

## BUILD A DESOLATION

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*Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2093*

The emperor's men sat at their screens in silence, pouring through the past, running test after test, checking one timeline after another. The emperor himself had taken lately to joining them in the basement of the *ghebbi*, watching the whirling sine-waves that passed for the output of each test. "There," he hissed, pointing at one of the displays hovering over their heads. "That one?"

A quick glance, a shake of the head. "No, *janhoy*. See there?" A finger pointing further down the sine-wave. "He still dies. Two days later, maybe three. Same as the others."

The emperor shook his head, shoulders slumped.

A tall, lean man just behind him bent down and whispered, "Your Majesty, it's time."

"Time?"

"The council meeting. The khalif's armies have crossed the Wadi Bisha. The counter-attack has begun."

The emperor nodded, not moving. "Tell them I will be there shortly."

The aide vanished without a word. The emperor stayed, opening a screen of his own. *The council can wait*, he thought. A red beam scanned his eye and knew him at once. Would know his sons, his daughter. Would know every one of his family without needing a name or wrist-port. His grandmother's cousin had buried it so deeply in the corporate code it had survived three mergers and the return from exile without anyone outside of the family finding it. A few more taps in the air, and he had access to all of the timelines his team had scanned that morning, all of them split in two: one screen sending input to the early months of 1974, the other receiving output from September, October, November that year.

Jam the comm cables at Kagnew Station? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

Kill the power at the Fourth Army Division's base? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

Ground the planes at Bishoftu Air Force Base? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

A rainbow of screens shimmered open, floating in the air in front of him, before he waved them all away with a curse. *We need another way back.*

*Aksum, Ethiopia*

Walatta-Negus pulled off her cap, wiped sweat from her forehead, rubbed her right eye. She had fought this for years, and lost. *They'll see I'm right, she'd thought, but it will be too late.* She begged the university to turn down the emperor's money, swore she could do it better on her own. *You want this Shoan emperor digging up our legacy? Putting it on display in his capital? Find someone else to do the digging.*

She had offered to find other funding, apply for grants overseas, do anything she could to keep her department in charge of the excavations. It didn't matter. Three of the tallest stelae in the world, and the emperor wanted to dig underneath.

*The first one already collapsed, she had complained. The second one we had to put back together ourselves when the Italians gave it back. The third one's been leaning for a century. You want to go digging around down there, something's going to come down.*

The chancellor of the university herself had come down to look at the dig site, twist her arm.

"Please, Chancellor Miriam," she had said. "Give me more time. The Voltai scan will give us a nearly perfect image of everything under King Ezana's stela. There is no need to dig."

"We don't want an image, professor. We want the real thing," the chancellor said, pointing at the hill underneath the stela. The stone slab soared nearly seventy feet in the air, towering over a field of smaller stone columns in all directions. "The emperor wants to build a guest-house and a museum complex at the base of the stela. Revenue from ticket sales in a fifty-fifty split with the university. Think of all of the projects we could fund with that money."

"If we go digging under that tower, we might bring the whole field down. All of these stelae, the big ones and the small ones, done."

“You know the story of King Ezana, Professor?” The chancellor had a strange smirk on her face.

*Better than you*, Walatta thought to herself. “What?”

“He put Ethiopia on the world stage, Walatta. He conquered Nubia. He sent our armies into Arabia.”

“I know the history,” she whispered, looking at the stelae fields.

“We are only now returning to where his armies stood. We are on the verge of becoming a world power once again, Professor.” She was reciting the line almost from memory, the Moa party platform, not quite word for word. “For the first time in 1500 years. You can be a part of that story.”

Walatta turned and stared at the tree line in the distance, remembered the last time someone had told her something like that. Fifteen years now since the Tigrayan wing of the royal family took to the bush, twelve years since Ras Sahle’s armies stormed Tigray, ten since his nano-bugs had eaten the last Tigrayan royalty alive from the inside out. His brother had gone with them, fought at Adigrat, somehow survived the massacre in the retreat from Ambeset. “We could use a leader like you,” he had told her. “Tigray will rule the empire again. You can be a part of that story.” She had chuckled at him, blushed and looked away. Never saw him alive again.

Shaking herself back to the present, Walatta turned to the chancellor. “The scans show us the foundation underneath, but don’t tell us how strong it is. You want me to do a lateral dig through the dirt supporting the foundation? If we weaken it, if something goes wrong, it will be failure bigger than we can imagine.”

“We are spending the emperor’s money. We have the emperor’s architect. We can build whatever support we need.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” Walatta protested, both arms up in the air.

“You’re a digger,” the chancellor hissed. “Dig!”

### *Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

The emperor scanned the summary again, fidgeting a bit with his feet, tired of the wait.

*Anti-trust action against EverCorps imposes restructuring of company into multiple independent firms, invalidating the licensing agreement signed with negusawi dirijit in 2089. Original share-options retained by Ethiopian royal family. Full ownership of time technology transferred to dirijit in exchange for royal family relinquishing all further claims on surviving EverCorps subsidiaries. Research staff from Tekla Giyorgis's corporate offices moved to Addis Ababa, merged with dirijit nanite staff.*

He had argued for this move against half his family. He'd been right.

"Janhoy, it's ready." His aide's voice popped him back to the present.

"Show me," the emperor ordered, speaking to a young woman in *dirijit* uniform, sitting in front of the server. Above the control console, shimmering gleams floated in the air, jumping a bit before turning into a grid, then jumping again when more gleams tightened and superimposed a map of the Ethiopian coastline over the numbers and lines on the grid.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Here." Aida's fingers danced over a series of virtual touch-screens above the main console.

"How does it work?"

She looked at the map for a moment, rolling a virtual knob under her palm, and paused before answering.

"The principle is the same as Tekla's original server," she said, pointing at the machine. "Opening the link to the past follows his techniques almost step for step. Treats it as ones and zeros. Look here: in and out, forward, back. But there is one crucial change."

She fidgeted with the controls as she spoke, the grid changing size and scale, the coastline zooming in and back out.

"Hapte-Mariam called it a 3D time printer," the emperor said, pointing at the team leader on the other side of the server room, making it almost a question.

Aida smirked. When she shook her head, the emperor did not see.

"Tekla was concerned about proof," she continued. "His work was purely digital. Connect to a computer in the past, leave a trace that survives to the present. It was proof we'd connected to the past. But we don't have to stop there. If we can toggle an electron in a circuit, we can toggle almost anything, almost anywhere."

"We can build. In the past."

Aida nodded. "One atom at a time."

"Show me," he said, pointing at the screen.

Aida zoomed in on the beach, the grid breaking and reforming three times, four, five, until the coastline vanished and the floating lights erased the map and drew ripples in the sand. And she zoomed in again, the gleams shuddering open, drawing grains of sand.

"Where are we?"

"The beaches near Zula, *janhoy*. Timeline at the top. We build a model here," she said, pointing to a picture of something that looked like a boulder, pivoting on one axis, then another, in a constant spin. "Then when the build is done, drag and drop. There."

Aida waved her arm from one screen to another. The boulder quivered, got smaller, vanished from the screen.

"What was it? What happened?"

"A grain of sand on a beach, *janhoy*." Aida smiled at him. "Two thousand years ago."

### *Aksum*

Walatta took another look over the stela field, trying to keep track of all the moving parts. A large dump mound crowded some of the smaller stelae at the edge of the field, one of the stones nearly buried. She had let the contractor put construction equipment near the Mai Shum, a pile of steel beams blocking her view of the lake itself. A gaping mouth cut under Ezana's Stela, a hole where ground should be, the first wave of steel beams holding up dirt walls around a ramp heading underground.

*Two more days*, she thought. *Two more days*.

From behind her and down the hill, she could hear a high-pitched voice bouncing up the path. Turning, she let out a quiet curse. A little blonde man, a yellow scarf flowing along behind him, walked up to her, smiling, panting for breath.

"Doctor Negus, I presume?" he grinned, putting out a hand.

"Walatta-Negus, yes. Professor." She ignored his hand, eyeing the camera crew coming up the hill behind him. "You must be the movie man," she said, crossing her arms.

“That does sound nice, doesn’t it? Movie man.” He smiled at her, shaking his hand a bit and pulling it back. “Arbury Poincelot, *Little Green Men*.”

“Sorry?”

“The show. That’s the name of my show. They did tell you, didn’t they?”

A cloud of his cameras came up to them, hovering all around, each one of the crew piloting a pair at once. One got six inches from Walatta’s face, pre-programmed to pull back and weave a bit when she swatted at it.

“They said you were investigating Africa’s greatest monuments,” she said to him, one eye still on the hover-cam, poised to come back at her.

“Why yes, ma’am, I am,” his voice growing mock-mysterious. “For signs of alien activity.”

This time, her curse was more clear.

### *Addis Ababa*

Back in the *ghebbi* basement, the emperor and Aida stood side by side, each with an open holo-screen above them. One showed the blank build space and the software for the printing platform. The other showed the stelae fields of Aksum in real time, the buzz of a tourist crowd watching the archaeological dig in progress on one part of the site. Kebede, another member of the *dirijit* team, sat in front of them, watching a build in progress on his own screen, scanning time-line displays, looking for changes as the build went further.

“The *dirijit* has invested quite a bit into their work,” the emperor told Aida, pointing at the live feed. “If she’s right about what they’ll find.” Aida looked at him, waiting for the rest of the sentence.

“Kebede,” he continued, forgetting about her. “Scroll it back a bit. I want to see what she’s going to find, maybe leave something in the tomb, some sort of sign.”

“Sign, Your Majesty?” He looked up from his screen

“Proof that it was him, that it was Ezana’s tomb.”

“But, I don’t understand.” Kebede looked to Aida, who had backed away from her screen

“An inscription, a commemoration. In Ge’ez.” The emperor was smiling, a glow in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I. I. I don’t read Ge’ez.” Kebede looked back at his screen, trying to break the emperor’s gaze.

“I know someone. The software. It can do it? Print text?”

“Yes, but.” The emperor stared down at him, motionless, eyes unblinking. “Yes. I. We. We’ll just need the right font.”

“Fine. I’ll get you files by tonight.”

Finally, Aida broke her silence. “Your Majesty, are you sure—”

Waving at the squiggling curves mapping each timeline, the emperor cut her off. “Have we noticed any variance? On any of them?”

“*Janhoy*, these are all small builds. With something larger, we can’t guarantee the same results.”

### *Aksum*

The Minister of Culture loomed a full head higher than Walatta, her hair a gleaming black imitation Empress Menen afro. *Another stubborn Gondari*, Walatta thought to herself. *Probably doesn’t speak a word of Tigrinya. Or will act like she can’t.* She had come with two blank-faced men whose names were whispered nothings, carrying the floating holo-stands common for paperwork in every government office in the country. *Dirijit* issue, she thought.

The minister paused to pat her afro before putting out a hand and introducing herself. “Lulit Azabi.”

Walatta fussed with the fingers of her left hand, clenched behind her back. Time wasted on pleasantries.

“I’ve missed it,” Lulit said, waving at the hills and the trees in the distance.

“I’m sorry?” Walatta asked.

“My cousins are Tigrayan,” the minister smiled, switching to Tigrinya. “I used to spend summers here, even during the war.”

It should have been a ten-minute drive from campus to the dig-site, a straight shot past the market, but traffic got thick just before Arabtu Ensessa,

and they got out to walk. Resting their hands on the cars stalled nearby, they soon found the street full of people, backs turned to them, looking north towards the cathedral.

And then, they heard yelling, just around the corner, and somehow the crowd surged and Walatta and the minister found themselves pushed forward in the tide.

More shouting, back and forth, and then clearly – *faranj!* – a foreigner at the center of the mob. Walatta waved at the minister and pushed her way through the crowd, closer and closer, past the bodies packed with sweat, just to the back gate of the compound around Saint Mary of Zion. There, jammed against the stone and metal fence was the movie man, Poincelot, his forehead bloody, his arms flailing in a failing attempt to fight off the crowd. On his left, one of the camera crew struggled to stay on his feet and keep his hover-cam pointed at Poincelot.

*Little Green Men* was streaming live.

And suddenly, Poincelot disappeared, pulled to the floor under a mess of fists and kicks. Barely two seconds later, a rifle shot rang out, then another. Three men in uniform – *the local militia?* Walatta wondered – stood by the fence, one’s rifle in the air, the other two pointed at the crowd. She had to lean into the crowd to keep her balance as they turned, one by one, to push past her in the other direction.

The minister herself followed close behind, her escort quietly transformed from faceless bureaucrats into muscle-built bulldozers.

Later, when the crowd had been cleared, Walatta grabbed Poincelot’s collar, shaking him. “What were you thinking, trying to get into Saint Mary’s? You know what they keep in there. They would have killed you.”

Poincelot said nothing to Walatta, grinning with wide, staring eyes.

“The men who stopped me,” he turned to the camera floating by the fence. “They were in civilian clothing, but there can be no doubt who they are.”

Walatta looked at the minister, then back at Poincelot, puzzled.

“The Order of Abba Pakhom, the oldest chivalric order in the world,” Poincelot raved, wiping sweat from the back of his neck, still streaming live. “The men sworn to protect the Ark of the Covenant. They knew I was getting too close to the truth, and today they tried to stop me.”

The minister turned to her paper-pushers. “Get him back to his hotel. Now.”

### *Addis Ababa*

The nanite projectors fizzled a bit as each connection came online, a strange moment of static while the machines looked for a light source and decided which particles to put where, faking the face and body of each board member at the other end of the call. The *dirijit*'s board was scattered all over the world. Cairo came online first, a grim-faced Copt who took a quick moment to figure out where he was supposed to look before bowing to the emperor. Lagos next, an old woman who had been interim CEO in the first years after the restoration. When all of them had logged in, the Small Council hall in the *ghebbi* was full, a warm buzz of old friends and rivals seeing each other again after a long silence.

The emperor sat in silence at the front of the room. Several division heads came and went to give reports on their areas. Profits up on wrist-scans: data-miners continued to find new ways to track travel patterns in new populations. Profits up on the nanite reality gear: it had been *dirijit* standard since the beginning, but the models kept getting better. Profits up everywhere, except for the EverCorps acquisition.

“Its energy use for last year rivaled all other divisions combined.” The board member calling from Mumbai pointed at something no one else in the room could see. “But where’s the product? EverCorps sold – what? – time secrets to competing companies? All of the contracts are gone, canceled, and we’re not told why. The servers are in the *ghebbi* basement, and we don’t know what you’re doing with them.”

The emperor shifted in his seat, said nothing.

“Your Majesty?” Mumbai waited for an answer.

“Next year, Makonnen,” the emperor whispered. “Next year. Don’t worry. Our margins are fine.” He looked down at his fingers, scratched his palm.

“They are, Your Majesty, but there is a separate problem, the question of the relationship between your profits and the budget of the royal family. The prime minister continues to push for legislation severing the Crown fisc from the *dirijit*.”

“How does it matter what I do with the money?” the emperor asked, waving a hand in front of him. “It’s my company.”

“It is not, in fact, your company, Your Majesty.” The Nigerian woman’s voice was crisp and clear, even as the nanites struggled to keep up with her image’s quick movements. “You are merely the largest shareholder, a position you inherited on your coronation. In that capacity, you are simply a private citizen, subject to the laws of your homeland.”

“I fought a war for this. I put down a rebel prince to save my cousin’s crown. And this is what I get for it? Feisty bureaucrats?”

The Copt had been sitting quietly through the meeting, but broke the silence now. “It might be wise, Your Majesty, to focus on other matters, at least for the time being. The wars have not yet ended.”

### *Aksum*

The chancellor had told Walatta that she had to allow the camera crew’s presence on site. *Great publicity for the university*, she had said. Hadn’t told her she had scheduled Walatta for an interview the next morning.

“There are hundreds of the smaller stelae, only three of the big ones.” Walatta explained to Poincelot, an ugly bandage on his head, his cameras hovering all around. “The stela of Aksum, which the Italians stole, 24 meters. The Great Stela, which fell in antiquity, 33 meters.” She rattled off the numbers without pausing to think. “And this,” she pointed at the dig site and the tower behind it, “King Ezana’s stela, 21 meters, the last one constructed, in the fourth century AD.”

“The big one,” he pointed towards the fallen tower. “What went wrong?”

Walatta’s lips pursed, her chin tightened. “It was the largest monolith ever erected, anywhere in the world. That is not a failure.”

Poincelot only smiled in reply, a brief pause before changing topics. “Why do they call it Ezana’s stela?” he asked, moving himself to give his hover-cams a better angle.

“The stelae were burial markers, the small ones for nobility, the greater ones for kings. Our traditions tell us that King Ezana built this stela, the last one in the series. When he converted to Christianity, they did not build any more.” Walatta sounded almost sad.

“And you believe it?”

“Believe what?” Walatta asked.

“That Ezana built it.” A mischievous grin snuck into his voice. “There’s no actual evidence, is there?”

“Better than little green men.”

“Is my truth worse than yours?” Poincelot smiled at her.

Later that week, the lateral tunnel they had sloped into the hillside ran into the hard packed earth of an original ramp, dating from the construction of the site itself. They had followed the ramp into the hillside and finally hit the wall they’d been waiting for. The dig had gone more slowly than the chancellor had hoped. Walatta had insisted on stopping for even the smallest remains, taking nanite casts of every bit of organics in situ, calling in the experts for soil samples and micromorphology. She knew she was stalling, afraid to be wrong.

“When it fell, the Great Stela broke through an underground tomb buried in the downhill slope in front of it,” she told the chancellor, long before the smell of the emperor’s money had blown through Aksum. “The Nefas Mawcha.”

*The source of the winds.*

“Chittick cleared the tomb over a hundred years ago. He dug other trenches, showed there were tombs all over these fields. But the money dried up, he died, the dig stopped.”

“You think there’s another one down there, under Ezana’s stela?” The chancellor’s desk had been covered in faded print copies of old archaeological reports, unread.

“There must be,” Walatta had nodded. “No need for a stela without a tomb underneath.”

And now, here she was, face to face with a solid stone wall, a tomb on the other side. She could hear Poincelot’s hover-cams buzzing at the top of the tunnel behind her, waiting.

*What would they call it?* she found herself thinking. *Ye genzeb minch.*  
The source of our money.

Tenagne, one of her grad students, had mounted the nano-drill on a tripod pointed at the mortar joining two of the largest stones. Walatta nodded at her, swallowed, closed her eyes, felt her lips grip tight. When her brother

had fought at Ambeset, he had stayed hidden after the town fell. Recorded a sense-wave of what he heard from his hideout in an empty water tank. Scattered shots. Bodies hitting the floor. A woman screaming, for over half an hour, the sound of dull thuds. All of it came rolling over Walatta as she stood there, listening to the nano-drill punch a hole in a dead king's tomb.

It took them the better part of a day to cut through the wall and document each stone. Through the cut, a space just big enough to enter the darkness inside. Empty. No body. No grave goods. Nothing. Just a smaller stela, embedded in the far wall.

Walatta-Negus sucked air through her teeth, coughed it back out. "Look, here, under the dirt." She started brushing the stela, soft bristles working the crust embedded in the cracks. But they weren't cracks: they were clear lines and curves, cleaner now, taking shape. "An inscription," she said. "Ge'ez. Go get Wolde-Giyorgis."

When the old man arrived, he was out of breath, wiping sweat from his face. "I hope you are right," he said to Walatta. "We have not found a new one in many years."

"Please," she said, beckoning him into the tunnel her team had dug under the stela. Seeing Poincelot come back up the path, she ducked inside.

"It is quite clear, yes. There can be no doubt. Here: *Ezana walde Elle Amida*," he read, pointing to one line on the wall. "Ezana, son of Ella Amida. This is it," he said, all of them smiling.

### *Addis Ababa*

Later, when the emperor ordered his team out of the *ghebbi* basement, no one had moved. Aida had stepped back from her console, turning to Hapte-Mariam. "Don't look at him," the emperor had laughed. "It's my palace!" In the end, after the rest had been sent home, he kept Hapte-Mariam and Aida late into the night. "I want to try it myself," he had said, popping open a set of his own files on a screen floating in front of his hands. "This thing can read synapse files?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. They'll port right through. But what is the design? And when do you want to print it?"

“Here,” he answered, three hi-res images of stone stelae popping into focus in the air over the console. “The time-stamp and coordinates are embedded in the files.” And the two others stared at the images in silence.

Hapte-Mariam spoke first, unsure what to say. “They. They aren’t. They aren’t there already? In the past?”

The emperor’s eyes gleamed with smile. “No one ever thought to look, did they?”

The build took hours and strained the palace power grid. “Tell the *dirijit* this is my last build.” The emperor stayed motionless, watching the progress.

Hapte-Mariam had taken the controls, fixing the emperor’s models, tinkering around the edges. Aida stood without moving, lost in thought. Her first words brought them to a stop. “The model’s not the problem. The model’s fine. It’s the ground you’re printing it on. The geology of that hill. It’s not going to work. Ground’s too weak. Especially with the tombs underneath.”

“I thought of that, Aida,” the emperor nodded. “Remember, we already know that it works. We’ve already seen the proof.”

Aida looked puzzled, said nothing. When they started the print, she took the center chair, running the console’s roller ball back and forth around the coordinates the emperor had given them, in and out, up and down, old and new.

“Start the live feed,” he ordered. She obeyed, then stood up to give him the chair.

“Dirt,” she whispered. “We’re going to need more dirt.”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.”

“It’s not compact enough. It’s uneven. It’ll lilt.”

“Hang on. It’s almost done. Look, we’re near the top.”

The live feed was so vivid that they could almost catch the shimmers of sun off the grass on the Aksum hills, imagine the smell of cattle and wood fires in the distance. And then, suddenly, where only the short stelae had stood a moment before, three tall ones, towering over the hillside. The greatest of the three held their gaze, held their breath, held itself still for just long enough to fool them all. Then the soil underneath – soft, moist in the highland spring – gave way suddenly, and the whole tower lurched, leaned, and fell to the earth,

thirty-three meters of solid rock broken into half a dozen pieces, puncturing the entrance to the Nefas Mawcha. Seventeen hundred years ago.

For a long moment, no one said a word.

“We could always do it over again,” Aida offered. “Go back a few seconds earlier, build a better base.”

“No,” the emperor whispered, gently stroking the roller ball with his finger-tips. “Leave it. It is now as it was always meant to be.”

### *Aksum*

Walatta had the team gathered in the trailer that passed for a dig-house, more convenient than the drive back to campus. The emperor’s minister of culture, two of Walatta’s graduate students, Professor Wolde-Giyorgis, and Mesfin, the field director, cramped around a cheap fold-out table.

“We need to talk about the next steps for conservation,” Walatta opened.

Tenagne answered first. “We set up sensors in the tunnel and the tomb chamber. If there is any structural danger, we’ll know right away.”

“What about climate control?”

“No good answer there,” Tenagne said, shaking her head. “We could put a nanite seal over the hole in the wall, but if they really want to bring tourists down here,” waving her hand at the minister, “the seal won’t matter much.”

“Hard to see people paying to go down there,” Mesfin added, looking more directly at the minister. “Just the inscription. Not exactly King Tut’s tomb.”

“It’s worse than you think.” Wolde-Giyorgis sat with his hands folded, looking down at his lap. They had barely heard him speak.

The minister of culture turned her head to look at him. “How so, professor?”

“We have a problem. With the inscription.” He did not move, did not look up, kept staring at the same spot on his pant leg.

“A problem?” Walatta asked. “What problem?”

“The incisions. They’re too clean.”

“That’s because we cleaned them.” It might have been Walatta’s first smile that week.

“That’s not what I mean,” Wolde-Giyorgis answered, finally looking up, putting his hands open in the air in front of him. “Not the inscription. The letters themselves. They’re perfect. No chisel marks, no cracks, no slips. The dimensions of the letters: they’re identical, every single one. The same height. Run a laser trace on the *re*’s, the *sat*, the *kaf*, and they’re all the same. You could put one letter on top of another and not see the difference.”

“That’s impossible,” Tenagne cut in. “No stone worker could carve that well.”

“Not in antiquity, no.” The professor opened his holo and sent an image of the inscription floating into the air. A second image of close zooms on two or three sample letters. Then a third image, of his own computer screen.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I kept staring at the letters,” he said, pointing at the images floating in the air. “I knew something was wrong, but I couldn’t see it. Not until I typed them out myself, on my own screen. I did a first edition of the text.”

Everyone stared at his holo as he superimposed the inscription on the stela with the text on his computer screen.

“My letters on the screen. They matched the text perfectly. Your inscription. It’s in a modern font.”

Walatta could not remember the rest of the meeting. Blood rushed to her head. She struggled to speak through waves of sound in her ears, a pounding in her eyes. She saw the minister get up to leave, didn’t hear if she said anything on her way out. Saw Tenagne point at an open window, one of the TV crew’s hover-cams floating a foot above the trailer. Heard Mesfin yell and run for the door. Felt the plastic chair thud when she sat down, stunned.

Clarity came back maybe twenty minutes later, in the crisp, sharp sun.

Poincelot had mounted the scaffolds supporting the tunnel and stood over the entrance to the tomb, his arms spread out, Ezana’s stela looming behind his live stream. Walatta called for security, Tenagne and Mesfin running for the guards.

“Get down,” she called to Poincelot.

He nearly bounced as he spoke to the hover-cams, giddy with excitement. “Ladies and gentlemen, we finally have proof. The largest

freestanding rock monument in the world, a product of alien technology.” Nano-projected images of the fallen stela superimposed upon his face, faded out, made way for images of the two still standing “How do we know? The inscription commemorating the creator of this tower, Ethiopia’s greatest king” and here, his voice rose to a near frenzy, “cut in letters so perfect nothing in antiquity could have done it.”

A close zoom on the letters of Ezana’s inscription.

“Was it a space laser? Was it something even now we cannot understand? The same machines that cut the building blocks of the Egyptian pyramids?” And a quick cut back to his glowing blonde head. “Let’s find out!”

As Walatta waved her hand, a soldier in green combat fatigues jogged over, his right hand gripped on a rifle. “Keep him out of the site,” she said to the soldier before turning to one of the workers. “Go back to the dig-house. Get the preservation tape and the seal. I’m shutting the dig.”

Walatta turned back to Poincelot, but saw the minister watching all of this in silence, reaching for her phone. The TV crew kept filming live while more soldiers came to drag them off the site.

“Professor Walatta-Negus,” she said softly, walking forward after a brief call. “We must go at once to the airport.”

Walatta squinted at her, rubbing the back of her neck. “Your men can take you. I have to finish closing the site.”

“I must ask you to come with me. The emperor has sent for you.”

### *Addis Ababa*

The *agafari* called her name as she entered the throne room, announcing her to the court. He had served the family since before the restoration. He was pale and weak now, but his voice still filled the hall. “Professor Walatta-Negus Mengesha, University of Aksum.”

She walked slowly through the hall, struggling with something she could not quite see. The emperor’s nanites made a cloudy haze between her and the throne, one moment thick as a fog, the next veering off to the right or left to make a shape in the shadows.

Halfway down the hall, the haze cleared and the emperor came into focus, sitting on his forefathers’ throne. His nanite haze split in two, each half forming the image of a lion pacing down the hall beside her, one on the left,

one on the right. Walatta started to sweat, wondering why the throne room was so hot. When she got to the edge of the carpet, she lost sight of the lions, wondering vaguely if they had turned back to sneak up behind her. She thought about looking up, but stood motionless, staring at a strange stain on the carpet. *Nanites couldn't scrub that out?* she wondered.

The man on the throne let out a half-cough, a hard push through his mouth and nose.

"His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Sahle Selassie the First," the voice of the *agafari* called from – behind her? – all around her.

Walatta looked up at the emperor, saw him flick his fingers at the floor.

"You know who I am," she said, shaking her head. "You know my family."

"Ras Seyoum fought for us against the Italian invasion. He died for us." He smiled and spoke as if remembering an old friend who had just left the room, not something a century and a half in the past.

"Then you know why I cannot kneel."

"You will, in time." This was barely a whisper.

Aida looked at him more closely, thinking about the rumors, wondering about his age.

"Why am I here? They told me you wanted to talk about the tomb."

Sahle nodded slowly, as if lost in thought. "You cannot publish your findings. I will not allow it."

"Your Majesty, with respect," Walatta smirked, "there is no way to stop me."

"What if I showed you how I did it?"

She blinked at him, thought she saw someone moving in the shadows on the side of the room, turned to look. Saw nothing.

Several hours later, they sat on a balcony overlooking the palace gardens, sipping coffee the emperor had roasted for her himself. Images from the screens in the basement flashed through Walatta's mind: the fortress at Gondar, the monasteries at Lake Tana, the churches at Lalibela, all of them through a server showing her centuries in the past. She thought of the story of Beta Giorgis, of the miracle stories of the king, claiming he built the church in

one night with the help of angels. For a moment, she wondered whether it was true.

“You stole one of our greatest treasures from us,” putting down her coffee.

“Stole?” He smiled, calm. “I built it myself, one inch at a time.”

“But this is our country’s legacy.”

The emperor nodded, pausing for a moment before he answered.

“Does it mean less, to see it built today? It means more. We can reach now higher than ever.”

The way out of the balcony passed back through the throne room, and the long walk down the carpet. As the doors closed behind her, the lions shimmered and vanished into a mist, the mist itself swirling back into vents hidden in the floorboards in the throne room’s darkened corners. The *agafari* stepped out of a similar mist, where he had vanished at the start of the meeting, and took his place by the side of the throne.

“*Janhoy*, the others on her team know what happened.” The slight lilt in his voice made it almost a question.

“Leave them be. One more time on the machine, the proof disappears.”

“Your Majesty, the *dirijit* board was clear. We can’t finance another project like that.”

“No need. Just dirt,” he smiled. “Just a little more dirt.”

### *Aksum*

The preservation tape over the tomb entrance had been stripped away, the hologram seal in fragments on the floor. The air inside was cool, a strange breeze coming as if from all sides at once. Their eyes seemed to take too long to adjust to the darkness inside, a thin haze coming in and out of focus ahead of them.

They saw Poincelot’s feet first, facing the entrance, then the rest of him, face down in a pool of blood, a mop of blonde hair nearly stuck to the floor in sticky fragments of bone and skin.

“How’d he get in here?” Walatta snapped. “We had guards posted on the tunnel.”

Tenagne came up behind her, out of breath. “Maybe not,” she said, waving a nano-projector small enough to fit in her palm. “I found this on the floor outside, pointing at the gate. No guard. Just a projection.”

Walatta took the projector, flipped it over, found a small cultural ministry monogram on the bottom, slid it into her pocket.

Later, when the police had left and the body had been taken away, Walatta went back down. She needed to replace the tape, she had told her team. Restore the seal over the site. They knew it didn’t matter. Once the seal had been broken, nothing inside could ever be authenticated. But they had said nothing, the hush of the man’s murder over the whole hill. In the night’s cool air, she opened her glow light and let it hover just over her shoulder, casting her shadow on the wall of the tomb.

Ezana’s inscription stared back at her, dirty and worn, taunting her. *Ba-hayla egzi’a kwellu...* Walatta blinked, tugging on her nose. She reached up to adjust her glow globe, get better light on the text. She felt her fingers start to float, reaching up to the wall. Some sort of moss had started to grow in the under-strokes of the larger letters. She scratched at it with her finger nail, felt part of the stone start to crumble under the pressure.

*Wa-i-yefalles em-Takkazi yebe...*

She hissed, pulling back her hand. Then floated it forward again, running her fingertips softly over the letters, rough and uneven to her touch. The first *bet* and the second, barely alike, a full centimeter apart in size, chiseled down-strokes in one, up-strokes in the other, nothing like her memories from the week before. The whole inscription nearly completely covered in dirt. And completely different in size and shape from the one she had found last week, proof of the emperor’s print job now gone forever.

*These are our kings?* she whispered. Thought of Lalibela’s angels. Wanted so much for them to be real. *For this my fathers fought and died?*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giovanni Ruffini is a professor of Classical Studies in the department of history at Fairfield University. He publishes on Byzantine Egypt and Christian Nubia, and has a lifelong interest in Ethiopia, which is the subject of this story.