

Oasis by Katya de Becerra Excerpt

There's a certain art to the processing of finds. When I was a kid, Dad would set me up with a plastic basin and give me little trinkets to wash. I would sink each object—unassuming pebbles, arrowheads, ceramic fragments—under water and brush off the dirt with gentle strokes, careful not to damage the object's surface. Not much has changed since then. Washing, marking, and sorting are still the three pillars of finds processing. And we already had ten days' worth of stuff in need of cleaning and labeling. Here were the rules to follow: Work with one bag of finds at a time and always, always comply with the filing system's rules. If you don't, you might mislabel things, and that's going to cause trouble later on. Each bag of finds we were given had a site code—a two-letter abbreviation for the site itself and the last digits of the year of excavation. Dad's site was split into three sectors, each coded clockwise. I picked up an unopened bag labeled ceramics. I took it to my station, on my way grabbing an empty tray. I poured some water into the tray . . .

When I checked my watch again, it was nearly lunchtime. I stood up to stretch my legs and let the momentum carry me out of the tent. Minh followed me outside. Together we covered a small distance to where Luke was smoking in a shadowed spot overlooking the desert. Droplets of sweat were streaming down his face, which must have washed away his sunblock. I wondered where Luke's baseball cap was. I could already see red patches on his forehead where his skin was starting to burn.

"How can you smoke in this heat?" I asked, but Luke had no chance to give me his snarky response because a commotion drew our attention. A crowd was forming at the far right of the dig camp, down where the outer tents met the desert proper. From afar, a familiar blotch of red stood out in the thickening sea of white, gray, and beige—Dr. Palombo's scarf. Before I fully registered what I was doing, my legs were carrying me toward the chaos.

"Some excitement, at last!" Luke commented as he fought to keep up with me. Leaving Minh behind, the two of us got to the outer edge of the gathering crowd first. Standing on tiptoe, a girl with cropped red hair was saying something to her friend that ended with "a French tourist!"

I joined her example and stretched higher, trying to see above the crowd. To my right, a young man with a shaved head, turning pink under the merciless sun, was murmuring to Ada, who we had met yesterday, "Dehydrated and completely out of it."

To which Ada replied in a low, heavily accented voice, "Maybe our defectors weren't wrong after all. Maybe this place is bad luck."

I saw him then, the reason for this gathering. They carried him away on a makeshift cot. A white man, possibly in his late forties, though it was hard to tell exactly. His face had suffered some awful sunburns, and his hair was bleached white.

Dr. Palombo, one of the people carrying the cot, noticed me in the crowd and called over his shoulder by way of explanation, "He wandered in from the desert . . . Alif, why don't you go back to the admin tent and wait for your father there? He's due to come back any second now."

I was about to take off when the man lying semiconscious in the cot opened his eyes wide and grabbed my hand. "Dup Shimati awaits. She grows restless."

He passed out again.

Frozen in my spot, I watched as they carried him into the med tent.

“What was that about? Dup Shimati?” Minh asked, her tongue awkward on the foreign words.

I hadn’t seen when she caught up with us.

“I have no idea,” I told her.

In the spot where the man had touched it, my hand was cold amid the heat.