

The Star Hunters
Book Three: Light Runner

by
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THE STAR HUNTERS: LIGHT RUNNER

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*For Ben, who
somehow managed to
survive me writing this one.*

*For Mom, Dad, and Jacki, who
were there at the start. There
would be no books
without you.*

*And while
it may seem selfish,
this one is also for me.
Sometimes, we need
to remember*

what we're capable of.

Chapter 1: Pulse

Lissa sat in the control room of the silver, blue and black ship, listening to the rhythmic hum of the systems as the ship bled stars and planets across its trail. It was a solid, comforting sound, steady as the beating of a strong heart. It helped keep her own heartrate in check.

As she studied the coordinates she had wrestled out of the communication logs lifted from the Seventh Sun ship on Sciyat, her thumb traced back and forth across the collar around her throat. Her nail scraped and bumped over the seven white stars.

Seven stars. Seven leaders for the Seventh Sun.

Subtlety was not a defining characteristic of the Neo-Andromedan organization, but when it came to hiding their leaders, they tended to employ more tact.

Particularly when it came to *this* leader.

Lissa knew she'd found at least one of them. But rather than giving her a sense of purpose, the discovery had tightened nerves until they were brittle with dread.

It's probably not Rosonno.

She told herself this as though the idea of postponing her next meeting with him could give her any comfort. He still haunted her nightmares, and sometimes, she had the feeling he would stay with her long after he was dead.

If he didn't kill her first.

Or send her back into an Awakening machine.

Welcome to the fight for me, Little Light.

Lissa closed her eyes against the voices in her ears. She pulled her hand away from the collar around her throat, took a slow, steady breath, and refocused on the sounds of the ship.

She was safe for now. She had to remember that.

She opened her eyes again when she heard Lance approaching the control room. She always picked him out by his footsteps, which were nowhere near as quiet as he thought they were. They were especially loud and erratic this time, and Lance kept muttering something under his breath that sounded like curses. Lissa swiveled in her seat, half-expecting to see Lance limping and rushing to tell her that someone had managed to sabotage the ship's defenses and get inside. It took her a moment to register what was actually happening, and a moment longer to

release her hold on her energy pulse pistol and relax again.

Lance stumbled toward the control room, holding two trays of food above his head as he dodged around Blade and Orion. The arkins had their eyes locked on the trays, and their muzzles kept straining upwards whenever Lance tried to rebalance himself. Orion got his head between Lance and the doorframe, and one of the trays almost tipped into Blade's waiting mouth. The black arkin's teeth snapped closed on air as Lance jerked his arm back. That made him pause and look back and forth between the two arkins.

"I think I liked it better when you two were trying to maul each other," he said.

Orion gave a frustrated grunt as Lance pushed past him, then settled for lying down and blocking the only way out of the control room. Blade stood guard behind him.

Lance offered Lissa one of the trays. Slices of dark meat and something charred and green sat precariously on the surface, and Lissa had the feeling that Lance had lost some of this meal to the arkins on his way back from the galley.

He had insisted on purchasing enough fresh meat for all of them, arkins included, the last time they had put into port. The Star Federation had accustomed him to decent, fresh food once in a while, although without a galley cook, neither he nor Lissa had known what to do with the meat. Lissa was conditioned to cheaper, preserved meals that were high in nutrients, low in flavor, and easy to find almost anywhere that sold basic supplies. Looking at the unseasoned, slightly burnt meat Lance had finally produced, she was not sure that the result was worth the price.

"I haven't figured out how to cook yet," Lance admitted, taking a bite from his own tray and grimacing. "But it still beats space food."

Lissa sniffed experimentally at the burnt food. In spite of her doubts, her mouth began to water. Then her stomach flipped and Lissa lowered the tray to her lap.

Lance caught the movement. His laughter faded as he took the seat next to her and studied her expression. "What did you find?"

Lissa reached for the datapad that held the translated communication logs and the coordinates she had lifted. "You're not going to like this," she warned Lance.

And he didn't.

He spent so long studying the coordinates and checking them against one of the ship's starmaps that Orion crept into the room and stole a bite off of Lance's tray. Lissa finally gave into hunger as well, and found that Lance was right; a burnt meal of fresh food was lightyears beyond the preserved meals.

Lissa chewed slowly, allowing Lance to take his time. His unfamiliarity with the written Neo-Andromedan language blocked him from verifying her translations of the communication logs, but the coordinates were more straightforward. There were no errors for him to find, but for that brief moment, Lissa allowed herself to hope that he would. She knew what they needed to do, but if there was one hunt she wanted to turn away from, this was it.

The target's coordinates were in an uncharted area, a piece of the galaxy too riddled with neutron stars, black holes, and other hazards for anyone to safely travel. Even renegades avoided unmapped territories unless near-certain death was a preferable alternative to capital punishment at the hands of the Star Federation. Lissa had checked and rechecked her translations and the coordinates until her eyes ached, but everything pointed to the uncharted sector.

And Lissa knew that only a Seventh Sun leader could be there.

She could not refuse this hunt.

Surprisingly, Lance did not question the coordinates. "Is this right?" He asked, pointing to one of the translated communications instead.

Lissa saw the name *Sciyat* near his finger. She nodded. "Whoever this is, they helped coordinate the attack on Sciyat."

Lance took another bite of food, too distracted to comment on the taste this time. "I suppose," he finally said, "an uncharted sector is the best place to hide your leader."

Lissa stopped her hand from straying back up to the collar. "One of them, at least."

He saw the gesture. His green eyes flicked over her tense posture. "Do you know who we're going after?" There was a layer of caution to his tone that snagged Lissa's attention, but she didn't know quite what to make of it.

She let it go and shook her head. "I only knew some of the Sun's leaders by reputation before Aven and I left, and that was a long time ago. If they're all still in power, I can't see any of them ordering strikes from a place like that."

Especially not Rosonno, she thought, remembering the dark night on Yuna when he had stood over her in the desert and promised to Awaken her.

Lissa shivered against the memory.

Lance was focused on a starmap and missed her distress this time. Relieved, Lissa gave herself a moment to take in the hard lines of his lean face and the determined set of his jaw. He'd let his hair grow a bit longer than the Star Federation's regulated length, and there was a gentle wave forming in the blond-brown locks. He did not take his attention away from the starmap when Orion's muzzle edged towards his tray again, but he placed his hand on the arkin's head and gave Orion a gentle but firm nudge away. The gray arkin snorted, and his yellow eyes narrowed against the black slash of fur across his face.

It's safe here, Lissa reminded herself, glancing over at Blade.

The black arkin had settled across the doorway, lying as stretched out as she could manage in the little space that remained in the control room. One wing was tucked neatly along her back, but the other rested awkwardly against her side, reminding Lissa that the Seventh Sun could and would always find her, and they could hurt her as easily as the ones she cared about.

Lissa looked back at Lance and Orion and wondered when exactly that had extended beyond Blade and Aven.

We're safe for now, she told herself.

But that was a dangerous, complacent thought. Aven was only safe because he was dead. And Lissa was taking Blade, Lance, and Orion to an uncharted territory to hunt a Seventh Sun leader.

Lance interrupted her thoughts before they could turn darker. "How long has this leader been at this location?"

Lissa took the datapad back and scanned through the transmissions she had marked. "I don't know," she admitted, "but I found one that dated back almost a full sidereal year. Same transmission signature, and I pulled the same coordinates from it. So at least that long."

Lance nodded. "That's a good sign." At Lissa's skeptical look, he continued. "They're comfortable where they are. And they know that they're protected by the location alone." Lance sat back and considered her. "It would be as dangerous for them to try to leave as it would be for us to go into that system. Whether or not they know we're on their trail, I'm betting they're not going to move for a while."

Lissa frowned. "That's not how people generally act when they're being hunted."

Lance started to say something, changed his mind, and said, "I only mean that if they've run, they're already gone, and it's not worth going in there trying to find them."

"And if they haven't?"

"Then they figure they're safer there than anywhere else in the galaxy, and they won't move until something forces them out. Something like us. If we somehow manage to get into the system and we're not completely prepared, we could lose the target. Maybe permanently."

He made a good argument, but Lissa sensed that there was something more than hunter's logic behind it. "You want to keep on track for Phan," she murmured.

Lance nodded, then quickly added, "Only because I think Dr. Chhaya could help with..." He gestured to the collar. "If there's any sign of the Star Federation, we leave."

Lissa saw the sense of the suggestion, but she balked at the idea. She had not been able to pull another target from the data, and as dangerous as this one was, she did not like the idea of letting it go.

But we're not letting it go. Just... putting it on hold.

Her hunter's instinct screamed at her to resist that temptation and throw the starship into the unmapped sector. Her caution and fear told her that would be a terrible, deadly mistake.

And if they stayed on track for Phan, that could give her more time to find another target in the communication logs. Maybe one that lived on a planet that was easier to reach.

"All right," Lissa finally agreed, "we'll go back to Phan."

She did not need to say anything about the risk of running into the Star Federation. Once, she would have been certain that Lance was trying to lead her into a trap and reinstate himself within the military's ranks. Now, they both would find themselves staring down the barrels of energpulse rifles as Star Federation soldiers tried to shoot them down. She knew that Lance understood that.

He nodded in response, not hiding his relief as well as he could have. Then he took another bite of meat, wrinkled his nose, and muttered, "It's worse than space food when it's cold."

He tossed the last of his meat to Orion, who snapped it out of the air and swallowed it whole. Blade groaned her disapproval and looked at Lance as though he had betrayed her to a mortal enemy. Her gaze softened as he approached her with the empty trays. She accepted his peace offering and curled her paws around the trays as she began to lick them clean. Lance gave

her an affectionate pat on the shoulder, then almost fell into her when Orion headbutted him in the back. Lance retaliated by twisting around and grabbing the gray arkin around the neck. Blade groaned and flattened her ears when Orion pushed Lance into her side, and then all three of them were wrestling on the control room floor.

Lissa was surprised to find herself smiling as she watched them. It felt wrong, but she let herself enjoy the security of the moment.

She knew it could not and would not last.