SEARCH FOR THE ARK

 Sebastian Templar was a professor of Biblical Archeology at Oxford University in England. A widower with two grown daughters and a son, he was sixty-three years old. His obsession over the past three decades had been the search for the legendary Ark of the Covenant, the sacred yet missing container holding the original Ten Commandments given to Moses by God on the holy summit of Mt. Sinai. Perhaps appropriately -- as evidenced by his last name -- the professor was descended from a long line of Knights Templar, the mystical religious-military order from France who had been involved both in the Second Crusade in Jerusalem (1147 A.D.) and in the quest for the Holy Grail -- the cup Christ Himself used during the Last Supper with His apostles before His crucifixion.

 Tragically, however, Sebastian had recently been diagnosed with terminal bone cancer, and his team of physicians estimated he would live only six to eight months longer. As a result, he felt an urgent need to finally find what he had been looking for during most of his professional life.

 Assisting him would be his top graduate student, Melody Gerrit. At age twenty-seven, Miss Gerrit was brilliant but unfortunately rather unattractive. She had been born with an oversized nose, and she tended to wear frumpy, unstylish clothing. She was also quite socially awkward. Neither various attempts with make-up, nor a new coiffure for her lanky hair helped her become more appealing to any men on campus. Hence, she seemed sadly cursed to remain single. But to Professor Templar, Melody was perfect -- the smartest and most dedicated graduate student he had ever mentored. They shared an ultimate passion for Biblical Archeology! Miss Gerrit would go anywhere and do anything to assist her instructor. Theirs was a warm and trusting 'father-daughter' kind of relationship, and they were always happy working together.

 So, what exactly did the famous lost Ark look like?

 The dimensions of the Ark were clearly outlined in the Bible: in our modern measurements, it was 52" x 31" x 31" and made with acacia wood, covered with pure gold both inside and out. The Atonement Cover or Lid was pure, solid gold. Two golden angelic Cherubims were placed on top of the cover, facing each other, their wings outstretched, with a small space called the Mercy Seat between them. (This was where Moses could place his hands whenever he needed to communicate directly with God.) Two acacia wood poles, also covered in gold and attached by four golden rings, allowed the Ark to be reverently lifted and transported. In addition to holding the sacred Ten Commandments, the Ark was said to also contain the Rod of Aaron (the special, power-endowed wooden staff of Moses' brother), as well as a sealed earthen jar holding *manna* -- the miraculous bread The Lord dropped from the skies to help feed the exiled Jews during their forty-years of wandering until they finally reached the Promised Land.

 Sebastian Templar knew that the Ark of the Covenant vanished from recorded history after the destruction of Jerusalem and its First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. Was it utterly destroyed by those ruthless conquerors?

 But another theory held that the Ark was buried in a secret tunnel or hidden cave under the foundation of the First Temple to safeguard it from the probable attack and its looting. The tabernacle inside this First Temple containing the Ark was called the *Holy of Holies*. The Ark of the Covenant was the most hallowed of all Jewish religious relics, and had to be protected.

 Yet still another possible resting place is hinted at in the Bible itself. In 2 Maccabees 2: 4-10, it states that the prophet Jeremiah was warned by God before the Babylonian invasion to hide the Ark -- with its precious stone tablets of the actual Ten Commandments -- in a certain cave on Mount Nebo. (The tomb of Moses is also said to be hidden in another cave somewhere on Mount Nebo.) Jeremiah was then ordered to seal the cave entrance and tell no one, for God would permit the Ark's glorious reappearance when the Hebrews returned from exile to their homeland.

 Lastly, the professor knew that the Ark was reported to rest in Aksum (now called Axum), Ethiopia, where it supposedly still resides inside the Chapel of the Tablet next to the old Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion. It was claimed that the Ark was secretly brought there by Menelik -- the son of Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Israel -- and a protective band of his fellow Ethiopian Orthodox Coptic Christians, after the fall of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 587 B.C.

 Sebastian realized that getting formal permission to dig under today's Temple Mount in Jerusalem -- where the Al-Aqsa Mosque is currently located, one of Islam's holiest sites -- would never be granted by the Muslim authorities. He also realized that there were several hundred caves, many never explored, in the Mount Nebo region of Israel. One could spend a century or more there excavating and still find nothing. So the professor was left with his only viable choice: he and Melody would have to venture to Ethiopia. It was to the pair's advantage that the professor could both read and speak Hebrew, Aramaic ( a South Semitic language still used by Orthodox Coptic Christians in Ethiopia), and passable Ge'ez, the more commonly used Ethiopian dialect.

 In his research regarding the Chapel of the Tablet on the grounds of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum, Professor Templar learned that the Ark itself was guarded by a single Orthodox Coptic Christian priest. **This anointed keeper never left the church compound** -- which was surrounded by a locked and gated, eight-foot high, spiked metal fence -- **for his entire life**. All necessary food and supplies were delivered weekly by being passed through the bars of the fence by another priest, and any laundry also taken care of. Inside the Chapel was a modest, compact living area, with a simple bed for sleeping, a tiny kitchen for refrigeration, cooking and dishwashing, a toilet, and a shower stall. This special priest was tasked with daily silent prayer and meditation, the reading aloud alone of various Bible passages, and the regular sanctifying of the Ark of the Covenant with holy incense. No one else was ever permitted to enter the *Holy of Holies*. When this priest was too old and near his probable death, he chose a worthy successor to replace him as the new, sole guardian of the Ark. If he died unexpectedly before naming a successor, however, a vote among his fellow priests would elect a worthy replacement.

 Sebastian shared his risky plan with Melody as to how they could break in and subdue the guardian priest and thus gain access to the Ark itself.

 "Once we arrive in Axum and settle in, we can scout out the church area on successive nights while hiding in our rental car. We will probably need to buy a portable, roll-up rope ladder to help us later scale the metal fence and escape again. We can extensively photograph both the Ark itself and its sacred contents once we get inside," Templar explained.

 "But Professor, how will we overcome the guardian priest? Surely, he will block our entry," Melody asked.

 "I have been thinking about that very dilemma... I happen to have a very good friend, Basil Egger-Smyth, who works at MI-6, the headquarters of British Intelligence. He owes me a big favor. I hope to obtain a special spray -- codenamed Cloud Nine -- which can safely render a person unconscious for an hour or so. It is housed in a small canister which resembles an asthma inhaler, so we can easily get it through Ethiopian Customs at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport. We would spray the priest in his face when he opens the door in the middle of the night to see who had unexpectedly knocked. Then we can swiftly drag his inert body inside and go about our work, escaping before he wakes up, with both him and the Ark unharmed."

 "Wow...that's amazing, Professor! And I thought you once told your students that Biblical Archeology was nothing like either a James Bond or an Indiana Jones adventure!" she smiled, her kind brown eyes twinkling with excitement.

 A week later, the two researchers arrived safely in the Ethiopian capital. Addis was located at 7700 feet above sea level, and -- being relatively close to the equator -- the average temperatures were rather consistent month-to-month: highs in the 70s and lows in the 50s F. The attractive city's population was about four million people, with most of the varied skin tones of the inhabitants looking more Sudanese and Egyptian than darker black African. For a typical African metropolis, Addis was doing much better than most of its neighbors. It was also the fourth largest city on the African continent.

 Renting an older model Toyota Land Cruiser, Sebastian and Melody drove the nineteen hours north to Axum over two days, lodging overnight half-way in Bahir Dar, where they were also able to purchase a portable rope ladder. The roads were quite dreadful and hazardous, however, so the pair was very relieved when they finally arrived!

 They checked into the Sabean International Hotel in Axum for 3425 Ethiopian Birr per room per night -- about 61 USD or 48 BPS. There they relaxed over a fine meal of *irjera* (flatbread), *tibs* (sauteed meat), *doro wat* (chicken curry, the national dish), *shiro* (chickpea stew), seasonal fruit, and robust Ethiopian coffee. And meals in this surprising country, they soon learned, were always eaten with one's fingers!

 The following morning -- a Spring-like April day -- the duo explored the fascinating ancient city of 57,000 people. First, they eagerly toured the excellent Archeological Museum. Next, they examined the many tall, historic granite pillars, or *stele*, dotting the landscape, some from 1300 years ago. Axum had once been the capital of the rich and sprawling Aksumite Kingdom (150 B.C. - 960 A.D.), and it was still the religious center of the largely Orthodox Coptic Christian nation today.

 Templar and Gerrit anxiously awaited nightfall so they could closely monitor the immediate environs of the Chapel of the Tablet. Watching from the dark interior of their car with binoculars from the hours between 0200-0400, they found that the Church was lit up with floodlights at night, but that there appeared to be no guard dogs or alarm sensors to prevent them from eventually sneaking inside. No police were seen patrolling either, over the next three nights. A side area off the main road offered the best chance for an undetected entry and exit, Sebastian decided. Their rope ladder would be uncoiled and attached to the fence there. The exit plan for the couple's later escape once their mission was accomplished would be to drive an hour north to the nearby border with Eritrea, then race another two hours to that country's capital, Asmara, before finally flying back -- with their sensational photographs of the actual Ark -- to Heathrow and home.

 Then came the day of The Night...

 At last, the dream of a lifetime, of longing and research, could finally be mine! the professor hoped with all his heart. And his assisting graduate student was equally excited yet understandably nervous, never imaging that she would ever be attempting such a bold action with her esteemed mentor, all in the name of archeological scholarship!

 In daylight, the Chapel of the Tablet was a very old square-shaped building made of dun-colored bricks. Its windows were protected by metal bar designs painted a sky-blue color. The lintels above the windows and door were painted a drab olive-green, as was the small dome on the roof with a silver Coptic cross upon it. Floodlit now at night, the Chapel appeared unchanged.

 Wearing their darkest clothing and black knit caps for camouflage, the pair began their planned operation at 0200. The coast was clear, and Axum was asleep. The only sounds came from some nearby crickets. The mild night was cloudy, luckily obscuring the moon. The team's rope ladder was fixed on the furthest side of the Chapel's fence barricade. With their torches (flashlights), cameras, and Sebastian's Cloud Nine mini-canister, the duo carefully and quietly made it over the fence, then re-arranged the rope ladder on the interior side for their eventual quick escape.

 Making their way up to the main entrance door, Sebastian and Melody paused, nodded together after their eyes met, then the professor used the brass door-knocker. He gave it three clear whacks. A lone dog barked somewhere in the distance.

 Half a minute later, a robed priest appeared after opening the creaking church door.

 "Who are you? What are you doing here? This is forbidden!" he uttered in an alarmed voice in the Ge'ez language. The man was bearded, tall, and thin, and looked to be about fifty years old, with dark, suspicious eyes and a caramel-hued complexion.

 "This will not harm you. We are friends," Templar responded calmly in Ge'ez, while simultaneously spraying the priest in the face with the special MI-6 chemical mist. The startled guardian of the Ark briefly coughed, slowly closed his dilated eyes, then collapsed.

 Melody helped Sebastian gently drag the priest inside and closed the door. In the dim interior light of the Chapel, the pair of archeologists immediately clicked on their torches.

 What they saw both astonished and delighted them!

 Going past the modest living quarters area of the guardian priest off to the side, Templar and Gerrit were confronted by a large purple velour drape, trimmed with gold thread inscribed with Coptic -lettering on its perimeter. They briefly stopped and took several photos. The smell of pungent frankincense was heavy in the air. Pushing the purple drapery carefully aside, Sebastian and Melody beheld a small tabernacle room -- *The Holy of Holies* -- featuring dark blue walls adorned with yellow painted stars. Four votive oil lamps -- hanging in each corner on ornate silver chains -- provided somber, additional light. In the center of the sacred room was a rectangular-shaped artifact of some kind, cloaked in immaculate white linen. Still more necessary photos were by the team.

 "That has to be...The Ark of the Covenant..." Sebastian announced in a reverential, murmured voice, almost choking with emotion.

 The professor and his student crept up to the covering sheet and drew it back at one corner.

 "What...what is this?" Melody let out in a gasp.

 It was not what the pair had expected, after taking another photo. No golden overlay, no dual angels on top of the lid, no golden rings and poles to transport it. Instead, it was an extremely old wooden box or chest, similar to a replica model box found in every Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox church today, called a *tabot*. And if the wood was once true acacia wood as mentioned in the Bible, it had since turned black and had almost petrified itself over the past nearly three millennia. It reminded Sebastian of reading about the purported fragments of Noah's Ark, which had been picked up by shepherds on the slopes of Mt. Ararat in eastern Turkey after an earthquake there in the early 1900s -- the wood black and hard as stone, yet carbon-dated to the supposed time of the Great Flood.

 Shaking off their dual disappointments, the professor asked Melody for her help in carefully lifting the sturdy wooden lid. It made a slight hissing noise when the seal was breeched. Using their torches, the pair peered inside.

 There rested two inscribed stone tablets, a wooden staff, and a covered grey clay jar. The odd smell inside the chest seemed very, very old, like opening a mummy's tomb.

 "The actual Ten Commandments, at last, by God!" gushed Sebastian Templar. "And Aaron's Rod, and the jar of holy *manna* too, it appears!" he announced. Click went Melody's camera, several overjoyed times. The pair happily grinned at each other.

 Touching in awe one of the cool stone tablets with his index finger, Sebastian rapidly translated the first carved line from right to left, seeing as it was written in ancient Hebrew lettering.

 But when he double-checked and read it aloud to Melody, both of them were equally surprised and confused.

 It was not the usual Ten Commandments as they had expected. Instead, they were gaping at Ten *other, new* Commandments!

 Melody took several more photos of the scene while Sebastian translated all ten Hebrew inscriptions. Here they are, exactly as read aloud by the professor and recorded by Melody using her iPhone 'voice memos' app:

 **SERVE OTHERS WITH LOVE AND COMPASSION**

 **ALL WARS ARE FORBIDDEN**

 **DO NOT HARM THIS PLANET, YOUR HOME**

 **PRAY DAILY AND BE THANKFUL**

 **DO NOT PREJUDGE OR CONDEMN OTHERS**

 **RESPECT ALL LIVING THINGS**

 **KNOW THAT ALL CREATION IS HOLY**

 **DEATH IS NOT AN END, BUT A NEW BEGINNING**

 **I ALWAYS HAVE AND ALWAYS WILL BE WITH YOU**

 **ONE DAY, A MESSIAH WILL COME UNTO YOU**

 But this experience was so intense, and so uniquely remarkable, that the pair of archeologists completely lost track of the time. It was now just past an hour since they had first entered the mystical Chapel of the Tablet.

 Suddenly, Sebastian was attacked from behind while bending over the rim of the Ark.

 His last sensation was of a cold steel blade entering the base of his skull where it met his neck -- much as a spent bull would feel when a skilled matador finishes him off with the *suerte de matar* in a Spanish or Mexican bullfighting ring. Templar's formidable brain was fatally punctured, and his spinal cord was severed, killing the professor instantly.

 It was the guardian priest -- newly recovered from his chemically-induced unconsciousness -- that a horrified Melody turned and recognized as the murderer.

 "I see now that you are both evil English intruders, so I will speak to you in your language. I regret the necessary action you just witnessed, but your accomplice fully knew the risks of entering this holy place, for it is forbidden to all of humanity save one -- myself. It has always been and will always continue to be so," the Coptic prelate explained.

 "But by killing this harmless man, haven't you in fact violated the fifth and sixth Commandments that are written on these exact sacred tablets here?" Melody asked, pointing towards the Ark, in defiant anger and incredulity.

 "That is not how my act shall be judged, for truly God will forgive and understand," he replied, by way of justification. "Such has been revealed to me over my lifetime here in the *Holy of Holies*. Such an action is very difficult to explain to the unfaithful."

 "What will happen to me, then?" Melody demanded.

 "I assume that you did not actually touch inside the Ark and hence profane it, so I will decide in a few moments whether to confiscate your camera and phone recordings and permit you to leave alive, or whether your guilty assisting actions aiding your colleague also warrants your own death."

 Miss Gerrit was terrified, considering the latter possibility. Still, the archeologist in her wanted to know more.

 "What is here inside this Chapel appears neither to be the original Ark of the Covenant, nor the repository of the original Ten Commandments. So...where exactly are they?"

 "The whereabouts of the actual golden Ark has never been found. But the twin carved tablets here are absolutely genuine -- indeed, they were written by the hand of Almighty God Himself! These were the *first* Ten Commandments. They were ***not*** destroyed by Moses when he descended from the holy summit of Mt. Sinai, as was mistakenly misinterpreted in the Bible during its many translations down through the ages. Moses was said to be furious that the Chosen People had reverted to pagan idolatry by worshipping a golden calf in his absence -- hence, he destroyed the Commandment tablets. God, upset with Moses losing his temper, ordered him back up the mountain for another duplicate set.

 But, in truth, there are actually *Twenty* Commandments, obtained by Moses during *two* trips up to Mt. Sinai. We Orthodox Coptic Christians have the first set of Ten, safely brought to Ethiopia by King Solomon's and Makeda's son, Menelik, shortly after 587 B.C. That is the original wooden chest we have here today, with Aaron's authentic Rod and the actual jar of holy *manna.* These sacred artifacts I have devoted my entire life to protecting! The other set of Ten, however, were indeed housed in the gold-inlaid Ark of the Covenant as accurately described in the Bible. But neither that nor those other Ten Commandments have ever been found -- though someday, I believe they will, if God permits."

 Melody was stunned at these revelations. The world must be told this whole incredible story! she was fervently convinced. Would she ever get the chance?

 But in her exuberance, she was reduced to simply staring at the knife in the guardian priest's left hand -- still dripping wet with Professor Templar's blood. The tall, thin, bearded priest seemed to now be deciding his final action.

 Thus, Melody Gerrit, Oxford University graduate student in Archeology, at the tender age of twenty-seven, could do little else but freeze. The entire experience, and her current life or death predicament, seemed like something out of an eerie, unreal dream.

 There was nothing really left to do then but close her eyes, say a brief silent prayer, and await her fate...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 December 28, 2023