

# ahoti

A Novel

## A Story of Tamar



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Raven

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# Geshur

## 961 BCE

On the day they came for me, I had earlier dreamed I was walking through the pungent fir copse of my youth, high in the mountains near Jerusalem, seeking the nuts I once gave out to strengthen weak hearts. The crisp, comforting aroma of pine resin filled the air from flickering torches like the ones that kept the night at bay in the palaces where I grew up.

But this had been no mere dream.

I opened my eyes and looked over at Mother, her form the vaguest outline in the still-dark room. She had sat up on her mat and stared straight ahead.

“Mother . . . Mother!”

But she couldn't hear me over the clamor that intruded into the night. Creaking wheels, clanking armor, the shouts of men that even the stout stone walls of our confinement could not keep out. That aroma—resin from a thousand torches that lit the path of my brother's army from where they marched to the walls of Geshur. That mighty army of King Solomon, come to fetch me.

Cracks of gray light now filtered in through the slats of the locked door as I scrambled to Mother's sleeping mat and clasped her to me. We sat, wordless in the knowing. She held me to her breast, her chin resting atop my head. “Now, we wait,” she said above the din. She disengaged from our embrace and rose. As if this day were no different from any other, she rolled away her sleeping mat and blanket, and motioned me to do the same. The guard would be in soon with a jug of water along with bread, olives, and figs.

But there was no sustenance that day. I paced, while Mother kept mostly to the cushioned bench against the wall and watched me, her eyes wary. Occasionally looking away toward some distant place I could never go.

The cracks in the door grew bright as the day wore on, then gray again with dusk. Finally, the door rattled as the heavy wooden key turned the lock.

Manas, the man who had kept us under lock and key, pushed open the door in one swift, rough move. His small black eyes roved the chamber, landing everywhere but on us. His jaw clenched and unclenched repeatedly as if he were about to say something, until he stepped aside.

He was not alone.

The man who stepped heavily over the threshold after him looked vaguely familiar. Taller than any man I had ever seen. A silver mane spilled from beneath his helmet, still shot through with the copper strands that bound him to the mountain folk of southern Judah where my father had first reigned. It was a trait he shared with King David, my brother Absalom, and me, once, before white had wiped away the russet that recalled a tie to family and homeland.

Broad pink scars beat paths through the warrior's grit-caked beard. One emerged from the tangle and ran up his cheek, spanning the place where an eye had once been, and disappeared under his helmet. I would never forget that wound. I had treated it myself. Though I could not save the eye, I had saved his life.

"Mother," I said with a calm I didn't fully feel. She had sprung from her seat like a panther when the key turned the lock and had stepped in front of me as if that was all that was needed to shield me from the stranger. Love flooded through me to dissolve the fear.

"It's Benaiah. Benaiah, son of Jehoiada. Do you remember him?" I spoke softly. Perhaps it was I who could shield her, repeating a name from her past that would calm her and diffuse the danger in this moment.

She might remember. Benaiah had been with my father from the days of the desert. His valiant spirit and loyalty had rightly earned the title by which he was known far and wide in Judah. They had taken him through a hundred battles against men and

gods. I struggled to pull a memory deep from the well of the past, from before the time of my disgrace. And hers.

“Mother, Benaiah is the man who returned from Moab at the head of his men—thousands and thousands of them—marching through the streets of Jerusalem to present the smashed altar hearths of the abominable Chemosh to the king. What a glorious day that was! Remember?”

I couldn’t see her expression, but when her shoulders relaxed, relief flooded Benaiah’s battle-torn face.

“Bat Hamelech!” he said then.

My childhood title, my native language. Those two words seemed to fell the walls of our prison as if a battering ram had smashed into them.

Tamar . . . my name. Bat Hamelech . . . my title, because I was the daughter of the late king of Israel. And now . . . I stood before the man who had been sent to return me to Jerusalem after nearly two decades of hiding. Now, I would be taken to see my brother, the newly crowned king.

And my fate—whether I lived or whether I died—lay completely in his hands.



# Jerusalem

## 17 years earlier

The milk thistles' royal heads were gone now. Weeks ago, before the rains stopped, they had risen tall on their stalks, lording their beauty over all the other herbs in my spring garden. But it was now, gray and withered, that they called to me, ready to offer up their precious seeds. My turmeric plants no longer had rivals; they no longer needed to shy away among their leaves. Their time had, at last, come to show off their fuchsia blossoms. The caper flowers had unfurled, their violet stamens proudly announcing that they, too, were ready for harvest.

And here now had come my favorite time of day—when I, the healer, strolled among the furrows and offered my thanks for these healing beauties.

But then, as if on the wings of a flitting butterfly, I no longer walked between the rows. No, I drifted just above them. This happened sometimes in my visions, and it was good for the healing. I welcomed it.

The floating would stop when I reached the garden wall. There it would always be, this wall, forcing itself between the women of the palace and the world beyond. This wall, the one constant in my life.

I opened my basket, stretched out my hand, ready to pinch off the heads of the thistles growing along it. But what is this? . . . The thistles were pulling away.

No. As the distance grew, I realized not they, but I pulled away. I continued to float until the wall disappeared. Below me, where the city's dwellings should cluster shoulder to shoulder, was nothingness. I clawed at the air, which stole my breath. Then, just as panic threatened to rise, the sash around my midriff caught on the cliff edge, spiraling and spinning me as I plunged until . . .



I jerked. A dream. Another dream. I forced my eyes open and shook my head free of it, determined to steady my breathing and thinking that perhaps today—this morning, in fact—I'd take the story to the seer. Gad would know what it meant. For I, healer and diviner of the dreams of others, could not interpret it.

"Mara." I looked up, acknowledging my servant's presence, kneeling next to my bed, as she did every morning. Wordlessly, she handed me my cup. The clay was cool in my hands. It brought calm, but the pomegranate juice it held burned as I swallowed, which told me that I'd been screaming again. Ah, so this was why Mara peered at me under knit brows, lower lip caged behind her teeth. Gratitude coursed through me that she was no ordinary servant, but something closer to an ally, to the mother of whom I had been robbed, in the world of women I inhabited.

Behind her lay my robe, the bright orange-, blue-, and green-dyed strips woven among the wool's natural blacks, browns, and beige. Bright, even against the vermilion walls of my room. Cradled in the colorful cloth, gleaming against it, was my special pendant, hanging from its intricately twisted gold chain. The sweet scent of tiny, fresh-cut, blushing spikenard flowers Mara had placed in my slippers wafted across the room. Seeing these only meant one thing—

"The king has sent for you, my lady," Mara said, answering the question I had not yet opened my mouth to ask. Ah, my thoughts have always been too easy to read, over the years, for Mara.

I did not ask her why my father called for me. Every day brought new tasks, many of them requiring my ceremonial robe. And today? For a prince, perhaps? A visiting dignitary? Or perhaps I had been called to help with an ailing servant. This was what I did, and that was what I wore. I would find out soon enough.

My visit to Gad the Seer would have to wait.

After splashing my face with water from the bronze laver in the corner that Mara filled, I stood and raised my arms, ready to be dressed. The garment floated down to my ankles as she draped it over my tunic, seemingly lighter than air, belying the nature of the wool from which it was woven. I took courage from the magical geometric patterns I myself had embroidered into the sleeves and flounced hem. The supple cloth swayed like a blossom in the breeze, the inner red and the outer purple turning into alternating stripes. I remembered, as I always did when donning the garment, the day my father announced he was commissioning it for me. He hadn't even waited until we were alone but proclaimed it proudly before all my brothers gathered in the audience hall.

Mara looped the sash around my waist. I pulled aside the curtain over the niche where I kept my healing herbs and picked up the little linen bags, each one filled with a different herb or mixture, then tucked them into the folds of the sash. As Mara tightened it, I had another memory of my father: the day he had paraded his friend Hushai, grandly robed, before me around the courtyard. "You'll have a robe more beautiful than Hushai's, and certainly richer by far than Joseph's," he'd boasted, and then told me I'd be a healer.

My father did not see me shiver at the vision that came that very moment, a vision of that fine garment's golden threads, unraveled, and the magnificently woven, multicolored wool torn and filthy. Of course, being only the ahot to my brothers, my father neither saw nor sensed my trembling. He generally ignored anything of significance in my life. He never tested my knowledge of the sacred stories the way he did my brothers, so how could he have known Joseph's robe would mean anything at all to me?

But I knew all the stories, thanks to the seer, and I knew that Joseph's robe spelled doom. That robe had been Joseph's downfall, the seer told me on the day he first taught me the story. Joseph's robe, given to him in love by his father, had taken him into the depths of a pit. And so, I knew, my robe would drag me into a place

black and deeper than Joseph's ever was. But would there—could there—be redemption?

"Princess, none of that now." Mara broke through my darkness, her stern voice belied by the gentle way she'd turned and steered me with one hand toward my dressing table, holding out my beloved glass pendant in the other. This, I would not appear without. Given to me by my mother after she had persuaded the king to make me the court healer, back when I was too young even to know what it meant, it told our story. Tiny, glinting, rough-cut carnelians flanked a single smooth, great white bead, gleaming in splendor like a full moon on a clear winter night above the palace. Mother said it would remind me of her faraway roots and the worship she had put aside when she came to Judah to marry my father. A tiny, twisted thread of blue glass coiled around one end, and green glass at the other. There was none other like it anywhere in Judah, she told me. It was a treasure handed down from her mother; no one was sure where it had come from. But Mother had said it was my own version of the thread of blue in the hem of the garments only the men in Judah wore, and the healing powers of the warm, blue lake near her old home in Geshur.

Mara never ceased to remind me that the azure and the iridescence in the glass, together with the golden threads in my garment, were the exact color of my eyes—the blue-gold of my left, and the green-gold of my right.

She told me as soon as I was old enough to hear it, that more than simply my skills would persuade people of my powers. No, those two different eyes, as if coming from two realms of another world, would convince even the most cynical.

Finally, in the center of the bead was a bright red iris against a golden corona. "The eye of God, protecting you," Mother said, "and those you worked to heal."

As I sat at my dressing table, I bowed my head so Mara could slip the pendant around my neck. It nestled against the richly embroidered symbols on the breast of my robe, radiating its strange but

familiar warmth while the gold chain lay cool on my neck. Lifting the bronze mirror, I watched as Mara dressed my hair.

"I don't want to go," I confessed, as if Mara did not already know. Her face betrayed nothing as she went about her task. "You were there during my last royal audience. You stood behind me. Don't pretend you can't remember that princeling from some horrid little border town whose favor my father sought, standing right next to the throne."

I took Mara's nod as a sign of encouragement, although I was surprised she didn't cut me off to remind me of some important lesson I should take away from the encounter, as she always did. So, I ventured even further. "Don't you remember his cruel little rat's eyes and the stench of garlic and burnt oil that reached us all the way across the great audience hall?"

The comb Mara wielded pulled a little too hard at my tangled curls. I had gone too far. But I couldn't help it. The words tumbled out as easily as they did in my visions.

"Fine, Mara, you've told me before. It was my mother's fate and it will be mine. I know better than to expect love. Besides, what good is love, as you've told me so many times."

"My princess," Mara said firmly, "if love were important, you would never have been born."

"And that you've told me as well . . . countless times since my mother was sent back to my grandfather in Geshur. But who in Judah has not heard the fate of Father's first wife, Michal? She loved the king at first, so much that she put his life ahead of everything else. And yet look how she despised him at the end, how he toyed with her and how she was reduced to tending to her sister Merav's children for the rest of her life." I paused, allowing my words to reach their target. "And so, without love, how like Michal's life might mine become—"

"Snippets of gossip carried home like trinkets from the market." Mara was the only person, besides the king and my brothers, who could interrupt me, and she had done so again. "Mindless nothings

that you hear from the kitchens and storerooms while tending your herbs are not the way for our court healer—and sister of the king's heir—to decide her future." She added another sharp twist to my hair.

"Then what should?" I asked, as if for the first time.

"You've seen fifteen summers already, Tamar. Since childhood you've chafed at your life like a muzzled donkey on the threshing floor, because you want to get out. Now is the time."

Only Mara could compare me to a donkey and get away with it. I couldn't hide a smile, although I needn't have tried—Mara ignored it. "You are a beauty and the daughter of a beauty, who, until she married your father, stood to inherit a realm much older and greater than Judah. And though the moon god does not rule here as he does at home, and some disparage you because your mother was from foreign stock, never forget that your mother was the daughter of a great kingdom.

"And even when your father appoints Amnon, his eldest, as his successor, as he certainly will, even though the two of you have different mothers, you'll find a place of strength because you are his sister. His ahot. You will take the authority for healing your father granted you and transform it into a position no woman but you could hope have—overseeing all the vast property and possessions that your father, whom God has shown favor to, will pass on to Amnon."

Mara's lips were pursed as usual, but her brows flitted briefly upward, and the smile that never failed to encourage me lit up her eyes. "You will soon learn to control even the expressions that you so poorly conceal now. And your power will multiply all the more when you are the wife of a great man. No one will be able to touch you."

Mara's final words floated down with the veil she placed over my head and arranged around my shoulders. I saw in my reflection that a few of the fat red curls I had inherited from my father had escaped despite her best efforts. No matter, I liked it that way. When her

mood was good, Mara would remind me that my mother wore her raven hair much the same way.

At Mara's signal I gazed up to focus on the plaster flowers blooming along the line where the wall met the ceiling as she applied the cobalt blue kohl below my eyes. When I obediently lowered my lids, she carefully coated them too.

I refused to open my eyes, although the delicate work was finished. "I woke with a troubling dream this morning, and I need the counsel of the seer. I will go to him before the throne room," I announced as if my mere words, simply because I had uttered them, were enough to carry out my will. I had to go. I must. Even Mara's ministrations, the power of my robe of office, the pendant and protective kohl had not dispelled the wisps of my dream.

"We won't reach Gad's apartments until the second step in the sun staircase is in shadow, Princess. There's no time even for your meal," Mara shot back. She was right, of course. As king, my father could not be kept waiting once he had called for me, no matter the cause, whether for matters of the palace or for the pleasure of seeing his only daughter.

As if on cue, my bedroom door opened, and the aroma of the freshly baked bread wafted in momentarily, then disappeared. I suspected Mara had shooed off the kitchen maid with my breakfast tray.

I opened my eyes. "All right," I said.

I was ready now to see my father.

I was ready to see the king.

