

THE SILENT YEARS

EGYPT'S SISTER

A NOVEL OF CLEOPATRA

ANGELA HUNT



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Angela Hunt, *Egypt's Sister*
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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author’s imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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In the Christian Bible, one turns the page after Malachi and finds Matthew as if only a few days fell between the activities of the prophet and the arrival of Jesus Christ. In reality, however, four hundred so-called “silent years” lie between the Old Testament and New, a time when God did not speak to Israel through His prophets. Yet despite the prophets’ silence, God continued to work in His people, other nations, and the supernatural realm.

He led Israel through a time of testing that developed a sense of hope and a yearning for the promised Messiah.

He brought the four nations prophesied in Daniel’s vision to international prominence: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. These powerful kingdoms spread their cultures throughout civilization and united the world by means of paved highways and international sailing routes.

God also prepared to fulfill His promise to the serpent in Eden: “I will put animosity between you and the woman, and between your descendant and her descendant; he will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

For God never sleeps, and though He may not communicate as we expect Him to, He can always speak to a receptive heart.

CHAPTER ONE

Though I was as close as a shadow to many of the greatest men and women in human history, no historian ever recorded my name. Though I walked down marble hallways and dined regularly with princes and princesses, no one ever thought my presence significant. And though I influenced a woman who molded the hearts of formidable men, I am never mentioned in their biographies.

But I have a story.

My mother died the day she birthed me, but my weeping father took me from the midwife, then stepped onto the street and held me aloft, publicly acknowledging me as his daughter. A nurse chewed my food until I sprouted teeth, and a slave steadied my footsteps as I learned to walk. I lived in a palatial home only a short distance from the royal residence, so perhaps it was only natural that my father, known as “Daniel the scholar,” regularly carried me to the palace where I played with other noble children. Only when I reached maturity did I realize that he did so not for my sake, but to benefit another child, one who could not leave the royal family at the end of the day. Her family called her Urbi, and I called her *friend*.

Out of all the honored foster siblings who were privileged to be the princess’s playmates, Urbi loved me most. We came

into the world only weeks apart, we grew at the same pace, and when we were old enough to learn, we sat before the same tutors, one of whom was my father. After class, we scampered through crowds of officials and hairless white-robed priests as we played tag in the royal gardens. In Urbi's chamber we played knucklebones and gave voices to terra-cotta dolls, then hid from the nursemaids until they cursed our mischievousness and sent for reinforcements. In the royal menagerie, we held hands and gazed at giraffes, bears, and snakes—one of them as long as a ship!—and felt ourselves small . . . but safe.

Only when the sun set did my father arrive at Urbi's chamber to take me home. Back in our house, my older brother Asher turned from his studies and looked at me with jealous scorn as I recounted the day's adventures. Father listened quietly while I babbled about exquisite gifts and strangers who spoke odd languages and flattened themselves on the ground when they chanced to meet us in the hallway.

"Why do they do that?" I asked.

Father ignored the question and offered advice: "You should watch, listen, and learn, Chava. Not every girl has the opportunities HaShem has given you."

Because I was young, I did not realize how fortunate I was. I did not know that few Jews had access to the royal palace, and I had no idea that hunger and deprivation existed. My life was a seemingly endless progression of games and fine meals; my biggest fear was that I might become ill and be unable to visit my best friend.

My heart yearned for frivolity, beautiful gowns, and polished jewelry from Urbi's treasure box. I could happily spend the day in her royal apartment, reveling in her massive collection of fine linen tunics and ornate headdresses . . . I was such a child.

If I had been wiser, I would have heeded my father's words. But as a mere girl I had no idea how swiftly life could change.



When Urbi and I were eleven years old, the people cheered as her father the king sailed away. I did not understand why he left, and Father did not discuss it with me or my brother, but I could not help but hear the victorious shouts as his ship left the harbor.

Shortly after King Auletes's departure, Urbi's older sister Berenice decided that she wanted to be queen. Because she was female, and the people of Alexandria expected her to rule with a husband, she married—first, a Seleucid prince, who died mysteriously several days after the wedding, then a priest who seemed to please her better. As a young girl, I knew little about Berenice and cared nothing at all about her court. My only concern was for Urbi, who did not appear likely to ever become queen.

I was happy that Urbi was the second daughter and not a queen-in-waiting. Queens were busy and powerful and had no time for their friends. So long as Urbi remained a princess, we would be close.

We lived in beautiful Alexandria, a city of Greeks on Egypt's northern shore. Urbi's father had inherited the throne of Egypt from his brother, Ptolemy VIII, and that king had inherited from his father, and so on all the way back to Alexander the Great, the Greek founder of Alexandria and a god to the Alexandrians. Alexander's tomb stood in the center of the city, and kings from far away came to gaze upon his preserved corpse.

When I asked Father why so many of our neighbors lit candles for Alexander while we did not, Father told me that though Alexander had nearly united all the world's kingdoms, he could not defeat death, proving he was not a god and unworthy of having candles lit in his honor. "But consider Moses," he added. "Though Moses united the twelve tribes of Israel, a task *easily*

as difficult as uniting the world's kingdoms, he was also unable to defeat death, proving that he was only a servant of HaShem, the one true God.”

“And he does not need candles?”

Father smiled and ruffled my hair. “Correct, daughter.”

The Greeks of Alexandria worshiped many gods, particularly Isis and Dionysus, the king's favorites. Isis, an ancient Egyptian goddess nearly always depicted with a sun disk on her head, was said to be the Mother of the Gods and wife to Osiris. Dionysus had not been an Egyptian god until Urbi's Greek forefathers landed on Alexandria's shores. With long, flowing hair and delicate features, Dionysus was the god of wine and the vineyard. The Ptolemies blended Dionysus with Osiris, expanding his power and influence everywhere but in the Jewish Quarter of Alexandria.

The people of our neighborhood worshiped one God alone, and He did not live in a marble house. We called him HaShem, Hebrew for *the name*, because His name was too holy to be used in conversation. Because HaShem was invisible, Father told me, we were never to bow before a graven image of any sort. We were different from the Greeks and Egyptians in that way, yet we, the sons and daughters of Abraham, had been chosen to bless the world.

“How?” I asked.

Father cleared his throat. “HaShem will show us when the time comes.”

“But how will He show us?”

Father did not seem inclined to answer.

On every seventh day, at sundown we went to our synagogue to join with the community. A velvet-wrapped Torah scroll stood in a place of honor at the front of the room, and from where I sat with the women I would look at it and imagine the scribes who had pored over the parchments, copying the holy words of

Scripture. Each time they had to write the holy name of God, Father said, the scribe would take a fresh reed, dip it into ink, and write the name. Then he would toss that reed away and continue his copying.

When our rabbi stood, he would read from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Scriptures. Many in our community did not speak Hebrew, so if we were to understand HaShem's words, we had to hear them in the common tongue. Father told me and Asher that we should be proud to live in such a distinguished community, for the Septuagint had been translated in Alexandria. "Seventy-two translators, six from each of the twelve tribes, completed the Torah translation in seventy days," Father said, smiling. "Though I was not around to see it, the story is probably true. The rest of the writings were translated later."

Many of the men from our community carried on the tradition of Alexandrian scribes, for several were scholars like my father. When he was not teaching one of the royal children, he labored at his most precious work: a manuscript he called "The Twelve Testaments of the Patriarchs." In short, he studied the Scriptures and summarized what each of the tribes' patriarchs would say to his descendants were he given a chance. Often he would call me to sit with him and listen. He would read a paragraph, then squint over the top of the parchment to gauge my reaction.

"How is this?" he asked one afternoon. "And there I saw a thing again even as the former, after we had passed seventy days. And I saw seven men in white raiment saying to me, 'Arise, put on the robe of the priesthood, and the crown of righteousness, and the breastplate of understanding, and the garment of truth, and the diadem of faith, and the tiara of miracle, and the ephod of prophecy.'"

He lowered the parchment and narrowed his eyes. "Is the meaning clear?"

“Yes, Father.”

“Can you guess who is speaking?”

I crinkled my nose. “Judah?”

“Who are the priests? The Levites. This is Levi.”

Father went back to work while I tilted my head and considered the seven men in white raiment. “Father?”

“Yes, curious one?”

“How did the patriarchs know what HaShem wanted them to do? Did He speak to them through angels? Or did He speak to them in dreams, as He spoke to Joseph? Could He speak to me?”

“You and your questions.” Father lowered the parchment in his hands as a wry but indulgent gleam appeared in his eyes. “And why would HaShem speak to a girl when He has not spoken through any prophet in nearly four hundred years?”

I felt myself flushing. “I do not know why He hasn’t spoken. But He spoke to Samuel, and he was just a boy.”

“So he was.” Father stroked his beard, then smiled, restoring my confidence. “And who can say how HaShem will speak? Sometimes He speaks through the glory of the mountains or the power of the sea. He also speaks through the Torah, the writings, and the words of His prophets as recorded in the Tanakh.”

I nodded.

“Sometimes He speaks through the voices of our leaders—like your father, the rabbi, or even a queen. For a king’s heart is like a stream of water in the hand of Adonai; He directs it wherever He wants.”

I nodded again.

“And sometimes”—Father’s gaze focused on me—“He speaks in a small voice that pierces the heart and soul of a man . . . or even a child.” A smile curved his mouth. “Have you any other questions for me?”

“Not yet.” I slid from my stool and bounded away.



Who was I that HaShem should speak to me? I was only a girl with no power or influence. But the more I thought about it, the more fascinated I grew with the possibility that Adonai *might* speak to me. Perhaps He would, if I listened carefully. . . .

When not with Urbi, I began to take my handmaid and go down to the sea, where we watched the waves crash as we listened for the voice of HaShem. And though I strained my ears, I did not hear Him.

I listened for Him in the rabbi's voice, in my father's teachings, and in the talk of the women who sat around me in the synagogue. But I did not hear Adonai.

Several months passed. We enjoyed the warm winds of spring and braced for the blazing breaths of summer. I spent my days with Urbi in the cool stone palace, and my evenings at home with Asher and my father.

One night, as one of our slaves lit the Shabbat candles, an unseasonably cool gust entered the room from the atrium's open roof. As the candles sputtered and Asher laughed, I lifted my eyes to the blue-black sky where a handful of diamond stars had already appeared.

Your friendship with the queen lies in my hands.

The voice came from nowhere, yet it engulfed me—behind me, before me, beneath me.

You will be with her on her happiest day and her last.

I shifted my attention to Asher, then to Father, expecting them to say something or rebuke whoever had dared interrupt our Shabbat meal. But they kept their eyes on the guttering candles, their mouths ruffling with good humor as the candles flickered and nearly went out.

And you, daughter of Israel, will know yourself, and you will bless her.

The flames straightened and took hold, brightening the gloom with golden light. Without acknowledging the voice and its message, Father began the Shabbat blessing: “*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam . . .*”

And I felt a tide of gooseflesh wash up each arm and crash at the nape of my neck.

In that moment, one thing became clear to me: my life was entwined with Urbi’s, and HaShem intended for me to remain by her side always.