

• C H A P T E R   O N E •

Capernaum, Galilee, AD 1

*Flap. Flippety-flap. Flap.* The yellow butterfly fluttered its black-tipped wings in desperation against the synagogue ceiling, unaware of the open window only a few feet away. On a mat below, five-year-old Yeshua lounged against his father's shoulder, squeezed in between the other Yehudi men of the village. His gaze wandered to the women's side of the dividing curtain where his mother sat cross-legged with his younger siblings. They were still too small to understand the words of God. Not like Yeshua. No, God and Yeshua were already the best of friends.

On top of a wooden pulpit at the front, flickering oil lamps danced in the breeze and the scent of incense filled the snug meeting room with magic. Yeshua tried to keep pace with the grown-ups who swayed back and forth, chanting monotonous words of praise. He longed to one day be just like the rabbi who leaned over the pulpit as if he carried the conscience of the entire world on his shoulders and read out loud from the Torah scrolls in Hebrew, the priests' own language. Yeshua would stand in front of all the neighbors and, with a steady voice, teach them the true words of God. Words of wisdom.

The rabbi brushed his wrinkled hand through the remaining wisps of gray hair on his head and lowered his tasseled head scarf onto his shoulders. When he spoke, the ambience changed like an evening sky, shifting from blazing orange to purple and pink. It became warm and vivid, as if angels had touched everyone's heart.

“Esteemed men—children of the Lord!” the rabbi exclaimed in a voice that could have awakened even the deadest corpse from eternal slumber. “Do you not see how he loves you more than your fellow villagers? And still, you cannot—*should not*—ignore his commandments. For you, he created Sabbath as a day to rest, not hurry. Forsake your worries today and revel in the divine. Ah, what a magnificent day to celebrate in God, to enjoy silence and seclusion. To sit still and hear his voice speak to us...”

Yeshua’s chest filled with a tender glow. With paradise. And just like the graceful butterfly above, he remained oblivious of the invisible chains that bound him.

But Sabbath came only once a week. On other days, a sleepy Yeshua rose before sunset and followed his father to the workshop around the corner from their home where he spent his days filing corners of tables and doors with an iron rasp until his hands burned with blisters. That’s what boys did; they adopted their fathers’ trade. It didn’t seem fair: filing wood was for babies. But his father said only big boys could use the fun tools like the saw, the plane, and the chisels. Yeshua peered through the window at the black-headed gulls that soared across the sky, free to go anywhere they chose. And he drifted into daydreams.

One day, as Yeshua was helping his father unpack a delivery of cedar logs for a tax collector’s table, two impossibly tall white-robed men staggered into the workshop. They had to bow their turbaned heads to enter.

“Water,” one of them croaked in broken Aramaic, his eyes bloodshot with thirst. He slumped onto the floor. “I please beg of you. Water.”

The log in Yeshua’s arms fell to the floor with a bang. God said to always help the needy. He squeezed his way between the giants, and

ran out the door and around the corner to their house, where his mother was baking bread in the courtyard. “Ama, Ama! Two men—foreigners. Come quickly! And bring water.”

“Who has come?” She frowned but didn’t move.

“Come! They need water!” Yeshua pulled her hand with all his weight. “Hurry!”

Without haste, Ama cleaned her hands, filled a jug of water from the vat, and pulled her head scarf across her face. Yeshua stayed close behind her as they entered the workshop, then crouched in the corner while Ama served the men cool water in ceramic cups. He had seen men like these before, from afar. Fascinating men, straight out of legends, they passed through Capernaum in caravans of hundreds of camels along the trade route between Damascus and Alexandria.

Ama dripped lavender oil onto the strangers’ palms and necks and told them to rub it in with a circular motion until their breathing had resumed a normal rhythm.

“Now, good men, what else may I do for you?” Abba said, and gestured to his wife to leave. Yeshua leaned against the wall and tried to make himself invisible. He was transfixed by these intimidating men with wide-bladed daggers hooked to their belts and fingers heavy with golden rings. And yet there was a kindness, an almost loving presence, about them. One of the men, his eyes like a burning sunset, caught him staring and grinned. His white teeth glistened against his swarthy complexion. Yeshua relaxed; these were respectable men after all, honest travelers. The men unfurled a heavy linen scroll that revealed a circular chart with scribbles of stars, moons, crosses, and triangles. The man who had smiled at him pointed at the chart and spoke in chunks of Aramaic peppered with peculiar words Yeshua had never heard before.

“We come looking for...a ray of light... And three hundred years ago, Prophet Zarathustra... Praise be to God for your help... Planet

Jupiter and stars in the sky show the way to us...and there will come...next prophet soon..." The man stopped midsentence and pointed at Yeshua. "This your son?"

Abba nodded.

"Come to here, boy." The man reached out his enormous hand, grasped Yeshua by the chin, and stared into his eyes as if searching for something. His intense gaze made Yeshua faint with fear, but he couldn't look away. Nearby, his father breathed heavily, nervously. Yeshua swallowed. Time seemed to have stopped. And then the man burst out laughing. Thick, short bursts of laughter. Yeshua wriggled free and ran to safety behind his father, where he watched the strangers chuckle and clap their hands. Their cackles echoed around the room.

Why were they laughing?

The man who had grabbed his chin beamed. He mumbled something to his friend, and then turned to Abba.

"Your son, one day, great man. Prophet. What you call it—Messiah. The world waits long time for him, his message."

"No, no..." Abba shook his head, his voice in shards. "No!" he said again with more determination. "Forgive my insolence, but that's nonsense. My son is a carpenter. Enough of this foolishness. Why does everyone wish for a Messiah to come and solve all their troubles?" He rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. "Those are the ignorant dreams of victims, of desperate men."

The strangers rolled up their scroll and smoothed their robes. The discussion was over. The man who had spoken reached into his pouch and retrieved a yellow scarf tied into a bundle, which he placed in Abba's palm, closing his fingers around it.

Then the strangers disappeared into the dusk as abruptly as they had arrived.

"Abba, Abba, what did they say? What did they give you?" Yeshua

couldn't hold back any longer.

Still shaking his head, his father patted him on the head and untied the yellow silk scarf. Folded inside was a shiny golden ring with a large turquoise stone, a clump of fragrant frankincense, and a jar of myrrh oil. When Yeshua reached to grab the ring, Abba slapped his hand.

"No touching!"

Tears stung Yeshua's eyes. Why was his father angry?

Inside their home, Abba threw the bundle at his wife.

"Look, Maryam. Behold what they gave us. Gifts for a nobleman. A king!" He covered his eyes with his hands. "They spoke of a prophecy. Their charts depict that an extraordinary child has been born hereabouts. But I didn't understand where. In Galilee? Maybe Judea? The Roman Empire?"

"And?"

Yeshua put his arms around his younger brother Yakov for comfort, shielding him from the serious discussion.

"They search for him. That's what they do. They make charts of the stars and planets, decipher them, and then scour the world for this child."

"And that's why they gave you these presents? To help look for the child?" Ama squatted next to her husband, baby Iosa suckling her breast.

"No. They reckon it's—the large one."

Ama glanced at Yeshua.

He hugged his brother closer. What did it mean, the *large one*?

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Zoroastrian seers. Devotees of a prophet called Zarathustra, from Persia." Yosef pressed his knuckles together. "They wish to educate him about their faith. They will return when he's grown."

"Oh!" Ama pulled her nipple from Iosa and placed the protesting infant in his cot. "Did you tell them we are Yehudim?"

“Forget it, Maryam. Let’s just forget this.” He tied up the gifts in the yellow scarf and hid it in a hole under the stove.

Yakov squirmed out of Yeshua’s embrace and snuggled up into his father’s lap, but Yeshua couldn’t move. Why had the men laughed? And why did they bring gifts for a king? And who was the large one they spoke about?

Could it be him—Yeshua? Was it possible?