

SIGN OF THE CROSS

C.M. Palov

4:57 p.m.

Gondar, Ethiopia

“How much for the woman?”

Shocked, Cædmon Aisquith schooled his features into a neutral expression.

“There’s a broker in Addis Ababa who specializes in light-skinned females. Demand is high in the Asian market,” the Ethiopian continued. As he spoke, the tall man flipped a *mishaba* back and forth, the Muslim prayer beads softly clacking. A sound made malevolent by the unsavory barter. “She’ll fetch a good price.”

Cædmon cast a sideways glance at the woman in question. Garbed in a traditional *shamma*, the vibrant blues and purples accentuated her flawless skin and espresso-colored eyes. *A vision of grace and docility*. Seemingly oblivious to the conversation taking place, she modestly held a gauzy headscarf to her mouth, her gaze fixed to the floor.

“While certain to command a premium, ‘she is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.’”

The verse from Proverbs met with a blank stare.

“Er, the lady’s not for sale,” Cædmon clarified.

The haggler placed his free hand over the knife scabbard at his waist. “A pity.”

Bugger.

“Leave be, Omar. It’s obvious that our guest is not interested in the flesh trade.”

At hearing that disembodied voice, Cædmon peered over his shoulder. A slightly-built septuagenarian stood directly aft, the other man having noiselessly approached. Like a ghostly specter materializing out of thin air.

The bead clacking instantly ceased. Contritely bowing his head, Omar retreated several steps, melding into the shadows of the small shop.

“Please forgive Omar for what must seem, to an Englishman, a rude impertinence.” Unlike his underling, who was attired in a knee-length white robe and matching trousers, the older man wore finely-tailored Western-style clothing. Smiling, he extended his right hand. “I am Bereket Haile Medeksa.”

“Cædmon Aisquith.” He grasped his right elbow with his left hand. A show of respect. Then, adding to the deceit, he said, “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” He didn’t bother introducing the woman. As Omar had bluntly remarked, she was a commodity. No more, no less. “Is the *Diarium Templar* still for sale?”

“It is. However I must first ask that you submit to a body search. A distasteful but mandatory precaution in my line of work.”

“Needs must.” Cædmon raised his arms in the air. As Omar patted him down, he stared at the dusty assortment of souvenirs – tacky T-shirts, postcards, snow domes – that lined the nearby shelves.

A few moments later, formalities concluded, Bereket gestured to the open doorway in the rear of the dimly-lit shop. “Shall we adjourn to the showroom? Omar will keep an eye on your woman while we conduct our business.”

“I prefer that she accompany me.” At seeing Bereket’s brows draw together, he pressed the point. “Not only is the woman a valuable piece of merchandise, she’s fleet of foot.”

“She seems compliant enough.”

“You wouldn’t say that had you been the one chasing her through the *merkato* earlier today.”

The confession met with a chiding *tsk-tsk*. “You Westerners are too lenient with your women. Very well.” Permission granted, Bereket led the way to the back of the shop.

The ‘showroom’ turned out to be a windowless, climate-controlled space that housed a staggering collection. *Scepters, coins, ancient manuscripts, sculptures. Even a jeweled crown.* All beautifully displayed to advantage in smudge-free glass cases. Glancing up, he saw a surveillance camera mounted near the ceiling. The ingrained training that he’d received in Her Majesty’s secret service immediately kicked in. Although he left MI5 two years ago, some lessons a man never forgot.

On high alert, Cædmon scanned the room, searching for an alternate means of egress.

Blast. One way in, one way out. If the situation soured, he’d have to get past Omar, now manning the front entry. Easier said than done with a woman in tow.

He turned to his host. Seen in profile, Bereket resembled an ancient pharaoh. A far cry from his actual profession, Bereket Haile Medeksa the most notorious black market antiquities dealer in Ethiopia. The souvenir shop in the front was just that, a front for a highly lucrative, and highly illegal, business operation.

“May I see the *Diarium Templar?*”

“By all means.” Smiling – his ebullience undoubtedly buoyed by the thought of a hefty profit – Bereket gestured to a wooden lectern positioned a few feet away. “I think you’ll be quite impressed.”

With a curt nod, Cædmon motioned the woman to the lone chair in the corner of the room. He then stepped over to the lectern; beside it, a pair of white cotton gloves had been laid. As with the body search, a necessary precaution.

Gloves donned, he stared at the remarkably well-preserved codex, the embossed leather aged to a rich burnt umber. He slowly opened the cover. On the first page, penned in purplish-black ink, the date had been neatly scribed in Latin, the lingua franca of the day. *Anno Domini Nostri Iesu Christi MCLXV*. ‘In the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1165.’ His heart rate spiked a notch.

During the Middle Ages, few people could read, let alone write; the reason why the *Diarium Templar* was such an extraordinary relic. The fact that the diary had been written by a young Knights Templar named Anfoy de Montegut made the *Diarium Templar* utterly priceless. An order of warrior monks, the Knights Templars were founded during the Crusades, the Church sanctioned series of bloodbaths that attempted to free the Holy Land from the Muslim infidel.

Cædmon skimmed the dated entries that chronicled the intrepid knight’s secret mission to the Ethiopian empire. Clearly dazzled by what he saw in the land of Sheba, de Montegut had included a number of hand-drawn sketches. *The stone obelisks at Gondar. The ancient temple at Yeha. And a curious depiction of two mating hartebeests.* Tamping his growing impatience, he turned the vellum pages, searching for a particular illustration. If he didn’t find it, the entire trip to Ethiopia will have been a waste of —

Bang on! he silently exclaimed, his gaze alighting on the sought-after sketch.

Although crudely drawn, he instantly recognized the box with two winged angels on the lid. And if he hadn't recognized that most famous of biblical relics, Anfoy de Montegut had been obliging enough to write the Latin word *arca* beneath the drawing. As in Ark of the Covenant. The gold-plated chest that contained the Ten Commandments and that accompanied the Israelites during their desert wanderings.

Beneath the illustrated Ark, in the middle of the vellum page, there was a Greek cross.



At seeing the familiar image, Cædmon frowned, knowing full well that the symbol had no connection to the Ark of the Covenant. One image belonged to the pages of the Old Testament, the other to the New. Beneath the cross, a single line of Latin had been penned – *In hoc signo vinces.*

The glass just became that much darker.

He turned away from the open *Diarium Templar* and walked over to where Bereket stood near the doorway. He wondered if the antiquities dealer had any idea that his ill-gotten inventory contained such an amazing treasure.

“Fifty thousand dollars is a steep price for a medieval codex that has no documented provenance.” As he spoke, Cædmon noticed that the woman had gotten up from her chair and was making her way to the lectern. *A vision of grace and docility.*

“It is a rare one-of-a-kind relic.” Bereket looked him straight in the eye. “The price stands.”

“Mmmm . . . may I call on you in the morning? I’ll need the evening to mull my decision.”

“Of course. Please take as much time as you need.” If he was annoyed by the delaying tactic, Bereket gave no indication.

A few minutes later, his hand tightly cuffed around the woman’s arm, Cædmon exited the souvenir shop. At the end of the block, he veered to the right, bypassing a gaggle of Ethiopian shoppers, all of whom carried a brightly colored umbrella to ward off the late-day sunshine. No broolly at the ready, he pulled his female cargo into the shadow of a centuries old sandstone castle.

The woman at his side yanked off the blue headdress, liberating a mass of dark-brown corkscrew curls. He discerned from Edie Miller’s outraged expression that his research assistant was none too pleased.

“*How much for the woman!?*” Hel-lo. And welcome to the 21st century. I came *this* close—” with her thumb and index finger, Edie indicated a scant half inch measure “—to kneeling that bozo Omar in the balls.”

“You Americans, always griping about something.” Amused by her ire, Cædmon wrapped an arm around Edie’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Were you able to get a shot of the *Diarium Templar?*”

“I’ve been a professional photographer for ten years, but *that* was a first.” She removed a small digital camera from the voluminous folds of her *shamma*. “Although I’m pretty sure that I got you a Windex clear photo of the diary page.”

“Well done, Miss Miller! Unless I’m greatly mistaken, our intrepid Knights Templar inserted an encrypted code into his diary that reveals the sacred relic’s whereabouts.”

“And what do you think our chances are? Of finding the Ark of the Covenant,” Edie clarified.

His lips curved in a triumphant smile. “The odds have vastly improved.”

Assuming they could crack the code.

5:49 p.m.
Lalibela Restaurant

“ . . . no sooner did King Solomon build his fabled Temple than the Queen of Sheba traveled to Jerusalem to view the architectural marvel.” As he spoke, Cædmon shifted his hips, adjusting his 6’3” frame to the two foot high traditional *mesob* table. A problem compounded by an eight inch stool.

Watching the contortion act, Edie bit back a smile.

“If the Ethiopian legend is true, the queen went on the—” with her fingers, she made a pair of air quotes “—*after hours* tour, giving birth nine months later to Solomon’s illegitimate son Menelik.”

“The same legend claims that, upon maturation, Menelik stole the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple of Jerusalem and secretly transported it to Ethiopia.”

“Hiding the darned thing Yahweh knows where.” Like the Knights Templar before them, she and Cædmon had come to Ethiopia in search of the Ark. A potentially dangerous venture. According to the Bible, the gold-plated chest could level mountains, raze cities and annihilate entire armies. A tale that she hoped contained more fiction than fact.

“For nearly three thousand years, the Ark’s disappearance has been one of the great unsolved mysteries of the Bible. To quote the medieval author Wolfram von Eschenbach, the discovery of the sacred relic would be ‘the consummation of heart’s desire.’”

In the process of pouring honey wine into two small glasses, Edie paused. “Should I be jealous?”

“Not in the least,” her companion replied. “My attraction to the Ark is entirely cerebral.”

“Spoken like a true Oxford graduate.” The right side of her mouth quirked upwards. “And how about your attraction to me: cerebral or visceral?” Teasing aside, it was a valid question. They met five weeks ago when she’d witnessed the theft of another relic of the Old Testament, the Stones of Fire. That dangerous exploit inspired their current hunt for the Ark of the Covenant. Flung into a whirlwind, she still didn’t know Cædmon’s favorite color. Or movie. Stick shift vs. automatic.

Cædmon raised his wine glass. “My feelings for you are cerebral, visceral and, lest you mistake me for a monk in an abbey, decidedly carnal.”

“Good answer.” She *clinked* the rim of her glass against his. “And right back at ya, Big Red.” Not for the first time, Edie thought that if you morphed some of history’s famous red heads – Erik the Red, William Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson – you’d end up with Cædmon Aisquith. Book smarts. Street smarts. The man had it all.

“Shall we have a go at the photo before our food arrives?” Reaching into his breast pocket, Cædmon removed the digital camera.

“So the working theory is that the illustration of the Ark, the Greek cross, and the Latin phrase comprise a single encryption.” Her gaze zeroed in on the almost childish depiction of the Ark on the camera’s display screen. “The drawing I get. What’s not so clear is the Latin inscription *In hoc signo vinces.*’ As you know, I only speak the pig dialect of that dead language.”

“It means ‘By this sign you shall conquer,’” Cædmon translated. “The Templars were a religious order and often employed religious symbolism in their encoded communiqués.”

“‘By this sign you shall conquer’ sounds more like a battle cry than a religious invocation.”

“In point of fact, it is both. In the year 312, on the eve before the battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine the Great had a dream in which he saw a soldier’s shield emblazoned with a cross, the phrase *In hoc signo vinces*’ ethereally floating above it. The next morning Constantine ordered his men to paint crosses on their battle shields.”

“And did the heavenly host make good on the promise?” Having a degree in Women’s Studies, ancient history, albeit it fascinating, wasn’t her forte.

“Just as the Ark of the Covenant brought military success to the Hebrew tribes, the divinely inspired cross secured Constantine a decisive victory.” Cocking his head to one side, Cædmon lightly tapped an index finger against his chin. His poker tell. “Unless we can decipher the meaning of the unexpected cross in the *Diarium Templar*, it’s an ancient mystery that may never—”

“Hold that thought.” Turning her head, Edie smiled at the approaching waitress. Uncertain what they ordered – neither party spoke the other’s language – she anxiously watched as a domed platter was placed on top of their table.

Cædmon unfolded his napkin.

“Dinner is served,” she exclaimed a few seconds later, removing the cover with a dramatic flourish. A large sourdough pancake, dotted with heaps of hot food, covered the entire platter. Starving, Edie tore off a piece of the *injera* bread, using it to scoop up a bite-size dollop of lamb stew. Garlic, lemon and ginger created a savory aroma that caused her stomach to impolitely growl.

“I’ll have you know that I’m doing this under duress,” Cædmon good-naturedly grumbled, rolling his food into the bread like a cigarette.

“Don’t be such a stuff shirt. What could be more fun than eating with your fingers?” Edie popped the morsel into her mouth. A split-second later, eyes watering, she grabbed the decanter of honey wine, in desperate need of a refill. “Man overboard!” she sputtered once the spice crisis had passed. “Talk about a sucker punch.”

Cædmon removed the decanter from her hand; in that instant their gazes met, both of them acutely aware that his fingers grazed against hers a moment too long. At least by Ethiopian standards. A conservative country, kissing, hugging and handholding in public were expressly taboo.

“Try the lentil dish. It doesn’t have as much of the *berbere* chili pepper.”

“Berbere is ver-ver hot.” Edie giggled. “Kinda like me, huh?” A playful wink punctuated the addendum.

“Indeed, your charms are numerous.”

Emboldened by the compliment, Edie slowly ran her finger over the rim of her glass . . . in the exact spot her lips had touched. “Do I detect a glimmer of interest in those blue eyes?”

Cædmon leaned closer. A man taking a lover into his confidence. “More like a gleam of— No sudden moves,” he unexpectedly hissed. “A Toyota truck just pulled up to the front curb. Bereket’s security man is in the passenger seat.”

“Do you mean Omar, the male-chauvinist bozo from the antiques shop?”

“None other. And he has a muscular fellow in tow.” As he spoke, Cædmon hurriedly shoved the digital camera into his shirt pocket. “Our shady antiques dealer had a surveillance camera in the showroom.”

Hearing that, Edie’s stomach muscles painfully tightened.

“If Bereket reviewed the tape, he knows that we got something for nothing.” Fifty thousand dollars a steep price to pay for a single page of the *Diarium Templar*.

Cædmon pushed himself upright. Bending at the waist, he helped Edie to her feet. His movements quick and efficient, he slapped a wad of *birrs* on the table. Bill paid, he ushered her toward the back of the restaurant where a steady stream of waiters moved back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen.

“Wait here,” Cædmon whispered, escorting her to a large column a few feet from the kitchen doors. “I’m going to scout the premises and see if I can find a rear exit.”

Not so sure she liked the plan, Edie flattened herself against the wooden column.

A few moments later, curiosity getting the better of her, she tentatively peeked around the corner . . . just in time to see Omar and his cohort enter the restaurant.

“*Yeat no faranji?*” Omar yelled in a commanding voice.

Whatever he hollered, it captured everyone’s attention. In the next instant, heads swiveled, necks craned, and heated whispering ensued. One restaurant patron raised his arm and pointed to where Edie stood cowering, hidden behind the column.

Crappola. Outted by the locals.

Fear a great motivator, she gathered the flowing hem of her *shamma* and ran toward the kitchen, shoving her shoulder against a swinging door.

At a glance, she could see that the space resembled any large commercial kitchen – bubbling cauldrons of food, a line of aproned assistants slicing and dicing, and harried wait staff bearing unwieldy trays.

Edie turned to the nearest prep chef. “Please, where’s the emergency—”

Suddenly, without warning, she was roughly yanked backward. Omar's cohort, a fistful of purple fabric in his hand, began to reel her towards him. Edie floundered, twisting, first one way, then the other. Losing her balance, she grabbed the edge of the prep station to keep from falling on her keister.

Which was when she caught sight of an open sack full of the red powder used in so many Ethiopian dishes. Edie shoved her hand into the sack and, turning to face her captor, blew a mound of *berbere* at his face.

Almost immediately, the brute released his hold on the *shamma*. Furiously yelping, he slapped both palms over his eyes. Edie figured he was screaming the Ethiopian equivalent of 'Face on fire!'

Tuning out the excited commotion – everyone in the kitchen now yammering at full volume – Edie charged toward a screen door, emerging a few moments later in an alleyway. Before she could catch her breath, someone seized her wrist, tugging her behind a trash dumpster.

“Keep your hair on. It's me.”

“Cædmon, thank heaven!”

“Postpone the hosannas. The Captain of the Guard just arrived.”

At the far end of the alley, Edie espied a tall man decked out in traditional Ethiopian garb.
Omar.

“Now wh-what?” she warbled, her heart thumping against her breastbone.

“We follow Constantine's example and put our faith in God.”

6:17 p.m.

Church of the Nine Saints

“But this is the Lord’s house!”

“Trust me. He won’t mind the trespass,” Cædmon assured his companion. He opened the door on the other side of the alley, having discovered the unlocked church vestry moments earlier.

Craning his neck, he peered down the alley. *Damn.* Omar was on the move. Their lead minimal, at best, he nudged Edie into the vestry. As his pupils adjusted to the abysmal lighting, Cædmon hurriedly perused the chamber, looking for *anything* that could be used as a weapon. His gaze landed on a pile of sticks haphazardly strewn on the floor.

Perfect.

He dashed over and grabbed a four foot length of shellacked sycamore. In Ethiopian churches, resting sticks were used by supplicants forced to stand throughout the service. He tested the heft. Satisfied that the sturdy stick could be used as a weapon, he shepherded Edie through another doorway and into a dimly-lit nave. Olfactory senses overwhelmed by a pungent effluvium, he barely stifled a gag. Somewhere in the cavernous church, a monk had been burning frankincense, the fog so thick, it blurred his vision.

“Who let in the three wise men?” Edie muttered.

“Shhh.”

Keeping to the shadows, much like Lewis Carroll’s fictional mouse, they scurried down the aisle. Nearly seventy meters in length, the passageway was buttressed on one side by a row of stone pillars. On the opposite wall, a clerestory window permitted dust-laden slashes of faint

light. They headed toward the vestibule at the far end of the church. From there, they could exit the building and hail a taxi. The perfect getaway.

Halfway into their trek, Edie tripped over the hem of her *shamma*. Cædmon caught her in mid-tumble. Which is when he noticed his companion frantically wiping her right palm against the gauzy dress fabric.

‘What are you doing?’ he silently mouthed.

Edie held out her palm, the entire surface stained a rusty hue. “It’s— *Aa-chool!*” The unexpected sneeze reverberated throughout the nave. “—*berbere.*”

A pounding footfall immediately ensued, the sneeze alerting Omar to their location.

“I’m thinking it’s time for Plan B.”

His thoughts exactly, Cædmon scanned the vicinity. To the right of them, tucked into the transept, he saw a wooden door slightly ajar. Hoping it might be an exit, he veered in that direction.

It wasn’t, the door opening onto a circular stone stairwell.

“In you go.” Edie opened her mouth to protest, but Cædmon resolutely shoved her across the threshold. “Stay put, love.”

Command issued, he dodged into the shadow cast by a massive column. Holding the sycamore stick like a club, he slowed his breath. *Waiting*. The sound of clomping feet had stilled, the church eerily silent.

“I smell the stench of an Englishman,” Omar taunted, the first to break the quietude.

“Sod you.”

“You owe an outstanding debt that Bereket is anxious to collect.”

“And I have no intention of rendering unto Caesar,” Cædmon retorted. Stepping away from the shadows, he approached the Ethiopian.

At seeing the length of sycamore, Omar scowled, nostrils flaring. In one quick, practiced move, he removed the *gabi* shawl from his shoulders, swirling the fabric around his left forearm. A makeshift shield. Still scowling, he slid a *danakil* knife from the scabbard at his waist. Nine inches in length, the angled *danakil* was traditionally used by herdsmen to gut dead animals.

Bugger.

Galvanized into action, Cædmon lunged at his opponent, swinging the stick at the other man’s head. Omar, possessed with damnably quick reflexes, recoiled out of harm’s way.

Scowl replaced with a smirk, the cheeky bastard toggled his knife.

Cædmon gripped the wooden stick that much tighter. About to launch another attack, he pulled up short, flabbergasted to see Edie emerge from the shadows directly behind Omar. In her right hand, she grasped a chain from which dangled a gold-plated thurible, the ornate vessel used to burn frankincense. A determined look in her eyes, she swung the thurible over her head like a medieval flail.

The sudden motion produced a loud metallic *Clank!*

Startled, Omar jerked in Edie’s direction. That being his cue, Cædmon took a straight-drive cricket swing, hooking the resting stick behind the Ethiopian’s knees. With one strong armed jerk, he pulled Omar’s legs out from under him.

The Ethiopian’s tailbone hit the stone floor with a resounding thud. Loosened from his grip, the *danakil* knife skittered across the roughhewn floor. Loudly bleating, Omar awkwardly

rolled onto all fours. Cædmon reared his arm, bracing for another swing. Just then, an intrusive burst of daylight flooded the nave.

He glanced toward the vestibule. A lone man stood silhouetted in the open church doorway.

“Where is the bitch-whore?!”

The thurible slipped through Edie’s fingers, metal noisily striking stone. “Oh, God! It’s Omar’s accomplice.”

“Right.” Grabbing her hand, Cædmon charged toward the stairwell in the transept.

No time for false modesty, Edie hitched the brightly colored *shamma* to mid-thigh as they clambered up the spiral stone steps. He estimated the circular shaft to be four stories high; he assumed it led to the church belfry.

Two stories into their ascent, he heard a stream of angrily muttered curses, Omar and his accomplice in pursuit.

At the three story mark, energy flagging, Edie began to loudly pant.

“Sor-ry . . . high . . . altitude,” she wheezed in between labored breaths.

Labored breath better than no breath, Cædmon maintained the clipped pace. Moments later, they rounded the last curve, the stairwell opening onto a sandstone belfry.

The proverbial end of the road.

Still panting, Edie fearfully glanced at him. “Would they actually . . . kill us . . . because . . . we took a photograph of—” She jerked, startled by the unexpected sound of a strident voice broadcasting on a public loud speaker. “Ohmygod!”

“Allah, actually. That’s the *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer.” And a mandatory call at that. At least for pious Muslims who, five times a day, stopped everything they were doing and headed to the nearest mosque.

The repetitive thud of stamping feet quickly receded.

Eddie sagged against him. “Saved by the *adhan*.”

“Indeed.” Stomach, leg and butt muscles relaxed. Permitting himself a gusty sigh of relief, Cædmon braced his hands on the belfry’s arched portal. Below, Gondar spread out in maze-like fashion, a labyrinth of medieval castles and mid-century apartment buildings, the city framed by the majestic Semien Mountains.

“While this is a perfect spot to watch the sunset, I think we should—”

“I don’t bloody believe it!” he interjected. Stunned at what he’d just glimpsed in the near distance, he hastily removed a folded map from his trouser pocket. Opening it, he checked the location.

St. Peter’s Monastery.

Eddie elbowed him in the ribs. “Mind filling me in?”

Extending his arm, Cædmon directed her attention to Gondar’s medieval quarter. “Behold a most incredible sight . . . a monastery shaped like a cross.” A Greek cross to be precise, all four arms of equal length, the flat roof emphasizing the building’s unique shape. “*In hoc signo vinces.*”

“By this sign you shall conquer.” Eddie turned to him, barely able to contain her excitement. “Do you think the Ark of the Covenant is hidden inside the monastery?”

“Haven’t the foggiest. It may simply be a *crossroads* that will lead to the next clue. That said, there’s only one way to find out.” Cædmon extended a crooked elbow in her direction. “Shall we?”