

Shackled

Chapter 1

Blessed Sands

Outside of the camp set up by the Sabali tribe, children gleefully play in the sand with bundles of fabric showing off their youth. Inside the same camp, their leader, Osiris Sabali, fights for his remaining seconds on this side of existence.

“Try to steady your breathing, chief,” Akef, the chief’s vizier, advises. He stands in a well decorated tent looking over his suffering ally with his hands in the sleeves of his robe. A doctor and nurse tend to his leader silently.

Osiris coughs and wheezes while angrily glaring at his healthy advisor. “I’m far beyond your advice at this point, so shut it! Just worry about what happens after I pass...” his words feather off as his breath runs out. Osiris struggles to inhale as he lies in a pile of ornate pillows and sheets. The only earthly tone is his brown skin. Sweat falls from his bald head to his brow and his large beard from struggling with the ailment set to take his life. Thus is the path of a warrior. It takes a little more than a flesh wound to take out the leader of a chosen tribe. “Do you have things in order?”

“Yes...but I have voiced my concerns about this decision. Our tribesmen will not approve of—” Akef attempts to voice his opinion but the chief slams the thought into the sand.

“She is my heir!” Osiris screams, causing another fit of coughs. “They WILL follow her rule whether they like it or not! My family has ALWAYS been a kind and compassionate one, so

she deserves as much from her people.” He settles down a little after relieving himself of the comments.

“Not to be rude, Osiris,” Akef refers to him by his first name, “but you’re not being too kind or compassionate right now.”

The chief scoffs and answers, “Sorry... I’m a little preoccupied with dying, Akef!”

“Indeed you are, sir. Carry on,” he replies. There is an awkward silence between the two men.

The bulky warrior on the pillows frowns at the slender wizard above him. A smirk slowly creeps across the leader’s face and he closes his eyes while resting his head into a pillow.

“That was a good one...” he mumbles before chuckling with his life-long friend. “My daughter knows her responsibilities and is just as capable as any of the other potential elects.” Osiris jolts upright, knocking the nurse off balance. He covers his mouth with his arm but blood splatters past it. The liquid of life stains his clothes and the pillows below. The nurse lets out a whelp from the sight of her superior choking on his blood.

A guard that is positioned outside of the tent peeks in through the curtains and sees the mess on Osiris’ body. He realizes the urgency and offers, “Shall I retrieve Tikal for you, sir?”

Osiris looks at him with weak eyes, “Yes, child... I feel the spirits tethering my soul.” The guard nods and sprints to the exterior of the camp, weaving between the crowds walking from tent to tent. Upon reaching his destination, he notices Tikal is not in sight. He frantically looks

around the makeshift playground the youth have put together. His target has snuck off behind a boulder with her best friend, Rashad.

Tikal and Rashad are huddled near each other, their backs against the large rock. Her garbs are more regal than his. She wears a blue tunic with a golden collar. A yellow waist sash holds the cloth tightly and dangles just as low as the tunic. Tikal scoots closer, “Stop being a chicken!” she teases him. He is dressed in a plain off white kilt with ropes that hold it in place.

“I’m not,” he defensively responds. “I can do it, no problem!”

“Then do it!” Tikal playfully tumbles in front of her friend, getting sand in her little afro. Rashad smiles at her and shakes his head. The beads from his black braids rattle and he slowly reaches out towards Tikal. She freezes as she anticipates him to complete her request.

He gets closer to her face and whispers, “Don’t move...” His open hand hovers just before her face and his eyes begin to change from hazel to a pure gold. Sand from Tikal’s face, hair, and clothes travel from her and gather in his palm. He sits back and focuses on his magic. The sand swirls around his hand until it forms a figure that resembles a warrior. It acts as if it were in battle, slashing its spear, swinging at the air around it, and tumbling about. Tikal’s dark brown eyes glow with amazement as she crawls closer to the show Rashad is putting on.

“That’s amazing,” she says in awe.

“It’s not really,” he says humbly. “Everyone in my bloodline has the ability to control magic.”

After hearing his confession, Tikal gets upset at him. “Stop cutting yourself short, Rashad! If you’re going to be my king someday, then you’ve gotta be more aggressive!” The sand warrior takes a seat as if he were listening to Tikal’s lecture.

Rashad answers. “Our people don’t recognize someone married into the royal family as a leader, Tikal... I’d just be the guy married to the queen. I won’t matter the slightest bit.” He and his magical sand puppet slump and pout.

“Shut up...” she mumbles. Rashad looks up at Tikal in shock. She looks to the sand at her hands and knees, hesitating to speak. Eventually, she says, “You’ll matter to me, stupid.”

Rashad’s pout becomes a warm smile.

“Princess!” the young guard shouts while swinging around the boulder in a rush. Rashad drops concentration on his spell and sand slips through his fingers. Tikal, upset at the intrusion, turns to the guard to scold him. “Your father...he’s fading slowly. It’s time.”

Tikal’s mouth, ready to bark at him, opens further in distress. She bounces to her feet and runs past the guard, nearly knocking him over.

The thirteen year old feels the pain adults would struggle to deal with. Her energy comes and goes as she runs through the camp to get to her father’s side. Anyone in her way gets bumped or shoved, but they put the pieces together and realize what’s happening. Whispers of the crowd echo around her. She buckles from the stress and drops to her knees, covering her ears and closing her eyes tightly.

The elders share more worries in the tent during her approach. “She’s still young, I understand that,” Osiris complains.

Akef shakes his head. “That’s not the problem I am trying to make you aware of. I do not believe the people will be okay with a female leader. It has never happened in the history of our tribe.”

Osiris grunts while sitting up again. The doctor tries to stop him but Osiris swats his hand away, “Then it’s your job to convince them everything will be fine.” He dismisses the doctor and the nurse. They attempt to voice their concern for abandoning him but he gestures for them to stay silent. Once they leave the tent, he continues, “Do I have your word that you’ll be as great a counselor to her as you were to me?”

“I—I will do my best, friend.” Akef shakes his leader’s hand. Their grasp holds for a moment.

Tikal bursts into the tent and the sight she takes in hurts her soul. Dark veins covering most of her father’s chest, neck, and now face.

The curse from the battle he had with the rival tribe has spread to his vital organs. The initial injury on his chest is a black growth that no longer resembles flesh. Fungus is more relatable. “My princess, you made it...” he weakly says but is able to smile at her. “Come. I need to bestow something to you.”

Tikal’s face is already soggy from her run to get to his side. Sweat and tears flush down her cheeks. She approaches her father sobbing harder than before. Akef tries to clean her face as

she reaches them. Tikal ignores him completely and falls into her father's arms. "Papa! You can't go yet!" she cries.

"I'm sorry, my child," he admits. "Bazra is calling me home."

Indeed I am.

"No!" the child screams. "This is your home! The gods don't need you! I need you!" The passion is felt but my will must be done. She will understand in time but this suffering will be a lesson unto her.

"Watch your tongue, princess," Akef warns.

Tikal refuses to hear any of what he's saying. "I don't care... I want my father to stay with me." Her sobbing into his neck touches me but as I mentioned before, I have plans for this soul.

Osiris calms his daughter. "It's okay, Tikal. I am not truly going to be out of your life. I will be with you just as your mother is. We will watch over you and lend you our strength as you need it." A true believer knows he is correct in saying this. I will show proof on the day of his release. "If the gods allow, we will be able to speak to you again."

"But—" she starts.

His hand goes up to stop her complaints. "Don't be angry with our god, my beautiful daughter. Bazra loves you as much as I do and will not forsake you. Stay faithful to her will and way. Do you understand me, child?" His words are wise and hold plenty of weight. My strength is abundant and should this little one agree, I will be her greatest asset as her father promises.

"Yes, sir," she submits.

“Great,” her father answers.

Great, indeed. Though this child’s path will be a rough one, her story will be legendary.