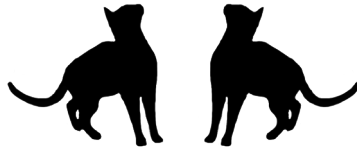


THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO YESHUA'S  
CAT



C. L. Francisco, PhD

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## SCRIBAL NOTE

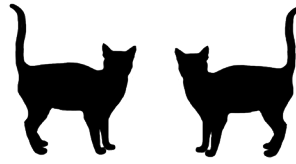
I, Maryam of Magdala, daughter of Avram ben Nesher of the lineage of Tzadok, have recorded the words that follow in my own hand, as they were spoken into my mind by Yeshua ben Yosef's extraordinary cat, Mari. How this could be she explains herself. I know from my own experience and the teacher's testimony while he was still with us that what she says is true. Both she and the teacher urged me to preserve her words and share them as I could, but the times are troubled. I leave her words in the care of the One, and pray that he will find a way to place them in the hands of his choosing.

## NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR

Finding this scroll hidden in the depths of a heretofore undiscovered cave in the Judean desert was the event of a lifetime. Its preservation and eventual translation from the Greek and Aramaic were a labor of love taking many years. I release it now into the world as a child finally coming into her own, with all my hopes and blessings.

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## Prologue

**M**y name is Mari, a name given me by the man they call Yeshua ben Yosef. I was little more than a kitten when he strode through a pack of wild dogs to lift me from the crevice where I crouched. The dogs slunk from his coming like jackals, and I ceased my growling. In our different ways, we sensed his power.

He laid his hand on me as if to feel the measure of the dogs' violence. My unborn kits, conceived in my first time of making, were gone, my belly agape. I could feel my body yearning toward Silence, but his hand soothed my pain and drew me into sleep. When I awoke again, I was lying in his lap. He sat quietly in a canyon niche above a small spring, far from the river valley where I had been born, in a stony desert waste. I felt weak and stiff, but alive. I stirred a little, and he turned his face to me and smiled.

"So, little mother, you are awake at last! Do not fear me. You have been sleeping on my breast through all the long journey here."

I looked at him with wonder. I felt no fear.

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"Take some water for your thirst," he added, and placed a small cupped stone beside me on his leg.

While I drank he studied me. "What name do you have among your kind?" he asked.

I settled to rest again on his lap, and considered this odd awakening. He spoke, yet I didn't see his lips move. He was human, but the words I heard carried the sense of my own language, not a human's roaring nonsense.

He laughed out loud, and his body shook with it. "Yes, little mother, you can understand me, and I can understand you! It is a gift I have, and one I am grateful for, since it allowed me to know your peril, and deliver you from the dogs."

"I owe you the life gift, O man. I am yours," I replied in silence, to see if he heard me.

"No, little mother," he said softly, "you are not mine anymore than I am yours. Freedom is your birthright, as it is the right of every life born. Will you tell me your name?"

"The name the grandmothers gave me when I caught my first mouse is Wind on Water, because of the way my fur moves in a breeze."

"Yes, your fur is thick and fine, and your eyes are the clear green of a mountain spring," he agreed. "Your sleek coat teases me with hints of a leopard's spots, swimming like fish beneath the surface of a wave. You are dark and comely! I think, if you agree, I will call you Mari in human speech, like the ancient walled city named for the sea—lady of beauty and wrath, mother of life. In your short life you have already been all those things."

"That pleases me well enough, human, but I haven't been, nor ever will be now, the mother of any."

"No, Mari, I say that you will have many children, but not as you might expect! 'Mother of life' you shall be."



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"As you will, O man. By what name should I call you?"

"You shall choose," he smiled.

"My mother called your kind 'beast that rises up,' but I don't think that name is for you. What is 'man' in your own speech?"

"Adam."

"Does it have meaning, more than just 'man'?"

"It's the name we call all humankind, as well as the first man. It is also the masculine of our feminine word for 'earth,' adamah, from which all flesh was formed."

"What do the others of your kind call you?"

"Yeshua—which, as you will certainly ask, is someone who rescues or delivers—as I have already proved to you. My full name is Yeshua ben Yosef, which means 'son of Yosef', who was my father. And Yosef means 'God will add to me another son'."

"How odd that you call yourself son of a father! We call ourselves children of the mother who gave us birth. Fathers mean little to our young and we make no effort to seek them out. When the time of making is upon us, males answer our call and then go their own ways. Your children know their fathers?"

I feared that he was choking on an unseen bone, or suffering a fit, as we sometimes do, and I was struggling to rise to my feet to escape his thrashing when I realized he was laughing again.

"Forgive me, Mari—my laughter is not at your expense, but my own! Of course your little ones do not know their fathers; it is not the way of cats. Not even all humans name themselves by their fathers. It is easy to forget that a thing is not always so just because it is so with us.

"Yes, my people trace our families back in time through our fathers, not our mothers. Our fathers guard the mothers of

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their children carefully, to insure that no other males come near them.”

I sat in thought a long time after that. “Man of the impossible name, I cannot call you this—it is too strange to me. May I suggest a different one?”

“Of course.”

“I will call you ben Adamah, son of Earth, which is like, yet unlike, what you call yourselves—and also like, yet unlike, what my people call themselves.”

He smiled at me then, did ben Adamah, and the sweetness of his smile took away even the breath of a cat.



## I

# Voices in the Night

*T*he son of Earth told me that he had come to that desolate place to be alone and pray, to speak with the One God and find direction for his feet. With every breath he took, he felt the One calling him, calling so strongly that the summons threatened to wrench his heart from his body if he could not find his path soon.

“Forgive me, little Shulamite, if I neglect you” (he often called me names like this, and after a while I stopped asking for explanations: his knowledge was prodigious, and he loved to fill up my ignorance). “I suspect that your own presence here touches what I seek, but only in prayer and fasting can I find answers.”

“What is fasting?” I asked him.

“Hmm,” he murmured. “That will be an odd idea for a cat.” Then he went on. “A fast is a time dedicated to the One God, when I eat no food and drink only a little water. It disciplines my body and clears my mind so that I can hear the One’s voice.”

“How long will you do this fast?”

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"For as long as it takes, or until the One tells me that no answer will come."

"Have you already begun?"

"I have been fasting since before you awoke. The dried meat I carry is yours only, food for you until you are well enough to hunt for yourself."

"Many days have passed?"

"Five days—as many days as the pads on one of your paws."

"So many days, son of Earth! And you won't stop yet."

"No, Mari, I have no answers."

He turned away after speaking these words, and I knew that he was returning to his prayers.

Prayer I understood well. My people have our own ways of resting in the One, and we seek her peace often—sometimes as simply as sinking into the warmth of the morning sun.

I healed quickly, and spent more and more time prowling the cliffs and drowsing in the sun. Before long I was finding my own food, but eating it at a distance from ben Adamah, not wishing to torment him with the sight of a tasty mouse or lizard when he couldn't share it.

Most strange to me in those days was the peace that settled over the little canyon. Serpents came and went from their rocky dens, ignoring me completely. Jackals slunk in and out as if fearful of reprimand. Lions slaked their thirst, but never turned a hungry eye upon my fasting friend. Carrion birds didn't gather in anticipation of his final weakening, nor did the great eagles molest me, small though I am, even for a cat. The power I had sensed in him that first night held our ravine in sway, and all who passed accepted us as they might their own kin.

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When night cooled the desert, and I'd finished prowling the borders of my new territory, I would often go and sit beside him. He rarely spoke to me now, even in his mind, although at times his hand would stray to my head. He sat immobile, a cross-legged image of a man, his eyes fixed on a world I couldn't see. I don't know how long we'd been in the desert. I'm not much for numbers (cats generally aren't) but I know the moon had rounded and faded again.

On the first night of the moon's darkness a change came. I awoke to the sound of voices, and to the tensing of ben Adamah's legs. At first I thought myself still lost in dream, until I realized, beyond all sense, that I was hearing my friend speak in his mind—and hearing also the voice of the one with whom he spoke. My friend's voice carried an unusual harshness, but the stranger's voice curled through my mind like the dizzying scent of a fresh kill, intoxicating. I moved away from ben Adamah with great care and turned to look at his shadowed face. Unusual furrows lined his brow. His eyes burned, and his beard rippled as the muscles in his jaw clenched and jumped. But we were alone. Satisfied that no immediate peril threatened, I settled to listen to his conversation.

"Why would I do this thing?" the son of Earth was asking. "I came here to pray for understanding of the pattern of my days and the shape of the calling that tears at my breast even as I sleep. Why would I choose to break my fast in this way, before answers come?"

"Because you are hungry, Yeshua, and weak from fasting," his companion answered with soft reasonableness. "Your mind grows vague, and your attention wanders. How will you hear the answer when it comes? Perhaps you'll be sleeping the sleep of

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exhaustion, or counting your ribs as they grow ever more prominent. You have no food, yet you have the power to transform any of these endless stones into whatever you desire. Imagine the strength one loaf of bread might bring to your famished body!" His voice flowed now with the heavy sweetness of a ripening carcass, noxious and deadly.

Ben Adamah shivered and shook himself slightly, as if trying to clear his thoughts. "I fast for the poor of the earth, for the desperate and hopeless," he said. "I fast for men and women snared in the nets of their own evil and visiting their pain on their children. I fast for the power-hungry, whose hunger will never be filled. I fast for the aging wife abandoned to make room for a young bride. I fast for the donkey chained to the mill, scarred with the whip and dying in his tracks. I fast for the holocaust of beasts slaughtered on the Temple's altars in the vain hope that anything less than a change of heart will lighten the darkness of a human soul! This is why I fast.

"Now go away and leave me in peace."

"Ah, Yeshua, I pity your plight!" The voice spoke with gentle sadness. "Do you not begin to doubt that your God will answer you?"

"I know the questions you hurl into the empty skies. 'Could I be the one?' 'Is it possible that I am God's anointed, the one who will free Israel from her bonds once and for all?'"

The unseen voice took on the tones of ben Adamah's own with uncanny accuracy. I felt the fur prickle and rise all along the length of my spine.

"You have had great gifts since your birth, Yeshua, and you yearn to use them. But are they from your God, or perhaps only the random blessings of an unknown ancestor? If Adonai Elohim heard your prayers, would he not have answered you by now?"

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You, his anointed one? Oh, my young friend, I fear for you! Despair and bitterness await you on this path.”

“Go away, phantom of darkness,” the son of Earth replied.

“Let us take council together in this matter,” the voice ran on. “Why not push ahead? Find out who you are? Discover whether you are indeed the Chosen One of Israel! Perhaps the God you like to call ‘Father’ doesn’t hear you. Or doesn’t care. Or doesn’t even exist. Wouldn’t you like to know? Settle everything once and for all?”

“No, no need to respond. Let me explain. We both know that prophecies of the anointed are scattered throughout scripture. The psalmist promises that angels will pluck him up and carry him to safety should he ever be in danger of so much as a twisted ankle.

“So, I propose an experiment. Here you are, sitting on a cliff with shattered boulders tumbled below. Just step off. See if you fall—or if the angels come. If angels catch you, you’ll have your answer. If they don’t, you’ll save yourself a lot of unnecessary grief, and you’ll still have your answer. No more anxiety, no more fear, no more doubt—either way.”

Ben Adamah’s sigh seem drawn from the belly of the earth itself. The fire in his eyes had gone out, and they were full of pain, yet his jaw remained clenched.

“You are the very mouth of despair,” he answered softly. “The whisper of nothingness. I will not surrender to despair, nor will I test the love of my Father. You have no counsel to offer me.”

“Yeshua, Yeshua, what must I say before you see the truth? Here you sit, a man full grown and wise beyond the wisdom of humankind, yet what have you to show for your years? Do you have a wife? Sons to carry on your name? Daughters to ease you

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in your old age? No, all you have is a wild cat, named after the harlot of the Amorite abyss.”

I jumped like a rock rabbit at that, but settled to listen again.

“What status do you hold in your village? You’re merely a builder who can’t keep his mind on business. You have wisdom Solomon himself might envy, yet no authority to wield it. Do you truly know what miracles lie dormant within you? How will you ever know what you can achieve if you pursue no goals, no ambition? Your people lie under the lash of Rome, suffering and dying. They cry out for deliverance! They cry for a king!

“Yeshua, I tell you, you could be that king. Imagine what you might do to ease their suffering if you picked up the reigns of power. You could easily command the loyalty of great armies. Even Alexander’s name would be eclipsed by your glory. Roman rule would crumble. Your empire would have no end! King of kings you are destined to be, Lord of lords. Reach out your hand and take the power I offer you!”

There was silence for a time. Then ben Adamah’s eyes cleared, he saw me watching, and he smiled. Now he was looking at a definite place, somewhere to the right of where I stood (my fur was bristling, and I was ready to spring away at any moment. Did I see something moving there in the moonless dark?).

“Oh, you evil fool,” the son of Earth laughed, “you have misjudged your game tonight! I have seen too many good men corrupted by even a little of that power to fall into its snare. The power I seek is the power to heal body and soul, the power of one who walks unnoticed among many, seeking the good of all: the power that binds creation together, not a power that consumes it. Burning through my heart is a power that rejects you and all you offer. I will have none of your thrones, your palaces, or your rich



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robes. No man, woman, or child will ever grovel before me in fear! Get out of my sight, corrupter of innocence. You have no place here."

The night grew quiet then, the tension vanishing on a slight breeze. Whatever had been happening was finished.

"Come, curl up beside me, little mother," ben Adamah said softly. "My vigil is over for tonight. It's time to sleep."



### **a cat's musings**

I'm only a cat. Until I met the son of Earth I knew little of humans, and nothing at all about their doings with the One, although cats do recognize the presence of good and evil, and of great spiritual power. But that I can speak of these things at all is a mystery born of ben Adamah's love: a human thinks a thought to me, or speaks words aloud, and I hear the language of cats; when I respond with a cat's thoughts, any human with a heart to hear hears human speech, amplified, I suspect, with many subtleties a cat would never speak aloud. How this could be I do not understand. I only know that when the son of Earth saved my life he chose to give me a gift of himself, and his gift lives in me still.





2

## Desert Light

When sunlight touched our ledge next morning, I woke to see my friend sitting on the canyon bottom, gazing into the spring-fed pool. I made my way down for a drink, rubbed against his knees in greeting, received an absent-minded caress, and set out to find a cat-sized shelf with a puddle of sun and a dusting of sand.

His voice drew me out of my meditations sometime later. “Mari, would you wake and listen to me while I speak? My mind is tangled with too much thinking.”

I purred into wakefulness, arched my back, stretched my legs, and reached up to touch my nose to his. “Of course, ben Adamah,” I hummed, and curled my tail around my toes, settling myself to hear his words.

“I am a man of the people of Israel, Mari. Above all else I love and serve the One God. I have studied the words of the scriptures all my life.

“But I am not like other men. I understand the speech of animals, and sometimes I even find myself in conversation with

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the wind, the trees, and the very Earth herself. My touch can heal the sick and wounded. I talk to spirits no one else sees. The future often unrolls in my dreams before it comes to be. The scriptures stir to life in my hands and sing of love. When I pray, the One God comes to me as my dearest father and mother, and I respond as a son, even a child. All this I have long accepted, although I do not know why it should be. Nor do I speak of it often to others.

“But in the weeks before I found you, little leopard, before I set out on this wilderness fast, many things happened. A restlessness of spirit and foreboding of change drove me away from the small community where I had gone in search of wisdom—a place not so far from where we sit today. I returned to my family's home in the hill country, only to find my unease increasing. My hands refused to keep to their familiar tasks. My dreams grew more urgent, more filled with echoes of God's voice.

“My brothers told me that our cousin John had taken on the mantle of a prophet and begun preaching in the wild lands across the River Descender. But his message sounded harsh in my ears when they recalled how he had warned the people of a day when those who shunned the law would be burned like chaff after the harvest. Yet he spoke also of one to come, who would bring all creation to completion.

“Before many days passed, I went to hear John preach on the banks of the Descender, where he was offering cleansing in the river to those willing to change and wash away the stains of the past. In spite of the sternness of his words, his voice burned in my heart. I saw his message bring hope to people trapped by chains of habit and ignorance. I allowed myself to be carried with the crowd pushing toward the river until I stood in shallow water, facing John across a muddy pool.

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"The thunder of the Presence drowned out the river's song, filling my senses until there was nothing left but myself and the summons of the One Who Is. John spoke to me and I to him, but our words were no more than ripples in the river's flow. I felt the Descender's current close over my head like death's long night.

"But when I rose from the water, only light remained. A sun brighter than any Judean day dazzled my eyes. Then at the light's center the vault of heaven was torn apart, and a bird of purest white descended: a dove, rounded of breast and gentle of eye, the most beautiful dove ever to spread wings of spirit above the Earth.

"This dove came to rest upon my shoulder, and I heard a voice speaking from everywhere and nowhere at once, a voice of such wonder that I have no words to describe it—it was neither treble nor bass, but both at once; neither stern nor joyful, but each together; neither male nor female, but a melody blended of the two.

"'You are my son, the Beloved,' the voice said. 'Great is the pleasure I take in you.'

"Then joy overwhelmed me, Mari, and I knew I stood within the source of all creation's power, where no doubt could ever take root nor evil deceive.

"By the time my sight had shed this glory, I had walked far from John's pool, seeking silence in these barren cliffs. And then I heard your cries."

The flow of Ben Adamah's words slowed and stopped.

At length I spoke into his silence. "You wonder if you might be the anointed one the dark voice spoke of in the night. But you aren't sure."

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He looked up at me from under shadowed brows but didn't answer.

"Perhaps," I said, "everything waits upon your 'Yes'."

Then I dropped my gaze and examined my claws with a critical eye.

At last, the son of Earth began to laugh: he laughed loud and long, with laughter that rolled up from his belly and shook his shoulders. Then he exclaimed in an oddly strangled voice, "Surely, Mari, today the cat has my tongue—or at the very least, my heart!" He wiped at the tears running into his beard, and added, "It shames me to admit that I had never expected to hear the word of God from a cat. My blessing on you, little mother! Your heart is at one with my Father's."

Then he rose and returned to our ledge, where he disappeared into shadow and brilliant light.



### **a cat's musings**

The son of Earth laughed more easily in those desert days than in our later days together. Once he started walking the Roman roads and meeting the people, he moved through his days with focused intensity. His love and kindness never failed, but the fire burning within him grew hotter and clearer to the eye, until toward the end he seemed little more than living flame. In our canyon he was just starting to rouse the power banked within him, to perceive its purpose—and the purpose of his life. In a way, during those early days ben Adamah was being born from the womb of wilderness.



### 3 Journey

*M*y legs are strong, and I am a tireless hunter, but cats don't make long journeys, running mile after endless mile without pause. Since ben Adamah's strides were long, and his journey longer, when we left the desert he persuaded me to ride on his shoulder. Even though I kept losing my balance like a blind kitten until I got the knack of it, he never cried out when I dug my claws into his skin. I'm not sure he noticed. He had set his face toward the green hills of the Galilee, and I think his thoughts ran there.

I watched the sun rise on his right and set on his left for maybe a paw's count of days while I rode his shoulder through landscapes growing always greener, through hills and valleys softened with grain and orchards. He avoided cities and crowds, and walked alone. We found food as we could, and slept wherever shelter offered itself. If he was troubled by the scornful looks other travelers aimed at me, he gave no sign.

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Then one evening as the sun was setting behind the hills where we walked, ben Adamah turned aside from the road into a hidden ravine, gathered wood, and made a small fire instead of simply rolling himself up in his robe and seeking sleep. He baked bread on a hot stone and drank the last of his wine. After dining in my own fashion, I joined him, and together we watched the dusk darken into night. Summer was almost upon us, and the days were growing longer.

"Mari," he said at last, "the quiet times are nearly over."

I rumbled deep in my throat to let him know I was listening.

"Tomorrow we'll reach my home in Nazareth, and I'll stay with my family until I can see where to go from there. Come with me if you choose, and stay at my side for as long as you will."

I hummed in response.

"The days of my old life are done, little Shulamite, and I am waiting for the new to begin. I am a wind-blown traveler in a strange land, swaying among huge possibilities, watching the mists thin before the brilliance of the One's rising. Will you wait with me?"

I got up, stretched, and moved into the firelight, where I lay down again. Then I looked him full in the face and drooped my eyes in a drowsy wink: a cat's assent.

When we took to the road the next morning, we agreed that I would no longer ride on his shoulder, but in a sling under his mantle where I could disappear completely. Our long solitude had eroded what little tolerance I had for the roar and stink of human towns. Before we even entered Nazareth, small though it was, I shrank deep into the sling and curled myself



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against ben Adamah's body. His calm eased my fear, and the babble dimmed in my ears as I sank into that nowhere place that beasts can go when all choices disappear.

A change in the level of human noise brought me back to awareness, and I crouched in the sling, ready to spring away. Voices rose in distress. I could hear women wailing, and men speaking low in anger: clearly some evil news had reached these humans. I could feel ben Adamah tensing, and I held my breath as his steps slowed and then stopped in the midst of the chaos. He had entered an enclosed space now; voices bounced back and forth all around us as if we stood within high walls.

"Oh, Yeshua, my son, thank the One you've returned!" a woman's voice cried out, breathless with relief. "Your cousin John has been arrested, and we feared for you, that you might have been with him. Herod has put him in prison, and even now his disciples are urging rebellion."

"Hush, Mother, watch what you say!" a man's urgent whisper cut across the woman's voice. "Where would Herod's spies be more likely to look for trouble than here among John's own kin?"

Ben Adamah's chest vibrated against my fur as he spoke. "Tell me, James, what has happened? When I last saw John he was preaching by the river."

"Where have you been, Yeshua? Do you know nothing? John went up to the Temple a couple of weeks ago, like the righteous fool he is, right into the outer court, and started raining down prophecies of destruction on Herod's head because he'd married his brother's wife—and if that wasn't bad enough, because of his godless government. And he didn't say it just once. No, he kept on and on about it, until yesterday Herod finally had enough and threw John in prison, probably just to shut him up.

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Some of us are afraid that his followers and family may be next. I'm glad you're safe."

I felt ben Adamah's shoulder flex, and he stretched his arm out to clasp James' shoulder. Then a woman's scent filled his robe as he embraced the one who must be his mother.

Not a whisker did I twitch, not a tail's tip.

I'd been keeping company with him long enough to know the feel of his shifting moods. I marveled that those around him didn't remark on how he sank away into stillness. Like a stone dropping through deep water, he left the rest of us floating on the surface of the day, with little but his after-image remaining where he'd been.

"No more arrests will come," he said slowly. Then he paused. "Forgive me for leaving you so suddenly, Mother, James. I need to pray about what this may mean. I will return when I can."

Then he turned away from them, and after receiving food for the road, he strode out of Nazareth.

He set a rapid pace. The setting sun lay behind us as he turned along a broad valley toward the darkening horizon. Night came and the moon rose, and I could see that he was making for a line of low hills, keeping always to the faintest footpaths. I guessed that he had decided on his destination, and was pushing himself to reach it quickly.

His feet remembered this land. Walking beneath olive blossoms, among herds of drowsing sheep, or through fields of ripening barley, he never faltered in his course or paused to seek his way. When he finally stopped we stood at the crest of a cone-shaped hill crowned with ancient oak trees and rubbled with

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stone. He threw himself down among the roots of the trees as if returning to the embrace of old friends and closed his eyes.

I listened to the voices of this new place, scenting both predators and prey, and waited until I felt ready to move into the tall grass to hunt. As a cat, I would never have chosen to venture so far from my own small circle of native earth, and the constant newness of each night's territory took its toll on me. But the son of Earth carried the certainty of home wherever we wandered, so I was content. And for now, the mice were fat.

The waning moon was low when I returned to the hilltop grove. My friend could hear like an owl when he chose, and now he greeted me even before I stepped out of the grass into the moonlight.

"These old oaks have lived many lives of men, little mother, and they have been my friends since I was a boy. Their roots draw water from the deep, and their branches sweep the doors of heaven. They have voices like fire and water, streaming together in the wind. When I hear them speak, my heart burns. I came to this place for their counsel."

He was silent for many heartbeats.

"John's arrest is the threshold I couldn't see. Just as the moon's lesser light sinks beneath the western sea and the sun prepares to pour daylight on the earth, so John's days of heralding are done, and the One draws me into the light of what is coming to be. I am who I am, Mari, and my way is becoming clear.

"Come, curl up beside me, and let us sleep for a little while. With first light we will turn toward the rising sun. A long road awaits us, and rain follows on the wind."

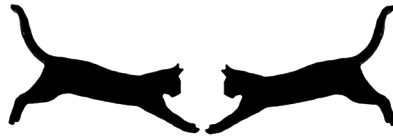


### **a cat's musings**

I don't think I've mentioned ben Adamah's appearance—perhaps because when I first met him he looked to me like any other human male: huge, with a bald face in the middle of a furry head, strange body coverings, and stork-like legs sparsely covered with hair. I didn't find humans an attractive species. But now that I've seen more of them up close, I understand what I see, what's normal for them and what's not, and I can usually tell the difference between one and another, even without their scent.

Ben Adamah was an ordinary man. He wasn't tall or short, young or old. His body was firm when I leaned against him, and his skin smooth—the color of the fertile earth in the valley below Nazareth. Like most of his kind, he had dark hair. He cut his beard short—it didn't lie on his breast. And what a grand nose he had! Long and slightly curved, a bit like the noses of my larger kin. His mouth was rarely still, and always gave his moods away, even when his eyes were veiled. It was always twitching and turning, frowning, smiling, quirking oddly, thinned or clamped in distress, full and soft when he was happy.

Best of all I loved his eyes. They were dark brown, but clear, like spring-fed pools full of sunlight. Not everyone liked his eyes. It took courage and a soul free of deceit to hold his gaze, and anyone who ventured close was pulled deep into the place where he truly lived. Even I, a cat, could lose myself among the landscapes of his heart.



4

## The Great Sea

*T* rue to ben Adamah's prediction, a cold wind howled through the damp cave, and rainwater kept trickling along new crevices toward my wet feet. Plucking them away from each fresh peril, I backed further up the slope of the cave wall.

"Son of Earth," I said to the silent figure standing at the cave's mouth, "perhaps you could light a fire to warm the night."

He turned away from the storm and squatted down beside me with a smile. "I'm truly sorry, little leopard, but the caves of Arbel have made a bad name for themselves over the years. They have a long and bloody history of sheltering bandits and rebels more often than homeless travelers, so the Romans look in regularly. Whether they were friends or enemies, we might not welcome the company a fire could bring. But the sun will come back to us tomorrow, and we'll be on our way again. Perhaps for tonight a cave mouse would raise your spirits."

I turned my back on him, grumbling under my breath and switching my tail as I picked my way down the dripping

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passageway in search of dinner. I'm sure I heard a soft chuckle behind me.

A great sea must have flooded half the world during the night—or so it seemed to me, cat of desert vistas. Ben Adamah had arranged my sling so that I could watch the road as he walked, and when we rounded the last cliff in our morning's descent, I suddenly found myself on the edge of a drifting mass of grey water and heavy fog. Ground, air, and sky, all had melted into watery nothingness.

Sensing my alarm almost before I felt it, he stopped and laid a light hand on my head.

"There's nothing to fear, Mari," he spoke into my thoughts. "The mist only hides the distant face of the water as a cloud hides the moon. We've reached the great sea of the Galilee, and even though it is long and wide, when the sun burns away the fog you'll see the far shore. Like a spring running in its bed, filling a pool and spilling over to continue in its course, the river that fills this sea is the same one that flows on to the south to water your homeland."

He started walking again while he talked, and his voice ran on in my mind, a comforting commentary on the strange sights we passed. The day grew warm, the fog thinned in the sunlight, and the water lay quiet within its shores, reflecting the blue sky almost like a desert pool. But in spite of his reassurance, the constant traffic on the seaside road eroded the peace his words created: humans driving carts and donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, foot travelers like us, even a line of camels sauntering south. But more alarming than any of these was a noisy band of men ben Adamah called Romans—a word he'd used before, but one I hadn't understood. They walked too fast for normal human

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beings, and their legs moved as one, like the legs of a giant centipede. All the other travelers stepped aside and yielded the road to them, and when they passed, the air boiled with fear and hate.

“Look, little mother,” he said gently, as the tramp of the Romans’ feet disappeared behind us. “See, there are the boats where the fishermen are pulling fish from the sea! Our road runs along this shore to the town of Capernaum, where many tasty fish are pulled from the water every day. I will give you one to eat when we arrive, and you, little mother of fishes, will forgive the sea its vastness!”

After a while he returned to his own thoughts, and I curled up against him, trying to imagine the taste of these new fish.

Capernaum was a town of grey and black, where the houses looked as if they’d been built with charred stone. The son of Earth said the stones were black because long ago they came from a burning mountain, but mountains of fire didn’t fit into my experience of the world, and I missed the white houses of my village. I did enjoy the fishy smells that permeated this huge new town, and I tried hard to remember that I was no longer a half-wild cat who panicked at the approach of more than one or two humans together.

In a narrow street ben Adamah stopped at a black house like all the other black houses and knocked loudly. Some moments later, the worn door scraped across the threshold and a tiny woman, wrinkled and bent with untold years, peered up at him. I watched her face as puzzlement changed to disbelief and finally to joy.

“Yeshua!” she cried in a quavering voice, “Yeshua, light of the One in my heart! You come to bless me with your presence

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before my eyes darken at the last! I prayed that I would live to see you again!"

She stretched both her hands up toward his face, and he took her gently in his arms, as if he feared she would shiver into pieces and float away on the wind like the down of a ripened seed head.

"Keturah," he murmured into her thick white hair, "I have missed you!"

Suddenly, with a cry, she stumbled away from him.

"Mrrww," I said to ben Adamah. "I think I frightened her."

My sling had been hanging just above the old woman's head, and when he leaned down to greet her she found herself caught in a close embrace with an unexpected cat. But I have to say, I didn't scratch or hiss—I only squirmed.

The son of Earth glanced quickly at me and then across at the startled woman—who began to laugh.

"Oh, child of my heart! What other son of Israel would knock at my door with a cat hidden in his clothes! Come into the house, both of you, before a crowd gathers!"

Once inside the door, I could see that we were in a large room open to the sky, with doors opening into the house, and stairs running up to the roof. Everything smelled musty after the rain, and the house had a desolate feel, as if it, like the old woman herself, was slipping quietly toward Silence.

"Put the cat down, Yeshua, so I can hug you properly! And come sit with me and share the tale of these last long months. If you'd like to wash away the dust of the road, you know where to go, and where to find wine and bread as well. Forgive me for not seeing to your needs, but I must sit down."



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Then she stopped to look at me as the son of Earth set me on the ground. "I don't care for cats, never have," she said. "But if you're Yeshua's cat, you're welcome. Just don't soil my house, or litter the floor with mouse tails."

I regarded her with an unblinking stare, and then turned my back and began to wash myself.

She walked into the dark house, laughing.

I left them to their catching up and sat quietly in the middle of the closed-in yard, listening and sniffing, seeking signs of any others who might share this house with one old woman. A she-goat revealed herself in a corner pen, but apart from her soft movements, I heard only the noise of the street and the small sounds of mice and nesting birds. Running up the stairs to the flat roof, I prowled its perimeter in the last warmth of the afternoon sun. The closeness of the other roofs all around unsettled me, especially those overlooking this one from taller houses: anyone who knows cats knows they have no respect for property lines, and a house without a resident cat is contested ground. Boundary disputes surely lay ahead, so I set about marking my new territory with my own scent.



### **a cat's musings**

Like other animals—even human animals—cats like to lay claim to their piece of earth. Ben Adamah was different. He didn't seem tempted by the idea of permanence, or boundaries, or even comfort. If he ever yearned for a settled home, he never shared his longing. I was more typical of my kind: a night spent in a place with burrows of fat rodents, few predators, and a secure

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place to sleep always led to fantasies of settling down. But they were only fantasies. The son of Earth carried life more satisfying than any I had ever known. Why would I turn away?



## 5 Village of Nahum

With a belly full of the small silvery fish that ben Adamah brought back from the fishing boats, I slept long and deep that night, and had no adventures at all. In fact I didn't stir until the mat we'd shared was suddenly showered with dust and falling roof debris. I jumped from the bed with an exclamation as close as a cat ever comes to cursing.

"Good morning to you, little Shulamite! You're a bit duskier than usual today!" His voice came from above me. When I squinted against the light streaming through the hole in the roof, I could just make out his eyes behind the settling dust.

"Come up and enjoy the morning sun. I'm repairing the roof today."

I stalked to the far end of the courtyard and joined the goat.

Hardly any time passed at all before I heard his steps coming down the stairs and his voice in my mind. "Forgive me, Mari. I didn't mean to bring the roof down on your head. I was repairing leaks, and that hole looked like a good place to start. I

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didn't think about who might be lying beneath it. And my laughter was thoughtless."

I didn't respond. Instead I fixed him with my "one step closer and your eyes are fish bait" scowl.

He ignored it and stood up. "Come with me to the roof," he repeated. "It's a fine day."

I looked at him, considered my choices, stretched in a leisurely way, and ran up the stairs ahead of him. I'm not a cat to hold a grudge. To show I had no hard feelings, I rubbed against his legs as he knelt on the roof, and butted my head against his shoulder.

"Keturah is like the strength of the earth to me, little leopard," ben Adamah said as he stroked my back. "She was the rock beneath my feet as a boy. She taught me to trust my own path, and nurtured my first glimmerings of vision.

"She is cousin to my mother's mother, and has no children of her own, but we two have loved each other from my earliest years. As a boy I spent many happy days here when I could be spared from home."

"She has no man?" I asked.

"Her husband died before I was born, during the building of Herod's great breakwaters in the harbor, but her life has been rich in prayer. Still, none of her family lives in Capernaum, and as the years pass, her in-laws remember the childless widow of their long-dead kinsman less and less often. And now she grows old, her steps falter, and her solitude becomes a burden.

"My heart sings praises to the One for drawing me here, no matter how brief my stay. At least I can return some pittance of the care she has given me. Here I will remain, and call this house my home, until I must go. Of course, your path is still your own to choose. But I hope we will not part, you and I."

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Then without waiting for a response he bent to his task, tearing away the rotted cane and broken plaster until he could test the strength of the exposed beam underneath. I lay in the sun and thought my own thoughts while he came and went at his work, weaving cane mats to patch the holes, and mixing the first batches of mud to seal them in place. His strong hands were quick and neat at their work, and I guessed that I was watching him at one of the skills he shared with his family.

At first the son of Earth divided almost all his time between Keturah's house and Capernaum's harbor and lakeshore. I knew Keturah found my presence unsettling, so I didn't join them often when they talked. But the harbor had fishing boats, and the boats had fish!

The men who caught the fish didn't interest me much, although their habits puzzled me. They brought their boats back from the sea full of fish, and then threw away many of the fattest ones as soon as they sorted their catch. According to Ben Adamah those fish weren't fit to eat. He might as well have said that fresh spring water wasn't fit to drink. I know there was nothing wrong with those fish, because I ate them myself, and a cat can always tell when her food is off. But the fishermen who got to know me threw plenty of them my way, so I had no quarrel with their peculiar tastes. I ate well in Capernaum.

Ben Adamah spent hours talking with the fishermen while they mended their nets. They liked to talk, and they laughed a lot. Some seemed to know him from past years, others watched him the way I watch a strange cat. I had a hard time telling one fisherman from another, but their habit of working naked (or nearly so) did make it simpler: any creature is easier to recognize

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when its body isn't covered up with dried plants and other beasts' skins.

Many suns set behind us while we sat together on the shore watching the fisherman pull fish from the sea. I liked seeing them cast the small nets; one man could do that by himself with no fuss, and the nets flickered in the light like birds' wings. But when they hauled in the great dragnets, too many men made far too much noise for me. Of course, the son of Earth never minded. He sat silent beside me, watching or not watching, thinking his own thoughts, while the fishermen caught fish, or didn't.

Like a cat hunting for her dinner, the fishermen had fat days and thin ones. If success hangs on how other beasts behave, how can you know what a day will bring? Well, unless you're like ben Adamah: he often seemed to know how things would turn out. And sometimes the fishermen did, too. They'd look at the water, feel the wind, and talk among themselves, trying to guess how large a catch would be. Many times they'd be right, but not always.

I respected the fishermen in the thin times. They reminded me of cats then, too: patient, watchful, not wasting energy on complaints and regrets. They just waited and tried again.

Except for one of them. I don't know why he didn't scare the fish away every time he went out in a boat. His voice was loud, and often angry, and some days he never stopped talking. To be fair, he was a kind man when he paid attention, and full of ideas. But he was big for a human, and he waved his arms around when he talked, and that just made him seem bigger. He was always jumping up without warning, or stopping suddenly and tearing back the way he came. I tried to stay as far away from him

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as I could. He was called Simon when I first knew him, before ben Adamah renamed him “Rock.” I thought the new name suited him. I’d often said that being near him made me feel like an unseen rock must be hurtling toward my head. Not that he threw rocks, but everything he did was so huge, and sudden. I still suspect that ben Adamah’s name for him was partly a private joke between the two of us.

The longer we stayed in Capernaum, the more often ben Adamah left Keturah’s house by himself, telling me that I mustn’t come with him, that I wouldn’t be safe where he was going. He spent more time alone when he was home, too, and he seemed tired. So one day I followed him. It wasn’t hard. Or it wouldn’t have been if he’d stayed in town. Instead, he walked away from the lake, up beyond the last houses, and stopped by a spring where a group of people was gathered. Olive trees grew all around, providing shade from the midday sun—and a sanctuary that probably saved my life, since the son of Earth had his mind on other things.

It had been a near thing reaching the trees, but once I was up in their branches I wasn’t worried. The two feral dogs circling my tree were probably the cause of ben Adamah’s concern for my safety. They paced silently, without calling attention to themselves, their eyes never leaving my perch. But I’d get a ride back with the son of Earth—who, I noticed, had started talking to the people under the trees. And more people were arriving all the time. I crept further along my branch to listen.

“My friends,” he was saying, “you have forgotten the days of your youth, when you walked humbly with the Lord and stood in the Temple warmed by his presence, knowing yourselves beloved. Turn around, and seek what you have lost!

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"You crouch in fear and dread, expecting the lash, when the One offers you only peace. You hope your many laws will keep you safe from the wrath of men and God alike, but I tell you, your careful rules have become a hedge of thorns, through which you can neither see nor hear the coming of your God. Turn around! Retrace your steps, discover the day when you sealed your hearts against the One. Seek his face!

"I tell you, neither your Shabbat piety nor your careful washings can ever make you clean. Leave the dove in her tree and the lamb in his pasture, and let your hardened hearts be transformed. Turn around, sing the songs of Zion and rejoice, because a heart of love and compassion is the only offering pleasing to your God.

"I say to you, the Creator of heaven and earth knows your suffering. The measure of time is complete. The reign of heaven approaches. Even now the One comes to embrace you in love and power. Turn away from the treadmill of your days and see the wonder of his coming. Hear the good news, and know its truth: the reign of heaven has come upon you!

"Let the one with ears to hear, hear and believe."

The crowd kept growing as he spoke, until there wasn't enough shade to cover them all. The dogs slunk away in disgust. At last he paused and smiled. People were beginning to press close around him, touching him, holding babies out for his blessing, and crying for mercy.

I watched him closely then, and listened for his thoughts. He had gone deep into the silence where he walked with the One. I could feel the power flowing through him almost like a vibration, like a murmur of rolling waters. He stroked a dying child, and she laughed aloud. He held a shriveled arm, and it



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straightened in his grasp. He laid his hands on people burning with fevers, and they rose up healed.

But there was no end to the people, and he was tiring, I could tell. Sweat ran freely down his face, and he grew pale.

“Ben Adamah,” I called loudly into his thoughts. “Ben Adamah, you must stop!”

His gaze lifted toward my branch. I could feel him refocusing his mind, and then he stood, shaking his head at the clamoring crowd. He reached up into the tree for me, and we walked away together.



### **a cat's musings**

The son of Earth had some hard times in those early weeks of teaching. All through his life he'd been discovering his gifts, one after another, but he'd kept them mostly to himself. He'd been reluctant to let people see them until he understood their purpose better, and his family had respected his silence.

Animals had benefited more often than humans from his healing, and then only one at a time, as they'd crossed his path. So what I saw that day was a new and painful challenge for him: how could he heal the crowds without exhausting himself so completely that he lacked even the strength to stand?

I don't think it was more than a few days later when he came home laughing from a walk in the hills and told me that he finally understood. He compared what he'd been doing to a man who tenses all his muscles in anticipation of moving a large stone and then wrenches his back when he moves it, instead of simply relaxing and using the strength given him by his Creator.

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But the suffering he saw all around him still weighed heavy on his heart.





## 6

### Beginnings

“You kept calling the One ‘he.’ Why did you do that?” I asked.

It was the morning after I had followed him to the spring, and he was chipping the crumbling plaster and mud from Keturah’s kitchen walls. He was slow to answer me, but I recognized the signs of a lengthy response in the making. I sighed. After all, I’d asked the question. He paused and looked at me where I sat across the room, out of reach of his dust.

“You’ve asked a good question, little mother, and I will try to answer it clearly.”

I blinked at him, and he resumed his digging.

“Cats have known the One as Mother,” he began, “through uncounted numbers of cat lives. It is simply so. And it disturbs you when I speak of the One as ‘he’.”

He stopped to wipe the sweat and dust from his face and then continued.

“The people of Israel have known the One as ‘he’ through uncounted numbers of human lives. It is simply so. And if I spoke of the One as ‘she’ or even as ‘he and she,’ many would be

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disturbed, even angry—although both our scriptures and our teachers sometimes describe the One as a mother.

“Israel has listened to the voice of the One through long years, but we are human, and we have a fondness for deciding a thing is ‘like this,’ and ‘not like that.’ So for this and many other reasons, Israel understands the One to be a masculine God.”

He looked at me again, and again I responded with a drowsy blink.

“I want to speak to my people and be heard. If I say, ‘God is my mother,’ most will close their ears. They will think I’m attacking what they know to be true, and perhaps that I worship one of the goddesses of our pagan neighbors. Would your people listen if you spoke of the One as father?”

“No, Mari, what I must say to the people of Israel is too important to risk by bickering over things that don’t matter. Is the One a father? A mother? Is there really so much difference between the two? At their best, do both not love their children?”

He fell silent then, and for a time I listened to the small sounds of his digging and scraping, and the pattering rhythm of walls returning to earth. Finally I said, “Thank you, ben Adamah. I understand.” And I left him to his work.

Every day the crowds following the son of Earth grew larger. Word of his power to heal was spreading across the Galilee, and the sick had even begun to gather at Keturah’s door, hoping to touch him as he came and went. His repairs to the house were complete: the roof was patched and smooth, the door remade, and the cistern’s seal repaired; the outside walls were mortared with fresh mud, the inside walls freshly plastered, and the cushions filled with clean grass. He had even found a shy young woman to live there whom no one else wanted because of

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her twisted face. I wasn't surprised when he held out his hand to help me into my sling one summer morning before the sky began to pale.

"Are we leaving, son of Earth?" I asked.

"Very soon, little leopard. Today we go fishing."

He opened the door quietly and stepped out, moving like a cat in the silent streets. By the time sunlight touched the highest hills above us, we were standing on the seashore, looking out across the water toward the sun's rising. With the brightening day I could see that the fishing boat standing out from shore belonged to Simon and Andrew. They were casting their small nets with the other men and piling their catch in the boat.

Ben Adamah did nothing I could see to attract their attention, yet as the sun's first rays reached him, the two brothers turned as one to look. At the same moment, some flame within him seemed to answer the sun's touch, filling his body like slanting light fills a clear pool. He smiled at the two men and stretched out his hand.

First Simon, and then Andrew, grasped the boat's side, setting it to rocking as they leapt into the shallow water and waded ashore. There in the sand they knelt at his feet.

"Teacher, let us come with you!" they cried.

Ben Adamah spoke from that place of deep silence where he mostly lived and said with a smile, "Follow me, and I will teach you to fish for men and women." Then he turned and walked along the shore toward the harbor, and they followed.

Some part of me had always known I'd be keeping company with Simon.

James and John joined us later that day. Their father was Zebedee, a man gnarled and weathered like an old olive tree, patriarch of the fishing docks from Capernaum to Bethsaida,

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such was his respect among the other fishermen. He and I had an unspoken agreement: I permitted him to laugh at the way I trotted at ben Adamah's heels, and he gave me choice fish. If I felt generous, I'd put on a show for him, batting his fish in the air like a juggler in the marketplace. He even tried to persuade ben Adamah to leave me in his care when he went out into the hills to teach.

Zebedee might have been a canny businessman, but he never sealed that bargain.

James and John were tall, and handsome for their kind. They didn't share their father's ready laughter, though. And they had no more interest in me than I did in them. In fact, I remember overhearing James say something about sending me off to the Roman games. Happily, I had no idea what he meant at the time.

Once they left their father's boats to follow the son of Earth, his teaching absorbed them completely. They would sit with him for hours, listening and asking questions. Of all the disciples, they seemed to understand him best, but even a cat could see that they weren't perfect. The disciples still laugh at how their eagerness to call down lightning on the Samaritan towns earned them the name "Sons of Thunder," and the twelve never let them forget their Mother's attempt to secure places of power for them alongside the son of Earth. They were proud men, with high opinions of themselves, and they didn't bear ridicule well. But they were faithful to ben Adamah, and he loved and trusted them above many others.

By the Shabbat, ben Adamah was surrounded by a group of devoted men, as well as by crowds. I recalled our days of solitude with regret.

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Cats were not welcome in the place they call the house of prayer, where the people gathered to read their scriptures and hear the words of the teachers (although I knew several cats who came and went whenever they wished). Ben Adamah saw no reason I should be excluded, but he wasn't a man to make trouble over silliness, and I was content to be left outside.

As he and his followers disappeared into the house of prayer on that Shabbat morning, I ran up the smooth bark of a great tree and jumped down onto the stone lip of the mud roof. Rising from the roof's center were smaller stone walls with cat-sized windows all around. I leapt carefully into a window and crept through to the inside.

Far too much air hung between my feet and the floor to jump through the window. Flattening myself on the sill like a mouse in a crack, I inched my head over the inner edge and crouched there to see what I could see. Many men and women sat on stone steps around the sides of a large room, and directly below my window I could just glimpse ben Adamah's head where he stood speaking.

"If you have wisdom," he was saying, "you will be like a fisherman who casts his net into the sea and draws it up full of little fish. But in the midst of all the little fish he finds a fine large fish, which he keeps with delight, throwing the little ones back into the sea. Hear, all of you, and understand!"

"Like a fisherman casting his net for good fish, let no one among you stop seeking until you find what is true.

"Yet when you find the true, and you understand with your heart what you have found, you will be greatly troubled. If you are wise, you will think deeply about your distress, asking yourself why your heart can find no rest. When you finally understand the cause, you will be astonished. Then in your



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astonishment, you will find that you have stepped outside your distress—and anything will be possible for you!

“Let those of you with ears to hear, hear and believe!

The son of Earth paused then, and I heard many voices speaking together, as if everyone was trying to ask questions of him and of each other at the same time. Then his voice rose clearly over the confusion, and he began to speak again.

“The realm you await is already here, among you and within you, but you don't understand what you see.

“See clearly what is in front of your eyes, and life's mysteries will open themselves to you!”

A guttural roar suddenly broke into his words, and a harsh voice scraped across my senses with the same whiff of decay I had scented in that dark voice in the desert.

“What are you doing here, Jesus of Nazareth?” the voice rasped.

I felt my hackles rising, but I couldn't see the one speaking. Not a breath stirred among the listeners.

“You seek to destroy me, but I will endure. You may be the holy one of God, but you will never taste victory!”

Like a snake's sudden strike at a careless mouse, ben Adamah's voice lashed out at the speaker. “Be silenced, evil one, and come out of the man! Release him and be gone!”

A raucous cry rose from the room below me, loud as the grinding of great boulders in a rockfall, and I saw a man in ragged clothes thrown across the room in violent convulsions. Then he lay silent, and I watched as the son of Earth knelt beside him. My friend laid his hand on the man's head—just as he often did on mine—and stroked the matted hair away from his face. The man's eyes opened, and for a moment I thought I saw there the

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same flash of peace and release from torment that I had known at ben Adamah's first touch.



### **a cat's musings**

Everything began to change after that Shabbat morning. Maybe it was because the son of Earth had demonstrated his power in front of Capernaum's most important citizens instead of among the common people. Maybe it was because that Shabbat healing started the whole furor over what he could and couldn't do on their day of rest. Maybe it was just the time when his reputation would've exploded across the country on its own, the way a smoldering fire suddenly blows up into flame. Or maybe it was the working of the One in all those things.

Whatever the reason, we soon left Keturah's house and began walking across the Galilee. The growing crowds followed him into the countryside, where he taught and healed them. Sometimes we slept rough in the hills. Sometimes he accepted the hospitality of strangers. He'd never intended to stay in Capernaum forever. So even though we visited Keturah from time to time, our traveling days began.

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