The Journey Home

Chapter 1: The Desert

Heat.

That was the first thing John Carter felt.

Not the cold air of the Indiana cave.

Not the hum of generators.

Not the scent of damp stone.

Heat.

Dry, relentless heat.

It pressed against his skin and filled his lungs with the familiar scent of sand and dust.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Above him stretched a cloudless blue sky.

For a moment he simply stared.

Then realization struck.

Egypt.

He sat upright suddenly.

The desert spun around him.

Golden dunes stretched in every direction.

The distant outline of Giza shimmered beneath the midday sun.

John blinked.

His heart pounded.

The Gate had worked.

They had made it back.

Immediately he looked beside him.

"Neferet!"

She lay motionless on the sand.

Fear shot through him.

John crawled across the desert and gently touched her shoulder.

"Neferet."

No response.

His pulse quickened.

Then she stirred.

A small movement.

A soft breath.

Slowly her eyes opened.

For several seconds she stared upward at the sky.

Then she turned toward him.

The moment their eyes met, relief flooded both their faces.

John laughed.

The sound surprised even him.

Neferet smiled.

A real smile.

The kind he had not seen since they left Earth.

"John."

"We made it."

She sat up slowly and looked around.

The endless desert.

The distant plateau.

The familiar horizon.

Tears immediately filled her eyes.

"We are home."

John followed her gaze.

The Great Pyramid stood in the distance.

Its white limestone casing gleamed brilliantly beneath the sun.

Thousands of years earlier than the world he had left.

Thousands of years earlier than the world that would one day study it.

He smiled.

"Yes."

For a long moment neither spoke.

They simply sat together on the sand.

Listening to the wind.

Watching the familiar landscape.

Feeling the reality of it.

There would be no return this time.

No portal.

No laboratory.

No modern world waiting beyond a doorway.

Earth was gone.

The twenty-first century was gone.

Jack.

Mitchell.

Emily.

His parents.

All of them now belonged to another life.

A life that felt impossibly distant.

John looked down at the sand beneath his fingers.

Somewhere in the future, archaeologists would walk these same lands.

Yet for him, the future no longer existed.

Only now.

Only here.

Only Egypt.

Neferet gently squeezed his hand.

"You are thinking of them."

John nodded.

"A little."

She lowered her eyes.

"I miss them too."

The admission surprised him.

Neferet smiled sadly.

"Emily."

John laughed softly.

"She'll survive."

"I know."

Neferet smiled.

"But I shall miss her."

The two sat quietly for another moment.

Then Neferet stood.

The desert breeze lifted her dark hair.

The sunlight caught her face.

For the first time since he met her, she looked completely at peace.

No confusion.

No fear.

No uncertainty.

Only home.

She extended her hand.

"Come."

John took it.

Together they began walking.

The sands shifted beneath their feet.

The sun climbed higher overhead.

Hours seemed to pass.

Eventually signs of life appeared.

Small groups of workers.

Stone haulers.

Farmers traveling between settlements.

People going about ordinary lives.

Lives completely unaware of the miracle that had just occurred.

Then a group of laborers spotted them.

At first the workers simply stared.

John understood why.

Their clothing was strange.

His modern shirt and trousers looked completely out of place.

Even Neferet's garments appeared unusual after her years in the future.

The workers whispered among themselves.

One stepped closer.

Then another.

Suddenly an older man froze.

His eyes widened.

His face turned pale.

He dropped to his knees.

"Princess Neferet."

The words spread through the crowd like fire.

Everyone froze.

Then, one by one, they knelt.

John looked around in surprise.

Men.

Women.

Children.

All kneeling.

All staring at Neferet in disbelief.

The older man began trembling.

"Princess."

Neferet immediately stepped forward.

"No."

Her voice was gentle.

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Please rise."

The man looked as though he might faint.

Slowly he stood.

Others followed.

None could stop staring.

To them, Neferet had vanished years ago.

Many believed her dead.

Yet here she stood.

Alive.

Unchanged.

As beautiful as the day she disappeared.

A young boy suddenly broke free from the crowd.

He could not have been older than ten.

His eyes were enormous.

His face lit with excitement.

Then he turned and ran.

As fast as his legs could carry him.

"Princess Neferet is back!"

His voice echoed across the desert.

"Princess Neferet is back!"

The shout carried from one group to another.

People stopped what they were doing.

Heads turned.

Workers abandoned tools.

Farmers left fields.

The cry continued spreading.

Like a wave moving across Egypt.

"Princess Neferet is back!"

Neferet stared after the boy.

Almost overwhelmed.

John smiled.

"You were missed."

She laughed softly through tears.

"I think perhaps I was."

The wind swept across the desert.

Far in the distance, beyond the horizon, riders were already preparing.

Messengers were already racing.

And somewhere inside the royal palace, a father, a mother, and a sister were about to receive news they had dreamed of hearing for years.

Princess Neferet had come home.

And Egypt would never be the same again.

End of Chapter 1

The Journey Home

Chapter 2: Princess Neferet Is Back

The boy ran as if the gods themselves were chasing him.

His bare feet pounded across the earth, kicking up clouds of dust behind him.

"Princess Neferet is back!"

His voice echoed across the fields.

Workers stopped what they were doing.

Farmers straightened from their labor.

Children abandoned their games and stared.

The cry spread from person to person.

"Princess Neferet has returned!"

"It cannot be."

"I saw her myself!"

"The daughter of Khufu lives!"

Within minutes the entire region buzzed with excitement.

Meanwhile, John and Neferet continued their journey toward Giza.

Everywhere they went, people stopped and stared.

Many immediately dropped to their knees.

Others simply stood frozen in disbelief.

An elderly woman emerged from a nearby group and approached cautiously.

Tears streamed down her weathered face.

"Princess..."

Neferet smiled gently.

The woman reached for her hands.

"We prayed for your return."

Emotion filled Neferet's eyes.

She squeezed the woman's hands.

"And I have returned."

The woman began to cry openly.

Others around her did the same.

Word spread even faster.

Before long a growing crowd followed behind them.

Not because they were ordered to.

Not because they were curious.

Because they loved their princess.

John walked quietly beside Neferet.

Watching.

Listening.

Learning.

For years he had studied ancient Egypt through books and artifacts.

Now history walked beside him.

The people were not names in a textbook.

They were real.

And they adored Neferet.

A small girl pushed through the crowd.

She held a simple flower in her hand.

Carefully she approached the princess.

"This is for you."

Neferet knelt and accepted the gift.

Then she kissed the girl's forehead.

The child immediately ran back to her family, grinning from ear to ear.

Laughter spread through the crowd.

John smiled.

"You've become famous."

Neferet glanced at him.

"I was a princess."

"You are a princess."

A smile touched her lips.

"Apparently."

As the afternoon sun climbed higher, the stories grew more dramatic.

Some claimed Neferet had returned from the dead.

Others believed the gods had hidden her in a secret kingdom.

No one knew the truth.

No one could imagine the truth.

A princess who had traveled four thousand years into the future and returned again.

Only John and Neferet knew that impossible story.

And neither intended to share it.

Hours later a rider appeared in the distance.

The horse raced toward them at full speed.

The crowd quickly moved aside.

Dust exploded around the rider as he pulled sharply on the reins.

For a moment he simply stared.

Then he dropped from his horse and fell to one knee.

"Princess."

Neferet immediately recognized the royal colors.

A palace messenger.

The man looked up, his face filled with emotion.

"The Pharaoh knows."

Neferet's heart skipped.

"My father?"

The messenger nodded.

"The moment the news reached the palace, His Majesty ordered riders in every direction."

A smile appeared on her face.

"And my mother?"

"The Queen is weeping with joy."

Neferet laughed softly.

"And Henutsen?"

The messenger actually smiled.

"Princess Henutsen has asked every few minutes whether the news is true."

Neferet covered her mouth.

Her little sister.

No longer little.

Yet somehow still exactly the same.

The messenger rose to his feet.

"The royal escort is already on its way."

Excited whispers spread through the crowd.

Neferet looked toward the distant horizon.

Home.

Her family was waiting.

Years of wondering.

Years of hoping.

Years of dreaming.

Soon it would finally end.

Then the messenger's gaze shifted toward John.

The warmth disappeared from his expression.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

Neferet noticed immediately.

"So this is John Carter."

John nodded politely.

The messenger studied him carefully.

A foreigner.

A stranger.

A man wearing unusual clothing.

A man standing beside the Pharaoh's daughter.

The messenger offered a respectful bow.

But there was caution in his eyes.

"I see."

John understood the meaning immediately.

The messenger had questions.

Questions that would not be easy to answer.

Neferet stepped slightly closer to John.

The messenger noticed.

So did everyone else.

For the first time that day, the crowd became quiet.

Far across the desert, a faint sound drifted upon the wind.

Chariot wheels.

Many of them.

The royal escort was coming.

And with it, the first real challenge awaiting John Carter in ancient Egypt.

End of Chapter 2

The Journey Home

Chapter 3: The Pharaoh's Joy

The messenger had barely disappeared over the horizon when another rider arrived.

Then another.

And another.

Like ripples spreading across water, the news traveled outward from village to village, settlement to settlement, racing toward the heart of Egypt.

Princess Neferet had returned.

By sunset, the news reached the royal palace.

A breathless messenger burst through the palace gates and raced across the courtyard.

Guards shouted after him.

Servants stepped aside.

The messenger ignored them all.

He ran directly toward the royal audience chamber.

The great doors flew open.

The sound echoed through the hall.

Pharaoh Khufu rose from his throne.

The ruler of Egypt frowned.

The messenger collapsed to one knee.

His chest heaved from exhaustion.

For several moments he struggled to speak.

Khufu stepped forward.

"What is it?"

The messenger looked up.

His face was covered in dust.

"The Princess."

The entire chamber froze.

Khufu's expression changed instantly.

"The Princess?"

The messenger nodded rapidly.

"Princess Neferet has returned."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

The words seemed impossible.

For years the palace had mourned her disappearance.

For years there had been no answers.

No clues.

No body.

Only questions.

Now suddenly—

She had returned.

Khufu stared at the messenger.

For the first time in many years, the mighty Pharaoh appeared uncertain.

"You are sure?"

The messenger nodded.

"I saw her myself."

The room erupted into excited whispers.

Ministers exchanged shocked looks.

Servants covered their mouths.

Several guards smiled openly.

Khufu ignored them all.

His eyes never left the messenger.

"Where is she?"

"Several hours from the city, Your Majesty."

The Pharaoh did not hesitate.

"Prepare my escort."

The messenger blinked.

"My lord?"

"I am going to my daughter."

At that exact moment another voice rang out from the doorway.

"Father!"

Princess Henutsen burst into the room.

She had clearly heard the news.

Her dark hair bounced wildly as she ran.

"Is it true?"

Khufu smiled.

A genuine smile.

One few people ever witnessed.

"Yes."

Henutsen stopped.

Her eyes widened.

Then tears immediately filled them.

"Neferet?"

The Pharaoh nodded.

For a moment the young princess simply stood there.

Then she laughed and cried at the same time.

A moment later another figure entered the chamber.

Queen Meritites.

Unlike Henutsen, she moved slowly.

Gracefully.

Yet the emotion in her eyes was unmistakable.

She looked directly at the messenger.

"Tell me."

The messenger bowed.

"Your daughter lives, my Queen."

The Queen closed her eyes.

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

For years she had prayed.

For years she had hoped.

For years she had feared she would never see her daughter again.

Now the impossible had happened.

Neferet was coming home.

Henutsen immediately rushed to her mother and embraced her.

The Queen wrapped her arms around her younger daughter.

Neither attempted to hide their tears.

Khufu watched them silently.

The sight softened something inside him.

For years he had ruled Egypt.

Built monuments.

Commanded armies.

Governed the greatest kingdom on earth.

Yet none of those things mattered at this moment.

He was simply a father.

A father whose daughter was coming home.

A captain approached cautiously.

"Your Majesty?"

Khufu turned.

"Assemble twenty chariots."

The captain bowed.

"At once."

"No."

Khufu's voice grew stronger.

"Make it thirty."

The captain blinked.

"Thirty, my lord?"

Khufu smiled.

"The daughter of Egypt returns."

The captain grinned.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As preparations began throughout the palace, the news continued spreading beyond its walls.

One rider carried the message north.

Another carried it south.

A third headed east.

Soon the entire kingdom would know.

Among those who received the news was another young nobleman.

Prince Khaemwaset.

The prince sat with advisors when the messenger arrived.

The moment he heard Neferet's name, he rose to his feet.

"What did you say?"

The messenger repeated himself.

The prince stared in disbelief.

Then hope filled his eyes.

Neferet.

Alive.

After all these years.

Without another word he hurried from the room.

His attendants struggled to keep up.

"Prepare my horses."

The servants rushed into action.

Khaemwaset looked toward the horizon.

For years he had carried her memory.

For years he had wondered what had happened.

Now he had one thought.

He had to see her.

Meanwhile, many miles away, Neferet and John continued their journey toward Giza.

The crowd surrounding them had doubled.

Perhaps tripled.

People joined from every direction.

Some brought flowers.

Others offered food.

Children ran alongside the procession.

The atmosphere felt more like a festival than a journey.

Neferet smiled at the people around her.

Yet occasionally she glanced toward the horizon.

Toward home.

Toward the family she had not seen in years.

Toward a reunion she had dreamed about countless times.

As the sun slowly began its descent, a distant cloud of dust appeared.

At first it seemed small.

Then it grew.

And grew.

The ground trembled faintly beneath their feet.

The crowd noticed.

Excited whispers spread.

Neferet's heart began to race.

John followed her gaze.

Far across the desert, dozens of royal chariots raced toward them.

The Pharaoh was coming.

End of Chapter 3

The Journey Home

Chapter 4: The Reunion

The thunder of chariot wheels rolled across the desert.

Dust rose into the sky behind the approaching convoy.

The crowd immediately stepped aside.

Excited whispers spread from person to person.

"The Pharaoh."

"The royal escort."

"They have come for the Princess."

Neferet stood perfectly still.

Her heart hammered inside her chest.

For years she had dreamed of this moment.

Now that it was finally here, she found herself unable to move.

John stood quietly beside her.

He glanced at Neferet and saw tears already forming in her eyes.

The chariots raced closer.

Closer.

Closer still.

Until finally the lead driver pulled sharply on the reins.

The horses reared.

Dust exploded around them.

The convoy came to a stop.

For a moment nobody moved.

The desert became strangely silent.

Then a figure stepped down from the lead chariot.

Pharaoh Khufu.

The ruler of Egypt.

The builder of monuments.

The most powerful man in the kingdom.

Yet in that moment he looked like none of those things.

He looked like a father.

His eyes searched the crowd.

Then found her.

Neferet.

For several seconds neither moved.

Father and daughter simply stared at one another.

Years of pain.

Years of unanswered questions.

Years of loss.

All disappearing in a single moment.

"Father."

The word escaped her lips as a whisper.

Khufu crossed the distance between them.

Then, to the shock of everyone present, the Pharaoh embraced his daughter.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

Neferet buried her face against his shoulder.

For the first time since returning, she cried openly.

Khufu held her tightly.

As though afraid she might vanish again.

"My daughter."

His voice trembled.

The mighty Pharaoh's voice trembled.

"You have come home."

Neferet nodded.

"I'm home."

Neither seemed willing to let go.

Eventually another figure pushed past attendants and servants.

A young woman.

Her eyes already filled with tears.

"Neferet!"

Princess Henutsen practically threw herself at her older sister.

Neferet laughed through her tears.

The sound was filled with joy.

"Henutsen."

The younger princess wrapped her arms around her.

Holding on as though she would never release her.

"I knew it."

Henutsen cried openly.

"I knew you were alive."

Neferet stroked her sister's hair.

"You have grown."

Henutsen pulled back.

"And you haven't."

The sisters laughed.

Even the surrounding crowd smiled.

The years between them seemed to disappear instantly.

At last another figure approached.

Unlike the others, she walked slowly.

Gracefully.

Queen Meritites.

Neferet's smile faded.

Fresh tears filled her eyes.

"Mother."

The Queen reached out and gently touched her daughter's face.

As though needing proof she was real.

For several moments neither spoke.

Words seemed inadequate.

Then Meritites pulled Neferet into her arms.

The Queen's composure finally broke.

Years of grief vanished.

Years of uncertainty ended.

Mother and daughter simply held one another.

The crowd respectfully turned away.

Some moments belonged only to family.

John stood silently nearby.

Watching.

Smiling.

For the first time since leaving the modern world, he felt certain they had done the right thing.

Neferet belonged here.

With her family.

With her people.

With her home.

Khufu eventually stepped back and studied his daughter.

"You are well?"

Neferet nodded.

"Yes."

"You were not harmed?"

"No."

The Pharaoh exhaled slowly.

A burden he had carried for years finally disappeared.

Then his eyes shifted.

Toward John.

The atmosphere changed immediately.

The warmth remained.

But caution appeared as well.

Khufu studied the young man carefully.

The strange clothing.

The foreign appearance.

The unfamiliar posture.

Everything about him seemed out of place.

John bowed respectfully.

He had practiced enough Egyptian customs to know what was expected.

The Pharaoh regarded him silently.

The crowd also became quiet.

Everyone seemed to be waiting.

Neferet immediately noticed.

She stepped beside John.

The gesture did not go unnoticed.

Neither did the way she looked at him.

Khufu's eyes narrowed slightly.

Not with anger.

With curiosity.

Who was this stranger?

And why did his daughter stand so close to him?

Before anyone could speak, another disturbance erupted behind the convoy.

A rider approached at full speed.

The horse was nearly exhausted.

Dust covered both rider and animal.

The moment the rider stopped, he dismounted and hurried forward.

Neferet recognized him immediately.

Prince Khaemwaset.

He stopped abruptly.

His eyes widened.

For several moments he could only stare.

Neferet stood before him.

Alive.

Beautiful.

Unchanged.

Exactly as he remembered.

A smile slowly appeared on his face.

"Neferet."

His voice barely rose above a whisper.

Neferet smiled warmly.

"Khaemwaset."

The prince closed his eyes briefly.

Relief washed over him.

Then he stepped forward.

Taking her hands gently.

"I thought I had lost you forever."

Neferet said nothing.

She simply smiled.

The prince looked genuinely overwhelmed.

Years of uncertainty had ended.

The woman he loved had returned.

Around them, the crowd celebrated.

The royal family reunited.

The future once again seemed bright.

Only John noticed the look that passed between Khufu and several of his guards.

A silent look.

A meaningful look.

The kind that required no words.

And for the first time since returning to Egypt, John felt a small knot form in his stomach.

Something was changing.

The reunion was over.

Now came the questions.

And John suspected he would not like the answers.

End of Chapter 4

The Journey Home

Chapter 5: The Stranger in Chains

The journey back to the palace began beneath the golden light of late afternoon.

The royal convoy stretched across the desert.

Thirty chariots.

Dozens of guards.

Hundreds of cheering citizens following behind.

The return of Princess Neferet had become a celebration unlike anything Egypt had seen in years.

Neferet rode beside her father in the lead chariot.

Henutsen sat on her other side, refusing to let go of her hand.

Every few moments the younger princess would glance at her sister, as if afraid she might disappear again.

Then she would smile and squeeze her hand tighter.

Neferet smiled each time.

Yet her eyes kept drifting elsewhere.

Toward John.

He walked several paces behind the royal chariots.

Alone.

For now.

Queen Meritites noticed.

Mothers noticed many things.

The Queen followed her daughter's gaze.

Then quietly looked away.

She said nothing.

The desert stretched endlessly around them.

The celebration continued.

People lined portions of the road.

Many knelt as the royal convoy passed.

Others threw flowers.

Children ran alongside the procession until exhausted parents pulled them back.

To the people of Egypt, it was a day of miracles.

Their lost princess had returned.

But not everyone shared their joy.

Khufu sat quietly beside his daughter.

His expression thoughtful.

Observant.

The Pharaoh had spent his life reading people.

Studying them.

Understanding them.

And there was one thing he could not ignore.

Every time Neferet looked behind her.

Every time her eyes searched for the stranger.

Every time concern appeared on her face.

The Pharaoh noticed.

At last he spoke.

"Who is he?"

The question caught Neferet by surprise.

She turned toward her father.

"Who?"

Khufu did not look at her.

"The stranger."

Neferet hesitated.

"His name is John."

"I know his name."

The Pharaoh's voice remained calm.

"Who is he?"

Neferet lowered her eyes.

How could she explain?

A man from another age.

A traveler through time.

The man she loved.

The man who had crossed four thousand years to bring her home.

No explanation seemed possible.

"He is my friend."

Henutsen looked between them.

Even she recognized that the answer was incomplete.

Khufu remained silent.

The conversation ended.

But the question remained.

Who was John Carter?

And why was he so important to Neferet?

Hours later, the palace finally appeared on the horizon.

Its towering walls gleamed beneath the setting sun.

The sight brought cheers from the crowd.

Neferet's heart swelled.

Home.

The place she had missed every day while living in the future.

Servants rushed from the gates.

Trumpets sounded.

The city erupted in celebration.

As the lead chariot passed beneath the massive entrance, thousands of voices filled the air.

"Princess Neferet!"

"Princess Neferet!"

"Princess Neferet!"

The sound echoed across the city.

Neferet smiled and waved.

But once again her eyes searched for John.

And once again she found him.

Still walking.

Still alone.

Still outside the palace gates.

Then something happened.

Khufu raised a hand.

The celebration stopped.

Not completely.

But enough.

The royal guards immediately approached.

John noticed them at once.

His stomach tightened.

The captain stepped forward.

His expression was respectful.

But firm.

"John Carter."

John nodded.

"Yes?"

The captain looked toward the Pharaoh.

Then back to John.

"By order of Pharaoh Khufu, you are to be placed under royal custody."

The words landed like a stone.

Neferet immediately stood.

"What?"

The captain bowed.

"My Princess."

"No."

She climbed down from the chariot.

The crowd watched in stunned silence.

"He has done nothing wrong."

The captain lowered his eyes.

"I follow the Pharaoh's command."

Neferet turned toward her father.

"Father."

Khufu remained seated.

His face revealed nothing.

"He is a stranger."

"He's my friend."

Khufu nodded.

"Perhaps."

The answer frightened her.

The Pharaoh's voice wasn't angry.

It was cautious.

Measured.

The voice of a ruler.

Not a father.

The guards approached John.

Slowly.

Almost apologetically.

One carried iron shackles.

Neferet's eyes widened.

"No."

The guard hesitated.

The captain glanced toward Khufu.

The Pharaoh gave a single nod.

The decision was final.

John looked at Neferet.

Then at the guards.

Then back at Khufu.

He understood.

A foreigner arriving beside the missing princess.

No explanation.

No witnesses.

No proof.

Any ruler would ask questions.

John extended his hands.

The guards looked surprised.

"You don't have to do this."

John smiled faintly.

"I think we both know you do."

The iron shackles closed around his wrists.

A second set locked around his ankles.

The sound echoed through the courtyard.

Neferet felt tears sting her eyes.

"John..."

He looked at her.

And smiled.

Somehow he actually smiled.

"It's okay."

The words helped very little.

The guards began leading him away.

The crowd parted.

Silent now.

Watching.

Wondering.

Neferet stood frozen.

As John disappeared into the palace.

Into the shadows below.

Into uncertainty.

For one brief moment he looked back.

Their eyes met.

Neither spoke.

Neither needed to.

Then he vanished beyond the doorway.

Gone.

The celebration resumed almost immediately.

Musicians played.

Servants hurried about.

Citizens cheered.

The city celebrated the return of its princess.

Yet Neferet heard none of it.

Her gaze remained fixed upon the doorway through which John had disappeared.

For the first time since coming home, she felt afraid.

Because home had become complicated.

And the man she loved now sat in chains beneath her father's palace.

End of Chapter 5

The Journey Home

Chapter 6: Three Days of Celebration

The city did not sleep.

From the moment Princess Neferet returned, celebration swept through Giza like a flood.

Music echoed through the streets.

Drums sounded long into the night.

Torches illuminated every avenue and courtyard.

People danced.

People laughed.

People sang songs that had not been heard in years.

The lost princess had come home.

And all of Egypt rejoiced.

The next morning, Pharaoh Khufu stood upon the palace balcony overlooking the city.

Thousands gathered below.

The crowd stretched as far as the eye could see.

When the Pharaoh raised his hand, silence slowly settled across the square.

"My people."

His voice carried through the city.

The crowd listened.

"Yesterday, the gods returned to us a gift we thought forever lost."

Cheers erupted immediately.

"Princess Neferet!"

"Long live the Princess!"

Khufu smiled and allowed the celebration to continue for a moment.

Then he raised his hand again.

The crowd quieted.

"In honor of her return, I declare three days of celebration throughout Egypt."

The city exploded with excitement.

"No work!"

Three days.

"No taxes!"

More cheering.

"Let every household feast."

The crowd roared.

"Let every family celebrate."

The cheers became deafening.

"And let all Egypt give thanks."

The city erupted into celebration once more.

Neferet stood beside her mother and sister on the balcony.

Looking out across the sea of smiling faces.

The sight moved her deeply.

She had dreamed of home countless times.

But she had never imagined this.

Meritites gently touched her arm.

"They never stopped loving you."

Neferet smiled softly.

"I can see that."

Henutsen laughed.

"They drove the cooks mad all morning."

"What happened?"

"They demanded enough food for half the kingdom."

Neferet laughed.

The sound felt good.

Natural.

For a brief moment she felt like the young princess she had once been.

The first day passed in celebration.

The palace filled with visitors.

Nobles arrived from distant regions.

Officials offered gifts.

Priests performed ceremonies of thanksgiving.

Everywhere Neferet went, people greeted her with joy.

Everywhere she went, people wanted to hear her voice.

To see her smile.

To reassure themselves she was truly back.

Yet despite all the excitement, a shadow lingered at the edge of her thoughts.

John.

At lunch she found herself looking toward the entrance.

Expecting him to walk through the doorway.

He never did.

During the afternoon she caught herself searching the palace gardens.

The courtyards.

The balconies.

Anywhere.

Every time she remembered.

He wasn't free.

He was below.

In a cell.

That evening, as music echoed through the palace, Neferet stood alone on a balcony overlooking the city.

The celebration continued below.

Thousands of lights flickered like stars.

The sight should have filled her with happiness.

Instead she felt restless.

A familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

"You're worried."

Neferet turned.

Queen Meritites stood beside her.

The Queen smiled gently.

"Mothers notice these things."

Neferet looked away.

"I should be happy."

"You are."

"I am."

The answer came quickly.

Because it was true.

She was happy.

Her family lived.

Her home remained.

Everything she had missed was here.

And yet...

"You are thinking about the stranger."

Neferet froze.

Meritites watched her carefully.

The Queen's eyes seemed to understand more than Neferet wanted to admit.

"What is his name?"

"John."

The Queen nodded.

"John."

The foreign name sounded unusual in her voice.

"He brought you home?"

Neferet looked toward the stars.

"Yes."

"Then I suspect I owe him my gratitude."

Emotion filled Neferet's eyes.

Her mother smiled softly.

Then she kissed her daughter's forehead and left her alone.

The second day of celebration arrived.

The city became even louder.

Merchants gave away food.

Musicians performed in every square.

Children filled the streets.

The atmosphere felt almost magical.

Yet beneath the palace, John Carter sat alone.

Far below the celebration.

Far below the music.

Far below the sunlight.

He listened to the distant sounds echoing faintly through stone.

Laughter.

Drums.

Songs.

The entire kingdom celebrated.

And he sat in chains.

John leaned against the wall.

He wasn't angry.

Not really.

He understood.

A missing princess had returned.

Accompanied by a mysterious foreigner.

Questions had to be answered.

Still, understanding something did not make it pleasant.

He closed his eyes.

Thinking of Neferet.

Wondering if she was happy.

Wondering if she was safe.

Wondering if she remembered him at all.

Above him, Neferet sat in her chamber looking out the window.

Thinking exactly the same thing.

The third day arrived.

The greatest celebration yet.

The palace prepared for distinguished guests.

Important guests.

Royal guests.

Word spread quickly through the court.

A neighboring king was arriving.

Along with his family.

Neferet immediately knew who it would be.

A knot formed in her stomach.

Henutsen noticed.

"What is it?"

Neferet forced a smile.

"Nothing."

But deep inside she knew.

The celebrations were about to change.

And so was her future.

End of Chapter 6

The Journey Home

Chapter 7: The Prince Arrives

The third day of celebration dawned bright and clear.

From the palace balcony, Neferet watched the city awaken.

Music already drifted through the streets below.

Vendors prepared food.

Children chased one another through crowded markets.

Flags fluttered from rooftops and towers.

The celebration showed no signs of ending.

Yet Neferet felt strangely uneasy.

She knew why.

Today Prince Khaemwaset would arrive.

Once, the thought would have filled her with excitement.

Before her disappearance, the prince had been a welcome presence in her life.

He was kind.

Respectful.

Intelligent.

Unlike many noblemen, he never boasted of his accomplishments.

He listened more than he spoke.

And he genuinely cared for the people of Egypt.

Neferet had always respected him.

But respect was not love.

Now that difference weighed heavily upon her heart.

A knock sounded at her chamber door.

Before she could answer, Henutsen burst inside.

"He's here!"

Neferet sighed.

"I assumed so."

Henutsen grinned mischievously.

"The entire palace knows."

The younger princess hurried to the window.

"Father ordered musicians to greet him."

Neferet walked beside her sister.

Far below, a large procession approached the palace gates.

Rows of soldiers marched in perfect formation.

Chariots followed.

Servants carried banners bearing royal symbols.

Behind them came wagons filled with gifts.

Gold.

Ivory.

Rare animals.

Treasures from distant lands.

The procession seemed endless.

Henutsen's eyes widened.

"That is a lot of gifts."

Neferet smiled faintly.

"It always is."

The younger princess looked at her carefully.

"You don't seem excited."

Neferet said nothing.

Fortunately, Henutsen was distracted by the spectacle below.

Trumpets sounded throughout the city.

The palace gates opened.

The procession entered.

Minutes later, servants arrived to escort the royal family to the main courtyard.

Neferet followed her parents and sister through the palace halls.

Every corridor buzzed with activity.

Every servant seemed to be rushing somewhere.

The atmosphere felt almost as festive as her own return.

When they reached the courtyard, hundreds of guests had already gathered.

Nobles.

Officials.

Military commanders.

Priests.

All waiting.

The music stopped.

A hush fell over the crowd.

Prince Khaemwaset stepped forward.

For a moment, everything else seemed to disappear.

He had changed.

The young man Neferet remembered had become a confident prince.

Tall.

Handsome.

Strong.

Yet there remained a gentleness in his eyes that she instantly recognized.

For several seconds he simply stared at her.

As though afraid she might vanish if he blinked.

Then a smile slowly appeared.

"Neferet."

His voice was filled with emotion.

Neferet smiled warmly.

"Khaemwaset."

The prince approached.

The crowd watched silently.

Years of uncertainty hung between them.

"I hardly know what to say."

Neferet laughed softly.

"That makes two of us."

The prince shook his head in disbelief.

"I spent years imagining this moment."

His eyes glistened.

"Sometimes I convinced myself you were alive."

He smiled sadly.

"Most days I feared otherwise."

Neferet lowered her gaze.

"I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

The sincerity in his voice touched her.

He truly meant it.

The prince turned toward Khufu and bowed respectfully.

"My Pharaoh."

Khufu embraced him warmly.

"Welcome."

Queen Meritites greeted him next.

Then Henutsen.

The younger princess smiled brightly.

"It is good to see you again."

"And you."

Khaemwaset laughed.

"You've grown."

Henutsen rolled her eyes.

"Everyone keeps saying that."

The crowd laughed.

For a moment the atmosphere became lighter.

Then another royal chariot arrived.

The conversations stopped.

A distinguished older man stepped down.

Beside him came a regal woman dressed in elegant robes.

King Amenhotep.

And Queen Nefru.

The parents of Prince Khaemwaset.

The rulers of one of Egypt's most important allied kingdoms.

Khufu immediately stepped forward.

The two kings embraced.

Old friends reunited.

The crowd applauded politely.

Servants began unloading gifts.

The display was extraordinary.

Chests overflowing with gold.

Jewelry adorned with precious stones.

Exotic fabrics.

Rare carvings.

Even several magnificent horses.

The assembled nobles whispered among themselves.

The gifts represented enormous wealth.

Neferet already knew what they meant.

And so did her mother.

Meritites quietly reached for her daughter's hand.

The gesture was small.

But comforting.

The Queen understood exactly what was coming.

As the celebrations continued, Neferet found her thoughts drifting elsewhere.

Far beneath the palace.

To a small stone cell.

To a man who knew nothing of the festivities above.

To a man who had crossed time itself for her.

The music swelled around her.

Guests laughed.

Servants hurried through the courtyard.

Yet the knot in her stomach only tightened.

Because she knew this was only the beginning.

And before long, choices would have to be made.

Choices that could change all of their lives forever.

End of Chapter 7

The Journey Home

Chapter 8: The Marriage Proposal

The celebrations continued well into the afternoon.

Musicians performed beneath colorful banners.

Servants moved among the guests carrying trays of food and wine.

Laughter echoed throughout the palace courtyard.

Yet beneath the joy, an air of anticipation lingered.

Everyone knew the true purpose of King Amenhotep's visit.

The gifts.

The timing.

The presence of Prince Khaemwaset.

None of it was accidental.

As the sun began its descent, Pharaoh Khufu invited his royal guests into the Great Hall.

The enormous chamber quickly filled.

Nobles occupied their places.

Priests gathered near the front.

Military commanders stood along the walls.

The royal families sat together beneath towering columns decorated with gold and lapis.

Neferet sat beside her mother.

Across from her sat Prince Khaemwaset.

Their eyes met briefly.

The prince smiled.

Neferet returned the smile politely.

Then looked away.

A knot tightened inside her stomach.

The hall gradually became quiet.

At last King Amenhotep rose from his seat.

The room immediately fell silent.

He was a respected ruler.

An ally of Pharaoh Khufu for many years.

When he spoke, everyone listened.

"My friend."

He inclined his head toward Khufu.

"For many years our kingdoms have prospered together."

Khufu nodded.

"They have."

"Our people have shared peace."

"They have."

"Our families have shared friendship."

A smile appeared on Khufu's face.

"That is true."

Amenhotep's gaze moved toward Neferet.

The hall seemed to grow even quieter.

Then toward his son.

Prince Khaemwaset sat perfectly still.

Everyone knew what was coming.

Still, hearing it spoken aloud carried a different weight.

Amenhotep spread his arms.

"I have come today not only as a king."

He paused.

"But as a father."

The nobles exchanged knowing glances.

The moment had arrived.

"My son, Prince Khaemwaset, has long admired Princess Neferet."

Neferet lowered her eyes.

"Through the years of her absence, he never abandoned hope."

The prince remained silent.

His expression revealed everything.

The love.

The pain.

The years of waiting.

Amenhotep continued.

"Now that the gods have returned her safely to us, I come before Pharaoh Khufu and Queen Meritites with a humble request."

The hall became completely silent.

Even the servants stopped moving.

King Amenhotep bowed his head.

"I ask for Princess Neferet's hand in marriage."

The words echoed throughout the chamber.

For several moments nobody spoke.

Then whispers spread among the nobles.

Many smiled.

Others nodded approvingly.

To them, it seemed perfect.

Two powerful families.

Two respected kingdoms.

A union that would strengthen Egypt.

Everything made sense.

Everything except Neferet's heart.

She remained perfectly still.

Years of royal training prevented her from revealing her thoughts.

Only Queen Meritites noticed the slight tension in her daughter's hands.

The Queen quietly placed a reassuring hand over them.

Neferet looked at her mother.

Meritites offered a gentle smile.

Not approval.

Not disapproval.

Simply understanding.

Across the hall, Prince Khaemwaset looked at Neferet with hope in his eyes.

The sight made her heart ache.

Because he was a good man.

A truly good man.

And good men were sometimes the hardest people to disappoint.

King Amenhotep returned to his seat.

All eyes shifted toward Pharaoh Khufu.

The ruler of Egypt sat thoughtfully upon his throne.

His expression revealed nothing.

The silence stretched.

Finally Khufu stood.

The hall immediately fell silent once more.

The Pharaoh looked first toward Amenhotep.

Then toward Khaemwaset.

Finally toward Neferet.

For a brief moment their eyes met.

Neferet's pulse quickened.

Then the moment passed.

Khufu smiled.

"My friend."

He addressed Amenhotep.

"We have stood beside one another for many years."

Amenhotep nodded.

"We have."

"Our kingdoms have prospered together."

"They have."

"Our friendship has never wavered."

Amenhotep smiled.

"Never."

Khufu looked toward the assembled guests.

Then raised his voice.

"Your proposal honors my family."

A murmur of approval swept through the room.

Neferet felt her stomach tighten.

She knew what was coming next.

And for the first time since returning home, she felt trapped.

Not by chains.

Not by walls.

But by duty.

By expectation.

By the weight of an entire kingdom.

Far below the palace, hidden beneath stone and darkness, John Carter sat alone in his cell.

Unaware that above him, the future was beginning to close around the woman he loved.

End of Chapter 8

The Journey Home

Chapter 9: The Pharaoh Accepts

The Great Hall remained silent.

Hundreds of eyes were fixed upon Pharaoh Khufu.

The ruler of Egypt stood before his court.

Before his allies.

Before his family.

And before his daughter.

King Amenhotep waited patiently.

Prince Khaemwaset sat proudly beside his parents.

The nobles watched with anticipation.

To them, the outcome seemed obvious.

This marriage would unite two powerful royal houses.

It would strengthen alliances.

Secure prosperity.

And restore the future everyone once expected for Princess Neferet.

Only Neferet felt the weight settling upon her shoulders.

Khufu slowly descended the steps of his throne.

The hall remained completely silent.

The Pharaoh stopped before his longtime friend.

"Amenhotep."

The king inclined his head.

"Khufu."

A smile appeared on the Pharaoh's face.

"We have shared many years together."

"We have."

"We have stood beside one another in peace and hardship."

Amenhotep nodded.

"As brothers."

Khufu looked around the hall.

Then spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"There are few men in Egypt whom I trust more than King Amenhotep."

The crowd murmured in agreement.

The two rulers had built their friendship over decades.

Everyone knew it.

Khufu turned toward Prince Khaemwaset.

The young prince immediately stood.

The Pharaoh studied him carefully.

Strong.

Intelligent.

Honorable.

Everything a future king should be.

More importantly, everything a father could want for his daughter.

Khufu smiled.

"Khaemwaset."

The prince bowed respectfully.

"My Pharaoh."

"You have always conducted yourself with honor."

"Thank you, my lord."

"You have served your people faithfully."

"I have tried."

"You have remained loyal to my family."

The prince glanced toward Neferet.

A small smile touched his lips.

"Always."

Khufu nodded approvingly.

Then he turned toward the assembled court.

"The proposal honors my family."

Cheers erupted immediately.

The nobles applauded.

Several ministers smiled openly.

Even some of the guards exchanged pleased looks.

The match seemed perfect.

Khufu raised his hand for silence.

The room quieted once more.

Then came the words Neferet had feared.

"I accept."

The hall exploded into celebration.

Applause echoed from every corner.

Guests rose to their feet.

Servants smiled.

Musicians began playing.

To everyone present, this was wonderful news.

The future of two kingdoms had just been secured.

Neferet remained perfectly still.

Only years of royal training prevented her emotions from showing.

Inside, her heart sank.

She forced a smile.

A princess knew her duties.

A princess understood expectations.

A princess did not embarrass her family before the court.

So she smiled.

And everyone believed she was happy.

Everyone except Queen Meritites.

The Queen saw the sadness hidden behind her daughter's eyes.

She saw the tension in her hands.

The hesitation in her smile.

But she said nothing.

Not yet.

Across the hall, Prince Khaemwaset looked happier than Neferet had ever seen him.

Years of uncertainty had finally ended.

The woman he loved had returned.

And now her father had accepted their future together.

The prince stepped forward.

The crowd gradually quieted.

Everyone sensed another important moment approaching.

Khaemwaset stopped before Neferet.

For a brief moment, neither spoke.

The prince looked directly into her eyes.

His voice softened.

"When you disappeared..."

The hall grew silent.

"...a part of me disappeared with you."

Neferet lowered her gaze.

The sincerity in his voice was impossible to ignore.

Every word came from his heart.

"There were days I believed you were alive."

He smiled sadly.

"And many nights when I feared I would never see you again."

Several members of the court looked visibly moved.

Even Khufu watched quietly.

The prince continued.

"Now the gods have returned you to us."

His voice grew stronger.

"They have returned you to me."

The hall remained silent.

Listening.

Watching.

Feeling every word.

Khaemwaset took another step closer.

"I swear before the gods."

He placed a hand over his heart.

"I will spend every day protecting you."

Neferet felt her throat tighten.

"I will stand beside you."

The prince smiled warmly.

"I will never lose you again."

For a moment, the hall disappeared.

The voices faded.

The celebration vanished.

Neferet saw only two men.

One standing before her.

A prince.

Honorable.

Kind.

Everything her family desired.

And another man.

Far below the palace.

Alone.

In chains.

Waiting.

She thought of John.

His smile.

His courage.

The impossible journey he had made for her.

The sacrifices he had accepted without complaint.

The life he had abandoned.

For her.

Neferet looked back at Khaemwaset.

Then smiled.

Warmly.

Kindly.

The same smile she would have given years ago.

Before everything changed.

The prince's face brightened immediately.

He believed it was a sign.

A promise.

Hope.

The crowd applauded.

The musicians played louder.

The celebration resumed.

But deep inside, Neferet knew the truth.

Her smile belonged to duty.

Her heart belonged elsewhere.

And beneath the palace, completely unaware of what had just happened, John Carter sat in darkness.

Waiting for a future that seemed to be slipping farther away with every passing hour.

End of Chapter 9

The Journey Home

Chapter 10: The Prince's Vow

The celebration continued long into the evening.

Music echoed through the palace halls.

Servants carried endless trays of food and wine.

Guests laughed and shared stories beneath the glow of hundreds of oil lamps.

Everywhere Neferet looked, she saw smiling faces.

Everyone seemed happy.

Everyone except herself.

Not that anyone would have noticed.

Years of royal training had taught her how to hide her emotions.

How to smile when required.

How to speak when necessary.

How to remain composed when her heart was anything but calm.

Tonight those lessons served her well.

As nobles approached to congratulate her, she accepted their kind words graciously.

As ministers praised the union between the two royal families, she thanked them politely.

As distant relatives spoke of the future, she smiled.

And smiled.

And smiled.

Until her face began to ache.

Across the hall, Prince Khaemwaset seemed unable to stop smiling.

Several times their eyes met.

Each time he looked genuinely happy.

Neferet found herself feeling guilty.

Not because she disliked him.

Quite the opposite.

He was kind.

Honorable.

Everything a princess should want in a husband.

Yet every time she looked at him, she saw what could have been.

Not what was.

As the evening progressed, the musicians eventually grew quiet.

The conversations softened.

Attention slowly shifted toward the center of the hall.

Prince Khaemwaset rose from his seat.

Immediately the room became silent.

The prince looked nervous.

For perhaps the first time all evening.

His parents exchanged knowing smiles.

King Amenhotep folded his arms proudly.

Queen Nefru dabbed at her eyes.

Even before Khaemwaset spoke, everyone knew something important was about to happen.

The prince walked slowly toward Neferet.

The enormous hall watched in complete silence.

Neferet remained seated.

Her heart sank.

She already knew.

Khaemwaset stopped before her.

For a moment he simply looked at her.

As though gathering courage.

Then he knelt.

Gasps spread throughout the room.

Even though everyone expected it, the sight still carried enormous significance.

A prince kneeling before a princess.

Not as a ruler.

Not as a nobleman.

But as a man in love.

Khaemwaset lowered his head.

"When you disappeared..."

His voice was quiet.

Yet every word carried through the hall.

"...I believed the gods had abandoned me."

The room remained silent.

The prince looked up.

His eyes never left Neferet.

"There were days I searched for answers."

He smiled sadly.

"And nights I searched the stars."

A few guests lowered their eyes respectfully.

The sincerity of his words touched everyone present.

"I asked the gods why they had taken you."

Neferet felt a lump form in her throat.

Not because she loved him.

But because she knew he meant every word.

Khaemwaset continued.

"I would have crossed deserts to find you."

His voice strengthened.

"I would have crossed kingdoms."

Another step.

Another promise.

"I would have spent my life searching."

The prince took her hand gently.

The hall watched in silence.

"But the gods were kinder than I deserved."

A smile appeared on his face.

"They brought you home."

For a moment his voice almost broke.

"They brought you back."

Neferet could feel hundreds of eyes upon her.

Watching.

Waiting.

The prince squeezed her hand.

Then spoke the words everyone would remember.

"I swear before the gods and before Egypt itself."

The hall became utterly silent.

"I will stand beside you for the rest of my life."

His voice carried strength.

Conviction.

Love.

"I will protect you."

A pause.

"I will honor you."

Another pause.

"I will never lose you again."

For several moments nobody moved.

The words hung in the air.

Powerful.

Beautiful.

Heartfelt.

Then applause erupted throughout the hall.

Guests rose to their feet.

Servants smiled.

Several nobles wiped away tears.

Even King Amenhotep looked emotional.

The vow had touched everyone.

Everyone except the one person whose heart it sought.

Neferet looked down at Khaemwaset.

She saw the hope in his eyes.

The devotion.

The future he imagined.

A future that included her.

A future she once might have accepted gladly.

But that future belonged to another life.

Another version of herself.

The version who had never stepped through the Gate.

Never met John Carter.

Never seen the future.

Never learned what true love felt like.

Neferet smiled warmly.

The prince's face brightened immediately.

To everyone watching, it looked like acceptance.

Approval.

Perhaps even affection.

The hall erupted into applause once more.

Khaemwaset rose to his feet.

Relief filled his expression.

Hope filled his eyes.

Neferet smiled again.

Because she could do nothing else.

Yet behind that smile, another face lingered in her thoughts.

A young man with blond hair.

A stranger from another age.

A man who now sat alone beneath the palace.

In chains.

Waiting.

Wondering.

Perhaps suffering because of her.

The music began again.

The celebration resumed.

The guests laughed.

The wine flowed.

The future seemed bright.

But Neferet could not shake a terrible feeling.

Because while everyone above celebrated a marriage.

The man she loved remained forgotten below.

And with every passing hour, the distance between them seemed to grow.

End of Chapter 10

The Journey Home

Chapter 11: The Cellar

Far beneath the palace, the celebration sounded like a distant dream.

John Carter sat alone in the darkness.

The stone wall behind him was cool against his back.

The air smelled of dust and damp earth.

A single torch flickered outside the cell, casting long shadows through the iron bars.

Above him, Egypt celebrated.

Below, he waited.

John listened quietly.

Every now and then, faint sounds drifted down through the stone.

Laughter.

Music.

The distant beat of drums.

Cheers from the city.

Three days ago he had been standing in a cave in Indiana.

Three days ago he had said goodbye to everyone he knew.

Now he sat in a prison cell beneath Pharaoh Khufu's palace.

Life had a strange sense of humor.

A faint smile crossed his face.

The irony wasn't lost on him.

For years he had dreamed of returning to ancient Egypt.

Now he was here.

And locked up.

A sound echoed down the corridor.

Footsteps.

John looked up.

One of the guards approached carrying a clay bowl.

The man stopped outside the cell.

Without a word he pushed the food through the opening beneath the bars.

John nodded politely.

"Thank you."

The guard seemed surprised.

Most prisoners were angry.

Some shouted.

Others begged.

This foreigner simply thanked him.

The guard lingered for a moment.

Curious.

"You are not afraid?"

John looked at him.

"Should I be?"

The guard shrugged.

"The charge against you is serious."

John nodded slowly.

"So I've heard."

The guard hesitated.

Then lowered his voice.

"The entire city speaks of the Princess."

A small smile appeared on John's face.

"I imagine they do."

The guard studied him.

"You must be either very brave or very foolish."

John laughed quietly.

"Probably both."

The guard couldn't help smiling.

Then he continued down the corridor.

Silence returned.

John stared at the bowl in front of him.

Bread.

Fruit.

Water.

Simple food.

But enough.

As he ate, his thoughts drifted.

To Jack.

To Dr. Mitchell.

To Emily.

He wondered what they were doing now.

Had the cave already been sealed?

Had the laboratory been dismantled?

Would anyone ever know what happened to him?

Would anyone ever find proof that he existed here?

The thought didn't bother him as much as he expected.

He had made his choice.

The moment he stepped through the Gate with Neferet, he knew there would be no return.

No second chance.

No backup plan.

Only Egypt.

Only her.

John finished his meal and leaned back against the wall.

His thoughts turned toward Neferet.

Was she happy?

He hoped so.

After everything she had lost.

After everything she had endured.

She deserved this reunion.

She deserved her family.

Her mother.

Her father.

Henutsen.

All the people she had spent years missing.

A faint ache settled in his chest.

Because while he wanted her happiness...

Part of him missed her.

Already.

He laughed softly at the realization.

Three days.

Only three days.

And somehow it felt much longer.

Another burst of laughter echoed faintly from above.

The celebration continued.

John closed his eyes.

Trying to imagine Neferet among the crowds.

Smiling.

Laughing.

Home.

The image brought him comfort.

Then another thought appeared.

Prince Khaemwaset.

John had noticed him immediately.

Handsome.

Confident.

Noble.

The kind of man any king would choose for his daughter.

The kind of man who belonged here.

Unlike him.

John looked down at his shackled wrists.

The iron reflected the torchlight.

A foreigner.

A stranger.

A man from another age.

What future could he possibly have in Egypt?

The answer seemed obvious.

None.

For the first time since returning, uncertainty crept into his thoughts.

Not fear.

Not regret.

Just uncertainty.

Above him, the palace celebrated the return of its princess.

Perhaps soon it would celebrate her marriage as well.

The possibility struck harder than he expected.

John looked toward the ceiling.

Toward the distant sounds of music and laughter.

Then he sighed.

If Neferet chose that future...

If she chose her family.

Her duty.

Her kingdom.

He would accept it.

Because loving someone sometimes meant letting them be where they belonged.

Even if that place wasn't beside you.

The torch outside the cell flickered.

The shadows shifted.

And alone beneath the palace, John Carter sat quietly in the darkness.

Waiting.

For judgment.

For answers.

For whatever future awaited him.

End of Chapter 11

The Journey Home

Chapter 12: Menka's Visit

The fourth day after the trial preparations began quietly.

Far beneath the palace, John Carter sat alone in his cell.

The celebrations above had faded.

The music was gone.

The laughter had disappeared.

Only silence remained.

A single torch flickered outside the bars.

Its light danced across the stone walls.

John sat with his back against the wall.

Lost in thought.

He had no idea what awaited him.

A trial.

A possible execution.

Perhaps worse.

Strangely, none of those thoughts troubled him as much as one simple question.

Was Neferet alright?

He closed his eyes.

Remembering her smile.

Remembering her laugh.

Remembering the way she looked at him before they were separated.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke the silence.

Slow.

Steady.

Familiar.

John opened his eyes.

A figure emerged from the shadows.

An elderly man carrying a basket.

John immediately smiled.

"Menka."

The old gatekeeper grinned.

"Still alive, I see."

John laughed.

"Barely."

Menka approached the cell.

The guards nodded respectfully and unlocked the gate.

The old man entered carrying the basket.

The smell alone made John's stomach growl.

Fresh bread.

Dates.

Cheese.

Fruit.

Food far better than anything a prisoner normally received.

Menka sat down on a stone bench.

"I brought lunch."

John looked at the basket.

"I think I love you."

Menka snorted.

"Neferet would object."

John laughed.

For the first time in days.

A genuine laugh.

The old gatekeeper seemed pleased.

"Good."

"What?"

"You're laughing."

John shrugged.

"I forgot how."

Menka nodded slowly.

"That is dangerous."

The old man handed him a piece of bread.

"No man should forget how to laugh."

John accepted it gratefully.

For several moments they ate in comfortable silence.

Like old friends sharing a meal.

Finally Menka spoke.

"The city is talking."

John raised an eyebrow.

"About me?"

"Mostly."

"That's unfortunate."

Menka chuckled.

"Some believe you are a sorcerer."

John smiled.

"Interesting."

"Others believe you are a spy."

John nodded.

"Less interesting."

The old man leaned closer.

"And one woman claims you are actually a god."

John nearly choked.

"A god?"

Menka nodded.

"She also believes her goat can predict the future."

John laughed so hard tears appeared in his eyes.

Menka joined him.

The laughter echoed through the prison corridor.

For a brief moment neither felt the weight of the coming trial.

Eventually the laughter faded.

The old man's smile disappeared.

John immediately noticed.

Something was wrong.

Menka stared at the floor.

As though deciding whether to continue.

Finally he sighed.

"There is something you should know."

John's smile vanished.

"What is it?"

The old gatekeeper looked up.

"The family of Prince Khaemwaset has arrived."

John felt a knot form in his stomach.

Menka continued.

"They brought gifts."

"That sounds expensive."

"It was."

The old man remained serious.

"Gold."

A pause.

"Jewels."

Another pause.

"Fine linens."

John understood.

Marriage gifts.

The traditional offering between royal families.

Menka nodded.

"The proposal has been accepted."

Silence.

The words struck harder than John expected.

Even though he already suspected.

Even though it made perfect sense.

Hearing it aloud hurt.

The old gatekeeper watched him carefully.

John stared at the torchlight.

Trying not to react.

Trying not to let the pain show.

After a while he managed a smile.

A weak one.

"I'm happy for her."

Menka frowned.

"No, you're not."

John laughed softly.

"No."

The old man nodded.

"At least you're honest."

Silence returned.

The torch crackled.

Somewhere above, faint sounds drifted through the stone.

Life continuing.

The kingdom moving forward.

Menka finally spoke again.

"There is more."

John looked up.

The old man's expression had grown serious.

Very serious.

"The marriage will take place soon."

John nodded.

"I understand."

Menka shook his head.

"You don't."

The old gatekeeper leaned forward.

"The wedding will happen after your trial."

John frowned.

"My trial?"

Menka looked surprised.

"No one told you?"

John slowly stood.

"What trial?"

The old man stared at him.

Then sighed heavily.

"The charge is kidnapping the Princess."

The words hung in the air.

John blinked.

Then laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was absurd.

Kidnapping.

Neferet had practically dragged him through time.

Menka rubbed his forehead.

"I know."

John continued laughing.

"This is insane."

"I know."

"I didn't kidnap anyone."

"I know."

The old man sighed again.

"Unfortunately, convincing everyone else may prove difficult."

The laughter faded.

Reality returned.

The trial.

The charge.

The possible consequences.

John slowly sat down.

For the first time since Menka arrived, genuine concern entered his eyes.

The old gatekeeper placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You are not alone."

John looked at him.

Menka smiled.

A wise smile.

A reassuring smile.

The smile of a man who had seen much in his long life.

"Have faith."

John nodded.

"I'll try."

Menka stood.

The visit was ending.

Before leaving, he paused at the cell door.

Then looked back.

"One more thing."

"What?"

The old man smiled knowingly.

"The Princess has not forgotten you."

For the first time that day, hope returned.

A small hope.

But enough.

Menka nodded.

Then disappeared into the shadows.

Leaving John alone once more.

But no longer quite as alone as before.

End of Chapter 12

The Journey Home

Chapter 13: The Trial

Menka's words lingered long after he left.

The marriage proposal had been accepted.

Prince Khaemwaset would soon marry Neferet.

John sat alone in the silence of his cell.

The old gatekeeper had not tried to soften the truth.

He had simply stated it.

And perhaps that was best.

Reality rarely became easier when hidden.

The torch outside the cell crackled softly.

John stared at the stone floor.

His thoughts drifted to Neferet.

He imagined her in the palace above.

Surrounded by her family.

Surrounded by expectations.

Surrounded by a future that no longer seemed to include him.

The strange thing was that he wasn't angry.

Not at her.

Not at Khufu.

Not even at Khaemwaset.

The prince had done nothing wrong.

He loved Neferet.

Any man could see that.

Any father would approve of him.

John sighed.

The situation was almost absurd.

He had crossed four thousand years for the woman he loved.

Only to lose her after reaching the destination.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor.

This time there was no mistaking the sound.

Several guards.

More than usual.

John slowly stood.

The guards approached the cell.

Their expressions were serious.

The captain carried a scroll.

Not a good sign.

The gate opened.

The captain stepped inside.

"John Carter."

John nodded.

"That's me."

The captain unrolled the scroll.

His voice echoed through the underground chamber.

"By order of Pharaoh Khufu, you are hereby informed that a royal trial shall be held."

John folded his arms.

"A trial."

The captain nodded.

"Yes."

"What am I accused of?"

The captain hesitated.

Perhaps because even saying the words aloud felt significant.

Then he continued.

"You stand accused of kidnapping Princess Neferet."

The words hung in the air.

John couldn't help laughing softly.

The captain frowned.

"You find this amusing?"

"Not amusing."

John shook his head.

"Just ironic."

The captain clearly did not understand.

John didn't expect him to.

How could anyone understand?

The truth sounded impossible.

The princess had willingly stepped through a portal connecting two worlds.

She had chosen to go.

She had chosen to stay.

But none of that could be explained.

At least not without sounding completely insane.

The captain rolled up the scroll.

"The charge is among the most serious crimes in Egypt."

John nodded slowly.

"I assumed as much."

The captain studied him carefully.

Most prisoners reacted differently.

Fear.

Panic.

Anger.

This foreigner seemed strangely calm.

"Do you understand the accusation?"

"I do."

The captain looked uncomfortable.

Then finally said the thing neither man wanted to discuss.

"If convicted, the punishment could be death."

Silence filled the corridor.

The guards shifted uneasily.

John simply nodded.

"Thank you for telling me."

The captain blinked.

"That is all you have to say?"

John smiled faintly.

"What would you prefer?"

The captain had no answer.

For a moment he almost seemed to respect the prisoner standing before him.

Almost.

Finally he stepped back.

"The trial will be held soon."

The gate closed.

The lock clicked.

The guards departed.

Their footsteps gradually faded into silence.

John remained standing.

Death.

The possibility should have frightened him.

Yet strangely it did not.

Perhaps because he had already made peace with his choice.

The day he stepped through the Gate with Neferet, he accepted the risks.

The possibility of never returning.

The possibility of losing everything.

Even the possibility of death.

He walked to the small opening high in the wall.

A sliver of sunlight shone through.

Somewhere above, life continued.

The palace bustled with activity.

Servants hurried through hallways.

Nobles discussed politics.

The royal family prepared for the future.

And Neferet...

He wondered if she knew.

He wondered if anyone had told her.

A strange feeling settled over him.

Not fear.

Not regret.

Only one wish.

That she be happy.

Whatever happened.

Whatever choice she made.

Whatever future awaited her.

That she be happy.

John closed his eyes.

And for the first time since arriving in Egypt, he began preparing himself for the possibility that his story might not have a happy ending.

Far above, in her chamber, Princess Neferet stood beside a window overlooking the city.

The sun was beginning to set.

A servant approached and bowed.

"My Princess."

Neferet turned.

"What is it?"

The servant hesitated.

Then lowered her eyes.

"The Pharaoh has ordered a trial."

Neferet's heart stopped.

"A trial?"

The servant nodded.

"For the foreigner."

The room suddenly felt smaller.

Colder.

More dangerous.

Neferet stared out the window.

Toward the horizon.

Toward nothing.

And whispered a single word.

"John."

For the first time since returning home, genuine fear entered her heart.

Because she finally understood.

The greatest challenge was not returning to Egypt.

The greatest challenge had only just begun.

End of Chapter 13

The Journey Home

Chapter 14: The Secret Request

The news spread quickly through the palace.

A royal trial.

For the foreigner.

For John Carter.

By sunset, nearly every servant, guard, and noble seemed to know.

The details changed depending on who told the story.

Some claimed John was a spy.

Others insisted he was a criminal.

A few believed he was a sorcerer.

Only Neferet knew the truth.

And the truth frightened her more than the rumors.

She stood alone in her chamber long after darkness had fallen.

The city beyond the palace walls glowed beneath hundreds of torches.

The celebrations were over.

Reality had returned.

And reality was dangerous.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts.

"Enter."

Queen Meritites stepped inside.

The Queen immediately noticed the worry on her daughter's face.

"You have been standing there for an hour."

Neferet managed a weak smile.

"I did not realize."

Meritites approached.

"You are thinking about him."

It was not a question.

Neferet lowered her eyes.

For a long moment neither spoke.

Then the Queen gently touched her daughter's hand.

"Do you love him?"

The question struck harder than Neferet expected.

Because no one had asked her directly.

Not her father.

Not Henutsen.

Not Khaemwaset.

No one.

Only her mother.

Neferet looked away.

The answer felt obvious.

Yet saying it aloud made it real.

"Yes."

The word barely rose above a whisper.

Queen Meritites nodded slowly.

Not surprised.

Not disappointed.

Simply understanding.

"I thought so."

Neferet felt tears gathering.

"He left everything behind."

The Queen remained silent.

"He crossed time itself."

A tear escaped.

"He brought me home."

Meritites gently embraced her daughter.

Neferet closed her eyes.

For a moment she felt like a child again.

Safe.

Protected.

Loved.

"What should I do?"

The Queen sighed.

"I cannot answer that for you."

The words hurt because they were true.

Some choices belonged to no one else.

Eventually Meritites left.

Neferet remained alone.

Watching the stars.

Thinking.

Remembering.

The laboratory.

The future.

Emily.

Jack.

Dr. Mitchell.

John.

Always John.

At last a decision formed.

Suddenly she knew exactly what she needed.

Not advice.

Not comfort.

Not permission.

She needed to see him.

The thought came so clearly that she wondered why she hadn't realized it sooner.

Tomorrow might be too late.

The trial could change everything.

She needed to speak to him.

Tonight.

Immediately.

Neferet wrapped a cloak around her shoulders and slipped from her chamber.

The palace corridors were quiet.

Most nobles had retired for the evening.

Servants moved about with lowered voices.

The princess walked quickly through the shadows.

She knew exactly where she was going.

A small courtyard near the outer gardens.

A place where old men sometimes preferred peace and silence.

Sure enough, she found him there.

Menka sat alone beneath a palm tree.

Watching the moon.

The old gatekeeper smiled before she even spoke.

"I wondered how long it would take."

Neferet sat beside him.

"You knew I would come."

"I was counting on it."

The old man chuckled softly.

Neferet managed a faint smile.

Then her expression became serious.

"I need your help."

Menka nodded.

"I suspected that as well."

The princess looked toward the palace.

Toward the darkness beneath it.

Toward the prison below.

"I need to see John."

Menka remained silent.

The night breeze stirred the leaves overhead.

Finally he sighed.

"That will not be easy."

"I know."

"The Pharaoh would not approve."

"I know."

"The guards will ask questions."

"I know."

Menka looked at her carefully.

"And yet you came anyway."

Neferet nodded.

"Yes."

The old gatekeeper smiled sadly.

The expression reminded her of something her mother had said.

Years ago.

When she was very young.

A smile filled with wisdom.

And concern.

"You truly love him."

Neferet did not answer.

She didn't need to.

Menka already knew.

The old man slowly rose to his feet.

His joints protested the movement.

Age had not been kind to his body.

But his eyes remained sharp.

"Tomorrow night."

Neferet's heart skipped.

"You can do it?"

Menka chuckled.

"My dear Princess, I helped a man travel through time."

A mischievous smile appeared.

"Arranging a prison visit is considerably easier."

For the first time all day, Neferet laughed.

A real laugh.

Menka smiled.

"Tomorrow night."

The princess nodded.

"Tomorrow night."

As she walked back toward the palace, hope returned for the first time since hearing about the trial.

The future remained uncertain.

The danger remained real.

The trial still awaited them.

But tomorrow she would see John.

Tomorrow she would hear his voice.

And for now, that was enough.

End of Chapter 14

The Journey Home

Chapter 15: Through the Bars

The palace slept beneath a silver moon.

The celebrations had ended hours ago.

Most of the servants had retired to their quarters.

The guards spoke quietly among themselves.

The halls that had recently echoed with laughter now stood silent.

Neferet sat alone in her chamber.

Waiting.

Every minute felt like an hour.

Her eyes repeatedly drifted toward the door.

Toward the moonlit window.

Toward anything that might distract her from the anxiety building inside.

She had not seen John since the day he was taken away.

She did not know how he was being treated.

She did not know if he was frightened.

She did not know if he had lost hope.

And that uncertainty hurt more than anything.

At last there was a soft knock.

Neferet immediately stood.

"Enter."

The door opened.

Menka stepped inside.

The old gatekeeper wore a dark cloak.

His expression was calm.

But there was urgency in his eyes.

"It is time."

Relief flooded through her.

Without hesitation she followed him.

Together they slipped into the corridor.

The palace was quiet.

Moonlight spilled through open courtyards.

Torches flickered along the walls.

Menka led her through passages she had never noticed before.

Hidden staircases.

Forgotten corridors.

Ancient pathways known only to a handful of people.

The deeper they descended, the colder the air became.

The sounds of the palace gradually faded.

Soon only their footsteps echoed through the darkness.

Neferet's heart beat faster.

Each step brought her closer.

Closer to John.

Closer to answers.

Closer to the man she loved.

Eventually Menka stopped.

Ahead stretched a narrow prison corridor illuminated by a handful of torches.

Iron-barred cells lined both sides.

The old man turned toward her.

"You will not have long."

Neferet nodded.

"Thank you."

Menka smiled.

"Some things are worth the risk."

Then he quietly stepped away.

Giving them privacy.

Neferet walked forward alone.

Her footsteps seemed impossibly loud.

Then she saw him.

John sat against the wall of his cell.

His head lowered.

Lost in thought.

For a moment she simply stood there.

Watching him.

After everything that had happened.

After the return home.

After the celebrations.

After the fear.

He was finally only a few steps away.

As though sensing her presence, John slowly looked up.

For a brief moment he stared.

Almost unable to believe what he was seeing.

Then he jumped to his feet.

"Neferet."

The relief in his voice nearly broke her heart.

She hurried forward.

Stopping only when the iron bars separated them.

For several seconds neither spoke.

Neither knew where to begin.

Both simply stared at one another.

Making sure the other was real.

At last Neferet smiled.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

John smiled too.

"I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me."

Neferet laughed softly through her tears.

"Never."

The answer came instantly.

Without hesitation.

Without doubt.

Never.

John stepped closer.

The bars now separated them by only inches.

"Are you alright?"

Neferet nodded.

"And you?"

John glanced around the prison.

"I've stayed in better places."

She laughed.

"I should hope so."

The sound echoed through the corridor.

For the first time in days, both felt a little lighter.

A little more hopeful.

Neferet slowly reached through the bars.

John did the same.

Their fingers met.

Then intertwined.

The simple touch felt like a miracle.

Neither wanted to let go.

Neferet lowered her eyes.

"I heard about the trial."

John nodded.

"So did I."

The attempt at humor failed.

Neither laughed.

The reality was too serious.

Neferet looked up.

"I am frightened."

John gently squeezed her hand.

"So am I."

The admission surprised her.

"You?"

John smiled sadly.

"Mostly for you."

Tears returned to her eyes.

Even now he was thinking about her first.

Always her.

Neferet hesitated.

Then spoke the words weighing heavily upon her heart.

"My father accepted the marriage proposal."

John's smile faded.

He had expected it.

Menka had warned him.

Still, hearing it from her hurt.

"Khaemwaset."

Neferet nodded.

John looked away briefly.

Trying to hide the pain.

Trying to remain strong.

For her.

When he looked back, she could see the sadness in his eyes.

And for the first time she truly understood what this situation was doing to him.

Neferet moved closer.

"As a princess, I smiled."

John remained silent.

"As a daughter, I nodded."

Still silent.

Then she looked directly into his eyes.

"But as Neferet..."

A tear slid down her cheek.

"...my heart never left you."

John closed his eyes.

The words struck deeper than anything he had heard since returning to Egypt.

For several moments neither spoke.

The prison.

The trial.

The kingdom.

Everything faded away.

There was only them.

Separated by iron.

Yet closer than ever.

Finally John spoke.

"What happens if the trial goes badly?"

Neferet immediately shook her head.

"No."

"Neferet—"

"No."

Her voice trembled.

But her resolve did not.

"I will not lose you."

John smiled sadly.

"You don't know that."

She stepped even closer.

"I crossed time for you."

John blinked.

The words caught him off guard.

A small smile appeared.

"Actually, I think I crossed time for you."

For the first time that night, she laughed.

A genuine laugh.

John laughed too.

The sound filled the dark corridor.

Even Menka smiled from a distance.

The old gatekeeper watched quietly.

Content to let them have their moment.

Eventually the laughter faded.

Silence returned.

Comfortable silence.

The kind shared only by people who truly loved one another.

Then distant footsteps echoed from the corridor.

Menka immediately appeared.

His expression serious.

"The guards are returning."

The moment was ending.

Too soon.

Far too soon.

Neferet's heart sank.

John squeezed her hand one final time.

"Whatever happens."

She shook her head.

"No."

"Whatever happens," he repeated gently, "I do not regret coming for you."

The tears returned instantly.

Neither looked away.

Neither let go.

Until the very last second.

Then reluctantly their hands separated.

Neferet stepped back.

John remained behind the bars.

Watching her.

The woman he loved.

The woman worth crossing time itself for.

As Menka guided her away, Neferet turned one final time.

Their eyes met.

No words were needed.

Both understood.

Tomorrow would bring judgment.

Tomorrow would bring uncertainty.

But tonight they had found one another again.

And for now, that was enough.

End of Chapter 15

The Journey Home

Chapter 16: The Trial Begins

The morning sun rose over Giza.

Its golden light bathed the Great Pyramid and stretched across the desert sands.

Normally it would have been a day like any other.

But not today.

Today the kingdom waited.

Today Pharaoh Khufu would pass judgment.

Word had spread throughout Egypt faster than the Nile during flood season.

A royal trial.

The return of Princess Neferet.

The foreigner who had come back with her.

The entire kingdom seemed to know.

And the entire kingdom seemed determined to witness it.

By midmorning, crowds filled every courtyard surrounding the palace.

Merchants abandoned their stalls.

Builders left their work.

Farmers traveled from neighboring villages.

Nobles arrived in elaborate chariots.

Priests gathered in ceremonial robes.

Military commanders stood proudly in polished armor.

No one wanted to miss what would happen next.

Inside the palace, servants rushed through corridors.

Guards took positions.

Officials prepared records.

The Great Hall had been transformed into a courtroom worthy of a king.

Rows upon rows of seats stretched across the chamber.

Every available space had been filled.

Nobles occupied the front rows.

Priests sat nearby.

Generals and military leaders lined the walls.

Foreign dignitaries and visiting rulers occupied places of honor.

King Amenhotep and Queen Nefru had arrived with Prince Khaemwaset.

Their presence alone showed how important the trial had become.

The atmosphere was tense.

No music played.

No laughter echoed.

Only whispered conversations filled the hall.

Everyone waited.

Everyone watched.

At the front of the chamber stood the throne of Pharaoh Khufu.

The golden seat seemed larger than usual.

More imposing.

More intimidating.

The great doors opened.

Immediately every person rose.

Pharaoh Khufu entered.

The ruler of Egypt walked slowly toward his throne.

His expression revealed nothing.

Not anger.

Not mercy.

Only authority.

Queen Meritites followed beside him.

Her face was calm.

Though deep inside her heart was anything but.

Princess Henutsen took her place nearby.

Neferet followed last.

The moment she entered, countless eyes turned toward her.

The lost princess.

The daughter of Egypt.

The woman at the center of everything.

Neferet ignored the stares.

Her eyes searched only for one thing.

One person.

But he was not yet there.

Khufu seated himself upon the throne.

The hall immediately fell silent.

A royal clerk stepped forward.

The man struck the floor with a ceremonial staff.

The sharp crack echoed through the chamber.

"The Court of Pharaoh Khufu is now in session."

Silence.

The tension grew heavier.

The clerk stepped back.

A captain of the royal guard moved forward.

He saluted.

Then turned toward the great entrance.

His voice thundered across the hall.

"Bring forth the prisoner."

The words sent a chill through the chamber.

The massive doors opened once more.

Every eye turned.

Every conversation ceased.

Every breath seemed to stop.

Two lines of royal guards entered first.

Their bronze armor gleamed beneath the sunlight streaming through the high windows.

Their spears remained perfectly upright.

Their faces expressionless.

Then came John Carter.

The chains around his wrists clinked softly with every step.

The sound echoed through the silent hall.

His ankles were shackled as well.

The iron restraints forced him to walk slowly.

Yet despite the chains.

Despite the hundreds of eyes watching him.

Despite the possibility of death awaiting him.

John walked with dignity.

His head remained high.

His shoulders remained straight.

He refused to look defeated.

The crowd watched in silence.

Many had expected a monster.

Others expected a criminal.

Some expected a sorcerer.

Instead they saw only a young man.

A young man standing alone.

Neferet's heart nearly broke.

Seeing him in chains hurt far more than she imagined.

For a brief moment John searched the crowd.

Then his eyes found hers.

Everything else disappeared.

The court.

The guards.

The nobles.

The throne.

For a single heartbeat there was only Neferet.

John smiled.

A small smile.

A reassuring smile.

As though he were trying to comfort her.

Even now.

Even here.

Tears immediately filled her eyes.

Henutsen quietly squeezed her sister's hand.

The guards escorted John to the center of the hall.

Then stopped.

The chains rattled one final time as he came to a halt.

Silence filled the chamber.

The entire kingdom seemed present.

The entire kingdom seemed to be watching.

And at the center of it all stood John Carter.

Alone.

In chains.

Awaiting judgment.

The captain stepped forward.

The scroll containing the charges rested in his hands.

He slowly unrolled it.

The sound of parchment echoed through the silent hall.

Then he lifted his head.

And began to read.

End of Chapter 16

The Journey Home

Chapter 17: The Charge

"John Carter."

John stood silently.

The captain unrolled a scroll.

The parchment seemed to stretch endlessly.

The formal language of Egyptian law filled the opening lines.

Titles.

Witnesses.

Declarations.

Ancient traditions observed for centuries.

Finally the captain reached the charge itself.

His voice grew louder.

So every person present could hear.

"John Carter."

Another pause.

"You stand accused before Pharaoh Khufu, Lord of Upper and Lower Egypt."

The hall remained silent.

The captain continued.

"Of unlawfully taking Princess Neferet, daughter of Pharaoh Khufu, from the Kingdom of Egypt."

Whispers spread through the audience.

The captain raised his voice.

"Of removing the Princess from the protection of the Crown."

More whispers.

Some disapproving.

Some curious.

The captain continued reading.

"Of depriving the royal family of their daughter."

Neferet lowered her eyes.

Queen Meritites remained perfectly still.

Henutsen clenched her hands tightly.

The captain took a deep breath.

Then spoke the final accusation.

The most serious one.

"The kidnapping of Princess Neferet."

The words echoed through the hall.

Then silence.

Complete silence.

Every person understood the gravity of the charge.

Kidnapping a princess was not merely a crime.

It was an offense against the throne itself.

Against the kingdom.

Against Egypt.

John stood quietly.

The accusation sounded absurd to him.

Yet he understood why it existed.

No one here knew the truth.

No one here knew about the Gate.

About time travel.

About the future.

From their perspective, the charge made perfect sense.

The captain rolled up the scroll.

"The penalty for such a crime may include death."

A collective murmur swept through the hall.

Even though everyone already knew the possible punishment, hearing it spoken aloud carried a different weight.

Neferet felt her heart stop.

Death.

The word echoed inside her mind.

She looked toward her father.

Khufu's expression remained unreadable.

The Pharaoh's gaze never left John.

The captain stepped back.

The formal reading was complete.

The hall waited.

The entire kingdom seemed to hold its breath.

Then Khufu spoke for the first time.

His voice filled the chamber.

"John Carter."

John met the Pharaoh's gaze.

"You have heard the charges."

"I have."

"Do you deny them?"

The question hung in the air.

Every person leaned forward.

Waiting.

Watching.

John could feel hundreds of eyes upon him.

He thought about the easy answer.

The simple answer.

The answer everyone expected.

But he could not lie.

Not here.

Not now.

Slowly, he shook his head.

A wave of whispers swept through the hall.

Even Neferet looked startled.

Khufu's eyes narrowed slightly.

"You do not deny taking my daughter from Egypt?"

John stood straight.

His voice calm.

"No."

The whispers grew louder.

The Pharaoh raised a hand.

Silence returned.

John continued.

"I took her from Egypt."

Another pause.

Then he added:

"But I did not take her against her will."

The entire hall erupted.

Voices exploded from every direction.

Nobles argued.

Priests whispered urgently.

Foreign guests exchanged shocked looks.

Even King Amenhotep leaned forward.

Prince Khaemwaset's expression darkened.

Only Neferet felt relief.

For the first time since the trial began, hope appeared.

Because John had spoken the truth.

And now it was her turn.

End of Chapter 17

The Journey Home

Chapter 18: Neferet Speaks

The Great Hall erupted into chaos.

Voices rose from every corner.

Nobles whispered furiously among themselves.

Priests exchanged shocked looks.

Foreign dignitaries leaned forward in disbelief.

No one had expected the prisoner to admit taking the Princess from Egypt.

And certainly no one had expected him to claim she had gone willingly.

The sound of arguments filled the chamber.

Until Pharaoh Khufu rose from his throne.

Immediately silence returned.

The authority of the Pharaoh swept through the hall like a desert wind.

Every voice died.

Every eye turned toward him.

Khufu's gaze remained fixed upon John.

"You claim my daughter went willingly."

John nodded.

"Yes."

The Pharaoh's expression hardened.

"And do you expect this court to simply accept your word?"

John opened his mouth to answer.

But another voice interrupted him.

"No."

The single word echoed through the hall.

Everyone turned.

Princess Neferet had risen from her seat.

For a brief moment nobody moved.

Nobody breathed.

Even Khufu appeared surprised.

Neferet stepped forward.

Her heart pounded.

She knew exactly what she was doing.

She knew exactly what it would cost.

Yet she could not remain silent.

Not while John stood alone.

Not while he faced death for a crime he never committed.

The hall watched in complete silence as she crossed the floor.

One step.

Then another.

Then another.

Until she stood beside John.

The guards exchanged uncertain glances.

No one dared stop her.

She turned toward the throne.

Then did something that shocked the entire court.

Princess Neferet knelt.

Not before her father.

Not before the throne.

Beside John Carter.

Gasps filled the chamber.

Queen Meritites closed her eyes.

Henutsen covered her mouth.

Prince Khaemwaset sat frozen.

The sight struck him like a spear.

Neferet looked up at her father.

Tears glistened in her eyes.

"He did not kidnap me."

The words rang through the hall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

The Princess continued.

"I went with him."

The silence deepened.

Khufu stared at his daughter.

"You chose to leave Egypt?"

"Yes."

The answer came immediately.

Without hesitation.

Without fear.

The Pharaoh descended one step from his throne.

His voice grew quieter.

More dangerous.

"You are telling this court that you left willingly?"

Neferet nodded.

"Yes."

The whispers returned.

Louder than before.

The impossible was unfolding before their eyes.

A princess openly defending the man accused of kidnapping her.

Khufu's gaze shifted between them.

Between his daughter and the prisoner.

Between the Princess of Egypt and the stranger from another world.

His voice became cold.

"Do you understand what you are saying?"

Neferet rose to her feet.

"I do."

"You understand that this man removed you from your family?"

"Yes."

"You understand that your disappearance brought years of suffering to this kingdom?"

Neferet's eyes filled with tears.

"Yes."

The Pharaoh's voice thundered through the hall.

"Then why?"

The question echoed across the chamber.

Why?

The question everyone wanted answered.

Why would a princess abandon her family?

Her kingdom?

Her future?

Neferet looked toward John.

Their eyes met.

Then she turned back to her father.

Her answer was barely above a whisper.

Yet every person heard it.

"Because I trusted him."

The hall fell silent once more.

John stared at her.

His heart felt as though it might burst.

Neferet continued.

"He risked everything for me."

Her voice grew stronger.

"He protected me."

Another step toward the throne.

"He never lied to me."

The court listened.

Spellbound.

"He never forced me."

A pause.

"He never treated me as a princess."

A faint smile appeared through her tears.

"He treated me as Neferet."

The words struck the hall with unexpected force.

Even Khufu seemed momentarily affected.

The Pharaoh looked away.

As though considering something.

As though remembering something.

Neferet's voice trembled.

"But he did not kidnap me."

She pointed toward John.

"I chose to go."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

The accusation that had seemed certain only moments before now stood upon uncertain ground.

The prisoner was no longer alone.

The Princess herself stood beside him.

Defending him.

Protecting him.

Claiming responsibility for her own choices.

And for the first time since the trial began, doubt entered the minds of many who sat in judgment.

Because if the Princess spoke the truth...

Then perhaps John Carter was not the villain of this story after all.

End of Chapter 18

The Journey Home

Chapter 19: Love Before Pharaoh

The Great Hall remained silent.

No one seemed willing to speak.

Princess Neferet stood beside John Carter.

The accused foreigner.

The man who should have been standing alone.

Instead, the daughter of Pharaoh Khufu stood at his side.

Defending him.

Protecting him.

The sight unsettled everyone.

Especially Prince Khaemwaset.

The prince sat motionless.

His hands clenched tightly upon the arms of his chair.

For years he had dreamed of Neferet's return.

For years he had imagined this moment.

Never once had he imagined this.

Khufu slowly descended another step from his throne.

His eyes never left his daughter.

"You chose to leave."

Neferet nodded.

"Yes."

"You abandoned your family."

Pain flashed across her face.

"I never wished to hurt anyone."

The Pharaoh ignored the answer.

"You abandoned your kingdom."

Neferet lowered her eyes.

"I know."

"You abandoned your future."

The words carried additional meaning.

Everyone in the hall understood.

The marriage.

The alliance.

The life prepared for her.

Everything she had walked away from.

Khufu stopped only a few paces away.

His voice softened.

For the first time, he sounded less like a ruler.

And more like a father.

"Why?"

The question hung in the air.

Neferet felt her heart racing.

This was the moment she had feared.

The moment she could no longer hide behind duty.

No longer hide behind polite smiles.

No longer pretend.

Slowly she turned toward John.

He looked back at her.

Concern filled his eyes.

Almost as if he wanted her to stop.

To protect herself.

To remain silent.

But she couldn't.

Not anymore.

Neferet faced her father.

And spoke the truth.

"I love him."

The words echoed through the chamber.

A collective gasp swept through the hall.

Several nobles looked horrified.

Others looked stunned.

Even the guards shifted uncomfortably.

Prince Khaemwaset closed his eyes.

The words struck him harder than any weapon.

Yet he remained silent.

Khufu stared at his daughter.

As though he had never seen her before.

"What did you say?"

Neferet lifted her head.

This time her voice was stronger.

"I love him."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

The Pharaoh looked toward John.

Then back to Neferet.

The disbelief on his face slowly transformed into something else.

Frustration.

Confusion.

Perhaps even fear.

Because fathers understood many things.

But watching a daughter grow beyond their protection was never easy.

"You love him?"

Khufu repeated.

Neferet nodded.

"Yes."

The Pharaoh laughed once.

Not because it was amusing.

Because he could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"This man?"

His voice rose.

"This stranger?"

Neferet did not flinch.

"Yes."

The Pharaoh spread his arms.

"You know nothing about him."

"I know enough."

"You have known him only a short time."

Neferet's gaze hardened.

"It felt like a lifetime."

The answer stunned the court.

Even John looked surprised.

Khufu shook his head.

"Love."

The word sounded almost bitter.

"You speak of love as though you understand it."

Suddenly another voice interrupted.

"I do."

Everyone turned.

Princess Henutsen had risen from her seat.

Tears filled her eyes.

Before anyone could stop her, she hurried across the hall.

Then she knelt beside Neferet.

The entire court stared.

Two princesses now stood beside the accused.

Henutsen looked directly at her father.

"Please."

Khufu blinked.

"Henutsen."

The younger princess wiped away tears.

"He saved her."

The Pharaoh remained silent.

"He brought her home."

More tears spilled down her cheeks.

"We have her because of him."

The words struck the hall with surprising force.

Because everyone knew they were true.

Whatever else John Carter might be...

Neferet had returned.

Khufu looked at his younger daughter.

Then at Neferet.

Then at John.

The three of them stood together.

United.

The sight unsettled him.

Because it reminded him that this trial was no longer about law.

It was about something much more dangerous.

The human heart.

Neferet looked up at her father.

Her voice trembled.

But only slightly.

"I love him."

The words came again.

Stronger than before.

"He loves me."

The Pharaoh folded his arms.

"Love."

His expression grew stern.

"What do you know about love?"

The question echoed through the hall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Everyone waited.

Because the answer would change everything.

End of Chapter 19

The Journey Home

Chapter 20: Prove It

The Great Hall remained silent.

Pharaoh Khufu's question lingered in the air like a challenge.

"What do you know about love?"

No one moved.

No one spoke.

The entire court waited.

Neferet could feel every eye upon her.

The nobles.

The priests.

The generals.

The royal families.

Even Prince Khaemwaset watched quietly.

Waiting for her answer.

Khufu stood before his daughter.

Not as a father.

Not at this moment.

As Pharaoh.

As judge.

As the ruler of Egypt.

His expression remained unreadable.

"Well?"

Neferet slowly rose to her feet.

Her heart pounded.

But her voice remained steady.

"You want proof?"

Khufu nodded.

"Yes."

Neferet turned toward John.

The chains around his wrists caught the light.

The sight hurt her.

Yet it also reminded her why she stood there.

Why she could not remain silent.

She looked back at her father.

"When I first met him, he was a stranger."

The court listened.

"He owed me nothing."

A pause.

"He was not Egyptian."

Another pause.

"He was not a prince."

Her eyes briefly moved toward Khaemwaset.

Then back to the Pharaoh.

"He was not even from my world."

Whispers spread through the court.

No one understood the full meaning of her words.

Only John did.

Neferet continued.

"He could have walked away."

The hall remained silent.

"He could have forgotten me."

She looked directly at her father.

"But he didn't."

Her voice grew stronger.

"He risked everything."

A murmur spread through the crowd.

"He left his home."

"He left his family."

"He left his friends."

The words struck John harder than he expected.

Images flashed through his mind.

Jack.

Dr. Mitchell.

Emily.

His parents.

The life he had left behind forever.

Neferet pointed toward him.

"He gave up everything."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"For me."

The hall fell silent once more.

Khufu said nothing.

His expression remained thoughtful.

Neferet took a step forward.

"He crossed impossible distances."

Another step.

"He faced dangers he did not understand."

Another.

"And when he finally had the chance to return home..."

Her voice trembled.

"...he chose me."

The words echoed through the chamber.

John lowered his head.

The memory still felt unreal.

He had made the choice without hesitation.

And he would make it again.

Every single time.

Neferet's tears finally escaped.

"He came through time itself for me."

The hall remained completely silent.

Even those who did not fully understand her words felt their weight.

She looked at her father.

"He knew he might never see his family again."

A tear slid down her cheek.

"He knew he might never return home."

Another.

"He knew he could die."

The entire court seemed frozen.

Then Neferet asked the question that would be remembered long after the trial ended.

Her voice cracked with emotion.

"He crossed the ages for me."

Silence.

"He gave up everything for me."

Silence.

"He stands here willing to die for me."

Neferet looked directly into her father's eyes.

Her voice became barely more than a whisper.

"Is that not enough?"

The words settled over the hall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Even the air itself seemed still.

Khufu stared at his daughter.

Then at John.

The foreigner remained silent.

He had not begged.

He had not pleaded.

He had not asked for mercy.

He simply stood there.

Willing to accept whatever judgment awaited him.

The Pharaoh looked away.

Toward the distant windows.

Toward the sunlight beyond.

Toward memories he had not visited in many years.

For the first time since the trial began, uncertainty appeared in his eyes.

Not uncertainty about the law.

Not uncertainty about the facts.

But uncertainty about something far more difficult.

The human heart.

Slowly, Khufu lowered his gaze.

Back to John.

Back to Neferet.

The hall waited.

The kingdom waited.

And beside the Pharaoh, Queen Meritites leaned forward slightly.

As though she sensed the moment approaching.

As though she knew exactly what needed to be said next.

End of Chapter 20

The Journey Home

Chapter 21: The Queen's Whisper

The Great Hall remained silent.

No one dared speak.

Neferet's words still hung in the air.

"He crossed the ages for me."

"He gave up everything for me."

"He stands here willing to die for me."

"Is that not enough?"

Even the torches seemed to burn more quietly.

Pharaoh Khufu stood motionless.

His gaze remained fixed upon the young man standing before him.

John Carter.

The stranger.

The foreigner.

The man accused of taking his daughter from Egypt.

For the first time since the trial began, Khufu saw something different.

Not a criminal.

Not an enemy.

Not a kidnapper.

A young man.

A young man willing to lose everything for the woman he loved.

The realization unsettled him.

Because it reminded him of someone.

Someone he had not thought about in many years.

Himself.

Beside the throne, Queen Meritites watched her husband carefully.

She knew that look.

After all these years, she knew every expression.

Every silence.

Every thought that crossed his face.

Khufu was remembering.

And that was dangerous.

For kings often judged with their minds.

But fathers judged with their hearts.

Slowly, the Queen leaned toward him.

The movement was subtle.

Barely noticeable.

No one in the court could hear her.

No one except Khufu.

Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Do you remember?"

The Pharaoh did not answer.

The Queen smiled softly.

"Years ago."

Still no answer.

Meritites continued.

"We were young once."

The words struck him harder than she expected.

The Great Hall disappeared.

The court disappeared.

For a brief moment he was no longer Pharaoh.

He was a young man again.

A young prince.

Standing beneath a starlit sky.

Holding the hand of a young woman whose smile had stolen his heart.

Meritites.

The Queen's voice remained soft.

"When we were young..."

A faint smile touched her lips.

"...and in love..."

Khufu closed his eyes.

The memories returned.

The stolen meetings.

The late-night conversations.

The reckless promises.

The certainty that nothing in the world mattered except being together.

The Queen's smile widened slightly.

"We did foolish things."

For a moment the Pharaoh almost laughed.

Because it was true.

The mighty ruler of Egypt had once been every bit as reckless as the young man standing in chains before him.

Perhaps more.

Slowly Khufu opened his eyes.

His gaze drifted toward John.

The young man stood silently.

Not pleading.

Not begging.

Simply waiting.

Waiting to hear whether he would live or die.

The Queen leaned back in her seat.

Her work done.

She said nothing more.

She didn't need to.

The seed had been planted.

Khufu remained silent for a long time.

The court waited nervously.

No one understood what had passed between the Pharaoh and Queen.

No one except Neferet.

Her mother caught her eye.

Then gave the slightest smile.

A smile filled with hope.

Neferet's heart quickened.

Something had changed.

She could feel it.

Slowly, Khufu rose from his throne.

The entire hall immediately stood.

Silence returned.

The Pharaoh descended the steps.

One at a time.

His sandals echoed against the stone floor.

He stopped before John Carter.

The foreigner looked directly at him.

Neither spoke.

The two men simply studied one another.

One a king.

One a prisoner.

One a father.

One a man in love.

The silence stretched.

Then something remarkable happened.

The anger disappeared from Khufu's eyes.

Not completely.

But enough.

The hatred was gone.

The suspicion remained.

The concern remained.

But something else had taken their place.

Understanding.

And at the corner of the Pharaoh's mouth appeared the faintest hint of a smile.

Almost invisible.

Yet unmistakable.

Neferet saw it.

Queen Meritites saw it.

Even Henutsen noticed.

The younger princess immediately gripped her sister's hand.

Hope surged through her.

Khufu looked at John for a long moment.

Then finally spoke.

His voice was calm.

Far calmer than before.

"So."

The hall held its breath.

"You crossed time itself for my daughter."

John blinked.

The question surprised him.

Slowly he nodded.

"Yes."

The faint smile remained.

Barely visible.

But there.

For the first time since the trial began, Pharaoh Khufu was no longer looking at a criminal.

He was looking at a young man who reminded him of himself.

And that changed everything.

End of Chapter 21

The Journey Home

Chapter 22: Judgment

The Great Hall stood frozen.

No one moved.

No one breathed.

Pharaoh Khufu sat upon his throne.

Before him stood John Carter.

A stranger from another world.

A man who had crossed time itself.

And now waited for judgment.

The Pharaoh's voice echoed through the chamber.

"My daughter chose her path."

The words settled over the court like a desert wind.

Shock spread through the assembled nobles.

Several priests exchanged confused glances.

Even the guards seemed uncertain how to react.

Khufu slowly rose to his feet.

The hall immediately fell silent once more.

His gaze moved across the chamber.

From the nobles.

To the priests.

To the foreign kings.

Then finally to his daughter.

Neferet stood perfectly still.

Hope and fear battled within her.

The Pharaoh looked at her for a long moment.

Then at John.

The stranger met his gaze without flinching.

Khufu found himself strangely impressed.

The young man possessed courage.

Perhaps foolish courage.

But courage nonetheless.

At last the Pharaoh spoke.

"John Carter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You took my daughter from Egypt."

"Yes."

"You caused this kingdom years of grief."

John lowered his head.

"I did."

Khufu nodded.

The answer was honest.

No excuses.

No attempts to shift blame.

The Pharaoh appreciated that.

For too many men hid behind lies when facing judgment.

John Carter did not.

Khufu stepped down from his throne.

His sandals echoed across the stone floor.

Slowly he approached the prisoner.

The entire court watched.

The ruler of Egypt stopped directly before him.

For several moments neither man spoke.

Then Khufu surprised everyone.

He smiled.

Only slightly.

But enough.

The anger was gone.

The hatred was gone.

What remained was understanding.

"You remind me of someone."

John blinked.

"Who?"

The Pharaoh laughed softly.

"Myself."

A ripple of surprise swept through the court.

Even Queen Meritites smiled.

Henutsen looked delighted.

Neferet felt tears gathering once more.

Khufu turned toward the assembled nobles.

"When I was young, I believed nothing was impossible."

The court listened carefully.

"I believed love could overcome any obstacle."

The Queen lowered her eyes.

A warm smile touching her lips.

Khufu continued.

"I was fortunate."

His gaze briefly met Meritites'.

"The gods smiled upon me."

The hall remained silent.

Then the Pharaoh turned back toward John.

"You were not so fortunate."

A faint chuckle escaped several members of the court.

Even John smiled.

Slightly.

Khufu folded his arms.

"You crossed impossible distances."

"Yes."

"You abandoned everything you knew."

"Yes."

"You came to Egypt for my daughter."

"Yes."

The Pharaoh nodded slowly.

Then came the question.

The final question.

"If I release you today..."

The hall became completely silent.

"...what will you do?"

John didn't need time to think.

He already knew the answer.

"I will stay."

Khufu raised an eyebrow.

"In Egypt?"

"Yes."

"You would never return home?"

John smiled sadly.

"There is no home to return to."

The answer struck the hall with unexpected force.

Because everyone understood it.

Perhaps not the full truth.

But enough.

John continued.

"My home is wherever Neferet is."

The words echoed through the chamber.

Neferet closed her eyes.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

Even some of the nobles appeared moved.

Prince Khaemwaset looked away.

The words hurt.

Because he knew they were genuine.

Khufu remained silent for a long moment.

Then he looked toward the captain of the guard.

"Remove his chains."

For a second no one reacted.

The order seemed unbelievable.

Then the captain hurried forward.

The iron shackles were unlocked.

One by one.

The chains fell to the floor.

The sound echoed throughout the hall.

John stared at his freed wrists.

Almost unable to believe it.

The crowd erupted.

Some cheered.

Others gasped.

A few protested.

But their voices were quickly drowned out.

Neferet smiled through tears.

Henutsen laughed openly.

Queen Meritites closed her eyes in relief.

Khufu raised his hand.

The hall gradually quieted.

His voice carried through the chamber.

"John Carter."

The young man looked up.

The Pharaoh smiled.

This time openly.

"You are free."

The words seemed to lift a tremendous weight from the room.

Neferet covered her mouth.

Tears flowed freely now.

John simply stood there.

Speechless.

For perhaps the first time since arriving in Egypt.

Khufu turned toward the court.

"The trial is concluded."

A murmur swept through the chamber.

The future had changed.

The expected outcome had vanished.

The story was no longer following the path anyone had imagined.

All except one man.

Prince Khaemwaset.

He remained seated.

Silent.

Thoughtful.

Watching.

Because while John Carter had won his freedom...

A far more difficult matter still remained.

Neferet.

And the promise of marriage.

End of Chapter 22

The Journey Home

Chapter 23: The Prince's Honor

The Great Hall slowly settled into silence.

The excitement that had followed John's release gradually faded.

Yet a strange tension remained.

Everyone could feel it.

The trial was over.

But the story was not.

John Carter stood free.

The chains lay discarded upon the floor.

Neferet stood only a few steps away.

For the first time since the trial began, neither faced immediate danger.

Yet one problem remained.

A problem far more difficult than any accusation.

Prince Khaemwaset.

The young prince remained seated.

Silent.

Thoughtful.

The entire court seemed aware of him.

Aware of the promise that had been made.

Aware of the marriage proposal.

Aware of the future everyone had expected.

Khufu noticed it too.

The Pharaoh's expression grew serious.

Because he understood something very important.

John's freedom did not solve everything.

A good man still stood to lose everything.

The hall remained quiet.

At last Prince Khaemwaset rose.

Every eye immediately turned toward him.

Neferet's heart sank.

John stood still.

Unsure what would happen next.

The prince slowly walked forward.

His face revealed little emotion.

Which somehow made the moment even more difficult.

He stopped before Neferet.

For several moments neither spoke.

The silence stretched.

Then Khaemwaset smiled.

A sad smile.

But a genuine one.

"I suppose I always knew."

Neferet blinked.

"Khaemwaset..."

The prince gently shook his head.

"No."

His voice remained calm.

"There is no need."

Neferet felt tears gathering.

The prince looked toward John.

For a moment the two men simply studied one another.

Neither spoke.

Neither looked away.

The entire court watched.

Waiting.

Then Khaemwaset laughed softly.

A laugh filled more with sadness than bitterness.

"You have caused me a great deal of trouble."

The unexpected remark caught John completely off guard.

A few members of the court chuckled nervously.

Even Khufu looked surprised.

John smiled faintly.

"I'm beginning to realize that."

The prince nodded.

"Good."

For the first time, a few genuine smiles appeared around the hall.

The tension eased.

Only slightly.

But enough.

Khaemwaset turned back toward Neferet.

His expression softened.

"When you disappeared..."

His voice grew quieter.

"I thought I would never see you again."

Neferet lowered her eyes.

The prince continued.

"I prayed for your return."

A pause.

"I dreamed of your return."

Another pause.

"And every day I hoped."

The hall listened in silence.

Khaemwaset smiled sadly.

"The gods answered my prayers."

Neferet looked up.

The prince's eyes glistened.

"But they did not answer them the way I expected."

A few tears appeared in the eyes of those watching.

Even Queen Nefru, his mother, lowered her gaze.

The prince took a deep breath.

Then spoke the hardest words he had ever spoken.

"Your heart belongs to him."

Silence.

Neferet could not answer.

Because denying it would be a lie.

And confirming it would hurt him.

The prince smiled gently.

"It is alright."

The kindness in his voice nearly broke her.

"It is not your fault."

Khaemwaset turned toward John.

The hall became silent once more.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, the prince stepped forward and extended his hand.

John stared.

Completely stunned.

The prince smiled.

"If a man is willing to cross time itself for a woman..."

He glanced toward Neferet.

"...then perhaps he deserves her."

A collective gasp swept through the hall.

John looked at the offered hand.

Then slowly accepted it.

The two men shook hands.

The moment carried enormous weight.

No hatred.

No rivalry.

No bitterness.

Only respect.

The court watched in stunned silence.

Even Khufu appeared moved.

Khaemwaset released John's hand.

Then stepped back.

His smile remained.

Though sadness lingered behind it.

"I will not stand between you."

Neferet's tears finally spilled over.

The prince noticed.

Then smiled again.

A warm smile.

The same smile he had offered her years ago.

Before everything changed.

"Be happy, Neferet."

The words were simple.

Yet they carried all the love he could no longer keep.

Neferet crossed the distance between them and embraced him.

The prince hesitated only a moment before returning the embrace.

A final farewell.

Not to a future.

But to a dream.

When they separated, neither spoke.

There was nothing left to say.

The court remained silent.

Many would later remember Khufu's judgment.

Many would remember John's freedom.

But those who witnessed this day would never forget Prince Khaemwaset.

Because on that day he proved himself not merely a prince.

But an honorable man.

And in losing the woman he loved, he earned the respect of an entire kingdom.

End of Chapter 23

The Journey Home

Chapter 24: Son of Egypt

The Great Hall remained filled with emotion.

The trial had ended.

John Carter was free.

Yet nobody moved toward the exits.

Nobody wished to leave.

Everyone sensed that Pharaoh Khufu had one final matter to address.

The ruler of Egypt slowly rose from his throne.

Immediately the hall fell silent.

His gaze settled upon John Carter.

The young man stood proudly in the center of the court.

No longer a prisoner.

No longer an accused criminal.

Yet not quite one of them.

Not yet.

Khufu descended the steps of the throne.

One by one.

The sound echoed through the enormous chamber.

When he reached John, he stopped.

For several moments he simply studied him.

The young stranger who had somehow changed the fate of Egypt.

The man who had crossed impossible distances.

The man who loved his daughter.

The man who had stood before death without begging for mercy.

At last the Pharaoh smiled.

"You have caused me many sleepless nights."

Laughter spread through the hall.

John smiled.

"I believe that."

"You disappeared with my daughter."

More laughter.

"You returned years later."

The Pharaoh folded his arms.

"And somehow made everything even more complicated."

Even Queen Meritites laughed softly.

Khufu shook his head.

"I have never met anyone quite like you."

John bowed slightly.

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment."

The Pharaoh grinned.

"Neither am I."

The hall erupted again.

The tension that had filled the court throughout the trial was finally gone.

Khufu raised his hand.

The laughter faded.

His expression became serious.

The court immediately quieted.

"John Carter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You came to Egypt with nothing."

John nodded.

The Pharaoh continued.

"No title."

"No land."

"No family."

The words echoed through the chamber.

"And yet."

Khufu paused.

"You have demonstrated courage."

The nobles listened carefully.

"You have demonstrated loyalty."

Another pause.

"You have demonstrated honor."

Even the priests nodded.

These were qualities deeply respected in Egypt.

Khufu slowly turned toward the assembled court.

"Hear my decree."

The hall became completely silent.

Every person listened.

From the highest noble to the lowest servant.

The Pharaoh's voice thundered throughout the chamber.

"John Carter shall live under the protection of the Crown."

A murmur spread through the audience.

Khufu continued.

"He shall not be treated as a prisoner."

The murmurs grew louder.

"He shall not be treated as an outsider."

More surprise.

Then came the words nobody expected.

Words that would be remembered for generations.

"From this day forward, John Carter shall be known as a Son of Egypt."

The Great Hall exploded.

Cheers erupted everywhere.

Guards struck their spears against the floor.

Nobles applauded.

Servants smiled.

Even many of the priests joined in the celebration.

Neferet covered her mouth.

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Henutsen openly cheered.

Queen Meritites smiled proudly.

John stood frozen.

A Son of Egypt.

The words felt impossible.

For years he had admired Egypt.

Studied it.

Dreamed about it.

Now Egypt had accepted him.

Not as a visitor.

Not as a guest.

But as one of its own.

Khufu stepped forward.

For the first time, he placed a hand upon John's shoulder.

A gesture of acceptance.

A gesture of trust.

A gesture of family.

The court immediately understood its significance.

The Pharaoh looked directly into John's eyes.

"You came here as a stranger."

A pause.

"You stand here now as family."

The words struck John harder than any judgment ever could.

For a moment he found himself unable to speak.

Finally he managed a simple answer.

"Thank you."

Khufu nodded.

Then glanced toward Neferet.

The Princess stood nearby, tears still glistening in her eyes.

The Pharaoh smiled knowingly.

"Do not thank me yet."

The hall chuckled.

John looked confused.

Khufu folded his arms.

"You still have the far greater challenge ahead of you."

John blinked.

"What challenge?"

The Pharaoh pointed toward Neferet.

"My daughter."

The Great Hall erupted with laughter.

Even Neferet laughed.

John rubbed the back of his neck.

"Fair enough."

The Pharaoh smiled broadly.

For the first time since Neferet's disappearance years ago, peace settled over his heart.

His daughter had returned.

His family was whole again.

And the young man before him had proven himself worthy.

From the back of the hall, Menka watched quietly.

The old gatekeeper smiled.

Years ago he had given a strange young foreigner a chance.

A simple job hauling stones near the Great Pyramid.

Now that same young man stood before the Pharaoh as a Son of Egypt.

Menka chuckled softly.

The gods truly did have a sense of humor.

And somewhere high above the palace, beyond the city, beyond the Nile, the Great Pyramid continued rising toward the heavens.

Stone by stone.

As though history itself was preparing for the final chapters still to come.

End of Chapter 24

The Journey Home

Chapter 25: A Life in the Past

The years passed gently.

Like the waters of the Nile.

Like the desert winds that drifted across the sands of Egypt.

For John Carter and Neferet, life settled into a rhythm neither had ever imagined.

Peace.

After all the danger.

After all the sacrifices.

After all the impossible journeys.

They had finally found peace.

The Great Pyramid stood nearly complete now.

Its shining limestone casing reflected the sunlight so brilliantly that travelers could see it from miles away.

People called it Khufu's Eternal Stairway to the Heavens.

John secretly smiled every time he heard it.

Four thousand years later people would still speak of it.

Still marvel at it.

Still wonder how it had been built.

Only he knew how many blisters he had earned hauling stones for it.

One morning, John stood atop the palace wall overlooking Giza.

The city was already alive.

Merchants opened their stalls.

Children chased one another through the streets.

Workers marched toward construction sites.

The smell of baking bread drifted through the air.

Beside him stood Neferet.

She rested her head against his shoulder.

"You're thinking again."

John smiled.

"Always."

"About the future?"

"Sometimes."

Neferet looked up.

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"What does the future remember about my father?"

John laughed softly.

"A great king."

Neferet smiled proudly.

"And my mother?"

"A beloved queen."

The smile widened.

"And Henutsen?"

John chuckled.

"A princess."

Neferet narrowed her eyes.

"That is not an answer."

"It is technically an answer."

She laughed and lightly pushed his shoulder.

The sound warmed John's heart.

Even after all these years.

Some things never changed.

Later that afternoon, the royal family gathered for a meal.

Pharaoh Khufu sat proudly at the head of the table.

The years had added silver to his hair.

But they had not diminished his presence.

Queen Meritites remained as graceful as ever.

Henutsen sat nearby, now a young woman admired throughout Egypt.

The conversation flowed easily.

Stories.

Jokes.

Family gossip.

At one point Khufu pointed directly at John.

"You still walk strangely."

The table burst into laughter.

John sighed dramatically.

"It has been years."

Khufu nodded.

"Yes."

A pause.

"And you still walk strangely."

Even Queen Meritites laughed.

John looked at Neferet.

"Do I walk strangely?"

She smiled.

"A little."

"Traitor."

The table erupted once more.

Khufu nearly choked laughing.

For a moment John simply sat there.

Listening.

Watching.

Enjoying.

This was family.

Not the family he had been born into.

But family nonetheless.

And he treasured every moment.

That evening he and Neferet left the palace and walked beyond the city.

The desert stretched endlessly before them.

Golden beneath the setting sun.

The Great Pyramid dominated the horizon behind them.

Magnificent.

Timeless.

The two climbed a small rise overlooking the valley.

Then sat together.

Watching the sunset.

For several minutes neither spoke.

Finally Neferet broke the silence.

"Do you ever miss them?"

John knew exactly who she meant.

Emily.

Jack.

Dr. Mitchell.

The people he had left behind.

The people who would never know what happened to him.

The people who would always wonder.

He looked toward the horizon.

Thinking.

Remembering.

Then nodded.

"Yes."

Neferet squeezed his hand.

"I am sorry."

John smiled gently.

"Don't be."

She looked surprised.

"You are not sad?"

"A little."

The desert breeze stirred around them.

"But if I had stayed..."

He looked at her.

"...I would have spent the rest of my life wondering."

Neferet lowered her eyes.

"And now?"

John smiled.

"Now I know."

She smiled back.

"Know what?"

He reached over and gently lifted her chin.

"That I made the right choice."

Tears filled her eyes.

Happy tears.

The best kind.

The sun slowly disappeared beyond the horizon.

Darkness settled across the desert.

Stars emerged one by one.

The same stars that watched over ancient kings.

The same stars that would shine over future civilizations.

The same stars that had guided two impossible lives together.

Neferet rested her head against his shoulder.

"Do you regret anything?"

John thought for a moment.

Then grinned.

"Yes."

Her eyes widened.

"You do?"

"Absolutely."

Neferet sat up immediately.

"What?"

John looked completely serious.

"I miss coffee."

For a heartbeat she stared at him.

Then burst into laughter.

The sound echoed across the desert.

"Thousands of years."

She shook her head.

"You crossed thousands of years."

"Yes."

"And you miss a drink."

"It's an excellent drink."

Neferet laughed even harder.

John joined her.

Their laughter drifted across the sands.

Into the warm Egyptian night.

Into history itself.

And somewhere deep within the Great Pyramid, hidden behind sealed stone, a secret chamber waited.

A chamber commissioned by Pharaoh Khufu himself.

A chamber few would ever know existed.

Upon its walls were carved five figures.

Pharaoh Khufu.

Queen Meritites.

Princess Henutsen.

Princess Neferet.

And beside them stood a strange man unlike any Egyptian.

A man with foreign features.

A man wearing unfamiliar clothing.

A man named John Carter.

Below the carvings were words carved by royal artisans.

Words intended for the distant future.

Words that would sleep beneath the sands for four thousand years.

Waiting.

Patiently.

For another age to discover them.

For another generation to remember.

For history to finally learn the truth.

The truth of a princess.

The truth of a stranger.

And the truth of a love that crossed time itself.

End of Chapter 25

The Journey Home

Chapter 26: Carved in Stone

Present Day

The Great Pyramid of Giza stood beneath the Egyptian sun.

Four thousand years had passed.

Empires had risen and fallen.

Kings had come and gone.

Civilizations had flourished and vanished.

Yet the Great Pyramid endured.

As it always had.

As it always would.

Deep within the monument, an archaeological team worked carefully through a recently discovered passageway.

The tunnel had been hidden behind layers of stone no one had ever suspected.

The discovery alone was enough to make headlines around the world.

But what lay beyond would change history forever.

A worker brushed away centuries of dust.

His flashlight swept across an ancient wall.

Then stopped.

"Professor!"

His voice echoed through the narrow passage.

The others hurried forward.

"What is it?"

The worker pointed.

"There is a doorway."

The team gathered around.

The opening was unlike anything previously discovered.

The stonework was flawless.

The seal appeared untouched.

One archaeologist shook his head.

"This chamber has never been opened."

Another nodded.

"Not in four thousand years."

Excitement spread through the group.

Carefully.

Very carefully.

The final stone block was removed.

A deep rumble echoed through the tunnel.

Dust drifted through the air.

Then silence.

The hidden chamber stood revealed.

The archaeologists entered slowly.

Flashlights illuminated the darkness.

One by one.

The beams swept across the walls.

And every person froze.

The chamber was enormous.

Far larger than anyone expected.

Its walls were covered from floor to ceiling with carvings.

Perfectly preserved.

Scenes from the reign of Pharaoh Khufu.

The construction of the Great Pyramid.

Royal ceremonies.

Family gatherings.

Moments from daily life.

The craftsmanship was extraordinary.

A discovery unlike any ever made.

Then one flashlight moved toward the far wall.

The archaeologist stopped.

"What is this?"

The others turned.

Five enormous figures stood carved into the stone.

Each larger than life.

Each crafted with incredible detail.

The first was immediately recognizable.

Pharaoh Khufu.

The second.

Queen Meritites.

The third.

Princess Henutsen.

The fourth.

Princess Neferet.

The archaeologists exchanged excited looks.

The royal family.

A remarkable discovery.

Then someone noticed the fifth figure.

Silence filled the chamber.

The figure was not Egyptian.

His clothing was different.

His features were different.

Everything about him seemed out of place.

One archaeologist stepped closer.

"Who is he?"

No one knew.

The mysterious figure stood beside Neferet.

Not behind her.

Not below her.

Beside her.

As an equal.

The chamber grew quiet.

Something about the scene felt important.

Very important.

One of the team moved toward a wall covered in hieroglyphs.

"There's an inscription."

Several experts gathered.

They began translating.

Line by line.

Word by word.

The chamber became silent except for the sound of their voices.

The translation continued.

"Here stand Pharaoh Khufu..."

"Queen Meritites..."

"Princess Henutsen..."

"Princess Neferet..."

The lead translator paused.

His eyes widened.

Then continued.

"And John Carter."

The chamber erupted.

"What?"

"John Carter?"

"That is not an Egyptian name."

The translator held up a hand.

The room fell silent once more.

He continued reading.

"A stranger from beyond the horizon."

"Friend of Pharaoh Khufu."

"Beloved husband of Princess Neferet."

More stunned silence.

The archaeologists stared at one another.

No records mentioned any such person.

No history spoke of him.

Yet here he was.

Carved beside the royal family itself.

The translator swallowed hard.

Then read the final lines.

"He came as a stranger."

"He lived as a friend."

"He loved as family."

"He became a Son of Egypt."

No one spoke.

The words echoed through the chamber.

Four thousand years of silence broken at last.

The flashlight beams moved slowly across the five figures.

Khufu.

Meritites.

Henutsen.

Neferet.

John Carter.

Together.

Forever preserved in stone.

History had forgotten him.

Time had erased him.

Yet somehow he had endured.

Waiting.

Patiently.

For another age to find him.

For another generation to remember.

And beneath the carvings, etched forever into the stone, stood the final inscription:

"Some people spend their lives searching for where they belong."

"John Carter found it on the other side of time."

End of Chapter 26

End of The Journey Home