

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 1

“Tut’s Revenge”

K.T. surveyed the friends gathered around her in their “clubhouse” behind her home. The three of them had been best friends and neighbors since kindergarten. She knew they would help her.

“I have a problem,” K.T. said as she pulled a tiny orange fluff ball from her backpack. “I found her by the side of the road. We have to find her a home. Isn’t she precious?” K.T. rubbed the white patch between the kitty’s ears, allowing the kitten to lick her palm. “I can’t keep her, but I want to find the best home for her. What do you think, Connie?” K.T. asked her best friend as she handed the kitten to her.

Connie pushed her long brown hair behind her right ear and cradled the kitty against her chin. “Pobrecita, poor little one,” she cooed. “I know we can’t keep her. Our two dogs would eat her up. What about you, Summer?” Connie set the tiny bundle on her friend’s head.

Summer’s short blonde curls made a soft bed, but she pulled the kitten to her lap and stroked its silky fur. “No way. Mom and Doc said no more strays after the last cat. Just because my stepdad is a veterinarian doesn’t mean we can rescue every animal. But I do know the perfect place for her. I’ll give you a hint: It’s home to the world’s most famous teenage monarch.”

“Who’s that? Prince William?” asked Travis, Summer’s stepbrother, walking up behind the three friends. K.T. quickly hid the kitten behind her. Travis, an eighth-grader, liked to play tricks on her.

“Of course not!” laughed Summer. “Ancient Egypt and King Tutankhamun.”

K.T. raised her eyebrows. “Do you mean actually using Professor Castillo’s new microchip?” she asked with excitement. Professor Castillo was Connie’s dad.

“That’s a perfect idea! Roman and I were looking for a way to test it,” interjected Connie. Connie’s thirteen-year-old brother, Roman, had used their father’s invention to build microcomputers for each of them to carry in their backpacks. They could now communicate by using a wireless, handheld device disguised as a key chain. They were

known around their small middle school as the Backpack Club, but no one knew about the powerful computers in their normal looking packs.

K.T. was a daredevil who liked a challenge. Her dark eyes flashed and a big smile spread across her face as she flipped open her key chain and pressed a button. Instantly, it connected to Roman's computer.

"Hey, K.T., what are you doing in the clubhouse?" asked Roman, reading her coordinates from the transmission.

"Roman, the new chip you installed in our backpacks is your father's time/matter/relator device, right? So we can program our backpack computers to take us anywhere, anytime. Is that right?" asked K.T.

"Actually, K.T., it's better than Dad's device for two reasons: number one, I added a language database that does instantaneous translations so you can communicate anywhere, anytime; and number two, we can all travel together," Roman responded with a laugh.

Travis, who was six inches taller than any of the others and the oldest of all of them, spoke up, "Why go back to ancient Egypt?" Travis was Summer's step-brother, but he felt very protective of her, especially when K.T. was involved. K.T. was always getting her into adventures despite the fact that Summer was partially paralyzed and used a motorized wheel chair.

"I found this kitten and Summer thought of the best home for her: Egypt during King Tut's reign. The ancient Egyptians worshipped cats; they had a cat *goddess*. Wouldn't this be a great way to test the new chip? Just a quick little trip?" K.T. pleaded.

Travis frowned. It was just like brave, spunky, crazy K.T. Watson. She was always the first in line for adventure.

"I want to go," exclaimed Connie. "I've always wanted to see a pyramid and find out how they built those incredible tombs. It was an engineering marvel!"

"I don't think I can maneuver very well in the sand, so I'll stay here and provide research support," Summer said. "For example, the climate was hot and dry so you'd better take some water bottles along."

K.T. turned to Summer. "When and where exactly do we need to go?"

If Roman was the computer whiz, then Summer was the geography genius and an insatiable reader. Egyptology was one of her favorite studies. She typed a search into her BPC (backpack computer) and confirmed the King Tut information.

“King Tutankhamun died in 1323 B.C. at Thebes near present day Luxor and was buried in the Valley of the Kings. The Great Pyramid at Giza is far from Thebes, but you could see the Temples of Karnak and the row of ram-headed sphinxes King Tut built there. To see King Tut’s tomb, set the coordinates for Thebes, the tenth year of King Tutankhamun’s reign, 18th Dynasty, Egypt.

“Well, I’m not letting you two sixth graders have all the fun,” said Travis. “I just might like to drive a chariot. Tell us again how to do this, Roman.” Now it was K.T.’s turn to frown. The last thing she wanted was Travis going along.

While Summer went to get fresh bottles of water, Roman reviewed how to initiate time travel. “Each of you types in the coordinates exactly the same and then together press “Control”, “Alt”, “Delete” and “Backspace.” To return, type in today’s date and time, and press “Control”, “Alt”, “Delete” and “Home.” Everyone understand? I’ll stay on-line with Summer in case you need technical support.”

The three travelers looked at each other, smiled, and nodded their understanding. K.T. checked her watch and said, “We’ll return in ten minutes current time.” Summer handed the kitten to K.T. who put it in her backpack and zipped the pack closed.

Travis, Connie and K.T. typed in the data and triple-checked each other.

Travis started the countdown: “Mark—set—go!” as they pressed the four buttons.

All four closed their eyes.

Then three were gone.

Slowly opening one eye, K.T saw a rush of color that flickered and disappeared. She opened both eyes to find herself standing between Connie Castillo, her best friend, and Travis Allen, her next door neighbor, in a place unlike any she had ever seen or imagined – desert, sun, vaporizing heat and smells so strong she felt nauseous for a moment. From the looks on Connie and Travis’s faces, they felt the same way.

“Let’s take cover,” recommended Travis. “Safe arrival,” he spoke into his boxtok.

K.T., Connie and Travis crouched below a clay wall that surrounded a small village. It was late afternoon and the sun beat down on the red sand. K.T.'s boxtok crackled and K.T. jumped like a scared rabbit.

"If they ask about your clothes, tell them you came from Lower Egypt – you're in Upper Egypt now," Summer's voice wavered through the air.

"Let's figure out exactly where we are," said Travis, looking east away from the sun. "I see a shimmer there on the other side of the black dirt. That must be the Nile River! Wow, you can really see where the desert begins and the Nile Basin ends."

There below their feet was the red sand of the Sahara and only a few hundred yards away was black, fertile Nile River soil.

Suddenly, a young girl ran around the corner of the wall and stumbled into them. Tears streaked her face and she cried out in terror at the sight of the three strangers. It was K.T. who first recovered from the shock of the collision.

"Hello, my name is K.T. and this is Connie and Travis," she began. "Could you tell us what town we've reached?"

The girl stared at her for a moment, but the translator program must have worked because she stopped crying and let her curiosity overtake her fear.

"My name is Nefah and this town is Kaefa. It is the village of the artists and artisans who work on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Don't you know where you are?" she asked, wiping the tears from her face. Her shoulder-length hair was straight and jet black.

"Yes, of course. We were just making sure. Why were you crying and running away? Is there something wrong?" K.T. questioned the girl.

"Everything is wrong – the pharaoh's death, the workers' illness, the overseer's stupid plan! But perhaps you are with the new pharaoh's government or with the new high priest's religion of Amun-Re. Perhaps I should not speak with you at all." Nefah began to back away.

"Wait, please, we're young like you. We mean no harm. We even bring you a gift," K.T. said, opening her backpack. Nefah looked with amazement at the zipper and then squealed with delight when she saw the kitten. "We are looking for a home for this kitten. We understand your culture appreciates cats."

“Yes, we love them, even if my family does not worship them as some do. They are part of an Egyptian’s family, much more than a pet. They are like sisters, brothers, or children. This one is precious. Is it really for me?” Nefah held the kitten tenderly and rubbed her cheek against its orange fur. Her olive skin was tanned by the sun and contrasted sharply with her linen tunic.

Connie suggested that they sit under a palm tree to get relief from the midday sun. Nefah instead offered to take them to her home for some food. There she would explain about all the terrible things that had happened. Perhaps the travelers would help her family and the others. Travis, K.T. and Connie held tightly to their backpacks and followed Nefah through the gates of the walled town.

Nefah hurriedly led them through narrow, dirt streets and past an open-air market where most of the “meat” was still alive. Huge papyrus barrels held barley grain that women scooped out and poured into smaller vessels. If some fell to the ground, it was scooped up with the same tool and put back into the barrel – dirt and all. Sand, it seemed, was a main ingredient in bread.

The three travelers couldn’t keep up with all the sounds, sights and smells as they ran through the alleyways to Nefah’s home. In the center of the town was a small water well with a rusty metal bowl that served as a bucket. The well was surrounded by a low wall and was shaded by tall palms and several shorter bushes that K.T. did not recognize. The plants were the only vegetation in the village. K.T. could make out a narrow gully leading from the well’s pool through the town and out under the wall. I wonder if that comes from the Nile, she thought.

When they reached Nefah’s house, she asked them to sit on the floor on brightly painted grass mats around a low clay table with designs of crocodiles, cranes, fish and frogs etched around the edges.

“Here are refreshments,” she said, offering them a platter of grapes, dates, figs and cone shaped loaves of bread. K.T. noted that the foods were similar to those from home.

“I wonder if this is like when my family traveled to Mexico last summer? We had to be careful not to eat anything washed by water. Maybe we’d better use our water to wash the food first,” Connie whispered to K.T. They both noticed too late to warn Travis, who had devoured grapes and a fig the moment the platter arrived.

K.T. drank from her water bottle. “Nefah, tell us now, what made you cry?”

“Many things. But let me start from the beginning. I know those from the ancient cities in Lower Egypt have knowledge that we have not learned yet. You must try to help me if you can.” Nefah glanced out the open doorway to be sure no one was near and then continued in a low voice.

“You know our good, young king, Tutankhamun, died just two months ago. He was not even twenty cycles of Amun-Re. Even though he has built many fine temples and monuments in Karnak, his tomb was not yet begun when he died so suddenly. Near here is the Valley of the Kings where his parents were buried. That is where my artist family is working now – my father, uncle, and two brothers. My ancestors have worked as artists for centuries in those magnificent tombs. Now, that all may change.” Nefah’s eyes filled with tears, but she kept talking.

“During the rainy season when the Nile floods, the peasant farmers pay their taxes to the pharaoh by working on the tombs and temples. They cut the rock, haul it, and construct the buildings. Then my family and artists and artisans like them decorate the tombs and temples to add beauty and preserve the memories. It is our way.” Nefah paused to see if the doorway was still clear.

“The new pharaoh is Ay, the former high priest. He has commanded that Tutankhamun’s funeral take place within seventy days. With so much work remaining to be done on the king’s tomb, the peasant farmers were brought in to help. But this is their busy harvest and threshing time. So my mother and other villagers were sent to help with the harvest. And when the temporary housing was built here for the peasant farmers, it was done so quickly that only one canal was dug to carry water both to and from their encampment. Now suddenly, so many workers are getting ill that the overseer announced today that he is going to require that the artists and artisans move to the workers’ camp to help excavate the rest of the tomb. That is dangerous work for my family to do—they are not made for hauling rock! And what will keep them from getting the illness? And if they move and my mother has to help with the threshing, I will be left alone!”

Connie put her arms around Nefah as she began to sob again. Travis looked at K.T. as if to ask, “What do you want to do?” With all this turmoil and danger, how would they see a chariot or a pyramid, a temple or a tomb? wondered K.T.

“You said King Tutankhamun died suddenly. Did he have this ‘illness’ too? Are all the workers dying?” asked Travis with the natural curiosity of a scientist.

“No, the pharaoh died suddenly by falling off his chariot. He hit his head. At least that is what we were told. King Tutankhamun was known as the best charioteer. He always drove himself.” Nefah lowered her voice to a whisper. “Some say the workers are getting sick because the pharaoh did *not* fall. The illness is his revenge. He is trying to keep them from burying him so fast.”

“What are the symptoms of the illness?” asked K.T.

“None of our people have taken ill, but we have heard that it starts with cramps in the stomach and then vomiting. Finally, diarrhea weakens the worker and he must go to bed. He can eat nothing without getting sick again. Even water does not seem to help.”

“The workers are not dying yet, but if it is a curse, how could they ever recover? And what will keep us safe?” Nefah’s crying grew louder but stopped abruptly when a shadow fell across the floor. A tall man dressed in a loincloth stood in the doorway.

“My Master, the Overseer of the Tomb, asks that Nefah bring her guests to him. He is most curious to learn from where these strangers travel. You are all to come with me to the Valley of the Kings. The chariots await. You must hurry!” he commanded, escorting them from the safe, dark, quiet coolness of the home, back into the brilliant desert sunlight, dust and noise.

During the wild and rapid chariot ride across the desert, there was no time for the three friends to talk. Only Travis seemed to enjoy any part of the journey. As they walked toward the canopy that shaded the office of the overseer, they stayed close together and whispered a plan.

Travis warned, “We really need to leave before we cause any more trouble. We did what we set out to do and even got to ride in a chariot. It’s time to go back.”

“I still want to see the tombs. Look how close we are!” Connie said pointing to the massive cliff walls covered with statues and grand openings to underground tombs.

“And we can’t just disappear and leave Nefah to face the overseer alone. He sounds dangerous. Don’t you want to find out more about this illness?” argued K.T.

“All right already! The tombs *are* awesome and I *am* interested in this illness. I wish we knew what kinds of tools and technologies they have for medicine,” Travis whispered. “And I’d like to see this powerful overseer dude for myself.”

K.T. began to observe her surroundings with a detective’s eye. Nefah walked directly behind the overseer’s servant and was visibly trembling. People were everywhere around them, working furiously to complete the tomb. Near a muddy canal that reached eastward to the Nile were hundreds of small canopies that served as protection for the artisans who fashioned all the beautiful objects that one day would end up in museums. Thousands of small tents dotted the plain to the south of the canal. Trenches and privies lined the edge of the canal farthest from the tomb. A southerly breeze picked up the stench from the encampment, causing K.T. to wrinkle her nose as Travis gasped and Connie coughed.

“Talk about your need for an Air Quality Control Board!” Travis joked.

Their conversation was cut short as they arrived at the overseer’s office. A heavysset, older man holding a long, thin staff sat at a long table upon a platform. Scrolls with drawings littered the table and the floor. Servants stood in line waiting to ask him questions. He answered them swiftly and then sent them off at a run. Now he looked up at the three travelers.

“Come in, guests from afar, come in. We have heard through the incessant gossip of that mud hole, Kaefa, that a young girl had invited foreigners into our midst. Surely, you know the dangers of this illness that affects our workers more each day, yet you brave a visit. Tell me, what is the purpose of your journey?” the overseer’s oily voice sizzled through the hot air like grease on a griddle.

Before Travis and Connie could stop her, K.T. replied, “We think we can be of service in curing your people of this illness. May we offer the wisdom of our faraway land, please sir?”

“Get ready to go in case he blows his top at that last idea,” mumbled K.T. to her friends. They took out their boxtoks and keyed in their home coordinates.

“By all means, share your knowledge at once,” sputtered the overseer with contempt. It was clear to K.T. that he liked for no one to make him feel inferior. She would have to let him think that he’d discovered the answers by himself.

K.T. worked hard to help the overseer understand the three most important hygiene problems that she and her friends had observed at the work camp. Despite her efforts, the overseer became increasingly irritated. “What nonsense! Why should I believe what you say about our working conditions?” asked the overseer.

“You do not have to believe us, but we can demonstrate our power right now by disappearing,” answered K.T.

“Now!” she exclaimed and they all three hit the “Control,” “Alt,” “Delete,” and “Home” buttons together.

A swirl of colors was all K.T. could see in the instant she returned home. Even keeping her eyes wide opened had not helped. She was aware all at once that Connie and Travis were beside her and that her own back yard surrounded her.

“Yahoo!” shouted Summer, as she watched her three companions reappear. Then they were all hugging and talking and laughing at once. K.T. pulled Connie aside.

“Did you notice how tiny the door to Tut’s tomb looked compared to all the other tombs?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s no wonder it stayed hidden for so long,” Connie agreed. “Maybe that was Tut’s real revenge. His was the only treasure left by the twentieth century.”

“Maybe we’ll even see the kitten’s picture on a tomb wall some day,” mused K.T.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll even see that cat in one of her other lives,” laughed Connie, patting her backpack.