

(Modified Kindle version)

THE HESTA

Volume III

of

The Last Legacy Quartet

GRACE CHETWIN

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for Brio

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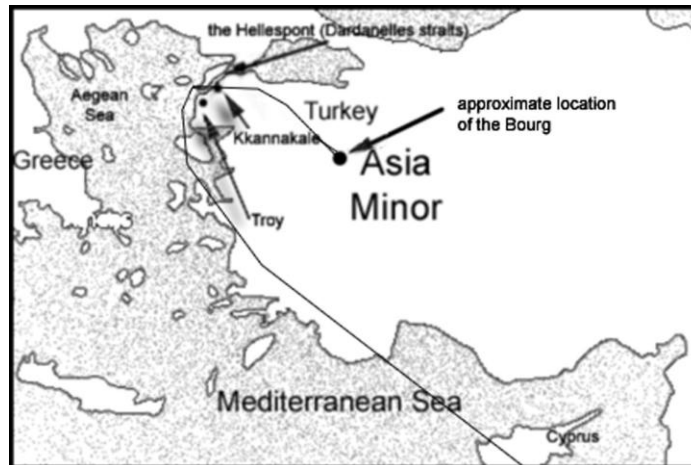
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*But if the horoscope's
bewildering
Like a flashing turmoil
of a shoal of herring
Who can turn skies back and begin again?*

*From "Peter Grimes"
Benjamin Britten*

frontispiece:

Part of the chart tracking the shuttle's flight from the Antarctic dome: its path over Cyprus homing in on the Bourg.



CHAPTER ONE

SHIRA

*01.20 Hours 28 October 2047
R.S ANZARC6*

It was sudden.

Jolt. A sense of falling from some height.

Grandfather.

“Easy.”

Not Grandfather.

Not falling. Lying flat on her back on...a cot.

Low overhead. Shiny. Permaplast. Industrial grey. Dull red glow from somewhere.

Unfamiliar.

Someone had just spoken in her ear.

Shira turned her head. MacAllister sat beside her in a regulation permaplast recliner.

“Slow, Shira. Slow and easy.” His voice was low.

She looked beyond him. They were in a small rounded cube of a space, grey, seamless. In the dim red light she made out shadowy forms lying on cots like hers. The glow came from recessed panels in the ceiling.

Emergency lighting.

“Where—what’s going on?” She had tried to match his clear, deliberate calm. The words came out slurred, drugged almost. She struggled to sit up.

“Stay put.” MacAllister put a hand on her arm, pointed to the sleepers beyond. He slipped off his lounge and knelt beside her. Whispered. “It’s been a bumpy ride.”

She was up now, back against the wall, crosslegged. “How long?”

“You’ve been out around eighteen hours.”

“*Eighteen!*” Questions rushed in as she surfaced. She bit them back. Quicker to let MacAllister dish up in his own time, that she’d learned the hard way.

“As you were going under—I don’t suppose you remember?”

Shira shook her head, pushing off images of blood and sorrow. She heaved a short, shuddering sigh. Said nothing.

“We were in the passage by your cubicle. I caught you as you fell—and almost dropped you because right then all hell broke loose—bells, lights, bang, boom. Sven—”

“He broke out again?”

“Don’t we wish!” MacAllister sat back on his heels. “He stowed away in a drone headed spaceside—in the hold, as far as we could gather. And, no, we couldn’t get it back, Sven fixed that. He may well be dead, no heat, minimal pressure.”

“Susann—”

“Is totalled.”

Shira stared at the floor. Sven! She’d thought him suicidal. And maybe he had been when he broke out. But this. “Wow. Could be bad for Ellisen.”

MacAllister snorted. “That’s putting it mildly, Shira. Think what a bargaining chip Hengst has now with the man’s son in hand.”

“Bad for us, too. He’ll know where we are.”

“*Were*, Shira. We got out, fast.”

She looked past MacAllister’s shoulder, counted five sleepers.

“The guys came too. Couldn’t leave them. They were coming, anyway.”

“But why would they—oh.” They didn’t work for Hengst but that wouldn’t have saved their heads.

“You moved fast.”

“We were ready.”

“We were?” No one told me, her frown said.

“Shira. You weren’t around.”

She felt her face grow warm. Most of the time in that warehouse dome, she’d been comatose. Awake, her mind had been on other more important matters. Like MacAllister’s dead wife and Sven’s repulsive groping.

“You did ask me once, Shira, if I’d said anything to the guys about why we’d dropped in.”

“I remember.”

“I told them that and more. I warned them of the risks. For us—and them. And you know what?” MacAllister spread his hands. “They asked in, and it went a whole lot further than offering sympathy.”

“You and Rufus go back a long way.”

He grinned at her, a cock-eyed thing; a MacAllister *So you remembered*. “Are you hungry?”

“Just thirsty. Is there any water?”

MacAllister got up, rummaged in a corner, fetched a beakerful. It was tepid and tasted chemical, but she took and sipped gratefully. She eyed him over the beaker’s rim.

“You prepared our getaway, then.”

“We sure did. We were happy to hang on as long as we could, but we knew it was just a matter of time. Our first thought was to blow up the whole place after us, but all that stuff stored in there! Food. Machinery. Medical supplies. We just couldn’t. Though once we were gone, the poor buggers out there likely won’t be getting any of it unless they can find a way to forage for themselves. In the end, we hit on another plan to cover our tracks. There were usually a dozen drones in the cargo bays as you saw. All waiting to go up for fresh supplies as loaded ones came down. If the worst happened we planned to launch them simultaneously to domes throughout the zone.”

“While we took the hopper.” A squeeze, for seven people.

MacAllister shook his head. “It goes out with the drones. Back to Palo Alto.”

Palo Alto! Where it had all started. “That would certainly set Hengst guessing, but—” Shira broke off. “How did we get out, then?”

“You’re waking up, I see.” He took back the beaker, set it down. “There was a thirteenth craft, not on the books. Those four guys aren’t just pretty faces, you know. Combined, they make a fair R&D combo. They put it together as a, well, a hobby, I guess, kept it under wraps. Rufus meant to use it for the odd jaunt some time. It’s a modified hopper. Bigger and heavier than the one we know and love, but *fast!* It’s parked through there.” MacAllister pointed to a side wall. “In addition, they had also come up with a couple of gizmos for it. They might have made a fortune off them in better times.”

“Such as?”

“Tomas and Kim built a noise chip. You can program it to send out a stream of scrambled signals that mask their host, allowing it to fly unnoticed in the general swarm. We’ve installed one in every drone. And the old hopper. We programmed the drone and Palo Alto chips to be detectable *after* a certain amount of sweat, enough to head off suspicion. Ours, of course, works fine. At least we hope so.” He paused, looking towards the sleeping men. “It seats nine, with room in back for gear. We grabbed up all we could, including yours, plus supplies. And split. I reckon we had a good twelve hours start on Hengst. In two hours or so, when his hounds are close enough—and we can monitor them—we launch the drones and the hopper by remote from here.”

“Won’t Hengst pick up on that?”

MacAllister grinned. “Not a chance.”

Shira gazed around the small bubble. “So where are we, anyway? What time is it? And how did we—”

“Whoa, Nellie.” MacAllister grinned. “We zigged and zagged. The way we did from Bentnose. Low and bumpy—god! The storms out there are wild. We’re in the ANZARC Zone, Shira. Not too far from the South Pole. In an old relay station. Like the Palo Alto one and even more godforsaken.”

“But how did you manage to get in. And activate—”

“Don’t ask. We can’t stay long. There’s not much power, and though we *think* the startup won’t be caught we don’t want to take unnecessary risks.”

“So why are we hanging around here?”

“We were waiting for you.”

“*Me?*”

“You’re the only one who can point us where we have to go.”

“Where we—”

“Your Bourg, Shira. Where we’d have headed the first time if I’d known Hengst didn’t know where it was.”

Shira shivered, thinking of Sven. “I’m glad we didn’t.” Even though security was tight, there was always the risk...

“And you are still sure that Hengst won’t find it?”

She nodded vigorously. “Grandfather took care of that. Actually—” She paused, thinking. “I don’t know if Hengst would even think of it. And if he did, why would it interest him?”

“He’d look for us there.”

“Why? As far as he knows you and those guys and Susann have no connection with it—you don’t even know where it is.”

“But you have and you do.”

“I doubt he’d even think of me. He never had anything to do with me.”

“Maybe not, but don’t forget Sven. He might well mention your name. Hengst is a clever man, and persistent as a terrier digging up a bone.”

“Well,” Shira said, “even if Hengst did get to hear of it, as I said, Grandfather hid it well. MacAllister—it’s the best place!”

“The only one left to us anyway. I hope you’re right. If he does get to hear of you, he would surely go after you, try to get at your grandfather through you. I don’t want to cause the Hesikastor any more stress than he has already.”

“Good thought.” Shira fell silent. Then, “*That’s* why Grandfather sent me off to Bentnose! To keep me out of that man’s way! I bet he knew all this was going to happen.”

“Mmm. You can give us the coordinates?”
Shira tapped the side of her head. “Of course.”

#

“A moment.” MacAllister rose, stepped off quietly among the sleeping figures, came back with Rufus. Sleepy, rubbing his face, smoothing back tousled hair, a bear roused from hibernation. He threw Shira a quick *Hello*, mouthed, “What’s up?”

MacAllister nodded them toward the side wall. A door slid open, no sound. They passed through, it *whoofed* shut with a quiet puff of air. They trod the red-lit passage, MacAllister in front, Rufus bringing up the rear. Long and straight, it ran off into the distance, the air getting chillier until her breath came out in clouds.

They fetched up finally at what seemed to be a blank wall. And she remembered. She and Grandfather taking off from the Palo Alto silo. This was the hopper launch pad.

MacAllister carded the door. It swung in, revealing dark beyond. He pressed a plate beside the door, emergency lights came on revealing curved wall and a fat gleaming hopper crammed into the space, vanes still deployed from a landing, ready for a quick launch.

“Bit of a squeeze,” MacAllister said. “But we made it, just.”

“This is ours? So where’s the official one?” That went with the station.

“The silo was empty, Shira.”

“That hopper’s long gone,” Rufus added. “But lucky they left all the instrumentation. Couldn’t salvage it, I guess.”

MacAllister brought down the ramp, they all three climbed inside.

Rufus brought up the controls, tapped for the map, punched in Shira’s numbers.

MacAllister whistled as the wider region hove into view. “Asia Minor. We had you somewhere in Europe—Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland.”

Shira smiled. “We let it pass.”

As the viewpoint zoomed in, they all three gazed at the ragged coast across the Aegean Sea from Greece: the Gallipoli peninsula, the Dardanelles straits, where Helle, daughter of King Athemas fell in flight off the Golden Ram, and through which the Argonauts later passed on their way to Colchis, over the Black Sea, to retrieve that ram’s magic fleece.

Closing all the time, the viewpoint veered back south, crossed the straits, passing over their southern shore, and what had been a strip of sunlit beach:

Kkannakale.

The Hesikastor’s birthplace.

Down, down, and southeast inland to mountains rising back, bare, forbidding. Nestled among them, a cluster of mounds. Peaks whose tops had blown off at some primordial time. Millennia of weather had scoured their rims and rounded their cones so that now they looked like a clutch of eggs in a thornbrake.

The middle of nowhere.

Rufus gazed into the lighted screen. “I read once that someplace in all that was the Garden of Eden.”

“Hah!” MacAllister cut a crooked smile. “Where it all supposedly began.”

“And also where it all may end. You’re a scoffing freethinker, Alistaire.” Rufus sighed.

The crosshairs had finally halted in the thornbrake’s middle.

“Strewth.” Macallister turned to Shira. “How do we get down there?”

“Carefully,” she said.

“Oh—*kaaaay*.” MacAllister straightened, checked the chronister. “Fifty-three minutes to launch. We’d better get everybody up.”

#

The three men weren’t so bad. They groaned, stretched, Tomas touched his fingertips to the floor, once, came up grimacing and rubbing his back.

There was a tiny loo and washroom just outside the door. Shira had hit it on the way back.

“Susann.” Shira told her where it was. Susann got up, went out without a word.

How aware was she, Shira wondered, watching after her. She hadn’t looked at anyone, not even MacAllister. She tried to imagine having a child so full of hate and rage and couldn’t. Neither could she imagine loving such a one. A shirt of nails. Did Susann really love Sven anymore? Years of hostility must surely have worn it down. Had Susann been such an ineffectual mother? Or was it purely Sven? He certainly lacked the stiff moral fiber of his illustrious forebears on both sides. Ellisen—he must know by now what his son had done. How was he feeling up there? Had he loved Sven? That man likely didn’t know what love was. And yet—how could any parent admit to not loving his child? Mothers especially were expected to love and keep on loving no matter what, weren’t they? That’s what she’d always understood. She didn’t know firsthand. Her own parents had died horribly. She couldn’t even remember them.

Jocko the Brain caught her eye, rubbed his hands together briskly. “It’s cold in here.”

“It’s even colder out there, Jocko.”

Washup didn’t last long.

When everyone was ready, they closed their suits, fixed their helmets, filed down the passage and climbed back into the hopper. The layout was simple: three cockpit seats for pilot, copilot, navigator.

Two more rows behind.

MacAllister was pilot. Rufus, copilot. Jocko was navigator.

Behind them, the other three men.

Shira and Susann took the rear row, an empty seat between.

Behind, the small cramped head and bin—walls crammed with gear.

It was tight. They tipped the seats back for takeoff. Like tilting dominoes, thought Shira, as Tomas’s seat back loomed over her.

“Ready?” Leaving the other four in peace, the cockpit three and Shira had set their helmet intercoms to a shared frequency.

“Ready.” As she would ever be. She always hated that moment. Any second now the engines would vibrate, quiet, soothing like a massage pad. Then, suddenly, they’d throb to life, kick to deafening blast. The pressure suits and helmets cushioned the shocks some but her senses were inordinately keen and it was still hell.

MacAllister held up a warning hand while Rufus worked the tablet in his, tapping in the signals to bring the distant drones to life. One by one, the silo seals slid open exposing the drones to the elements. Then faster than Shira could count, he launched them simultaneously. She pictured them all roaring up side by side, a giant fireworks display until, reaching the preplanned altitude, they shot off towards their respective domes, etching a fiery aster against the sky.

In all fairness, Rufus did replace the seals atop the empty silos. Just in case, he said. Someone got around to salvaging the place sometime.

That done, MacAllister hit the ignition and, intercom momentarily off, Shira squeezed her eyes tight shut in the relative quiet of her helmet.

#

She was dozing, when MacAllister's voice cut through.

"Any word yet from your grandfather?" Calm and cool as ever but she was not fooled. She had tried again and again to reach the old man, to tell him where they were going, to ask him to warn the Bourg they were coming.

"I've called and called him. He's out." She pushed down the worry. Hengst would be shoving all kinds of poisons into him. But maybe that wasn't it. That last transmission had been long. Eighteen hours, she was out, according to MacAllister. But the impact of the transmissions so far had been greater on the Hesikastor than on her, he being first in the line of fire.

"Uh-huh." Silence. "Shira—will you try to reach your Aunt Marita?"

"Me?" Shira stared front towards the dark of his helmet, stark against the bright blue of the console lights. "I-I can't. Even Grandfather wouldn't have been able before—before now." Before the signals had sent his psi power off the register.

"You've been exposed to whatever, too, Shira. To some extent. It could have affected you. Have you tried?"

"Well...no."

"Shira, we're cruising up the Suez Canal. I suggest you make some attempt. We can fly all over the place as long as you like, but in two hours as the world turns, we come into Hengst's scanner range. The noise chip should work, but we can't be sure. We must be gone by then."

Shira leaned back, did a quick relax, closed her eyes. Pictured her Aunt Marita—Grandfather's sister, actually, but she'd always called her that. Tall as the Hesikastor, and as bone-thin. Waist-long hair drawn tightly back into a pony tail—still jet black despite her years. And covered anyway with a black shawl. Shira smiled faintly. Doyshan.

She reached out into the dark. *Aunt Marita.*

She pictured her looking up from whatever, startled, turning to see where the voice was coming from.

It's Shira.

Silly. Of course Aunt Marita would know that at once. Who else could it be?

I'm by the Bourg. In a hopper. Open up, quick. Aunt Marita—please—please hear me. It's life or death.

Nothing.

Minutes passed.

Then they were flying over what looked to be a tiny brown shape much like a shriveled leaf on dead brown sea: Cyprus, once an island of great beauty, now lifeless, not even a dome to mark its wastes. At the beginning of the Arctic Melts early in the century, it had disappeared altogether under the ocean. In the aftermath of the First Wave, as the seas began their retreat, it had reappeared, a lifeless quagmire with no one left alive to claim it.

A moment, and they were past.

Shira tried to reach her aunt again. And again. And again.

"Anything?" MacAllister.

"No," she said in a low voice.

She heard him heave a forceful sigh. Then, “Do they have any sort of monitoring system? You know, to detect traffic in their space?”

“Um.” Shira was reasonably sure they did, didn’t everyone have one? But she had no idea what it was or how or when it worked.

“We’re out of options,” MacAllister said, still firm and steady. “I’ll aim for the crosshairs, then circle low as I can. Rufus, give me an outside view. Aagh! Those peaks. God! They’re close together!”

“Can you hover over the mounds?”

“Maybe you can try to reach your Aunt again?”

“I haven’t stopped.”

“Well, that’s good. Here goes then.”

The hopper swooped, banked, started carving loops and circles inside the close ring of jagged mountain tops. “We’re right on it!” Rufus, fixed on the chart.

MacAllister banked sharply. “There’s a blue spotlight coming right up out of a hole, it’s—”

“The landing beam! Drop straight down to it!”

MacAllister switched to vertical mode. “I hope you got it right, Shira,” was all he said as they plummeted towards that giant bed of nails.

Shira felt the drag on her restraining straps, felt her stomach fly upwards, knew the others were wide awake and aware of the change. Then they were falling below the level of the ranges, down, down, and though there were no portholes in that craft, she knew they were sinking down past sheer-cut mountain wall, god, MacAllister had better keep them steady!

Bump. They were bang in the middle of the landing pad. A mile above, steel plate was grinding back into place. Steel lined with titalanium—the strongest alloy in existence, sealing the vulnerable shaft-hole in the Bourg shield, that metal being proof against every sensor yet invented. Steel whose upper surface was camouflaged with rock veneer to merge with its surroundings.

MacAllister cut the engines. “What now, Shira?”

“We wait.” While the silo was pressurized. Air was pumped in. The temperature brought up to ambient. Security assembled from various areas. The Bourg was a frugal place. Nothing wasted. Everyone had at least four jobs. And everything ad hoc.

MacAllister got up, made his way back. Looked to Susann in the far seat. Susann, sitting quite still, looking straight ahead showing no sign of interest. Then back to Shira. “Looks as though you reached your Aunt Marita after all.”

“She didn’t answer.”

“Perhaps she did. Anyway, we’re down.”

MacAllister switched his helmet intercom to wide range. “Stay put everyone.” He went back to the cockpit.

Shira clutched the arms of her seat. Almost there! Fighting a surge of excitement, she lay back, closed her eyes and worked on relaxing.

The wait was long. But no one moved. No one complained. Asked what the hell was going on.

After half an hour, there came a rapping on the hull.

MacAllister got up, slid aside the safety bar, snapped the bolts, then swung back the hatch.

He beckoned. “You first, Shira. No!” he added sharply as Shira made to remove her helmet.

“It’s alright. The safety lights are on.”

She lifted off the helmet, shook out her hair in relief.

Stepped into the open hatchway.
There came a shriek from below. High, loud. Female.
“Your Aunt Marita?” MacAllister cocked his head.
Shira had to smile. “Kataïs—my eldest sister.”
Home at last.