I was surprised they even assigned you here at all, since Delta Decks are for Scientist housing. Crew housing is several decks above us on Beta Decks one through three. I guess whoever assigned the quarters did not have a ship layout map to work from", she informed him reluctantly.

Tim looked down at Valesque as she looked over at Sanic in concern.

"Aw, come on, now. Look, Sanic, you can stay with me in my quarters until we can get this place straightened up. I have a big place, with running water and working lights, it would be no problem. It could fit two nicely", he added almost suggestively, as he met Valesque's gaze.

The Engineer gave him a sour look before turning to see what state of completeness everything was really in.

"That's nice of you, Lieutenant", Sanic replied. "But you know as well as I do that there are Military rules about upper and lower crew

members socializing together. And Fairbanks isn't the sort of Captain that would let something like that slide by. No, I had better just stay here, it won't be that bad. And there are always the showers by the gel-pool on the Rec. Deck."

"Speaking of the Rec. Deck", Tim interrupted, "I was just coming down here to see if you wanted to join me in a Holo-room. You too, Beautiful", he added to Valesque.

"Actually we were just about to go down to the Med-room", Sanic told him, "But maybe we could all go down there and then come back up to the Holo-rooms?" he suggested, looking over at Valesque for her approval.

Valesque meanwhile had gone over to the in-room computer interface and was messing with a few wires, checking the connection, when a sudden jolt hit her and the terminal activated for a fraction of a second. Valesque dropped the power cable she was holding and turned slowly towards the very alarmed men as they came rushing towards her.

"I think I still have a bit of a charge left", she muttered groggily.

Tim looked over at Sanic in utter amazement. "The Med-room it is. Besides, I think I need to get this cauterized", he continued pitifully as he examined the slash in his right hand.

"Perhaps you should learn to keep your hands to yourself", Valesque remarked, feeling no pity as Sanic tried to figure out how the Lieutenant had gotten such a nasty cut in his room.

The Lieutenant was in fact bleeding quite steadily from the gash she had made. The cuff of his long sleeved flight suit beginning to get soaked through, as he tried to keep the blood from dripping on the new flooring.

Valesque did not have anything to give him as a temporary bandage, besides she didn't want him thinking she was the least bit

concerned. After all, that is what you get for messing with a Virrilian, and this was exactly the reason she kept her nails filed.

Well, that and she did not want everyone knowing she was Virrilian right off. With the war going on Virrilian was not the safest thing to be, and especially a Virrilian named Valesque Rhaugh.

Captain Fairbanks paced her Observation Room restlessly. Nothing was going as smoothly as she had hoped. Her 'Ace Pilot' could barely manage his controls, the Ensign assigned the Operations Command post seemed to have nothing to do. Half the flight control crew seemed to have no idea what they were there for. The ship had so far taken three days just to clear the Milky Way. If it kept up this pace the war would be over before they got there.

She had ordered her engineering team to fix the problems but they just kept saying how everything was 'unfinished' or they did not understand the design.

She knew the General would never have sent her out in an unfit ship; it had to be that darned Virrilian.

After all, she had sworn she would sabotage their mission. The Captain had tried the shipboard locators but had not picked up the Virrilian Ensign's communication signal anywhere; perhaps she had made it off the ship after all, after disabling all their defenses and crippling the engines.

"Arrgh", Captain Fairbanks moaned in frustration as she slammed her fist into the wall. A small metallic clink followed this action and she turned quickly towards the sound to see a small, thin,

rectangular object on the floor under the ship's name display. She walked over to it and reached down to pick it up.

It read 'I.P.A Vortex', the back of the name plaque was slightly sticky against her fingers. She looked at the place where it had been and narrowed her eyes.

The Captain peered at the sign, her lips pressing together into a tight, thin line as she positioned the fallen plaque over the sticky residue on the wall and pressed it into place, covering back over the lettering underneath it.

"Computer, locate any Virrilian life signs on board and notify Second Officer Fazar I wish to see him in my Observation Room", she called out, after a moment's consideration.

This was not going well at all.

When Valesque and the others entered the Med-room, it was empty. The beds and medical equipment were all there but no patients or medical staff could be seen anywhere.

"Is this room ever staffed by anyone?" Tim asked after looking around the now familiar emptiness. "I have been up here several times recently looking for....uh, someone, and I have never found anyone in here", he remarked, trying to avoid admitting he had been searching for the beautiful Virrilian, thinking it might make him look desperate.

Valesque looked a bit puzzled as she pushed the medical call button just inside the Med-room doorway, "Lola? Are you in here? Lola?" she called, gazing around the room, looking for signs of life.

"Lola?" Tim repeated to himself, eyebrows raised in interest, with an expression that reminded Valesque of a cat eager to pounce. Valesque rolled her eyes at his obvious anxiousness to meet any new female and walked further into the room. She was sure Lola

was here; she never left the ship and seldom ever left the Med-room.

A door on the far-right side of the room slid open and revealed a young woman clinging to the doorframe as if she was about to fall over.

The two men were not far enough into the room to get a look at her, all they could see from their angle was a small hand on the doorway and a glimpse of her pale blue uniform.

Valesque who was further into the Med-room could see her clearly. "Lola!" she exclaimed on seeing her. "What's wrong? You don't look very good."

"I don't feel very good", the girl replied in a cute sounding voice but with a strange grimace on her face. "I have been feeling a little dizzy, it is worse when I stand up, so I have been lying down. I keep feeling like I am going to fall", she said worrisomely as she moved slightly to tighten her hold on the doorframe.

Tim, always eager to help a lady, and especially such a cute sounding one, moved forward as if to go to her aid.

Valesque noticed his movement out of the corner of her eye and put her hand out for him to stop. "It's okay", Valesque said, speaking to all in the room but mostly to Lieutenant Baine. "She is just not used to space travel. This is her first time on a Space Ship."

"Space travel?" Lola squeaked, "You mean we are not in the airlock anymore? I was not told the ship had been completed and we were launching. How long have I been in here?"

"We launched three days ago, although the ship is still not complete", Valesque replied a little bitterly.

"Oh," Lola sighed with a very disappointed look on her face, "I had so wanted to watch the launch too."

"Well, it was a bit sudden. I am afraid you are not the only one who missed seeing her maiden launch", Valesque explained, rubbing her head as she remembered how she had missed it by being unconscious in a life pod.

"But, you are okay, Lola. You are not sick. You just have to adjust to the movement of the ship and then you will be just fine."

"Oh, is that all it is?" Lola asked brightening at the thought. "I had never felt so strange before in all my life, I thought something was seriously wrong with me", Lola said happily, as she released her hold on the doorframe and stepped boldly into the main room.

She stumbled a bit as she walked and Tim rushed to catch her.

Lola felt the Lieutenant's strong arm encircle her and help her regain her balance. She turned her head back towards him and gave him a sweet smile after she regained her footing.

Tim had been surprised at Valesque who usually seemed so prickly being so patient and kind to Lola, but now that he saw her, he could not wonder at anyone being kind to such a beautiful creature.

The young woman was perfectly formed and gorgeous. She was small and slender with a perfect, healthy pink complexion; round, bright green eyes and soft, lustrous hair that was candy pink on one side and sky blue on the other.

Her hair was cut short to her chin on the pink side, with the blue side being slightly longer and ending in a downward slant.

"What's a gorgeous girl like you doing in a place like this?" Tim asked in his usual flirty way as he gave her his patented smile.

Lola giggled girlishly, her green eyes twinkling with delight. She was still very young and naive and loved to be admired.

"Was it you that pressed the medical call button?" Lola asked him with a cute, tempting smile and flirtatious flutter of lashes.

"No, that was me", Valesque interrupted, quickly tiring of the nauseous scene. I have an electrical charge I need to get rid of. He just has a little scratch on his hand."

Lola breathed, wide eyed at the thought as she turned her attention from the Lieutenant to the medical task at hand. "And how did you get this electrical charge?" Lola asked professionally, as she suddenly turned from young flirtatious girl to serious medical worker.

"She was hit by a taser", Sanic replied before Valesque.

"A taser?" Tim asked, confused as he remembered the bright jolt he had seen from Valesque earlier.

"Set to kill", Sanic added eagerly.

"Kill? How could she have possibly survived an electrical shock of that magnitude?" Tim returned unbelievably.

"She's a Virrilian", Sanic replied simply and almost proudly. "They had to use the top setting to knock her out. She was out for three days!"

Tim looked to Lola for help. "He is kidding right?" he asked her.

Lola just shrugged. "I haven't gotten up to the 'V's' yet in the intergalactic encyclopedia. But it is possible."

Tim glanced from Lola to Valesque, who's naturally pale complexion looked deathly white beside Lola's healthy pink tone. "You do look awfully pale", Tim observed in concern.

Valesque sighed irritably as she got up on an exam table to prepare for her treatment. "I am a Virrilian", she said, suppressing

the urge to call him an idiot. "I'm always this pale."

Lola came forward and slid small metallic cuffs on each of Valesque's fingers. Each cuff had a different colored wire, and all the wires combined to form a cable that was plugged into the exam table.

She then reached up, lowered the exam table's arm over Valesque's body, and set the arm to perform the various treatments she deemed necessary for the taser blast. "This will discharge the electrical build up and rebalance all your system functions", Lola explained with a comforting smile.

"Now, let's see about your hand", Lola said turning towards the Lieutenant and taking his hand as she led him to another exam table across the aisle. "My goodness, how ever did you get such a nasty, deep cut?" Lola exclaimed, reverting to being flirtatious as she cared for her handsome patient.

"This ship is just full of untold dangers", Tim replied with a knowing backward glance at the reclining Valesque.

Sanic watched for a while as the Lieutenant and Lola flirted across the way.

"It is amazing", the Ensign began leaning in close to Valesque, so as not to be overheard by the other two. "Absolutely amazing. Is that your work?" he asked, his dark, spiky, blonde-tipped hair almost touching hers.

Valesque who had been resting comfortably as she underwent her procedures opened her eyes slightly and looked at the Ensign who was still staring across the aisle at the flirtatious two.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, utterly confused.

"Lola", Sanic said excitedly as he turned to look at Valesque. "She is amazing, did you design her too?"

Valesque looked a bit uncomfortable as she glanced quickly over to where Lola and the Lieutenant were talking and giggling as Lola fixed the cut in the Pilot's hand.

"How did you know about Lola?" Valesque finally whispered, obviously upset about the subject.

"Well," Sanic began nervously, noting her intent and a bit unfriendly stare. "I...uhh. I am a scientist too, you see. I like to build things and to make electronic gadgets. Like these.", he said as he reached down and took two small discs off the bottom of his shoes. "I made these." he continued, showing her the small, metallic circles. "They are anti-gravity discs. You can put them on your shoes and you can move without having to walk or climb."

"Hmm...very interesting. I was wondering what you were using. Don't let the Captain see you with those though. I doubt she would approve, she would probably find something in her rule book about requiring movement that involved exercise."

"Oh, I get plenty of exercise with these, believe me!" Sanic laughed, "They are extremely sensitive, it takes a lot of concentration and effort to get them to move the way you want. They are controlled by body balance and just a little too much pressure in one direction and you can go flying off out of control. I should know, it took me a while to get used to them."

"Mmmm..", the Engineer muttered trying to see what this had to do with anything, "but that still doesn't explain why you were asking about Lola."

"Well, being used to making mechanical things, I guess I just have an eye, or actually an ear for them. I have slightly more sensitive hearing than most people do when it comes to electronics, and when I got near Lola I heard that distinct high-pitched sound all electronic things put out. Not that it is very noticeable", he added

quickly afraid of offending her. "She seems to be very well insulated."

Valesque sighed as she laid her head back on the exam table and stared up at the ceiling as she thought of an appropriate response. Sanic watched her in nervous concern, he got the feeling she did not appreciate him finding out that Lola was an android.

"She isn't mine", Valesque finally said softly, so only Sanic could hear. She looked back over to where Lola was still flirting with the Lieutenant to be sure they wouldn't be overheard. "She was created by a couple. Doctors Larea and Neegal Triumdic. They are both scientists. She is in biomechanics and he is in microbiology. She doesn't know... I mean Lola knows she is mechanical, that she is an electronic being, but she does not know that is something different.

That she is any different from a so-called "normal" life form. So, just don't...don't treat her like she isn't a real person, just because she is mechanical, okay. She really wouldn't understand and it would upset and confuse her."

"Okay. I mean, no, of course I wouldn't. She is just amazing", Sanic stumbled out as reassuringly as he could. "So... real and lifelike."

Valesque scowled at him as if he just insulted her child. "She is real, she is a person and she is alive", she said sternly. "Just be sure you remember that in your admiration of her."

"I understand", the Ensign assured her hurriedly, hating the idea he might lose Valesque's trust and good opinion. "I won't treat her any differently than I would anyone else of another species that fascinates me", he smiled.

Valesque looked back over to where Lola was giggling and sighed again. "She is very young and naive still. She has been in creation

for over a decade but she has only been active in that body for about a month. Although, she does not know that.

She has implanted memories of an entire childhood growing up, just as any other being would have. She has memories of a past and a home and of her parents; Larea and Neegal. They knew it would be easier for her to interact with others if she could reflect back on 'past experiences' and relate to others more intimately by having childhood memories to share with them. That way she will never feel any real difference in herself compared to anyone else", Valesque explained.

"Oh, no!" Lola suddenly exclaimed, putting a hand to her face in alarm.

Valesque and Sanic looked quickly over to her to see what the problem was, hoping she had not been upset by something she had overheard.

Lola turned to Valesque with wide, worried eyes. "Oh, no", she repeated, this time addressing Valesque as she walked quickly back over to the side of her exam table. "The Lieutenant and I were just discussing our home worlds and our families when I suddenly remembered. My parents!" Lola exclaimed. "I haven't seen or heard from them in over three days. They may not even know where I am. They will be so worried!" she cried in her cute innocent way.

Valesque sat up, pushing the medical exam arm out of the way. It had stopped humming and showed all green lights on the front panel so she assumed it was done with its programmed treatments and she could get up. Lola helped her remove the metal cuffs from her fingers as she looked intently at the Engineer for guidance. "It's alright, Lola", Valesque said calmly and with a slight reassuring smile. "Your parents probably weren't informed of your departure and they are probably wondering where you are, but we can contact them from the ship. The main off-ship communications aren't working, but I think I can rig up a relay that will get a

message to them for you."

"Really?" Lola squeaked excited. "I can send my parents a message that I am okay, and about my new friends?" she asked, glancing back coyly at the Lieutenant.

"Sure", Valesque replied obligingly. "You can tell them whatever you like. We just need to go to the main medical console and set up the signal. Do they know about your latest look?" she asked. Lola had the ability to alter her appearance by changing, among other things, her hair, eye and skin color.

Lola patted her candy-pink hair satisfactorily. "No, not yet. I think I have decided I like this appearance best, I am going to keep it. Don't you just love it?" she asked Valesque, her eyes sparkling with glee.

"Yeah, it's...uhhhmm..." Valesque looked her over as she searched for the right word, taking in her bright pink and blue hair, green eyes, fresh pink complexion and silvery blue uniform, "it is very...colorful."

As Valesque and Lola left the patient treatment area of the Med-room to access the main computer terminal on the lab side, Sanic went over to chat with Tim who was still sitting idly on the edge of his exam table flexing his treated hand.

The Med-room was a very large rectangular area that was used for initial exams and minor injury treatment. More severe injuries or long-term care was provided in other rooms on the medical deck. The Med-room had a large open doorway onto the corridor; just inside the doorway was a medical call button to summon medical help if no one was in the room at the time.

From the doorway, looking to your left you could see three aisles, each aisle having a row of three exam tables.

The tables were spaced wide apart allowing plenty of room for medical personnel to get around them and access each bed's medical controls. The medical controls were located in the large arm that hung over the head of the bed and could be pulled down and positioned over the patient, as well as in a standing tower console that housed all kinds of medical devices, including the finger cuffs Lola had used earlier on Valesque.

Behind the rows of beds was a giant window that showed a panoramic view of space.

Tim and Sanic were sitting on the first exam table in the last aisle, just in front of the large window.

Across the room on the right side was a large table console for the medical teams to use for research and patient records.

The door Lola had entered from earlier was beside this console.

The door led into a smaller room that was meant to be used as a Doctor's break-room, it contained a desk with a computer terminal, a bed and a food duplicator. The main access panels to the medical computer core were also located in this room.

In the main Med-room to the right of the main doorway from the corridor was a large 'L' shaped counter area with all kinds of beakers, glass slides, digital microscopes and other lab materials. There was also an island counter that housed the sink and decontamination devices.

Built into the large 'L' shaped lab counter was the main medical computer terminal where Lola was waiting as Valesque worked to set up a way for her to send a message to her parents.

As Valesque tinkered with her hand held computer that was always at her hip, faint voices and sounds riddled with static were occasionally heard.

"I am looking for a sub-space signal that I might be able to send your message on. The people who receive the signal will have to

relay the message on to Saturna 3", Valesque explained as she continued her sub-space frequency scan.

"This one should work", she said, finally deciding on a certain signal. "It is a sub-space music signal. Someone who receives this program should be able to forward the message for us."

Valesque now reached forward and attached her Vid-screen mini-computer to the main medical console in order to boost the signal and hopefully get the message out clearly. Now all that was left to do was to record the message, pirate the signal long enough to send it out and then hope someone listening will be nice enough to relay it.

"I sure hope this is a program signal a lot of people actually listen to", the Engineer remarked as she finished her calibrating. "Ok.. now we start the recording, get ready", she told Lola as she pressed the console's voice log recording button.

"This is a personal sub-space message for the Tech-Labs on Saturna 3. Our ship's communications are non-functioning, please record and relay this message as follows. Repeat: Our ship's communications are non-functioning, please record and relay this message as follows: To Doctors Triumdic of Tech-labs on Saturna 3. This is a message from Scientific Engineer Valesque on the Magellan, your daughter is safe and with me. Her message is as follows", Valesque concluded, nodding to Lola for her to begin, before walking away to give her some privacy.

The Doctors would know not to worry about Lola when they heard she was with Valesque, so whatever Lola added at the end was just for her own piece of mind. This was the first time she would be this far away from her family.

Valesque put her hand to her head as she waited for Lola to finish her message. She had started to feel a little strange when she had first entered the Med-room, a little light headed with a dull throbbing in her inner ears. She had assumed it was a taser residual effect,

but she still had it even after her treatment.

The Engineer glanced back over to Lola and saw her still chattering away, she was definitely going to have to edit the message if they wanted anyone to bother forwarding it.

Valesque took the time to look around the still room, noticing as she did so that her ears throbbed more when she looked in the direction of the break-room than when her head was turned anywhere else.

The young Engineer's brow furrowed as she curiously walked towards the break-room door.

She looked back around at the others in the room but no one else seemed to be having any problems. They all seemed at ease and as if they didn't notice anything unusual.

Perhaps something was out of alignment in the systems and it was at such a low frequency only she could sense it.

Valesque pressed the room access button on the side of the break-room's door frame. As the door slid open, a very low pitched drone flowed over her from inside the room.

She went over to the computer terminal on the desk, to the right of the doorway.

Valesque glanced over the terminal's screen as it glowed in the semi darkness, it was displaying a section of the Intergalactic Medical Encyclopedia, apparently Lola had gotten up to volume 'K'.

She sensed the noise was not emanating from this direction.

She reached out and touched the room's light activating panel, sliding her fingers all the way to the top, making the lights shine their brightest and then back down to the bottom, turning the lights completely off before moving the sensors back to the middle

setting. The sound was not caused by a malfunction in the lighting.

Valesque turned around and looked over at the food-duplicating unit, but it was not yet active.

Finally, she moved towards the last possibility in the room, the electrical access panel. As she approached the smooth, pale green wall, the throbbing in her ears became stronger.

She pressed the panel release button and a small section in the wall popped out and then slowly rose up out of the way.

As soon as the panel opened, Valesque felt an increase in the low frequency pulse's intensity. Whatever it was, it was in here.

As the access panel moved out of the way and the overhead lighting illuminated the interior of the opening, Valesque gasped in horror!

Amid the silvery wires and multi-colored cables sat a black, metallic, titan spider of a device. Valesque was too shocked to do anything but stare for a moment, taking in the many 'legs' of wiring fanning out from the central device and intersecting every major circuit of the ship.

The alarmed Engineer suddenly sprang forward and swiftly closed the panel as if she feared the spider-like device would jump out and consume her. She turned her back to the panel and leaned heavily against it, keeping it closed as she stared ahead in wide-eyed shock.

"Oh, no", she groaned, trying to come to grips with what she had just seen.

As if things were not bad enough already, and now this! She had hoped she would never see that thing again; that she could forget

about ever having created it, but now here it was, on her own ship.

The Space Tripper had returned.

