

The Caves of Death

by

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Chapter 1

“Karl Dietrich von Wetzel?”

I looked up from the account book in which I was making some entries and my eyes widened in surprise. A British army officer in typical khaki shirt and ill-fitting shorts stood before me, a look of weary detachment on his face. So it was true. They had finally taken matters into their own hands. The Allies had, at last, decided to confront the collaborators in the Middle East. It was a development that was only to be welcomed. But what business had they with me?

“I am at your service, mein Lieutenant.”

“I am instructed by the Allied Command to place you under arrest...”

Arrested? What for? And then I realised what it was all about. And my heart sank. The British were acting with their usual lack of intelligence.

“...the Middle East Command has ordered that all enemy nationals be interned for the duration.”

Enemy nationals, did they never learn? Could they not understand that unlike their own kind, some people did not believe in country right or wrong. More than that, I had no country, I was stateless. Or rather I belonged only to the Republic of Cataxia, but I could not expect them to understand that. He had spoken my language and I replied in kind.

“Lieutenant, you are making rather a fool of yourself. Major le Clerc will tell you that I have been active on behalf of the Allies...”

“Unfortunately for you, sir,” he replied. “Major le Clerc has also been placed under arrest.”

This was madness. Le Clerc had retained his honesty while almost every other Legion officer had supported the collaborators. His determination to ignore instructions issued by the traitors had very nearly cost him everything; sometime earlier, he had confided to me that he expected to be dismissed at any moment and he had welcomed reports of an Allied landing as an eleventh hour reprieve.

“Young man, Major le Clerc is a patriot,” I said. “Whatever I may be, he at least has not betrayed the honour of his country.”

It was a portentous speech, though no more than the truth, but it had little noticeable effect on the young British officer. The man was as tall as me but very young; his skin was tanned but retained the suppleness of youth, his blond hair was bleached by the sun despite the great peaked cap that seemed out of place on his almost baby face. I tried another tack.

“I have a family, Lieutenant.”

I had absolutely no intention of surrendering into their hands and any delaying tactic was better than none.

“Yes, sir, we know,” he replied. “Arrangements will be made for them to join you in the internment quarters.”

I was not hearing this. Did they really believe that I was going to allow them to take Electra and Zita from our home and corral them in some stinking concentration camp? Thank goodness Electra had taken Zita to the House of the Riders.

“Lieutenant, I demand to see the senior British officer, you are obviously just carrying out orders.”

I spat the words out with all the intimidation that could be mustered from many generations of aristocratic hereditary. And it had as much effect as anything else I had said to him. I knew why immediately. This sprig of the British officer class was himself from an identical background, more than that, he was utterly convinced of the unassailable correctness of his actions.

He said, “I will ask Major Gower if he will see you, I cannot guarantee that he will. He also is acting under orders.”

“Do that,” I said, turning aside. “Come and let me know his decision.”

“I regret, sir, that that is impossible;” I turned back in heat as he went on. “If you will not come voluntarily, I have orders to use force.”

Force? Then I saw what he meant. It had escaped my notice that half a dozen burly soldiers, rifles at a position of obvious readiness were watching us from the road. Behind them my neighbours were taking everything in very attentively. My mind dwelt for a moment and inconsequentially on the thoughts that must be accompanying their observations. I knew them all well. Insofar as it had been possible for an obvious infidel to become the friend of Muslims, then we had been friends, especially after they became aware of my relationship with the Sky Riders. Yet it had been a friendship which as far as they were concerned was tinged with wariness. There were men in the suq with whom I had established trusting relationships but oddly enough none of them had their establishments in the Rue Al Fayah and I imagined my neighbours hoping that my loss would be their gain. I was appalled to realise that at that

moment there was nothing I could do to disappoint them.

I said, "You make your point well, mein Lieutenant. Will you allow me to speak to my servant?"

"Of course, but I must accompany you."

"Very well."

He followed me through the open fronted shop and into the drawing room behind. It was rather untidy for Zita's toys were scattered on the furniture and on the floor. Though he would have liked to have done so, we absolutely forbade Amil to tidy away Zita's possessions, she had to do such things for herself. That was the only way that she would learn to appreciate the work of servants.

As usual the old man, hearing my footfall in the room came out to meet me; his face registered surprise at the sight of the British officer. The invasion had been the talk of the suq for some time but I cannot imagine that he had expected to see a Britisher here in our house. I gave him no time to say anything.

"Amil, go to the House and tell Electra that Paolo must contact the plateau, tell them that the British are in the town."

"A moment!" The lieutenant shouted from behind me. "What is this instruction you are issuing?"

I faced him, protecting Amil from his intimidation.

"Lieutenant, since you will believe neither me nor Major le Clerc, it is necessary for me to arrange for your senior officer to meet someone of whom he will take notice."

"You have attempted to trick me, to send a warning..."

"You fool, do you really believe that I would be stupid enough to send such a message while you stood behind me, able to hear what I was saying?"

He faltered for a moment, taking the point at once.

"Lieutenant, give my servant leave, we mean no threat to you or your forces."

He did not like it. His face showed the confusion which occurs when the habit of obedience is confounded by sheer common sense.

At last, he said, "To whom is your message going, if it is not a warning?"

I gave a little sigh, I did not want to do this but there seemed no alternative.

"What do you know of this country, Lieutenant, and of its people?"

"This is relevant?"

"Yes."

"Arabs for the most part," he replied. "Although there is a sprinkling of other nationals as well," his face showed a slight smirk. "And of course, there are the Sky Riders."

"The Sky Riders, what do you know of them?"

"Very little," he replied, plainly interested. "There is some evidence to suggest that they really exist..."

"They exist, Lieutenant, take it from one who knows," and I stretched out an arm to him so that my drill jacket drew back, revealing the gold Sky Rider bracelet around my wrist. He was visibly taken aback, took my arm in his hand and examined the stylised butterfly emblem inlaid in black quartz into the gold of the bracelet. Then he looked straight at me, an appraising look in his eyes.

"References to the Sky Riders were found in le Clerc's records at the Residency. We had previously supposed such talk to be nothing more than gossip in the bazaar," he paused, gave me a hard stare. "If you are warning the Sky Riders..."

"I am not, Lieutenant," I cut in. "I was alerting their leaders to your arrival. The head of the Sky Riders is my sister. She will want to meet your commander and establish relations."

He was silent for a moment.

"In that case, can you not send a more open message?"

I turned back to Amil.

"Tell Electra what I have told you, add to the message the request that the Lady Christina comes here at once."

"Yes, master."

I entertained the hope that after that I might be allowed to stay at my shop but the officer had his orders and he conducted me, politely but firmly through the familiar streets to the Residency.

The activities of the casbah were muted, the denizens of the suq had, for the most part, gone inside. From behind the protection of their doors they peered out on events which they only barely comprehended. There were already patrols of British soldiers, details of three or four men patrolling the streets, their faces full of the idle curiosity of the servicemen in a foreign land. And I wondered how much difference their presence would make, in the long term, to this outpost of civilization in the barren backyard of a poor and deprived territory. Very little I guessed, life in Dar El Qarar would return with the inevitability of day and night to its immemorial normality. To the Sky Riders however, this might be the beginning of the end. For some time Christina had been predicting that Cataxia's halcyon paradise would soon be overcome by events. That there had been no change in the circumstances of the Sky Riders, or in their relationship with the authorities had been an unexpected interval in events, one which could not be expected to

continue for very much longer.

The Legion was gone from the Residency, its baroque splendour was attended by the British, men whose very appearance told of the ravages of modern warfare. Dishevelled, and for the most part, stripped to the waist, they were very obviously soldiers used to fighting, men who understood that smartness of dress had little to do with actual fighting ability. There was a directness in their manner and a brusqueness lacking in the Lieutenant who conducted me, after a brief conference with his superior, to le Clerc's old office. Clearly this was a vision of a new world, one in which the subtle accomplishments of the aristocracy would hold no sway, one for which my sister's avowed socialism made her eminently more suited than me.

Major Gower was about my age, tall and showing some overweight but beyond that an older version of the young Lieutenant, his easy familiarity of command betokening not training but an assumption of right. Streaks of grey flecked his dark hair but his broad open face showed no more of the cares of responsibility than it might in peacetime, all of which tended to confirm my placing of his background and character. He got up to greet me as I was shown in, even extended his hand for a brief handshake. Then he waved me to a chair.

"Now sir," he said in English. "What can I do for you?"

"Firstly I wish to make it clear that your arrest and internment of myself and my family is a mistake. I appeal against that decision."

"I note your appeal," he replied, unemotionally. "What then?"

"I gain the impression that you wish to make contact with the Sky Riders."

"If they exist," he put in, "a fact about which I understand you can give me information."

"I have already done more than that, Herr Major, I have sent a request to my sister who is the First Tribune of the Sky Riders, to join us here."

He said nothing for a moment. Then, "Herr Wetzel, is there any reason why I should not send an armoured division into the desert to await your sister?"

"You cannot mean that..."

"The records of the Residency refer to assistance provided by the Sky Riders to the former administration. On that evidence I must assume them to be enemies."

"But that is ridiculous. Le Clerc was not a collaborator..."

"And you, you are an enemy national..."

"No," I charged to my feet, raising my voice. "That is no longer true..."

"You are the Graf von Baden Hessian, your brother Kurt commanded a tank brigade in North Africa under General von Baelbec..."

"To hell with my brother, I recognise no nationality except the Republic of Cataxia."

He raised his own voice.

"Sit down, sir!"

I stared at him. Then did as he commanded. I was about to speak again but he cut me short.

"Tell me about Colonel Falkenhynne, Herr Wetzel."

"Colonel Falkenhynne?" For a moment I had no idea what he was talking about; then "You know about that business?"

"Yes, the records are here in the Residency; but it appears that le Clerc did not come into contact with him."

"Nor I," I told him. "It was Electra who infiltrated his activities and brought about his downfall."

"And this Electra, who is that?"

"If you have access to le Clerc's records, you must know..."

"Even so, tell me," he commanded.

"Electra is the assumed name of Zita Johanna Schmidt, the clever and beautiful daughter of a Cataxian engineer. She is also the mother of my daughter."

"I see," and the way it was said was evidence that he was thinking about what I was telling him, not just letting it pass. He continued, "Herr Wetzel, if I am to believe what you tell me, I must know more about you. I have to accept that the frustration of the Falkenhynne plot was a friendly act. Tell me in your own words about yourself, and about that incident."

Was he just giving me an opportunity to say just too much and make my support for his enemies clear? I had no way of knowing and no alternative but to comply with his demands. I made a movement of resignation.

"As you rightly observe my father was the hereditary nobleman of a north European state whose power, I may say, evaporated nearly thirty years ago when the Emperor threw everything away in a stupid war of aggression..."

I told him about my sister, Christina, the real inheritor of the von Wetzel qualities, how she had become the leader of the Sky Riders, a group of Europeans, either escaped white slaves or their children, now about 2000 in number. They inhabited a paradisaical desert plateau and rode perfectly bred Arabian horses, mounting a kind of desert police force which provided help and protection for the Bedouin tribes. I told him how I had come to the territory and how I had discovered my sister in this place, about the hereditary von Wetzel birthmark which she had on her left shoulder blade and which had been adopted as the badge of the Sky Riders. I told him about Christina's son, now

nearly fourteen years of age, a fine young man, tall and lithe and going to be, one day, as clever as his mother. And I told him about Electra, to me the cleverest and most beautiful of the Sky Riders, the woman whose love had dragged me from the gutter and restored my self-respect, whose almost reckless bravery had foiled the schemes of the evil forces which the Major's own people were fighting in Europe, schemes which had been intended to prepare the Middle East for eventual conquest.

I paused for breath but Gower made no attempt to intervene. I went on, telling him about Electra's great love of engineering and the tremendous ability, both intellectual and practical that she brought to that discipline. I described the arrangements that we had made to enable Electra to continue to be involved in Cataxian engineering schemes even when she was with me in Dar El Qarar. As soon as our daughter was born, Electra had been drafted into the team charged with the design and construction of installations which it was hoped, would reduce the labour intensiveness of some occupations on the plateau. My immediate reaction had been to object but I could not resist when Christina - and later Electra herself - had insisted that she should do everything to assist with this work. The Sky Riders had lost a large number of their warriors in the battle that had been fought to defend the plateau against Falkenhyne's hordes. Christina had been right, Electra's facility for design could not be wasted. She had buried herself in this work and the results of the team's activities were beginning to come into use, saving many hours of manual labour. Directly resulting from her work on these projects Electra had become Chief Officer of the Works Department. She had been only twenty six years of age at the time. But there was more to Electra than that, not only was she a first class leader but one who was personally popular with her subordinates.

Such conflict as there was between us arose because I had not wanted to give up my business in Dar El Qarar. I think I wanted to retain a degree of independence and though my love for Electra made it very difficult, I insisted upon maintaining that position. After a while Electra supported me, she was sensible enough to realise that she needed time to rest and relax and that the opportunity to get away from the plateau and stay with me in the town would provide that relaxation. I made it a great deal easier for both of us by taking one of le Clerc's officer's, released at the end of his service, into partnership. Juan Delgado had some money of his own and we pooled our resources so that I could spend three months of every year in Cataxia. Electra arranged her own affairs so that she spent a similar length of time in Dar El Qarar, thus ensuring that our time apart was limited to the absolute minimum.

Nor was the time that Electra spent in Dar El Qarar wasted; Christina had become very concerned that news took a minimum of fifteen to eighteen hours to reach the plateau from the town and she had prevailed upon le Clerc to use his influence to obtain radio equipment from Damascus, assistance about which the colonial authority knew nothing. Electra was given the task of installing the equipment at the House of the Riders, a job which first required her to learn the practicalities of sending and receiving radio messages. Needless to say, she mastered it very quickly and soon knew more about it than I did.

For a while there had been little apparent change in the arrangements at my house in the Rue Al Fayah. Electra was not the domestic type of woman and she made no attempt to intervene in Amil's organisation, beyond a little leavening of our male dominated life-style. My old fellahin servant was very fond of our daughter Zita, and would have indulged her abominably had we let him. Like all very young children she had to be cared for and trained in all the little things that even older children take for granted but we passed from the phase of sleepless nights to that of mud parties in the sun baked back yard without one word of impatience from the old man.

Christina and her lover, Alain, and of course, Little Karl still came to the town during the periods when we were there. The boy had got to the stage of being embarrassed by the soubriquet 'Little' and after one or two adolescent sulks Electra started calling him 'K', a diminutive which he accepted without demur and which, in my presence at least, even his parents adopted. In fact he was rapidly approaching manhood; not yet fourteen he was as experienced with horses and desert riding as many Sky Riders ten years his senior. He seemed to have inherited both the intellectualism and the intuitive affinity for horses of his mother as well as his father's soldierly bearing; yet there was nothing precocious about him, he was perfectly happy playing in the mud with his little cousin Zita and often had no alternative but to do so. Zita spent many happy hours in the garden at the back of my shop utterly absorbed with her toy animals. If 'K' should arrive while she was thus engrossed, she would come running in to demand his attention. The tall handsome young adolescent would have to get out of his clothes, tie a loin cloth around his hips and join her. I think it was actually good for him, he had played in the mud in that same garden many times, participating in Zita's games gave him a respite from the demands his self-perceived need to be an adult imposed upon him.

Yet behind this picture of careless pleasure clouds were gathering. The territory had never really been peaceful of course, not even in the days of the Ottoman Empire. Mandating it to the European powers had been intended only as a half way house to full independence but the colonial governments seemed to have had other ideas. The authority responsible for our part of the region had been particularly determined to resist nationalist forces and this had brought a number of serious disturbances. When the war in Europe broke out, the people behind these disturbances became the willing accomplices of the authorities enemies. Then Le Clerc's people surrendered and the country became almost ungovernable. The war threatened to come prominently into our lives on a number of occasions but it took four years for that to happen to any significant extent. Until the invasion of the Middle East by the British our only difficulty arose from the determination of some of the local colonial officers, particularly those in Damascus, to accept the

direction of the collaborationist government in Europe. Le Clerc absolutely refused to do this. It caused him a great deal of personal trouble, he had been promoted shortly after the Falkenhynne affair and would, in the normal course of events, have received further promotion and a transfer to a more responsible position, possibly even Damascus itself. But it never happened, the powers were obviously determined to keep the troublesome le Clerc out of the way. Which as I explained to Gower made his internment by the British not only incomprehensible but insulting as well.

“Yes,” he observed. “I know much of what you tell me from other sources.” He said nothing for a few moments, clearly sizing everything up in his mind. Then, “Very well, Herr Wetzel, I’m going to take a risk. If you will give me an assurance that you will not leave the town I will allow you to return to your shop to await the Sky Rider leader.”

“Of course, Herr Major, I am happy to give it,” I said. “But what of le Clerc?”

Gower grinned, the first indication I had seen that the man had a sense of humour.

“Oh, I don’t think you need to worry too much about Major le Clerc,” he told me.

I was not credulous enough to believe that no watch would be kept on my movements, indeed I was sure that Gower would have me followed and my shop watched back and front throughout the following days. For this reason I did not go near the House of the Riders but went back to my own establishment. Amil had returned from the House and told me that Electra too was on her way back, only doubling through the suq to confuse any pursuers, a ruse that was by now almost second nature.

As always the thought of seeing Electra again, even after only a few hours apart filled me with anticipation. My life had been very different to hers. I had been born into an aristocratic family with every opportunity that privilege could provide. As certainly as night follows day I would have succeeded to one of the richest of the smaller north European states and my upbringing and education had been intended to prepare me for this inevitable inheritance. Though I did not lack brains or any of the other attributes that are supposed to be the divine gifts of the hereditary rulers of Europe, I always lacked that most important of qualities, determination. Electra’s unaffected love for me and the confidence that she showed in all I did had proved that I had all the character and personality of the best of my forefathers. Yet, in Baden Hessian it had been my sister, Christina who had demonstrated the von Wetzel qualities. She could never have inherited the title and yet she had needed no second person to drive her to show that she was a true descendant of the von Wetzel line. I had been the heir apparent but Christina had been my parent’s joy and pleasure. And what was worse was that I did not much care. Fortunately it made no difference to my relationship with my sister whom I loved like a warm spring morning. And when she was supposedly drowned through my negligence I made no attempt to defend myself but just cleared out.

Electra was a natural born Sky Rider, the daughter of young scientists captured by slave traders whilst on a research mission in the Middle East. They had escaped and reached the safe haven of the Cataxian plateau. Electra’s parents had actually lived in the state of Baden Hessian before coming to the east though we had never met. They had come of lower professional stock and had got by on brains and determination alone. Their daughter was very much a love-child and she had inherited an unusual combination of talents, a brilliant scholar with an extraordinary facility for mathematics and science, she was also a gifted, indeed natural horsewoman. Very sensibly her parents had not pressurised her development, let it take its own course, recognising that Electra’s own enthusiasm and determination were enough. This far-sighted policy had allowed her to develop her own interests without any hothouse forcing. Yet anyone thinking her over-serious was quickly disabused of this error, Electra had a good sense of fun and loved display, a characteristic of which not everyone approved. Yet in many respects, none of those qualities put her above the merely outstanding. There was one other characteristic that really did set her apart.

After leaving Baden Hessian I spent years roaming around the Middle East until I became rooted in Dar El Qarar, more through default than any other cause. I led a dissolute and disgusting life, eking out a living from usury and expending it on drink and women with no regard for any future. I did not have a future, I lived only for the moment, for the instant of pleasure that hard drink or the body of a whore provided. Why I did not die a dreadful and appalling death in misery I cannot tell.

Then I met my sister again. Or rather, she revealed herself to me, grown to maturity and the leader of the Sky Riders. My lifestyle changed but not so much as when Christina brought into my life the new young Resident Sky Rider at the House of the Riders. All the thrill of our first meeting surged through me as she came into the withdrawing room at the back of my shop, revealing once again to my eyes the quality that put her above all others. Not only was Electra clever but she was also very beautiful. My sister Christina was beautiful but not like Electra, for the young engineer was a vision of classic loveliness.

“Paolo radioed Cataxia as soon as Amil brought your message,” she said as we embraced, briefly, for Zita was with her and demanding attention.

Our daughter was not yet four years old, like all children of her age, round and podgy but also dark skinned like her mother and showing already a suppleness of movement that betokened Electra’s graceful elegance. I threw my arms round her and lifted her bodily off the floor in a big bear hug of which she pretended to be afraid, as she always did, making a great deal of silly cheerful noise. Like her mother, Zita was barefoot but she was wearing a robe and burnous hood, Electra had long ago stopped wearing an abayah, preferring to go about in Dar El Qarar in riding jodhpurs and shirt. Since the war in Europe had begun, most of the colonials had gone home and the need for her to

hide her identity had gone with them. I put Zita down on her feet and told her to collect up her belongings from the floor.

Electra stood in the doorway of the bedroom pulling her shirt out of the waist band of her jodhpurs and unbuttoning the front.

“Did Paolo get through to Christina?” I asked.

“Yes, she was in the Command building and they were able to bring her straight to the radio,” she did a half turn and discarded her shirt onto the bed behind her. “She’s coming straight here, Karl, planning to make it in one go.”

Electra went into the room and sat on the edge of the bed to take her jodhpurs off.

“150 miles, I hope she knows what she’s doing.”

“Taking it very seriously I think. Paolo’s to ride out towards the plateau with a spare horse and meet her.”

Electra pulled her jodhpurs off the ends of her feet and stood up, dropping the garment on the bed behind her; she was tall and slim, her skin the colour of dark mahogany, exertion giving it a thin sheen. Her body demonstrated strength as well as beauty, the muscles in her long elegant thighs and legs were taut and sinewy and her stomach was hard from riding horses since almost before she could walk. But there was no ugliness in her strength, if anything it was under-stated and only revealed itself when some movement tautened a fibrous tissue, thrusting the corded muscle into view. Her shoulders were sharp and mobile in her back and her breasts firm and round. Most Sky Rider women cut their hair no longer than the nape of their neck but Electra, unsurprisingly, grew her glossy black hair in lustrous locks that tumbled off her head and down to the small of her back. She had a very obviously European face, big widely spaced dark blue eyes, high cheekbones and a strong mouth.

“It’ll take her about fifteen hours or so,” I mused. “Is she coming alone?”

Most of the Sky Riders were Europeans and they brought many European ways to the desert regions particularly as regards their dress. On the Cataxian plateau, washed by its subterranean river and high enough above the level of the desert for the harshest effects of the sun to be reduced, the climate was hot but bearable and in these conditions the Sky Riders only wore such clothes as were absolutely necessary. In the privacy of my home, or at the House of the Riders, both Electra and Christina were able to adopt the same style, wearing only a halter necked bikini top to support their breasts and a loin cloth over their bikini pants.

“Apparently K’s been asking to come and see us again,” Electra told me. “She’s arranging for Alain and the boy to follow her.”

“Here, at this time?” I demanded. “That’s not terribly well advised.”

Electra tied a square of patterned cloth, doubled over into a triangle, around her hips and knotted it at the front as a loin cloth. She came to where I stood leaning against the door jamb and in the gloom of my withdrawing room her body appeared almost black but her gold Sky Rider bracelets blazed like coruscating fires, flashes of luminescence that glowed against her skin.

“I think she feels that it will impress the British as an act of faith,” she put out her arms and I held her to me, feeling the warmth of her body vibrant and alluring. She grinned, “I have a feeling they’ll find ‘K’ impressive in more than one way,” she said.