



**TT LINSE**

*"A powerful launch to a fresh SF series that  
promises a wealth of ingenious concepts"*

*– Kirkus Starred Review*

**THE LANGUAGE OF  
CORPSES**

**MECHALUM SPACE I**

“I NEED PEOPLE TO DO THINGS. Loyal people. People like you. Can you do things?”

Jazari nodded, less vigorously. What kinds of things, she wondered.

“Yeah, don’t worry too much about it,” Zosi said with a smile. “Nothing you can’t handle.” She let out a big sigh and sat back against the seat.

Time passed and Jazari relaxed a bit and glanced out the window. They had taken off and were flying over open seas, deep shimmery turquoise underneath them, silver- and redcaps dotting the surface, a few habs in the gloomy distance. The habs on Cecrops were open and airy affairs, more like extended cabanas around enclosed living areas—after a bit of terraforming, the atmosphere on the planet was earthlike, the weather generally mild. No seasons to speak of. The skies were dark blue and dotted with stars, lightening to orange and red around Trappist 1 in its fixed position in the sky. Clouds outlined in red threaded in the mild breeze, with Trappist 1’s nearest creche planets Otrera and Actaeon in their places, shining low in the sky. Sunward, the largely uninhabitable Otrera was small, pale, and purplish, while the ice and water world of Actaeon, mottled gray and white, loomed half above the opposite horizon. Tidally locked Actaeon had a thick crust of ice that melted to water on the heatward side toward Trappist 1, a doorway where transports entered to access the sparse habs in the water under the ice. The other four planets in the system were either too close to Trappist 1 to make out, orbited behind the planet from their position, or were too far out to be seen without amplification.

“One more thing,” Zosi said, looking out her own window. “I’m easygoing until I’m not. Because I’m easygoing, people don’t take me seriously at first. I know this about people. You won’t take me seriously, and I forgive you. But I’ll only give you one chance. One screwup. When you screw up, I’ll take what you love the most and destroy it. Be expecting it. Then you’ll believe me. Then and only then will things work the way they should.”

She didn’t even glance over at Jazari.

*Praise for Author*

***TT Linse***

“Readers will be drawn in to the collection's world and will find themselves wanting to read more of Linse’s intimate tales.”  
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Linse’s wide array of believable characters, and her ability to return to the same set of themes without becoming repetitive or predicative, makes her a notable literary force. ... a notable debut from a very promising writer.” —IndieReader

“Linse’s gift for fiction lies in her seemingly offhand but richly engaging observations. ... Linse makes each journey relatable and emotionally textured while occasionally injecting her signature literary observations.” —IndieReader

“By far, the author’s greatest talent is her beautiful eye for detail. She has the remarkable ability to paint a picture with just a few choice words.” —Books Direct

## **Mechalum Space**

*The Language of Corpses*

## **TT Linse**

### **Writing as Tamara Linse**

*How to Be a Man (stories)*

*Deep Down Things (novel)*

*Earth's Imagined Corners (historical novel)*

## **The Wyoming Chronicles (YA)**

### **British Classics Set in Contemporary Wyoming**

*Moreau (adventure)*

*Pride (romance)*

# The Language of Corpses



*Mechalum Space 1*

*TT Linse*



*Copyright © 2020 by TT Linse*  
*www.ttlinse.io*

*All rights reserved*  
*Published in the United States by Salix*  
*www.salix.site*

*This is a work of fiction—names, characters, places, and events  
are the products of the author’s imagination or are used  
fictitiously*

*Cover design by Lyndsay Stanley and TT Linse, photo credit  
Vladimir Kolesnikov*

*Print*

*ISBN-13: 978-1-953694-02-7*

*Print (Amazon)*

*ISBN-13: 978-1-953694-00-3*

*Epub*

*ISBN-13: 978-1-953694-03-4*

*Kindle*

*ISBN-13: 978-1-953694-01-0*

*Edition 1.0*

*For Caroline and Allyson,  
who made me believe*

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don’t love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*



*Part 1*  
*Jazari*

# Chapter 1

*Fury, Proxima Centauri system, EU 2728, FuFG602*

This is a really bad idea, Jazari thought as she punched in the mechalum hash, her hands the mech equivalent of sweaty as hell.

Or, you know, what she had remembered as the mechalum hash. Not the right one, as it turned out. Such a brash cockup would usually result in the poor rust bucket dancing with the Prox eels. Dead, in other words.

Or dead for all intents and purposes—we don't actually know what happens to people when they go through a Faison Gate with the wrong coordinates. They could end up nowhere. Or they could end up two million EUs in the past in a black hole, since time doesn't matter in mechalum space. But there would be no comp waiting on the other end and no receiving team, so, you know, as good as.

*Should we be considering our life choices?* her ccomp subvocalized in her ear.

*Off*, Jazari shot back.

Blessed silence.

Must remember to turn down its sarcasm.

Jazari had never liked her ccomp. It was always there trying to help, which you'd think was a good thing, but it was not. Its offers of help felt more like running commentary on all the ways Jazari was wrong. Always there, always watching, always judging, jumping at the chance to be *helpful*. She didn't trust it. And it's not like Jazari could pull it out of her brain and shut it in a drawer. Why anyone thought it was a good idea to link a mesh-connected sentient AI to the human essent, Jazari would never know.

She couldn't ask her ccomp the coordinates because it wouldn't know, and of course the gate comp wasn't going to tell her, even if she worked here. And the mesh was no help with privileged info like this—they don't post these things and you can't ask your next door neighbor.

The gate room she was in was like all the others. Basically a small sterile medical room, this one painted a pale yellow, that smelled of cleaning chemicals that didn't quite hide Fury's usual stench of human bodies and mech oil and decaying seaweed. It held a mobile crash couch and a touchpad and had two doors on opposite sides of the room, one for travelers to enter—and never leave—and one for personnel and bodies, which were carted off to be put on ice or reused for some other essent.

But Jazari thought she had a valid hash. She thought she remembered it from that last person she helped gate in her suck-ass poor-paying glorified step-and-fetch job. A rich tourist to somewhere in the Ross 154 system, maybe, or one of the Ogles. She just had to hope their emergency backup wasn't on the fritz. She'd be stored without a body until it got sorted out. But, dead here or dead nowhere—at least there was a good chance across the galaxy.

She should have remembered the hash, as she had a damn good memory for symbols. Not photographic memory, since she didn't gen with it, but as good as she could get augmented in with the bit of money she could scrape together. And this mech body she'd picked up on Fury was better at memory even than her gen body, and she'd been good in her gen body because she'd worked hard at it. If you're going to be a xenolinguist—even if there were no real live aliens to talk to—you better be able to remember symbols.

But to her credit, she felt a bit rushed. The two hulking mechs and the deceptively slender and normal bio essent that Zosi had sent after her had moved beyond talking to the door comp to hotwiring it. At least Atze hadn't come—Jazari would be dead already. She could see the three on the screen she'd pulled up in the corner of her eye. She had no doubt that bastard bio would figure it out, even with the security in this place.

Gates always had levels upon levels of security. Story as old as time. Everybody has reasons to want to get into—or away from—a Faison Gate. To go somewhere or, you know, to blow it up because they'd been forced to immigrate. Or because their caro or creche mate had been forced to emigrate. Or something someone had done to their gen body or their receiving body. Or didn't do. Or, you know, threatened to do. Crackpots abound.

Irony does too, considering what she was doing.

Jazari had talked to this bio essent for a bit at a bar before she figured out who she was. Her ccomp had had to sim-translate the bio's thickly accented Standard. Jazari had a pretty good ear for accents, but she hadn't recognized this one. That should have been her first clue. The meeting sent the fear of Nuc into Jazari. That and the fact that the essent told her she was going to kill

her. In another life, this bio was a dictator on a small but important planet. You know, like Zosi back on Cecrops.

## Chapter 2

Cecrops. Jazari had grown up on that shithole. Well, to be fair, it wasn't a shithole—Fury was—but any place you grow up and want to get away from as quick as possible is a shithole. It actually was pretty nice. A tidally locked mostly water world in the Trappist 1 system. Not too much weather, mild climate. Dim star. People lived on the water in ramshackle habs. Lots of aquaculture and pretty good sushi. No, it was the fact that she grew up in a snow creche with just the bare minimum of essentials and caretakers who could give a rat's ass. That's why it was a shithole.

Jazari was covered by Basic, so she wouldn't have starved. Every citizen of a planet or system in the MWA, the Milky Way Alliance, supposedly was. But you had to work to have more than the bare minimum. The Cecrops government, unlike other richer communities like the Ring around Epsilon Eridani, only kept you from starvation and put a roof over your head. In the Ring, your level of contribution to society could earn you a decent living, even a comfortable one. But this excluded communities with extremist ideologies that refused to join the MWA—like the one orbiting the gas giant Harpsichord around Lacaille 9352. There, generally you were shit out of luck. Jazari

had heard that their ideologies had something to do with stoicism and aliens and their social support system involved a form of cannibalism that they called *recycling*. It was probably just a story.

Cecrops had some of the galaxy's only archaeological sites with alien advanced tech—discovered so far—and that was important because that was the reason Jazari had the burning desire to figure out alien language. Some rich high-sider had taken an interest in their snow creche and sponsored a field trip to the orbiting artifacts when Jazari was nine. When Cecrops had first been settled, essents had thought that the light asteroid belt was a naturally occurring thing. But once they were up and running and took a closer look, they realized that something was off.

The individual asteroids were a little too smooth, and they were asymmetrical in a symmetrical kind of way—a very deliberate sort of asymmetrical. When scanned, they were of uniform density throughout, without the usual variations of naturally occurring rock and ice. And on them here and there etched into the rock were small patches of symbols. Each symbol tended to be a rounded square weaved through with an intricate pattern of naturalistic shapes that could be weird faces or hands or Nuc knows what but you couldn't quite make them out. They were each the size of a very large thumbprint and were arranged in a jumble mass—no rows or columns or regularity. They did not react when poked and prodded with various instruments, so scientists figured they were keyed to the aliens in some way.

These were not the first alien tech artifacts found—previous findings in 2366 near Gamma Pavonis had been studied for their

technology and brought the galaxy superstrong materials that allowed the construction of the Ring around Epsilon Eridani and terraforming on the leading edge of settlement—what was it? Now almost ninety light years out from Sol. But these around Cecrops were obviously from a different species than the ones found before, and no one had figured out much about them.

But, to be honest, that wasn't the real reason xenolinguistics fascinated Jazari. The real reason was because she'd always heard voices in her head. This wasn't like the subvocalizing of her ccomp. There was always a low-level hum, rising and falling, but sometimes one or two voices would stand out. Often it was when she was dozing off or staring into space, her mind quiet. A voice would be screaming—in terror or in anger or in pain or, it seemed sometimes, in sheer boredom. Other times, it would sing, sometimes tonelessly, sometimes with very elaborate and beautiful melodies. Jazari looked forward to those times. Every once in a while, she could even make out nonsense words. Most of them were questioning. They never answered her and they never answered each other or had conversations.

It was really inconvenient if they started shouting when she was in the middle of a conversation. She unconsciously tried to cover them up by talking very loud and very fast, hushing them, even though whoever she was talking to couldn't hear them. Essents gave her funny looks. "You're running from something," one very astute but inept lover had told her.

There were two options, as she saw it. These voices were internal or external. If they were internal, then she had a whole planet's worth of babbling people inside her. If they were external—well, that was more troubling. Who the hell were



they? And why were they talking to her, of all people, and how did their voices end up in her skull?

Extensive medical testing at eight EUs had ruled out schizophrenia and other mental disorders, although the med had looked at her through narrowed eyes. *I wish* I was faking it, she'd thought. Mental note to use a medcomp next time—less judgy. Jazari herself was unsure. It had to be a mental disorder, even though essents had figured out a cure or at least a treatment for most of the traditional physical-based disorders. Essents went bat-shit crazy in the natural course of things after they'd been alive for centuries and jumped through a bunch of bodies, but Jazari had a long way to go to get to that.

How else would you explain it? One way. Maybe those voices were aliens, and maybe by studying alien languages, she'd eventually figure out what those voices were saying. That's why she decided to go to college for xenolinguistics—in the off chance something would click.

She had hoped she would lose the voices when, at 17, she gated to Fury into a mech body and left her gen bio body behind. That's how a lot of people escaped illness or severe injury or old age—they just jumped into another body and the authorities disposed of the diseased one.

Before she jumped to Fury, she'd had a minimum of augments because she was poor—ccomp, mesh modem, memory, languages, vision and endorphin boosts to combat the twilight and the lack of a day cycle on Cecrops—the usual, but none of which physically altered her. Her gen body had been short, male presenting, with light brown skin—bio bodies on Cecrops because of its lower gravity had begun to elongate but not appreciably from Sol standard. She tended to wear simple

standard clothing in browns, blues, and oranges—fabricated one cycle, recycled the next. She didn't bother with entopics—they cost money—but she had a few physical behances, a baubleband of sea fibers and jadestone on her wrist, tantalum rings in graduated sizes around one ear.

Her hair was a wavy brown, which she kept cropped above her ears. Her light eyes were uptilted, and she had a narrow but prominent nose, flared nostrils, and curvy lips—lips that were always half-smiling, she'd been told. Somebody had once called her Puck, for a moon named after a fool. They'd laughed when they'd said it, but Jazari knew she was no fool. Let them think that.

She didn't look much different from the other essents on Cecrops. Unlike the others, though, she did not know her genetic origins. Most people could trace their genetic ancestry back to Sol, just as they could trace their essent history back to their gen body and gen planet. It came with their gen and citizenship certs. Jazari's records had been lost somewhere along the way, and no one had any idea how or why—that's how she'd ended up at a snow creche.

When she'd gated to Fury, she hadn't had the money to transfer to another skin job—hardly anybody did. Only rich people could afford that. But, it seemed reasonable that, if the voices had been inside her, she would have escaped them when she slipped her biology. It hadn't happened though, so it must be something essential to her.

The voices, though, had gotten louder the closer she got to a Faison Gate. During the brief surge of pain and disorientation as she came through, they had literally screamed in her brain, a chorus of millions of voices. When she came to in her mech

body, after they'd moved her from the unscheduled comp transfer, the voices were back to what they had been before—slightly elevated, but not overwhelming.

Something about mechalum space set them off. Maybe that's why, after she'd got what she came for—a degree in xenolinguistics with honors—she'd put off transferring to that backwater, Gliese 1061, to fulfill her indenture to teach and instead took a shit job at one of Fury's five gates. To be closer to the voices.

## Chapter 3

Zosi and Atze. Now there was another story. Jazari had held out hope that she'd escaped their clutches. No such luck. Evidence these three goons.

She'd met them the first time when she was 17. At 17, you had to pick a trade or a trade picked you. At that age, founding essents like Jazari already had something in mind like apprenticing to the aquaculture farms and they'd shown aptitude or interest. Or by not choosing their lives got chosen for them. If they seemed smart, they may be slotted into one of the few scholarship spots in the better schools, or they may be apprenticed to a trade. If they were really unlucky they got picked up by people like Zosi for sex work or black market mules.

Jazari was smart and she knew what she wanted. She wanted to study alien languages. Only, even with its alien artifacts, Cecrops was more of a trade school planet, and so Jazari's only hope was going offworld. The jobs counselor at the creche had told her she was out of luck, better to settle for the communications guild, since she was smart, but Jazari had her heart set, and while she dithered, the slots filled up. So that's why she was left with no choice. She was aging out of the creche,

and Zosi just showed up. Zosi must've had an arrangement with the director—she must send all the misfits her way.

Jazari knew when she entered the director's office that something was up. The director caught her attention first, her mech body in its civil service uniform standing stiffly by her desk, leaning forward on her toes as if she would jump at any noise. Her faceplate's eyes were wide, and it was tense around the lips. A mech body is less expressive than a bio body, but there were similar tells—muscle memory from your gen body.

The director had come from one of those planets that insisted on keeping its original ping language, in addition to Standard. Jazari wasn't sure which planet or which language. She'd heard the director speaking it once, lots of guttural gees and kays, with a touring dignitary. In general, your ccomp could translate any incoming known language for you. For outgoing, if you were in a mech body like the director was, the ccomp in conjunction with the mech body could take your internal speech and translate it directly to your mech voice. It took some getting used to. Similarly, your ccomp could assist you in outgoing translation in a bio body, but it was a recipe for disaster, since you had to pronounce the foreign sounds yourself and you'd most likely screw it up.

Almost immediately, Jazari noticed who was standing across the room from the director. It was the most beautiful bio body Jazari had ever seen. To a casual outsider, this was a good-looking rich kid called to the director's office. The essent didn't look much older than Jazari, with pale freckled skin, artfully spiked blonde hair, a tall slender frame, expensive well-fitting exercise gear that you don't actually wear exercising, and no garish entopics, though Jazari suspected there may be a few

enamors. The essent had no visible mech enhancements, unless you counted the large mech standing by the door that made Jazari jump when she noticed her.

The mech was upgraded—larger and elongated, some military augments, an expression faceplate altered from standard with wider fuller features. Its large wide-set eyes sparkled, faceted like golden-brown jewels. The mech had no ornamentation or entopics and was not wearing any clothing, which sometimes indicated the mech was just a comp, but all the augments pointed to it being an essent.

No, it was the way the director acted that gave Zosi away. The director was falling all over herself. Here was someone with power and lots of it, a formidable old essent who chose a young bio body.

“Jazari, bow to the Honored Guest,” the director said in her mech voice. She’d chosen an accent from Epsilon Eridani, which was often used to signify class and culture. Jazari had wondered if she’d ever lived on Epsilon Eridani, or if she’d just chosen it to make herself sound better. Jazari was guessing the latter.

The director added subvocally, *Warning—be on your best behavior or your life just got a lot worse.* The director’s subvocal accent matched her spoken one. The system was designed that way by default so you could recognize people’s voices.

Jazari blinked. No advanced warning, but at least she said something now. The director wasn’t a bad person, Jazari had decided, just anxious in that way that made people small-minded. Jazari had known something had to give, but she didn’t think it’d quite gotten to this. But then it all came together—

since she hadn't chosen, this was the essent who was going to decide her future.

At that moment, Jazari's voices shrieked and then cut off and were quiet. She stiffened, and adrenalin shot through her, causing her ccomp to subvocalize, *Query? Status?*

*Fine*, she sent back.

This is how it is, Jazari thought. I have no choice. I'm going to make the best of it then. She sized up the essent for a split second. Was this the type of person who would benefit from calculated defiance? Or from subservience? At 17, Jazari had had plenty of lessons in games people play. This was someone who liked to be admired, judging from her careful presentation. She liked ease and people who did what she said. She'd most likely have little patience for back talk.

Jazari made a quick decision. She bowed two degrees more deeply than was strictly necessary. "I am honored," she said.

The director relaxed visibly. *Good choice*, she said to Jazari. To the bio essent, she said, "This is Jazari. She has not yet chosen a name or a profession. She's shown facility with communications and public perception. A strong mind." The director paused and then added, "She's shown an openness to mods, as well." Jazari wasn't sure where the director had gotten that, though the first part was true.

The director did not introduce the essent to Jazari but stood waiting. That meant it didn't matter what Jazari thought. It only mattered what this essent thought.

"Is she loyal?" the essent asked. Her resonant voice sounded a bit archaic and upper crust. She may have been talking to the director, but she was looking at Jazari with those manicured eyebrows raised.

“Yes, absolutely,” the director said immediately, but the essent didn’t react. She watched Jazari’s face.

Jazari considered her for a minute. She wanted something. She wanted Jazari to respond, which was a good sign. Something told Jazari that this essent was really dangerous, but she liked the fact that she was looking to her, Jazari, rather than just taking her, since she obviously could.

Jazari nodded slightly and opened her expression, not quite a smile.

“Good,” the essent said to Jazari, nodding back. She looked at the director and said. “As always, it’s nice doing business with you.” A chill—this essent wanted Jazari to know that this was just business. A warning.

A thrill shot down Jazari’s spine. Here we go, she thought. My life’s going to begin, one way or another.

That was pretty much for the meeting. “We’ll send your things,” the director said as Jazari followed the essent out of the office. “Nucyotta,” she added, almost under her breath, “Godspeed.” The mech turned and followed them out the door.

Grief swept over Jazari for a split second. Grief for the loss of everything she’d known—even if it was shitty, it was hers. All her creche mates, her friends she’d known her whole life. She’d resisted having a caro, other than the occasional fairly innocent hookup—life was complicated enough and she saw what the others went through, plus she knew they’d all be moving on. She’d even miss one or two of the teachers. Her stupid little bunk and the few things she had in the packet under her mattress. A notebook where she marked down important things—how quaint, her bunkmates had said. She hoped they would send that.



She stumbled. The mech behind her paused to let her catch herself but did not move to help her—another sign that this was an essent, not a comp. A comp would've helped.

Jazari shook her head. They were just things. At least her digital library was coming with her, and she could mesh with the people she really wanted to talk to. They weren't really lost. She had to focus on what lay ahead.

Waiting for them was a transport, luxurious, understated, and spacious. The front half look like a sleek and sinuous ground transport that morphed into a spacious air shuttle in the back half. It was made of molded metallic composites and aerodynamic one-way black diamondglass. They stepped in, first the bio, then Jazari, then the mech. The bio faced forward, leaning in with her elbows on her knees, and the mech sat next to Jazari facing backwards toward the bio.

The interior was surprisingly large and had that new transport smell, understated synthetics and florals. It was dim with soft blue underlights and crystal accents and gentle soothing enamors. The seats quickly molded to the body.

“A couple of things,” the bio said, glancing over at the mech. “I'm Zosi oi Bsam. I get things for people. Things they can't get at the store.”

People were no longer grouped by families, except on the rare throwback planet, since most people didn't gen the traditional way. They were grouped by creches, which were most often organized around trades or guilds. *oi Bsam* meant *of the Bsam creche*, which was one of the first established on Cecrops. Very old, very rich, very powerful, known for trade and politics.

Zosi paused and reached into her jacket and pulled out a slender pack. She extracted a med sheet, which looked like a small square of purple plastic, placed it on her tongue, and shut her mouth and eyes. She lolled her head back and then forward again, swallowed, and then opened her eyes.

“That’s Atze,” Zosi said, nodding toward the mech. “She’s me, too. Split a century or so back.”

The mech lifted her chin, expression neutral, but didn’t say anything.

Jazari nodded and met her weird eyes. The hair on Jazari’s neck prickled—she wasn’t sure quite why.

“Second, I need people to do things. Loyal people. People like you. Can you do things?”

Jazari nodded, less vigorously. What kinds of things, she wondered.

“Yeah, don’t worry too much about it,” Zosi said with a smile. “Nothing you can’t handle.” She let out a big sigh and sat back against the seat.

Time passed and Jazari relaxed a bit and glanced out the window. They had taken off and were flying over open seas, deep shimmery turquoise underneath them, silver- and redcaps dotting the surface, a few habs in the gloomy distance. The habs on Cecrops were open and airy affairs, more like extended cabanas around enclosed living areas—after a bit of terraforming, the atmosphere on the planet was earthlike, the weather generally mild. No seasons to speak of. The skies were dark blue and dotted with stars, lightening to orange and red around Trappist 1 in its fixed position in the sky. Clouds outlined in red threaded in the mild breeze, with Trappist 1’s nearest creche planets Otrera and Actaeon in their places, shining low in

the sky. Sunward, the largely uninhabitable Otrera was small, pale, and purplish, while the ice and water world of Actaeon, mottled gray and white, loomed half above the opposite horizon. Tidally locked Actaeon had a thick crust of ice that melted to water on the heatward side toward Trappist 1, a doorway where transports entered to access the sparse hubs in the water under the ice. The other four planets in the system were either too close to Trappist 1 to make out, orbited behind the planet from their position, or were too far out to be seen without amplification.

“One more thing,” Zosi said, looking out her own window. “I’m easygoing until I’m not. Because I’m easygoing, people don’t take me seriously at first. I know this about people. You won’t take me seriously, and I forgive you. But I’ll only give you one chance. One screwup. When you screw up, I’ll take what you love the most and destroy it. Be expecting it. Then you’ll believe me. Then and only then will things work the way they should.”

She didn’t even glance over at Jazari.

## Chapter 4

They traveled heatward for hours, the open ocean unchanging below them. They passed around a large shining hab city and several smaller cities and then back out over open ocean. In the distance, the skies brightened a bit and the roiling stormclouds of heatside slowly rose into view as they got closer.

Early in the trip, Zosi pulled her legs up onto the seat, curled against the wall, and slept. Atze sat there unmoving—Jazari suspected she was viewing something on her internal screens. At one point, Zosi seemed to rouse a bit but never opened her eyes. Atze also shifted a bit, which made Jazari think they were subbing a conversation.

Jazari mostly just watched out the window and fiddled with the baubleband on her wrist, a nervous habit. She had a bunch of questions, but it didn't seem the right time to ask them. So instead she brought up her ccomp and accessed the feeds for as much information as she could find on the Bsam creche and on Zosi and Atze oi Bsam. She knew that they would know what she was doing, but it was the only natural thing. They'd probably think it was weird if she hadn't.

She was right—the Bsams were important. They weren't the Alpha who, three hundred EUs ago, traveled 39.46 light years

from Sol as a virtual essent in the ping meant for the Trappist 1 system. Like all pings, the Alpha had been brought out of digital cryo by the AlphaComp an EU before touchdown to fine tune the choice of planets and landing spots in order to establish a Faison Gate. A hundred sets of human genetics preserved in cryo were included as standard procedure—the seeds of future generations, altered and recombined and genned in artificial wombs.

The Bsams also weren't the Beta, the first essent brought through the Faison Gate to assist the Alpha and AlphaComp. It was also the Beta's job to assess the Alpha's mental state, after all the stress of the journey, and to report back independently to Ping Project Command. Only once in the establishment of hundreds of Faison Gates had a Beta had to oust an Alpha. On one of the moons around Kapteyn C in the Kapteyn's Star system, an Alpha had to be taken out by the Beta and an army of bot mechs for monomaniacal tendencies. An undetected instability had been exacerbated by the interaction of an element of the local atmosphere with one of her systems, and she had been planning to send an army back through the gate to take over Ping Project Command.

However, the Bsams, a Pema and a Jan, were among the first wave of essents through the Faison Gate into the small bot mechs. They were among the specialists who assessed the planet's resources and established production systems to gen both mechs and mech and bio bodies to receive future immigrants. They helped establish hab cities and energy and food supplies and, when the technology became available, began the terraforming.

The Bsams had quickly established themselves as an influential creche. A Bsam had been appointed Cecrops project leader after the Alpha stepped down to do other things. Although they no longer held that post, now called the planetary minister or prima, there seemed to be a Bsam or a Bsam advisor in the most important roles. There was even an interplanetary pop star.

No matter how hard Jazari looked, though, the feeds had no reference to a Zosi or Atze oi Bsam. On one hand, she'd been surprised if there had been, but she was disappointed nonetheless. The silence spoke louder than anything.

She would later realize that the trip was all some kind of test, and she apparently passed. She briefly wondered what would have happened if she hadn't.

They were approaching two small beautiful islands when Atze turned her head and said, "That's us." Her voice was like Zosi's, only deeper and gruffer.

Jazari sat up. The jutting islands were covered with tall spindly spiro trees and lots of underbrush, with sheer cliffs on a couple of sides. There were no habs, no developments that she could see.

Just as she was telling her ccomp to zoom in, Atze subvocalized, *You'll want to tell me, if anything comes up*. Atze was looking out her side of the window as she said it, and she lifted her fist and tapped it, the soft chink of metal on diamondglass.

Jazari started to glance over at her, but she said, *Don't. Don't look at me right now. You're looking at the islands*. Smart, Jazari thought. It looked like Jazari glanced over in reaction to Atze's motion. Which begged the question—what kind of relationship did Atze and Zosi really have?

Jazari looked back out the window, waiting.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jazari saw Zosi open her eyes, lift her head, and look at Atze. Atze just looked back, maybe subvocalized. Zosi shrugged slightly and put her head back.

When nothing more came, Jazari said to Atze, *What do you mean? What kinds of things?*

*I couldn't tell you, Atze said. But you'll know. It's also good not to get too comfortable. Even with me.*

Jazari thought that was sound advice.

## Chapter 5

To Jazari's surprise, the transport skimmed the surface of the sea and then dove underwater. It was a regular thing on some planets such as Actaeon to live under the ocean, but not so here on Cecrops. Maybe because of Actaeon, people took perverse pride in not augmenting for underwater survival, unless they were aquaculture farmers. Of course, most mech bodies would automatically survive, but they didn't draw attention to the fact.

The transport settled in a waterlock, and the door fell and sealed. It took a bit for the water to drain, and by the time the car door lifted, a small maglev transport stood waiting. They got in and sat, the platform rocking with their weight. It gently whisked them into a hallway that quickly transitioned to diamondglass with a stunning view of the Cecrops equivalent of a coral reef.

Jazari gasped. It was so beautiful, it didn't seem real. Zosi smiled.

Turned out that large portions of Zosi's habs were made of diamondglass. Zosi loved beautiful things and had the money, so—instead of the dark, cramped, smelly halls like the habs on Fury, with all its shielding from Proxima Centauri's fierce solar winds—you had all the best comforts while surrounded by



sinuous brightly colored plants and fish creatures and Trappist 1's rays through the silver, green, and blue of the deep.

The transport came to a smooth halt in the large, dimly lit, open lounge and entry hall, a twisted bulbous snake of a room with archways and floors in levels and couches and chairs and lamps and views and exits going off in all directions. At its center in a pool of slowly sliding light was an exquisite work of art. It was a combination of intricate colorful sculpture and kinetic mesh holo and enamors. It gave the impression of both infinite space with stars and galaxies, of an underwater environment with plants and coral and fish creatures, and of the quantum mechanics of quarks. If you looked at it for more than a second, soft eerie mesh sounds and scents emanated from it, and it gave you a feeling of loving calmness, no doubt the intended effect.

An essent was waiting for them on one of the couches. She stood when they pulled to a stop and waited, hands clasp in front of her, as they stepped off the maglev.

"This is Dangarembga," Zosi said, nodding to the essent. "Call her Dang."

Dang bowed deeply, first to Zosi, then to Atze, then less deeply but still more than necessary to Jazari. Jazari noted that her bows were meticulously the same to Zosi and Atze. Jazari made a mental note to always do likewise.

Jazari bowed back and returned Dang's warm smile.

Dang was a bit shorter than Jazari but, Jazari would find out later, older by six EUs. Like Jazari, she had been born on Cecrops and was still in her gen body. She had dark black-brown skin and naturally frizzy hair in short dreads that sprang from the top of her head. Dang's eyes, nose, and lips were wide, dark, and

expressive. She liked to wear tops without sleeves and long flowing pants in whites and tans. She favored entopics that showed up as a pale tracery of scars in elaborate designs on her skin, including a tat sleeve with a stylized scowling face on her upper arm. Dang smiled a lot, which hid the fact that she was wicked smart. Solidly built, she spent her off hours obsessively perfecting her boxing and judo techniques and collected replicas of weird hand weapons from other planets—the perfect hobby for someone whose job it was to obtain hard-to-get objects.

One glance at Dang, and Jazari's vitals skyrocketed. Something about her. Jazari took a deep shuddering breath. She glanced over at Zosi and then Atze, hoping they wouldn't notice. She also hoped they never queried her ccomp, as that would be really embarrassing. As things turned out, Zosi probably had. Fucking Zosi.

“This is Jazari,” Zosi said. “She's joining the team.” She looked over at Jazari and added, “A valuable addition, I think, to where we're headed.”

The compliment stoked Jazari's pride, and she let her gratitude show on her face. But inside she withheld judgement. People like Zosi didn't just hand out strokes like this. There was an agenda.

“Let's get you settled,” Dang said, her voice elongated and musical with no accent. She nodded as Zosi and Atze turned and left and then led Jazari down one of the twisting halls. As they descended, Dang asked Jazari about where she was from, to which Jazari mumbled a few vague answers. Dang then told her the history of the place. The hab had originally been a small research station before the Bsams took it over. If you went down

into the bowels, there was still a big med and lab space that they used for augments and things like that.

Jazari was hyperaware of where Dang was in relation to her. When they stood close together peering out the diamondglass at Dang's favorite undersea garden spot, Jazari could feel the warmth of Dang's shoulder next to hers. When they bumped into each other, a miscommunication in which direction they were going, they both laughed, but Jazari didn't regret it. When Dang put her hand on Jazari's arm to draw her attention to a couple of people walking by, the feeling lingered, and every time she thought about it that spot would tingle. She felt like a creeper, aware of every move Dang made.

Dang was good at this—making essents she'd never met before feel at home, which would make her useful to Zosi, Jazari's analytical mind said. But another part of her wanted Dang to give Jazari some token, something personal, some positive sign. It made her uncomfortable that she was this drawn to someone she'd just met.

"Here you go," Dang said, opening a door. "This is you." *Let me know if you need anything else*, she subvocalized as she left.

Yes, Jazari thought as she entered her rooms. A sub, like a whisper, spoke to a personal connection.

At a glance, Jazari took in the fact that these quarters were more luxurious than anything she'd ever known. A well-designed living room and workspace and bedroom, with kitchenette and fabricator, which meant she could snack whenever she wanted to. She didn't have to wait for mealtimes like at the creche. Crisp veggies with plantach dip, popped salted gesaat, tirionfruit, cubes of salty rich vegcheese and sweet crisp ping, spicy humma chips. She could also get specialty meals

from support staff anytime she wanted. Shrimp-eel scampi or ceviche, sweet and sour egg soup or chile con soya, cacio pio pasta or caprese with sliced barada, rich and fluffy krem syr donuts and dense coklat bread toasted and topped with a rich honeyvutter.

In the cycles to come, Jazari's quarters began to feel like home, and she found she loved having her own space and a door she could lock, even if Zosi and Atze could access it at any time. For a while, she left everything as is, her walls white and her surroundings drab, but as she got more comfortable, she had her ccomp add subtle touches—calming blue and green entopics with natural scents and soft sounds induced by mesh for anyone in the room. Her few belongings, when they were delivered, took up one corner of one drawer, and even as time passed it stayed that way. It reminded her to not get too comfortable.

That first night, she did not sleep well. It was lonely and weird and she missed the deep breathing of essents in bunks around her. Her internal voices seemed louder than normal in the silence, and toward the end of the night, one single voice started a long slow melody in a minor key that left Jazari feeling bereft. She had the urge to call Dang but resisted it.

Instead, she searched for Dangarembga oi Bsam or Dang oi Bsam on the mesh. There wasn't much. The first hits were for a Dangarembga oi Bsaltic, a writer from the station New Algeria in the Epsilon Eridani system who wrote pre-FG time travel mysteries set on old Earth. So Jazari drilled down. She looked up in the public database Dang's name and creche history—this directory was publicly available, since essents changed their names regularly and it was the only way you could track someone. It showed that Dang had grown up on Cecrops in the

Ivor creche, which raised public servants and police officers. With that clue, the first entries she found were for Dang winning some self-defense competitions. She'd also won a interplanetary school writing contest focused on the rights and responsibilities of citizens of the MWA with her essay "Do You Have a Right to Your Body?" Jazari read it. It was charming and persuasive, if not a little naïve. Jazari found a piece on standout cadets at the United Gendarmes Academy, and Dang was prominently featured, with an image of a very young and fit Dang standing on her head and laughing. However, her name was not listed with her graduating class. Ads kept popping up for websites that revealed criminal backgrounds. One said, "Two warrants out for the arrest of one Dangarembga oi Ivor!!! Click here to find out more!!!" Jazari didn't know if that was just a bait and switch, but she knew better than to follow the link.

## Chapter 6

After the sleepless night, Jazari was up early. She felt groggy, so she showered and drank two cups of gaur tea, which left her shaky from the caffeine, so she ordered a breakfast of spicy protein scramble and coklat toast from the replicator and wolfed it down. She was just finishing up when her ccomp informed her she was expected in the ready room. It guided her down the hall and through the twisting corridors to a large meeting space. Along the way, she passed a few essents coming out of their quarters or walking briskly and with purpose. They glanced at her with curiosity. Most were going her way and showed up in the meeting room.

The room was large with a big oblong table encircled by fairly comfortable chairs, some for humans, some for mechs, and a couple for bot mechs. The chairs were full, and there were essents standing along the walls—eighteen or twenty people, with more coming in. Zosi stood at the front of the room, with Atze standing off to one side and a service mech on the other. Dang was seated near the front and gave Jazari a nod when she first came in and stood near the back. The people in the room gave off a nervous energy, like they didn't know what to expect but they were excited about it and full of purpose. They were

talking quietly to each other in Standard with a number of accents, but the moment Zosi stepped up to the table, everyone focused on her.

“We have new people for this project,” Zosi said and nodded toward Jazari. “I’m not going to introduce you here, but you’ll be working together extensively, so I’d suggest you make it a point to introduce yourselves when you get a chance. Let people know what you’re good at—they’ll find out your weaknesses soon enough.” A smile.

Jazari did in fact get to know them really well.

There was Dang, to whom she’d been introduced.

Standing off to the side was Zosi’s personal assistant Booker. She had a nondescript mech body with a pleasant faceplate, most likely comp origin, and she was always in the background but you had to remind yourself that she was there. She anticipated the needs of everyone in the room, especially Zosi, but she and Atze pretty much ignored each other. If a group of you were working late into the night and a cup of guar showed up at your elbow, that was Booker.

Atze did not have a personal assistant, but there were three muscle essents who worked closely with her.

Usem was a huge tank-like mech who always stood because chairs broke under her weight. In fact, the ceilings of most rooms were not tall enough, and she had a special standing and walking posture for low ceilings. She was used for both the threat—she looked bad-ass—and for all her military augments. She could take down military transports and squads of bio essents all by herself.

Nunig was the bio equivalent of Usem. She was a cartoon of centuries-old masculinity on the verge of roid rage, but in reality

she was pretty even keel. Like Usem, she was used to quell crowds and stand menacingly behind you, but she could back it up with training and augments, though she joked about being clumsy as hell.

Jazari never figured out exactly what Conchetta was. In a bio body, she had been augmented so much she barely looked human in the form she walked around in. She was tall and slender and wiry and she moved like she had extra bones. She could change her shape, maybe even her DNA, and disguise herself without changing bodies. When Jazari stopped by to see Dang at judo practice, Conchetta would sometimes be there practicing a weird form of zero G martial arts, and her sparring partner would often end up across the room. Conchetta would often say things in a language that Jazari's ccomp couldn't translate.

M-80 was the mesh and security expert. She didn't have much use for a body, and her physical form was a bot mech about the size of Jazari's head. She got around with maglev and communicated mostly subvocally. She swore creatively and enthusiastically, given the chance, and if you saw her physical form resting on a table or just hovering in a corner, you knew she was inmesh. Jazari suspected she started life as a comp mech, not an essent.

Emilia was both a psychologist and a sex profiler, and her bio body was augmented to look like a breathing female sex doll. Her accent was a sexy Fury lilt. She'd started in one of Zosi's sex houses before working her way up through mesh work to madame. She had an extraordinary ability to suss out what turned people on, and her insight was invaluable in getting people to do things.



Precis was a political consultant. Her bio body looked like a placeholder of a person, but she was an expert in enamors and could go from hole in the air to the most spellbinding person you'd ever meet in the blink of an eye. Her voice and accent depended on who she was talking to. She was hard to pin down. She was fascinated by influence, and she could tell you the political history of almost every planet in the galaxy. She also seemed to know a lot of languages, but Jazari didn't know if these were learned or augmented in.

Sully was a biomedical and augment specialist in a bio body covered in real tattoos. Nobody knew her backstory, but it was whispered she'd been on a generation ship that came to a really bad end. Her cryo chamber had been one of the few remaining intact when the ship had been picked up on the edge of civilization in the HD 70642 system. She had an odd hesitating accent, almost a stutter, and Jazari wondered if it was her original and why she hadn't bothered to change it or smooth it out. She not only performed augments but she could tell just by looking what augments essents had.

Joseph was the physics specialist. She was an interplanetary expert on a number of things, and why she was part of the Bsam creche, Jazari would never know. The only reason Jazari could think was that Zosi had something on her. Zosi rented Joseph's time to people across the galaxy. She had a fairly standard pale-skinned bio body, but her brain was augmented to the max—so much so that she had a special augment on her scalp of celia that looked a little like pale hair—until you looked closer. They served as receivers and sensing organs and to dissipate heat.

Working closely with Joseph was Ooe, who was an expert on Faison Gates and mechalum space. She had the mech body

of someone who lived and worked in space—a large bot mech of tough aluminum and titanium alloy with six long spider-like legs and two extendable arms, the ability to retract into an oblong sphere, jet propulsion, extra battery life, and robust comm arrays. Her form and specialty were so out there, she might as well have been alien. The few times Jazari heard her speak, she sounded either formal and archaic or sidling up to crazy.

Te Arika was the mech specialist. If you could dream it, she could build it or augment it. Ironically, she preferred bio bodies, though she changed them fairly regularly. Currently, she was in a short sturdy body with long-fingered hands and an owl-like face. She was in charge of the army of comp mechs Zosi had at her disposal. She could go on for hours about the evolution of mech bodies.

Ae-Cha and Bong-Cha worked with Te Arika. They looked like standard-issue comp mechs—standard hardware, no faceplates. They had special protocols that could fool essents and comp mechs alike, and they could infiltrate almost any institution. You couldn't tell them apart, and Jazari wasn't so sure they weren't the same comp split in two but then synced up. People just called them the Chas.

The list went on.

As Jazari stood there taking them all in, she suddenly realized that her name was now Jazari oi Bsam. Everyone here had the name oi Bsam. It felt really weird. She hadn't chosen the name or the creche, but here she was. All that history she had been reading, all these people she just met—they were now hers too. She was one of them, if only a lowly pawn. It made her feel warm in a way she'd never felt before, a part of something

larger. From now on, she would be introduced as Jazari oi Bsam, and people would take note. It stroked her pride, but overall she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it.

## Chapter 7

“So let’s get to it,” Zosi said at the front of the room.

The project they’d been hired for was to discredit a certain Cecrops politician and her Ring counterpart. Zosi brought up the entopic display in the middle of the table as she talked, which flicked through 3D holos of the politicians—a well-kept but overweight bio with a shiny face and a stylized mech with lots of enamors and beauty augments. There were holos of the leaders of the trade union and of the planetary systems in question. Zosi kept her voice fairly soft, but it was projected through the mesh so that everyone heard it perfectly. She looked into essents’ faces as she spoke, gesturing toward someone when what she was talking about related to someone’s assignment. When she focused on Jazari, the reaction on her face seemed to indicate she knew what Jazari was thinking, which made Jazari wonder if she was carefully monitoring everyone in the room. No small task while also keeping your train of thought and speaking.

This discrediting job was on behalf of a trade union out of one of Dimidium’s moons in the 51 Pegasi system. It seems that this pair of politicians held the reins to some research on a technology developed from a rare-earth element that was really

common on Dimidium. If it got developed, the trade union's expertise would be much in demand. These politicians had shelved the research in favor of another technology, and so the trade union needed the politicians shelved in turn so that their essent on the governmental panel on Cecrops could push funding through.

Jazari's job in all this turned out to be in public relations. How weird, she thought, that a black market mobster needed a PR sub. Her part involved planting evidence of a drug problem for the Cecrops politician and helping lure the Ring politician to Cecrops. The drug was fairly hard to get, and so Dang, whose specialty was obtaining such things, was on task to acquire it and to make it look like the politician had.

More generally, Jazari monitored the mesh feeds on whatever topics Zosi wanted her to and reported developments directly to her or to others on the team. She pushed certain agendas in subtle ways. Setting a bot army to foment dissent by surfacing some idiot meshlogger on everyone's feed or steering it to show one particular news article. Writing outrageous opinion pieces for small but influential journals. She did research, sometimes darkmesh stuff that took a lot of digging into some pretty shady essents.

She found that she was good at it, and she liked that feeling.

This shit-disturbing wasn't just local. It went out hundreds of light years over the mechalum space comm channels to the hundreds of worlds and space station cities across the galaxy, whoever was linked in. That's the thing about mechalum space—it worked through quantum entanglement, so whatever you sent was transmitted instantaneously. The data, whether it was communications or an essent in mechalum code, was

entered into the gate comp processor on one end, which changed the state of the processor on the other end, depending on the mechalum hash of the Faison Gate or gates. If someone was gating, her essent mechalum code shifted from the bio or mech body on one end through the processors to the body on the other end. What would take hundreds or thousands of EUs on a regular electromag comm link or in cryo aboard a generation ship was instantaneous as mechalum space data.

In fact, some people didn't even have bodies any more. If they were rich enough, they lived their lives inmesh with all the other really rich people. Mesh wasn't just a window on your eye screen or a featureless meeting room. No, it was a full physical experience where you got to create your world in every detail. You picked one of the many luxurious base options and then changed things as you went along however you liked. You could meet with others one-on-one inmesh or go to inmesh clubs where the other cool people hung out. You could go slumming with the unevolved by using a body you had on ice or renting one on another planet. And if you were that kind of person and rich enough, you could go to a club filled with just NPCs, and you got to be the center of attention all the time, no challenges to your unique supremacy. Inmesh sex was supposed to be out of this world, pun intended. But there were also rumors that certain governmental agencies on shadier planets used those virtual rooms for torture. They could sniff out your worst nightmares and realize them.

The plan for the politicians was a murder suicide. These two had been creche mates back on the Ring, and though it was never confirmed that they were lovers, Zosi—and therefore Jazari—was going to use the rumors to turn public opinion and curtail

any investigation into their deaths. Atze would take care of the details of the actual deaths, but it was going to be framed as accidental massive power spikes to their biosupport and mech units while they were inmesh having sex—the salacious details focused people’s attention and distracted them from digging too deeply, erotica disguised as press release.

It was a lot to take in for a first job. Fairly quickly, Jazari made the decision to think of the politicians as comps, not essents. It made her more comfortable. She used her research to craft them in her own mind into one-dimensional nonsentients. This was a job, after all, and she had to remember where she came from. Caring about shit—and morals—were not allowed for people like her. People like her kept their heads down and their eyes on the prize. Damn mixed metaphor, but it reflected about how she felt—twisted, if she thought about it too much.

All she was doing was telling the world a story, while Atze and her crew did the dirty work.

## About the Author



TT Linse comes from a world that is unreliable and often stranger than science fiction. She is infinitely curious with a short attention span, a great believer in second chances and the value of pigheadedness, a failed computer engineer but an aspiring computer scientist, a science writer and geek creative, and an avid futurist who believes that fiction leads the way. She's still going through a space phase. Find her at [tlinse.io](http://tlinse.io).