

TAKEN BY ANUBIS
A Gods Awaken Tale

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CHAPTER ONE

I Am Gold

You wear me on your finger now, or around your neck. I've been molded, melted, shaped, and merged for millennia. I've started wars and ended lives. Nothing glows like me in the night. Nothing warms to your touch like me. Every time you caress me, I remember.

I am gold, element of the gods, and in my presence they awaken.

CHAPTER TWO

At The Hands Of A God (sample)

The tomb was dark and silent when she arrived. Sa-Khonsu's sandals made a soft thud on the carved stone floor as she walked slowly toward the central burial chamber. She carried a basket in one hand, laden with fruit, dried meats, and flowers. In her other hand was a candle. It flickered as she walked but when she slowed its flame was steady for she was deep within the tomb complex where the air was still.

Her attire was simple, reflecting her status. Sa-Khonsu was nineteen, the youngest of the virgin priestesses who served Osiris, Master of Rebirth. She wore a simple white linen shift, bound at the shoulder, and her hair was in a long, shining black waterfall down her back. She had the fine features of her mother—high cheekbones, sandstone-colored skin, wide dark eyes ringed in kohl—but the intelligence of her father, one of Pharaoh's scribes. They'd given her to the temple when she was ten, a high honor. It was an even greater honor to be chosen to serve as a priestess.

It was her duty to tend the tomb of the Pharaoh, Ameny-son-of-Qemau. He ruled but a year before disease took him. He was wise beyond his age and his unexpected passing left the country in grieving turmoil. Sa-Khonsu remembered him fondly; he has always smiled at her when she washed his feet at the temple.

This was the last of her nightly visits to his tomb. Tomorrow would be the final ceremony, and the pyramid would be sealed for all eternity. She walked past the brightly-painted carvings on the wall, depicting Pharaoh's journey through life and into the afterlife, then through the doorway into the antechamber to the tomb itself.

The statue of Anubis startled her in the candlelight. It guarded the doorway with a ritual staff, ready to weigh Pharaoh's heart against the feather of Ma'at. It was taller than most men, more than a cubit taller than Sa-Khonsu, and had been carved in three pieces and assembled in the antechamber because it loomed above the doorway that was the only entrance.

She paused for a moment to make sure the ritual fruit and scented oils at the feet of Anubis were in place, taking a deep breath of their spicy, sweet scent, then dared a glimpse up. In the light of her candle, Anubis' jackal-shaped head gleamed

darkly, and the light shimmered and bounced off the ornamental necklace placed around his neck. Her gaze moved downward, over his strong chest and muscled stomach, to the painted stone wrap-around skirt he wore, the shendyt. She shivered--it was chilly this deep in the earth, even in the warm summer, and moved toward the main tomb chamber.

Sa-Khonsu entered the main burial chamber, walking past the array of ushabti, the statues of servants who would serve Pharaoh in the afterlife. To the left, they were arranged at various tasks on a small clay model of a farm. To the right, they were tending a large house. They were a mix of clay, stone, and lapis lazuli, each uniquely carved with distinct hieroglyphics describing its function in Pharaoh's sacred home in the afterlife.

Beyond the ushabti sat the large carved tomb of the Ameny. Arrayed at its base were fruits, flowers, candles, and scented oils. Sa-Khonsu made her way around the tomb, exchanging fresh flowers for yesterday's wilted blooms, and replacing any withering fruits with new ones. Her task ended, as always, by the head of the open tomb, beside the stone lid as thick as her hand that was set to the side now but would be placed onto the Pharaoh's casket tomorrow. She lowered her head, averting her eyes.

Sa-Khonsu remembered Pharaoh's kind smile when she would gently run a wet cloth across his foot, rinsing away the sand and dust. He would go into the temple, then, and pray for hours. He was a devout man, far more obedient to Osiris than his father or his young son who was now Pharaoh along with his regent uncle.

Sadness overwhelmed Sa-Khonsu. She dared to look down at Pharaoh's burial mask. It was stylized, in the way of the finest artists in the kingdom... but it was his face: his kind, understanding face. She reached toward it, tears streaking the kohl around her eyes, and laid a gentle hand on the mask, careful not to smudge the pure gold. "You are missed," she whispered. She spoke then in a fervent prayer for her Pharaoh, her fingers still caressing the gold mask that warmed to her touch. "I rise like the sun above olive trees, like the moon above date palms. Where there is light, I shall be. Where there is darkness, there is none of me. I rise like the moon above date palms. I am counted as one among stars."

As she finished the prayer, Sa-Khonsu felt heat blossom beneath her fingertips, like a spark of flame against the gold of the mask. She gasped and pulled her hand back, eyes growing wide as she saw the gold begin to glow. Suddenly her candle flame guttered and extinguished. So deep beneath the earth, the tomb was black and silent. All she could hear was the rasp of her own frightened breaths.

Sa-Khonsu carried flint and tinder in case she needed to relight her candle. She fumbled through the wilted flowers and old fruit in her basket, sorting by feel. She had just found the bundle when she heard it: the clear sound of someone breathing in the tomb with her. As she stood, stunned into stillness, she heard one heavy footstep that sounded like stone on stone, then a strange grinding sound, then another deep breath.

Sa-Khonsu's instincts told her to run, but run where? It was pitch black in the

tomb. She unwrapped the flint and tinder with trembling fingers, and struck them near the candle, but the spark didn't catch.

"O Osiris, your children come forth like the dawn of a new sun." The voice was deep, thunderous, inhuman. It filled the chamber and Sa-Khonsu's mind, seeming to come from both within and without her. She covered her ears, crying out in fright, but the voice was penetrating. "They stand up on their hind legs to adore and worship you. They fill your temples with golden treasures and your idols are fashioned of gold, lasting forever in your House of Light."

As the word "light" echoed in Sa-Khonsu's head, all the candles in the room burst into flame, including the candle in her hand. She gasped and dropped it to the stone floor. She was blinded briefly by the brilliant light that filled the chamber, reflecting off golden adornments and decorations, glinting off gold leaf stars on the blue vaulted ceiling. She wiped her eyes and as she blinked, thinking perhaps she had fallen asleep and was having a dream, she saw him.

The figure was tall, throwing a shadow long enough to stretch across the length of the chamber. His legs were the flesh of a man, tanned and muscled, as were his bare chest and strong arms. He wore a dyed linen shendyt, and a gold and lapis necklace across his chest. Her gaze traveled upward and her breath caught in her chest, for his head had the black snout, tall ears and sharp white teeth of a jackal. His eyes were brilliant in the yellow light, intelligent but detached. They returned her stare impassively.

"You have awoken me," he said, and she clasped her hands over her ears again at the sound. He tilted his head, studying her, and when he spoke again his voice was modulated, more quiet. "Do not be afraid. You have called me with your faith, and with your grief."

Sa-Khonsu took a shuddering breath and whispered, "Are you..."

The figure took a step toward her, and his ceremonial rod made a metallic sound against the stone as he walked. "I am Anubis, Guardian of the Duat, Keeper of the Dead, the Divine Lawyer, Weigher of Hearts, Master of Ammit, beloved son of Osiris, leader of souls to the light."

Before Anubis had finished his ceremonial titles, Sa-Khonsu was on her knees, forehead pressed to the cold stone, stammering out her words in a frightened rush. "Forgive me for looking upon you. Forgive me for looking upon Pharaoh."

She heard the heavy steps of Anubis stepping toward her, but she didn't dare raise her head or open her eyes. She felt the warmth of his body as he approached her, then smelled the sweet oils that she had arrayed at his feet. Sa-Khonsu was startled to feel a hand on her shoulder.

"Arise, faithful one. You looked upon your Pharaoh with love. You prayed for his safe passage to my judgment. Now look upon me and know me."

Her chin trembled as she looked up at Anubis. His skin was like beaten gold in the candlelight, supple and glistening. She breathed in the scents of myrrh and cardamom as he reached toward her and touched her upraised face.

Her skin tingled in the wake of his touch. "What do you ask of me, Keeper of

the Dead?"

"You have awakened me," he intoned, looking down at her solemnly, "and now I shall awaken you."

Sa-Khonsu's eyes widened. He used an older form of Egyptian that she rarely heard. There were two ways to interpret his phrasing, and she dared not misunderstand. She asked, hesitantly, "Am I dreaming then?"

His jackal jaw parted, and she saw the glint of white teeth. "No, priestess. You are not dreaming." Anubis bent to place his hands on her arms, raising Sa-Khonsu to her feet.

"But..." She took a sharp breath, hardly believing she dared question a god. "I am untouched, dedicated to serve our Lord Osiris." Standing, Sa-Khonsu's head barely reached the middle of Anubis' chest. Her heart was pounding. She felt tiny, overwhelmed, confused.

Anubis looked down at Sa-Khonsu, and studied her again for a moment. "I hear your thoughts, priestess. You betray no one. Osiris is my father, and we both serve him in this act."

Sa-Khonsu could not bear to hold the gaze of a god. She looked down at his strong chest, at the fingers that held his wood and gold staff, and finally her eyes rested on his shendyt. She'd seen men without clothing, of course, but never touched one. Not like that. Not in that place. A shiver went through her, and her breath quickened.

He was watching, and he knew her thoughts. Anubis reached out to touch her face again, and she looked back up at him. His ears turned and shifted to catch sounds in the chamber, and the fur on his snout was lush, shining black in the candlelight. "Do not be afraid," he said again.

"I have never been with a man," she stammered, a blush rising into her cheeks.

"And you will not be with a man this night," Anubis replied, looking into her eyes. "You will be with a god." He set the staff aside, leaning it against the end of Pharaoh's sarcophagus, then bent and lifted her in his arms in a single motion. It took no effort as he carried the gasping woman two, three, four steps across the chamber, to the stone altar priests had covered in linen in preparation for the final ceremony tomorrow. He laid Sa-Khonsu on the altar, then took a step back.

"Arise, servants!" His voice boomed inside her head again, in a stark command. "Serve me as you would serve Pharaoh."

Sa-Khonsu heard that subtle sound again from the next room: the grind of stone on stone. Then she heard small steps, coming from the antechamber. She watched in stunned silence as Pharaoh's clay, stone and lapis lazuli ushabti walked into the tomb. They were almost the height of the altar, half Sa-Khonsu's height. They were murmuring prayers to Anubis and Osiris as they walked. They were alive!

"We come to serve," each said as it entered the room, and the combined small voices echoed through the empty tomb. "We are yours to command, oh Keeper of the Dead."

"Prepare the priestess," Anubis commanded, taking a step back from the altar.

Sa-Khonsu's eyes widened—what did he mean?

The ushabti bowed to Anubis, and the six lapis figures stepped forward. Their carved heads and ceremonial robes glistened blue in the candlelight. As she watched, shrinking back against the stone, they approached, then effortlessly climbed onto the altar. They stood around her prone form, at her head, hands, knees and feet, seeming larger now that they were towering over her.

She stuttered, tried to speak, but before she could manage any words the ushabti were touching her. Their small hands were cold and hard as they began to unfasten the pin at her shoulder that held her linen shift in place. The ushabti at her feet began removing her sandals. Together, the ushabti pulled the shift apart and down, exposing Sa-Khonsu's shoulders to the cold tomb air, then traveling lower to bare her small, firm breasts, and lower still to leave her nude. She trembled, from the chill of the stone altar through the linen covering, and from the gaze of the ushabti on her naked flesh.