

THE SILENT YEARS

# JERUSALEM'S QUEEN

A NOVEL OF SALOME ALEXANDRA

ANGELA HUNT



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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 “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.

Our sages commanded that one should not teach one's daughter Torah because the minds of most women are incapable of concentrating on learning, and thus, because of their intellectual poverty, they turn the words of Torah into words of nonsense.

Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*,  
“Laws of Torah Study,” 1:13

## CHAPTER ONE

They are all here, gathered like vultures around my bed, watching with long faces and occasionally bending near to listen for my breathing. Hyrcanus studies me with wet eyes; Aristobulus is not present, undoubtedly intent on working mischief outside Jerusalem. His wife, whom I have never liked, smiles at my bedside, ready to fly to her husband once I am gone.

HaShem, can I not stay a little longer? My sons are not at peace with each other, and I worry their animosity will destroy the peace of Judea.

I close my eyes and the room goes silent. When I open them again, the daughter-in-law at my side frowns.

I shift my attention to the others. Such beloved faces! Here is Simeon ben Shetah, who takes my hand and pronounces a blessing on my head. There is Honi the Circle-Drawer, who pushes his way past Simeon to see me. I try to smile at him, but my lips do not respond as I would like.

The distant sound of mournful music seeps into the room. The figures around me soften in a hazy glow, and my friends and family are replaced by loved ones from long ago. My father! My sister, now a woman as beautiful as I expected. My mother, who smiles at me with pleased surprise. And Uncle, standing

erect, his hands folded, wearing a look of satisfaction. I see Alena and Avigail and Ezra Diagos—

“Mistress?”

I blink at the sound of Kissa’s voice. My eyelids flutter, and with an effort I focus on the oval face hovering near mine.

“Honi Ha-Meaggel would like to pray with you.”

I nod, or try to, and as the circle-drawer reads, the beloved words lift me from my surroundings and distract me from my visitors.

“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
from where does my help come?  
My help comes from Adonai,  
Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot slip.  
Your Keeper will not slumber.  
Behold, the Keeper of Israel  
neither slumbers nor sleeps . . .”

I look down on the palace courtyard that has filled with my people, many of whom are weeping. The air vibrates with the ululation of mourners. Men and women are beating their breasts, asking HaShem to bless my journey . . . *as I have blessed Israel.*

Their words are a balm to my soul. Thanks be to HaShem, He listened to the prayer of a fatherless girl and granted her most earnest desire: to matter in a world where women were often chattel, overlooked and forgotten.

And then He made her queen.

## CHAPTER TWO

# *Shelamzion*

I covered my eyes, unable to look at the dead man on the table. Thus occupied, my hands could not protect my ears, which had filled with the sound of Mother's frantic wailing and the mourners' rising ululation.

"My husband," Mother cried, her voice trembling. "And my beautiful girl! How can I lose them both in one day?"

"Hush now." Avigail pulled my mother into her arms. "Ketura Desmona may yet live. We will know nothing until they find her."

Mother shook her head. "She is gone. HaShem has taken her from me."

The mourners wailed on cue, and Mother burst into fresh sobs.

Overcome by the sights and sounds of grief, I crouched lower in the corner, willing myself to disappear. No one looked in my direction because I was the second daughter, the plain one. I was only Shelamzion.

"So sudden," Avigail said, releasing my mother. The old woman, our closest neighbor, picked up a piece of wet linen, wiped it over my dead father's chest, and shook her head. "Ittamar was a fine man. HaShem blessed you with a fine husband, a prosperous man, and now He has taken him away."

“Blessed be the name of the Lord,” another neighbor murmured, determination in the straight line of her mouth as she scrubbed between the dead man’s toes. “He gives and He takes away.”

“But to take him—like this!” Mother sputtered, looking from one neighbor to another. “He was fine this morning. He broke his fast and went riding with Ketura, and before I could even visit the well, my husband returned to me, dead! And my daughter—my pride and joy—what has become of her?”

A newcomer caught Mother’s arm. “A swift death is a mercy, and my son said your husband died instantly. Apparently the horse reared, and Ittamar fell backward. Your daughter must have been thrown from the saddle.”

“So where is she?” Mother shrieked. She stepped to the window, threw open the wooden shutters, and looked into the courtyard as if expecting my nine-year-old sister to materialize outside the door. “Where could she be?”

“Poor, proud Ittamar.” Avigail’s hands drifted to the corpse’s forehead. “Why did you have to insist on a horse? Would not a mule have served you as well?” The other women did not reply but kept washing the body.

Though I was but a child of six years, I knew the old woman had raised a valid point. Most of the villagers in Modein rode mules, if they rode at all, yet Father had insisted on riding a horse. And not just any horse—his mount had to be a stallion, the finest money could buy, and it had to be a proud beast, and lively, with a wild streak to intimidate less-skilled riders.

That insistence, born of pride, had probably cost Father his life. The skittish stallion often fidgeted when a rider climbed onto his back and frequently kicked at any passerby who happened to startle him. Mother often spoke of how untrustworthy the animal was, yet Father only laughed at her fears.

He was not laughing now. And Ketura? Where was my sister?



Before sunset, Father would take his place in the family tomb, and Mother and I would face life without him. I would miss his twinkling dark eyes, his booming laugh, and the work-worn hands that had always patted my head with gentle affection.

A sob rose in my throat, and I barely forced it down. Mother was already mad with grief; I did not want to distract her and cause her further pain.

Now she walked around the room, her hands in constant motion—pressing against her forehead, clinging to the table for support, tugging at the neckline of her tunic. “What will we do?” she asked, glancing around the room. “Ittamar’s parents are dead, and he has no brothers. His sisters have married into other families . . .”

“The people of Modein will be generous,” Avigail said, “as they were generous with me when my man died. The Law commands them to leave grain and fruit for the needy.”

“But I don’t want to be poor!” Mother looked from one woman to the other, searching for answers they did not have. “All I have are a few wild horses, and no one will want to buy them after this. I have daughters to feed, unless—” Her voice broke as she looked at the small stool where Ketura usually sat at meals. “Ketura!” Her anguished voice spilled out the window as she turned toward it, frantically looking for my sister.

“Tend to your husband!” Avigail’s voice cut through the mourners’ cries. “Half the village is out searching for your daughter. They will find her soon.”

Reluctantly, Mother left the window and stepped to the table, then looked at the dead man and broke into fresh tears. “What a fool I married! He should never have taken Ketura with him on that animal.”

This earned her a sharp look from Avigail, but I had no time to wonder about it, because a strong voice suddenly called from the street: “Sipporah!”

Mother lifted her head, and for an instant the worry lines between her brows melted away. “Did they find my beautiful girl?”

She flew to the window again, and from the sound of her anguished cry I knew they had not found my sister alive. Mother took several steps backward and crumpled to the floor, tearing at her tunic as the air trembled with the agony of her grief.

A man from the village came through the doorway with my sister in his arms. Without speaking, he laid Ketura’s body next to my father’s, and the women in the room lifted their voices in another chorus of unspeakable loss.

The cause of death—later they would say it was snakebite—did not matter. All I could hear was Mother wailing that with her husband and beautiful daughter gone, she had nothing, so she might as well join them in the grave.



Two days after we buried my father and sister, a man riding a fine horse entered the village. I saw him come through the gate, and some deep-seated intuition told me he had come to see my mother.

“Who is that?” one of the other girls whispered, pointing to the stranger at the center of a dust cloud.

“Someone important,” another girl answered. “He wears elegant clothing.”

I left my jar at the well and hurried home. Mother had not done her chores since the funerals, so I had been fetching water and doing my best to grind the grain. But my arms were not strong, and my efforts were far from satisfactory.

I passed several houses, each sitting behind a courtyard. In each courtyard a woman stood and peered toward the well, where the stranger had dismounted to water his horse.

“Well-bred animal,” one woman remarked.

“Expensive tunic,” another said.

“He looks familiar,” called the woman across the street. “I’ve seen him before.”

“He is one of the high priest’s sons.” Avigail’s mouth curled in a smile. “Distant cousin to Sipporah. Mark my words, he has come from Jerusalem to see her.”

“He can’t go in the house,” the first woman said, her voice flat. “He won’t. Sipporah will be unclean until the Sabbath.”

“As will we all,” Avigail said. “But we can still speak to him.”

“Sipporah!” The woman who lived next to our house turned toward our door. “Someone has come to see you.”

I reached our home just as Mother stepped into the courtyard. Her face was pale, her head uncovered, and her eyes still puffy. She looked around, then asked the air, “Who would come to this house of sorrow?”

Without speaking, all the women turned toward the well, where the well-dressed man had left his horse. He was moving down the dusty street, saying nothing, and studying each woman he approached. Finally he stopped at our courtyard gate.

He did not ask permission to enter but dipped his head in a respectful nod. “Sipporah, wife of Ittamar?”

Mother squinted at him. “Could it be John Hyrcanus?”

“Cousin.” He greeted her, his deep voice resonating with concern. “How sorry I was to hear about Ittamar and your child. I know your heart is heavy, but I have come to extend what comfort I can. I want to assure you that we will never ignore your needs. My family will be your family, and you do not need to fear the future.”

Tears glinted in Mother’s eyes. “I have suffered a great loss. Ittamar is gone, and Ketura—she was the most beautiful girl in Modein. She would have been a lovely bride for some fortunate young man. She would have been fit for a prince.”

The visitor inclined his head. “Yes, the last time I spoke with Ittamar, he remarked on your eldest daughter’s beauty. But you have another daughter, yes?”

Mother blinked, then nodded. "Salome Alexandra."

"Ittamar said your youngest daughter was exceptional, as well. He said she was clever."

Mother blinked again. "Clever?"

"He said she taught herself to read. That she was advanced beyond her years and studied Torah with him, memorizing as easily as a scholar."

Mother gave him an uncertain look. "He said that?"

"He did. So when I heard about your tragedy, I knew I had to come and offer our help. We will be happy to take care of you and your daughter."

"You are too kind." Mother murmured the words absently, and I could tell she was still thinking about what Father had told this man.

"Nonsense. I'm sure Ittamar would do the same thing if the situation were reversed."

I tilted my head and considered the stranger's words. While my father had been a good man, I could not imagine him offering to take care of this powerful man's family. They would probably laugh at his offer, a tribe of lions scorning help from a mouse.

"I will send a wagon for you after the Sabbath," John Hircanus went on. "Henceforth, you and Salome will be under my guardianship. We have a place for you, so you need not worry about anything."

That promise, bestowed so easily, seemed to fill the shadows in the courtyard and brighten Mother's face. Looking up, somehow she found the courage to offer him a weak smile. "May HaShem bless and keep you, cousin, until we see your wagon coming through our gate."



Though grief lay heavy on my mother's heart, throughout the next week she did her best to prepare for our move to Jerusalem.

She gave away my father's clothing and sold our goats to the neighbors. She sold Father's wild horses to a trader. She packed up our few tunics and sandals, putting all our possessions into wooden trunks and woven baskets.

When we had finished packing, we had little to occupy our time as we waited for John Hyrcanus to send a wagon. Mother sat in the nearly empty house and wept while I wandered through the village, pausing at the gates of the neighbors' courtyards and silently saying good-bye to the sights and sounds I had known since I was old enough to walk. The village of Modein, small though it was, encompassed my entire world, and I could not imagine anything outside it.

As I wandered through the dusty streets, the other mothers called out condolences and assured me they were going to miss me. "Take care of your mother in Jerusalem," I heard time and again. "Don't let her forget us."

While we waited, I sat by the fire pit and thought about all the things my father had taught me. From the Tanakh he read portions of the Torah, the writings and the prophets, and frequently the Scriptures mentioned the word *Savior*. "My God is my rock, in Him I take refuge," David wrote, "my shield, my horn of salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my Savior— You save me from violence."

I had never endured the hard things David suffered, but as my childish lips repeated the Scripture I had memorized, I realized that John Hyrcanus was a sort of savior to Mother and me. With Father gone, we faced a life of poverty and want until John Hyrcanus, son of Simon the high priest, left his home in Jerusalem and came to little Modein with his promise to save us.

But that promise vanished when two sweaty riders stopped at the well and broadcast a terrible report: Simon Maccabaeus, son of Mattathias the righteous priest, had been most foully murdered, along with his two eldest sons, Mattathias and Judah.

Simon had been the last of the five brothers known as the Maccabees, and the first of the Hasmon family to be proclaimed Israel's "leader and high priest forever, until there should arise a faithful prophet."

As a child, I did not understand the full meaning of those words, but I had heard the name *Simon* enough to know he was important to everyone in Judea.

Mother went silent at the somber news, and the village of Modein sank into a grief that eclipsed the mourning of my father and sister. The sons of Mattathias, I heard people say, were *our* people. Simon had grown up in Jerusalem, but his father and his brothers had launched their war against the Seleucid invaders in Modein. The neighbors around me had watched and prayed with Judas Maccabaeus, who led the army of Israel, and they had traded and worked alongside Johanan, Eleazar, and Jonathan. Along with Mattathias, they had sacrificed their husbands, fathers, and sons to win their freedom from pagan tyranny.

Simon, Mother reminded Avigail, had been our high priest for only seven years. "He should have died in his bed," she said, weeping. "He should have led us until his death as an old man."

"Even more horrible," Avigail replied, "is the betrayal! They say Ptolemy, his own son-in-law, planned the murder."

Confused, I tried to make sense of the wailing I heard from every house. I tugged on Mother's tunic and waited until she looked down at me. "Ima, was Simon our king?"

She shook her head. "Simon was our leader and high priest."  
"So who will be high priest now?"

She looked at Avigail, her brows lifting. "What do you think? With the two older sons in their graves, the high priest must be John Hyrcanus."

Avigail frowned. "I am surprised they did not try to kill him, as well."

“Maybe they did. Maybe . . . he was somewhere else when they sought to kill him. Maybe he was here . . . with us.” An odd look settled on Mother’s features—surprise, puzzlement, and a touch of fear. “I am being foolish. Surely we are too small to matter in such dealings.”

Avigail smiled. “HaShem uses all things to work His will—even small things.” She peered at me. “Never forget that, Salome Alexandra. Even a girl as small as you is not too small to matter.”

The corner of Mother’s mouth twisted at that suggestion, but the mention of Hyrcanus had turned her thoughts to other matters. Her face clouded. “My cousin may not send for us now. He will mourn his father and brothers, and he will move his family into the high priest’s house. His life is about to change completely . . . I would not be surprised if he forgot about us.”

I tugged on Mother’s tunic as hope filled my heart. “If he forgets, can we stay here? Can we get our goats back?”

Mother gave me a swift tap on the shoulder and told me to run along.

As I wandered through the village, I realized that Mother was not the only person talking about changes in Judea. The news that John Hyrcanus would become our high priest seemed to stun the village almost as much as the news about Simon being killed. “Hyrcanus has not been trained,” the men protested as they led their sheep and goats out to pasture. “He was never meant for the priesthood.”

“Is he not a Levite?” others countered. “And was Simon not his father? The hand of HaShem will be on his life, and surely even this is the Lord’s doing.”

When I returned home, I found Mother sitting by the window and chewing on a fingernail. She would not tell me why she appeared anxious, but when Avigail came to visit, Mother did not mince words. “I thought we would be all right,” she said, her hand at her throat. “John Hyrcanus promised to take us

in, but how can he do that now? The high priest and the leader of Israel will have no time for poor relatives. He will have far more important things on his mind.”

“A priest looks after HaShem’s people,” Avigail said, her voice low and soothing. “If John Hyrcanus made you a promise, he will keep it. You must be patient and give him time.”

“And when we run out of grain, what then?” Mother’s eyes snapped. “Am I to beg by the well? Perhaps I should resort to thievery and steal one of my kinsmen’s lambs.”

“Patience, Sipporah,” Avigail counseled. “HaShem hears the cries of the widow and the fatherless. He will take care of you as He took care of Hagar in the desert. As He took care of me.”

He would be our savior.

I looked at Mother, hoping to see relief in her face, but all I saw was a cloud of fearful desperation.