

# SURROGATE: HUNTED

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## Chapter One

### Lifeboats

“Diani Fash Ixtii-Sternbow, stop playing with your hand-held!” Etain Ixtii’s growl held a practiced, parental edge. This would make the third time her eldest child had clicked off his hand-held, the third time—

“It’s not me!” Twelve-year-old Diani, with his dark mass of unruly curls, turned his head as the screen cut out again. Diani Fash liked practical jokes and mischief making. Nothing deliberately harmful but enough to keep him in trouble with his parents. “Everything on the ship’s acting wonky.” His image returned.

“Put your pala on.” Etain watched as Diani turned his hand-held to where Leigheas, her Takla husband-atalaci of thirteen years, stood talking to his students.

“Hey, Pala! Mom wants you!”

“What? Oh.” Leigheas pulled his hand-held from his pocket, and two view blocks appeared on the vid above Etain’s desk. “Hello, my love.” He squinted at the screen.

*He missed his last vision adjustment. I’ll have to make him an appointment.* “Our son is being himself.”

“Diani?” Leigheas looked to where the boy sat. Black hair, blue-black skin, dark eyes, and a lean build. Diani was a Gno’ worker by genetics but freeborn so he’d never know the subjugation his mother and biological father had faced. “What’s he done now?”

“He keeps clicking out of our conversation. Please remind him that—” Leigheas’ screen cut out at the same time as their son’s. *So, it’s not Diani being himself this time.* Etain sighed and waited until Diani’s image reappeared.

“See, Mom? It’s not me!”

“Etain?” Leigheas returned as well.

“Why is the feed cutting out?”

“We’re on auxiliary power. They’re trying to reset the engines.”

“What is the problem?” Etain could hear the rumbles, see the lurches. Analeigh’s icon appeared on Etain’s hand-held. She tapped the vid, and the ten-year-old and her wild, red-brown, springy overmane filled a third block. Analeigh and her younger siblings were all Human-Alyward mixes— hybrid alien children according the less tolerant Takla court members. *They’re all beautiful cubs.* Analeigh’s eyes were a rich brown, her skin taupe with a slight blue undertone, and she was broader built than an Alyward child. “Yes, cub girl?”

“This transport is being weird.” Analeigh chewed on her bottom lip, bringing out the hints of pinkish Human tones deep within them.

*Why do my children acquire my worst habits?*

“Who’s Pala talking to? Analeigh pulled at a curl.

“Me.”

“See?” Diani Fash blurted. “It wasn’t me this time.” All three images on Etain’s vid shook and a thin, dark smoke trail rose behind Diani. “Rashers!”

“Leigheas?” But he was talking to the crew. His students sat in small groups in the passenger cabin, including Diani and Analeigh. *Oh, this age, so resistant to everything and anything parent-related.*

“Keep your seats.” Leigheas’ gaze returned to his hand-held. “It’s a minor fire. A melted line or—I don’t know exactly.” But when his surroundings shuddered, he narrowed his dark-green eyes. “Minor fires don’t cause that. Hold on.” He shoved his hand-held in his pocket. “The Caplieri, please. Yes, I know she’s busy, but I have sixteen children under my charge.” Etain couldn’t understand his under-the-breath observations. “Caplieri Agusta, I know you’re in a hurry, but—”

“Everything’s under control, Instructor Leigheas.”

*She sounds winded.*

“We’ve run across some sort of energy wave. Nothing too serious, but both ships are adrift right now.”

“And the fire?” he asked.

“One of the auxiliary systems overheated.” Caplieri Agusta’s voice faded. “It’s already been extinguished. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Leigheas pulled his hand-held and smiled at Etain. “The Caplieri says—”

“You left the channel open.”

“Again?” He chuckled. “Bad habit. Sorry. See? Nothing serious.” But smoke continued to filter into the passenger cabin behind him. “Nothing serious,” he repeated as he turned to his students. “All right, kids. Quiet down. Move so four of you are sitting with each chaperone.” He spoke to one of the chaperones then returned to Etain. “Before you ask, they’ve already handed out breathers.”

“Good.” *There’s nothing worse than fighting for air.* Her throat tightened with memory. “You have a lot to deal with. Contact me when—”

“Please proceed to your designated evacuation position. This is not a drill.”

“They’re activating the life boats.” The message repeated behind him. “Once we’re aboard it’s official communication only.” He touched the vid. “Love you. Time to load the kids.”

“Love you too. Keep Diani and Analeigh with you.”

“I’ll bring them back, promise.” He closed his hand-held correctly this time.

“This is so rashers!” Diani Fash grinned. “We’re going down!”

“Stop frightening your sister.” *And me.* “Turn off your vid and go sit with Pala.”

“Aw, Mom.”

“Diani Fash.” She growled to stress the situation.

“But—”

“Love you. Now do it.”

“Love you too.” Diani Fash’s vid block closed, leaving only Analeigh.

“Can I sit with Pala too?” She pulled at another curl.

“Of course, you can. Love you, cub girl, now disconnect.”

“Love you too.” The vid went dark.

Etain scrolled her hand-held to contact Dresh. *If anyone knows what’s going on, she will.*