**At the Funeral**

Slowly and with painstaking care Evangeline brushed the loose earth away. The sweat prickled at the nape of her neck and ran in rivulets down the back of her legs. Pulling her hat down lower to block out the glare of the desert sun, she concentrated on the vessel manifesting itself in front of her eyes. She could see it was broken in at least one place. With any luck she would be able to excavate it in no more than two pieces. The Arab helpers moved about some fifteen feet above her. She had been so excited to join Leonard Woolley on this incredible archaeological dig – unearthing the Royal Cemetery of Ur. But she had not banked on this heat. She drained the last of the water from her canteen.

“Evangeline! How’s it progressing down there?”

“Very well Max. Would you like to see the funerary vessel I’m uncovering? It is beautiful. I would say it is a very thin piece of gold. There are mosaics at the top and bottom, possibly lapis and some red stone.”

Max climbed down the rickety ladder into the pit beside Evangeline.

“Absolutely stunning Evie. And look at the position of the hands they must have been holding it when buried. How complete do you think it will be?”

“Hopefully no more than two maybe three pieces.”

“Well done Evie.” Max patted her shoulder as he rose to his feet. “This is a significant find.”

Evangeline smiled up at Max as he clambered out of the pit.

“Don’t forget, lunch in an hour.”

Evangeline nodded and looked down at the vessel. She should have it freed by then.

Holding the two pieces of fragile gold pot in her hands Evangeline felt a surge of euphoria. This was indeed a find of some magnitude. She put the pieces together so they formed a whole – such finery, such beauty and yet in such a sombre setting. The whitened bones of the hands that had held it for three and a half thousand years now lay empty. The burning sun would whiten them more. There was not a corner of the pit that offered respite or shade. She sat back against the pit wall and closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the gold in her hands.

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“I don’t want to. Please, please don’t make me, please!”

“You have no choice. Drink.”

“No!”

“Drink! You must honour your queen.”

“No.”

“You are nothing, a chattel, you will drink. You are the last, you will have the cup for all eternity; you should be honoured. Drink!”

As the tears drew tracks through the desert dust ingrained on her skin Abi-simti lifted the cup to her lips, closed her eyes and drank. The poison trickled down her throat. Opening her eyes she watched as the priest shimmered and wavered before her just like the mirages in the heat of the day. The mirages she had watched with her brothers and sisters – the camel train, the palace, the oasis. “Please,” she whispered, “please, please…”

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“Please Evie, please. Please, drink up.” She could feel the cool metal pressed to her lips.

The voices became stronger and clearer. “Evangeline, please drink the water.”

“Max, shouldn’t you make sure that everyone works in pairs in the future? And some shade, they need shade from the sun.”

“Yes Agatha, but for now… Evie, oh thank goodness. Drink. Drink some water, there’s a good girl.”

Evangeline looked at their faces as they slowly came back into focus. She gulped the proffered water. Her hands still clasped the two pieces of the funerary cup. Cracked lips slightly moistened she moved towards the collection of whitened bones. “Abi-simti,” she whispered, “poor Abi-simti.”

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