

PART ONE

Permission

I. The Proselytizer (30 AD)

“A good tree does not bear rotten fruit; a rotten tree does not bear good fruit. Are figs gathered from thorns, or grapes from thistles? Every tree is known by its fruit”

- The Book of Q

They were nothing alike, the two of them, but maybe that was for the best. Proculus, an ex-senator and devoted believer in the Roman Republic, was intelligent, successful, confident, stalwart, and above all, a visionary. Saul, the current object of Proculus' ponderings, was studious and devout, but was also stubborn and somewhat delusional about his own abilities. *Nevertheless*, Proculus thought, *he may just be the one person who can help save the Republic.*

Proculus was walking a convoluted path. The twisted trail in the woods behind his villa in Antioch offered a respite from bustling people and was one of his favorite places to think, especially in spring. He came to his beloved spot, where he had built a bench of stone and Shittah wood to overlook the small lake in the hills named Lake Yosef. He admired the calm glistening surface, and turned his mind to the failing Roman Republic. It was clear to all who would open their eyes that the Republic was dead and an insidious Empire was consuming it. What people could not comprehend was the impending war with Judea.

He heard birdsong and smiled, enjoying temporary relief from his gloomy thoughts. He could barely feel the sealed scroll in his hand as he breathed in the fresh air and the sweet smell of acacia. He stood erect with his folded hands behind his back and his fingers worrying the message from Saul. He hadn't even bothered to unseal it before heading to the woods. The content was not what was important. *Could it be this simple? Could this son of Aharon be the proselytizer we need?*

Proculus finally opened the letter and skimmed it to find that Saul was planning a trip to Antioch and wanted to visit. That would give Proculus a chance to explore his ideas with the young Jew, even if he would have to do it in private, away from the prying eyes of servants. *I'll have to be very careful about what I say to him.*

Proculus left the lake and continued up the trail as he thought back to their most memorable encounter. Saul was a young man just accepted to the Pharisaic school in Jerusalem; the only school for Jewish scholarly studies and dedicated to that sect's intellectual interpretation of the Torah and Jewish law. His proletarian parents, Aharon and Ruth, were friends of Proculus' and they were both justifiably very proud of the young scholar. It was no easy task getting into the elite school for the Pharisees. Proculus remembered thinking at the time that he had doubts the boy could make it. But he was a devout Jew who had studied the written and oral histories and seemed quite motivated.

As it turned out, Proculus had been right and the school discharged Saul midway through the program. As far as Proculus knew, Saul's parents had not heard from the failed student since his release.

Proculus came upon a fork in the trail and had to decide whether to take the long route around or the shorter one on the right that headed directly to the villa. He went left.

The question at hand was whether Saul could be the proselytizer they had been looking for. Proculus and Maximus, his best friend and cohort, had failed twice before with potentials and there was little time left. If they did not find a suitable person soon they would be too old to bring their plan to fruition.

Saul did have the right temperament – that overinflated view of himself – that meant he might be able to become a notable speaker and he did know Judaism and Judaic law well enough. He had also been somewhat shunned by the Pharisees, which might help him accept new ideas. The real question was whether he had gotten over being so devoutly Jewish. Proculus followed the circuitous path back to the villa hopeful and anxious.

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Nine days later Saul arrived at Proculus' Villa. It had been a long and dusty trip, his muscles were sore and his energy drained, but he wanted Proculus to know he was in town. He hesitated twice walking up the path to the front door and stood, unsure of what he would say or how they would greet him. His eyes flitted back and forth nervously and he ran his hands through his thinning unruly hair. He

shook his hands out as if wet and stretched his neck in an attempt to relax. He then took a deep breath and knocked.

A servant invited him into the house where he found Proculus' wife June approaching. Saul frowned as he wondered what pleasantries he would have to exchange with the woman. She must have interpreted his reaction correctly because she immediately led him to the library where Proculus was working.

The library hadn't changed much since he'd been there years before. Two plush chairs covered with purplish leather sat next to a small round table. Most notable, however, were the shelves of scrolls and books, rare objects since they took so long to replicate. Proculus sat comfortably behind the desk.

From when he was a young boy and Proculus a senator, Saul had been intimidated by the man. The few times he saw Proculus on visits to their home in Tarus, he appeared to be an imposing figure who seemed to command attention and obedience by his mere presence.

Saul observed him from the doorway. Proculus was taller than Saul's average height and the man's upright posture made him look taller still. He had short neatly kept curly black hair and dark penetrating eyes. His waistline had thickened over the years though he wasn't unfit. The desk he sat behind was made of fine mahogany and held some papers, a quill, and a few unlit candles.

The best memory Saul had of Proculus, and the one that always returned when he saw the man, was when he had won the scholarship to the Pharisaic school. Proculus had given him a scroll with notes on the Jewish Oral tradition written down by Gamaliel himself. It was still one of Saul's most prized possessions.

He was shaken from his reverie when Proculus stood and smiled at him, "Welcome Saul, it has been too long."

He didn't smile back; he was always a little nervous around Proculus and his situation with his parents made any interaction with their friends difficult. He replied, "It has been too long, sir. My duties keep me traveling."

"I have heard about those duties, I cannot imagine they are pleasant."

Saul looked down, mildly ashamed, "No, but someone has to enforce the laws and I am... found useful."

June asked, "How are your parents, Saul?"

The two men looked at her as if they realized for the first time she was still in the room. Saul blushed and stammered a response, "I, um, have not spoken to them. Not since I left the school." He avoided their gazes and stared at a set of elephants carved out of ivory on the shelf behind Proculus. June must have seen how uncomfortable she made him since she quietly backed out of the room, bowing. He was

thankful she had left. A woman's presence was never comfortable and her pushing him about his parents hadn't helped.

Proculus turned back to Saul, but before he could say anything, Saul interrupted him, "I'm sorry, but I can't stay long." Proculus raised an eyebrow. "I have friends I must meet and I need to arrange a place to stay. I just wanted to stop by quickly to tell you I had arrived."

Proculus replied, "As you wish, but I hope we can spend some time together while you are here. Your parents would like to hear how you are doing and I am sure you want to hear about them, even if you are not ready to see them yet."

"Yes, of course. I'll call on you within a few days."

Saul turned to leave and Proculus followed him out of the library. As they made their way towards the front door, June joined them. "Are you leaving already Saul, I thought you might stay for dinner."

Saul blinked in surprise and then frowned at June, trying not to be offended at the offer, but a little shaken nonetheless. *Why would she ask such a question? She knows I won't eat with Gentiles.* He laughed a little, nervously, before he caught himself. "No, thank you, I must be going now," and he hurried out the door.

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Once Saul was outside and the door closed, Proculus turned to June. "I am surprised you offered that already; you know he had to say no."

"True, but I thought he should say no now and then if you do convince him to be this evangelizer of yours, he may accept if asked again and that will say much."

Proculus was nodding as he considered June's reasoning. "Well, let us hope he's the one and this works. He seemed to make excuses to leave... Maybe we made him too uncomfortable to stay, so if he is not back within a few days, I may need to approach him."

They started to withdraw back to the library and June said, "You know, one of the mistakes you made with Marnie, was that you didn't take him through a progression. From being a devout Jew to being willing to convert Gentiles, something most Jews don't agree with." Then, after a pause, she added, "You need to take it slow and let him see how to counter the old traditions one at a time."

"Perhaps, but we do not have enough time to be overly sensitive. We have to begin soon if this is going to happen in our lifetimes."

"Yes, but pushing too hard and losing him won't make it happen any faster."

“Saul will be back within a few days and we can start the more important discussions then. I implied we have news about his parents and he will not ignore that.”

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Saul returned to the house two days later feeling rested and more composed. Proculus led him to the garden table as a gentle wind caressed them under a cloudless sky. A servant brought watered down raisin-wine and then left without a word. Proculus never even glanced at the woman, though he did seem to nod at a different servant working in the garden and the man put down his trowel and left.

Saul was nervous and forgot about pleasantries. “Do you have word of my parents?”

The corner of Proculus’ mouth raised in a slight grin. “Yes Saul, they are well. Your mother continues to be involved in temple.”

“How about Father?”

“He was just recognized at synagogue for his contributions and I know he continues to fight for the rights of Jews in Rome. I also heard that a friend of his there in Tarus named his son after your father. I do not need to tell you how unusual that is or how much of an honor.”

Saul leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and sat silent, relishing the idea of his father doing well. After a few moments, he opened his eyes. “And how is his business?”

“Still trading, although I have heard that he does not travel as much now. He has hired others to do that for him and his business grows. He is importing dyes now as well and that has proven quite profitable.”

Saul glanced around the garden. The spring flowers were in bloom and he could smell jasmine and other flowers. A limestone wall, about the height of a man, surrounded the courtyard and was mostly covered by climbing vines. Fruit trees and flowering shrubs filled the enclosed area, along with a small shallow pond at the far end where birds were splashing and preening.

Saul’s attention returned to the conversation as Proculus said, “He would love to see you again, Saul.”

Saul immediately became distressed, his eyes pleading. He struggled with the possibility of having that conversation. When Proculus didn’t say anything more he answered resignedly, “You know I can’t. Not yet.”

“Why not yet?”

Saul stammered, “Because, well... my father loved the Pharisees and now I’m,” he had trouble even saying the word, “persecuting them. I’m the exact opposite of what he wanted.”

“You do not know that Saul and if I remember correctly, you were the one who wanted to be a Pharisaic scholar.” Then with a little more compassion in his voice, he added, “It is true that he tends to disagree with the aristocratic Sadducees and their deference to Rome and Hellenistic ideas. But that does not mean you had to become a Pharisaic scholar to please him.”

That mollified Saul somewhat, but he kept his head bowed. “Saul, let me ask you this: How do you, you personally, feel about working for the Sadducees as an enforcer?”

Saul’s eyes brightened at the distraction as he answered, “It troubles me. It’s work and I’m thankful for that, but it isn’t what I was taught and certainly isn’t anything to be proud of.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“It’s work,” he repeated, simply.

“That is not an accurate answer. You know you could do other work.”

“I guess it makes me feel better when I get back at them for kicking me out of school.” His eyes darted down and his face warmed. *Why am I so honest with him? It’s like he has some magical power to make people tell their inner secrets.* Saul was mad enough at himself that he stood up and walked away from the table towards the pond causing the birds to flutter away. After getting some distance from Proculus, he began to wonder why Proculus was asking these questions. *Is this just to convince me to talk with Father? Or is there some other motivation here? Why should he care if I support the Sadducees?* To Saul’s knowledge, the senator hadn’t shown a preference for any of the Jewish sects in the past.

Proculus stayed sitting while Saul perused the flowers. After a couple of minutes, Saul returned and offered, “You have a truly beautiful garden here.”

Proculus laughed. “That would be our servants Rebekah and Daniel.” Then he became serious again, “Saul you do not need to be ashamed. You spent most of your youth studying to get into that school. You understand their laws better than most people I have met, including some who graduated.” Saul felt the back of his head tighten at the praise. He recalled the school and his eyes quickly narrowed as his lips tightened into a line. He became pensive and mumbled, “I’ve been having dreams lately where I’m doing evil things to Pharisees and then they turn out to be good people and, well, it’s disturbing.”

“I’m no reader-of-dreams, but maybe you should consider seeing your parents again. They would love to see you and they are not the kind of people to think negatively of you.”

So he is just trying to push me into seeing them? “Maybe,” was all he could say.

After an uncomfortable silence, Saul changed the subject. “I’ve often wondered why you retired at such an early age. You were one of the youngest senators ever and could have gone far. May I ask what happened?”

Proculus glanced to the side as a series of emotions seemed to cross his face. Saul thought he saw hope, pride, frustration, disappointment, and even regret in Proculus’ face. He wasn’t sure he would answer, but after a minute, Proculus looked directly at Saul. “Did you know I was married once before, to Cæcilia Aelius?”

“Yes, I might have met her once at my parent’s house.”

“Possibly. In any case, she was the more politically inclined of the two of us. My parents were wealthy and she came from an aristocratic family with influence. I was young and eager to make a difference and the marriage seemed appropriate.”

Proculus hesitated, his eyes blinking and sad as if a dark memory had invaded his mind. “She was also a sickly woman and never really recovered from a serious bout of malaria. When she died, I decided to leave politics. I had come to respect and appreciate Judea and its people. So I sold my estates and moved here and this is where I fell in love with June.”

“Why Antioch?”

“Its diverse population, proximity to a busy port, and that it is one of the largest cities in the Emp... Republic.”

What was he about to say? It isn’t like Proculus to misspeak.

June came into the garden then with a note for Proculus. “This just arrived and I thought you would want to see it right away.”

Saul took a longer look at her, curious after hearing Proculus say he had fallen in love with her. She was Jewish by descent, but had taken up Gentile ways with Proculus and had even changed her name to Junious. A somewhat robust woman with long reddish hair and hints of gray, she had an elegant look to her, but what disturbed Saul most was her penetrating eyes that seemed to read a man’s soul. It was difficult to be in her presence for long. *She eats with Gentiles!*

June left and Proculus opened the note and read it in silence. Saul could see his face becoming heated and foreboding as he read, but he knew it wasn’t his place to inquire. When Proculus was finished reading he folded the note and tossed it onto the table, looking into the distance in contemplation.

Saul asked, “Is everything all right?”

“No, not really.” Proculus pulled his attention back to Saul. “This is something not many people are aware of, but the Roman Republic is dying.”

Saul’s head went back as if slapped, his mouth opened slightly, and he blinked. All he could manage to say was a stumbling “What?”

“What I mean is that it is turning into an empire, rather than a republic. The change began back with Augustus, or maybe even before, with Julius Caesar, but it will, eventually, be the downfall of Rome and it... irritates me.”

“As much as I hate Rome and think it needs to burn, what you are saying is difficult to imagine. What enemy could possibly challenge them?”

“It will not be an outside enemy, at least not initially. It will be the weakness of the Senate or in-fighting or even civil war. It will be the generals vying for control of the government and a senate too weak to stop them.”

“But,” Saul spluttered, “they seem so... solid, so untouchable, and Tiberius Caesar seems to have total control.”

“I know it seems that way and few understand the problems, but they exist and they will grow. My bigger concern at the moment is how all of it will affect Judea.”

Now Saul became apprehensive and leaned forward in his chair attentively. *What could he be thinking? Has he just become a paranoid old man? And why wouldn’t the failure of Rome be a good thing for Judea?* “How do you mean?”

“There has always been strife between Rome and Judea. They are a relatively new province and they still see themselves as the chosen ones. They cannot fathom Rome as their masters.”

The ‘chosen ones’ phrase vexed Saul and he let it show. But before he could say anything, Proculus continued, “I know what you are thinking Saul, hear me out.

“Judea is the only province that is allowed to skip paying taxes once every seven years. I know the sabbatical has religious origins and Rome honors local religious customs, which is why Judea has been allowed to suspend taxes during that time. But there are Romans who grow tired of the special treatment. Imagine what happens if one of those becomes Caesar? Since so much power is in the hands of one person, he can just order the Jews to pay, whether or not they are planting and harvesting that year. Just imagine what that would cause.”

Proculus’ voice grew more urgent, “And what of the Caesars proclaiming their predecessors to be Gods and wanting us all to worship them? We have already seen that cause strife. Did you know that some people wanted Tiberius to proclaim himself a living God

and build temples in his name? Thankfully, he refused, but one of them will do so and what happens when they require the Jews to worship them as a God? It will happen and you know how the Jews will react. They will refuse and that will lead to war between Judea and Rome and that is, well, that is unthinkable.”

“Truly? War? I know there’s disagreement, but not to that level.”

“No, not yet, but that is because Tiberius is a reasonable Caesar. What happens when we get an unreasonable one?”

Saul shook his head, “That’s impossible to plan for.”

“Possibly, possibly...,” Proculus mumbled as his intensity subsided and he relaxed into his chair. He seemed to drift into deep thought.

After a few minutes where both men sat thinking, Saul spoke up, “I should be going.”

Proculus frowned, “Oh, will you be coming back to see us before you leave Antioch?” There was a hint of anxiety in his voice that troubled Saul. *Does Proculus want me to come back or not? What is he not saying?*

“I don’t know, I’ll try to,” and he stood to leave.

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After he was gone, June came out. “Well?”

“I do not know. I was able to tell him about the problems with Rome. He has some of the right makings, but he may not be able to accept that there is a real threat, or that he will be willing to help do something about it.” After more consideration, he added, “If he comes back before he leaves town, then we have to present the idea to him.” Proculus picked up the blank piece of paper, handed it to June, and added, “Thank you for bringing that in; it was perfect timing, though I was surprised you did not write something on it so I would not have to hide it so obviously.” He smiled and June giggled.

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Over the following days, Proculus became demonstrably agitated with terse responses to June and the servants, and an inability to sit still for long. Saul had been gone almost a week and it was approaching the day he had said he would be leaving town. Proculus noticed June keeping her distance and was thankful even as it exasperated his agitation. There were few prospects for what he had in mind and he had built Saul up into a real possibility. June had even suggested they consider a way to force a meeting before Saul left town.

On the day before Saul's planned departure, he finally arrived at Proculus' house. Proculus had been away on an errand when Daniel came running up out of breath and told him Saul was at the villa. It was early evening, just after the final meal. Proculus dismissed the errand and rushed back.

He took a few minutes to get his breathing under control and wipe some of the perspiration away before entering the library. He looked in to see Saul standing at the shelves of scrolls and books. The man's dark complexion and long nose made him look distinctly Jewish. He had clean but ruffled hair and a freshly trimmed beard. Proculus advanced through the door and Saul turned to greet him. The two men exchanged small talk about Saul's activities in Antioch and then Proculus sat in his chair, looking into Saul's vague blue eyes, and leaned back waiting for him to initiate the real conversation.

Saul looked intently at Proculus. "I've considered this a great deal. It's been hard to concentrate on anything else. But I know you well enough to know you have a plan. It was one of the things my father used to say about you. I clearly remember him proclaiming, 'Proculus is a visionary. He's always looking to the future and he always has a plan.' So I may not agree with what you've said, but I am curious. What's your plan?"

Proculus was surprised at how accepting of the situation Saul seemed to be, but maybe it just seemed that way. He decided he still needed to be careful. "Yes Saul, there is a plan, at least a vague one. It will take a long time to come to realization and, as you probably guessed, I could use your help."

Saul leaned forward in his chair. "Yes?"

"The idea is to spread Judaism so far into the Roman Empire that war would be unthinkable. People link Judaism with Judea and if we can spread Judaism, we protect Judea."

Saul turned and seemed to look at some scrolls behind Proculus left shoulder. He replied, "You mean to try to convert Gentiles to Judaism?"

"Yes, exactly."

"That won't be easy. The laws..."

"Which is why I need your help."

Saul relaxed into his chair. "You want me to find a way around those laws."

"Precisely."

Saul's eyes flicked back and forth and he rubbed his neck. Proculus waited patiently. Saul said, "There might be some who would favor such a move. We will need to use the Essenes. Their founder professed universal availability to the Kingdom of God. I

haven't studied them much, but I think their teachings might support this."

Proculus could hardly believe his ears. The writings of the Essenes were part of the inspiration for this plan and were at the heart of every idea he had for converting the Romans. He was also elated that Saul had used "we" since it implied he had already decided to help, even if he had not realized it yet.

The two continued to talk until darkness consumed the sky and Saul realized he had to leave in order to be safe. As he stood up, he sighed. "It's a nice dream, but I don't see it really happening. The Jews would never change their laws and without that, we cannot convert the Gentiles.

Proculus wasn't giving up though, "Saul, would you consider extending your stay in Antioch so we may discuss this further? It is possible and I would like the chance to convince you."

Saul cocked his head and opened his mouth to say something, but hesitated. Then he relented, "I can do that Proculus. Let me make plans for some place to stay. I'll be back in a couple of days to continue this." He turned and left as Proculus looked on intently.

II. The Vision (30 AD)

“Those who cry are fortunate for they shall also laugh.”

- The Book of Q

Proculus spent the next two weeks with Saul, as time permitted, discussing various Jewish sects. They both knew the Pharisees and the Sadducees well, but the mysterious Essenes were elusive and few knew much about them other than they were diasaporic and followed the teachings of a long-dead high priest known only as the Teacher of Righteousness. They also discussed what it would take for the High Council to allow them to openly convert Gentiles. As Proculus knew they would, they concluded there was not enough information to convince the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. What was most significant, however, was his appraisal of Saul as a proselytizer.

On their fourth such meeting, Proculus decided to take the next step. He had spent most of the previous discussions explaining to Saul the intricacies of the Roman Empire and exactly why his predictions were likely. With this meeting, he had Saul come after the last meal of the day and had a flask of good wine waiting in the library for them.

Rebekah led Saul to the library when he arrived, but left the door slightly ajar. Saul glanced at the open flask of wine on the desk. “What’s this for?”

Proculus’ hands came together under his chin as his forehead crinkled in concentration. “We have talked a lot about the Essenes and others and about the tact we might take with the Sanhedrin. However, I still see doubt in your mind and I think I know why.”

Saul grimaced and leaned back in his chair, but stayed silent.

Proculus reached down, poured two cups, and offered one to Saul as he noticed a lock of hair that had fallen in front of Saul’s left eye. *Sometimes he appears so young.* “We have only discussed the first part of this plan. You see, after we get permission to proselytize,

then we have to have a speaker for the new sect go out among the Gentiles of the Roman Empire to establish communities and teach them new ways.” Saul was scowling, so Proculus added, “We need to create a separate sect, Saul.”

The scowl remained and Proculus’ eyebrow went up in a prompt. “Why wouldn’t we just join with the Essenes?” Saul asked.

“Initially that may be the most reasonable approach, and at a minimum we need to learn more about them, but they are reclusive and are seen by mainstream Jews as outcasts. We need to use their ideas, possibly enhance them, and work with the existing synagogues or this will take centuries.

“You know that most Jews outside of Judea do not care about the various sects within Judaism; they are all collectively Jews. And so shall we be. Only we will have permission to convert Gentiles with new ideas and rules that enable and encourage conversion.” There was a lot more to it than that but he was not about to go too far with Saul like he and Maximus had with Marnie.

Saul rediscovered the wine in his hand and held up the glass, appreciating the patterns of swirling blue and green in the stonework. He asked again, “So, what’s this for?”

Proculus laughed and touched Saul’s cup with his in an informal toast. “Because, I think you and I understand each other and are heading down a path to form something better.”

“I haven’t agreed to help you.”

“Indeed. However, I think you will.”

They both took a drink and Saul commented, “This is fine wine; I don’t often get to taste any this good.”

“It is one of the finest, called Falernian, and comes from a viticulturist associate of mine in Rome.”

The two schemers spent hours drinking and discussing what types of people would be best to travel the empire and build up Gentile-friendly communities. Eventually, Proculus changed the subject. “You know Saul...” June interrupted them with a replacement flask of wine. This one was lesser quality, but Saul didn’t seem to notice as he reached out and poured. June left quietly. Saul stared at her silent withdrawal, eyes squinting. “You were saying?”

“Just that you might not be aware of this, but I was at your naming ceremony.”

Saul’s eyes went wide in mild surprise, “No, I didn’t.” He sat the cup down with a look that seemed to indicate he was done or at least wanted to concentrate on this new topic.

Proculus relaxed into his chair to tell the story. “I remember your father was so proud that day. He and your mother were young and just starting their family. They had had trouble conceiving, so you

were, in your mother's words, 'a magnificent gift from God.' Ruth was still recovering because the delivery had been quite difficult; in fact, the attendant was not sure she would survive, but she did and there you were. I remember her sitting in a chair, at the naming, holding you while your father tried to stand still behind her, but he was so excited he struggled to stay in one spot. During the ceremony, I could see tears in his eyes.

"I also remember that, before you were born, they had a hard time finding a name for you. They struggled for months because the only names they liked were already in use by living relatives. Then, just weeks before you were born, your paternal great uncle died and he had been a kind and devout man and your mother and father knew they had found your name."

Saul interrupted. "How is it that you were allowed to attend? Not being Jewish..."

"Normally that is true, however your father is a respected leader and away from Judea the communities tend to bend the rules a little. I was allowed to stand just outside the room, with the doors open so I could see and hear the ceremony." Then he added with a smirk, "So in reality, I was not actually in the room when the ceremony occurred."

Saul sat back in his chair, with his face relaxed and his eyes glistening, looking up at the ceiling. After a few moments, he mumbled, "Maybe it is time for me to see them again." Then he shook his head and refocused on Proculus.

Proculus watched Saul in silence as he seemed to be looking inward and then brought up the story he had been planning to tell Saul all night. "I also saw you give a speech when you were ten and getting ready to go to the Pharisaic school."

Saul examined his near-empty cup as his shoulders slumped. Proculus ignored the look of dejection and continued, "It was in front of the congregation again and because it was not a religious ceremony, there were a number of gentiles there. Cæcilia was in bed ill, so I was standing with your father."

"The entire town was swollen with pride to be having one of their own accepted into the school; well, at least the Jewish quarter of the town. There must have been three hundred people. I remember there were so many that they did not fit into the synagogue. Some of the latecomers were quite disappointed."

"I really expected you to be nervous, talking in front of all those people. You walked in with your head down. I recall thinking 'this could be embarrassing,' But you seemed to gather your strength, walked to the front with your head upright and proud, and stood on a small platform they had placed there for you. You lifted your head, took a deep breath, and spoke with confidence."

Proculus could see tears welling in Saul's eyes and was pleased at the emotion. He touched cups with him again for a distraction and Saul ran his sleeve across his face. Then he drank the remaining wine in his glass. Proculus poured another and continued, "Your parents were beaming with joy." His voice got a little quieter, "You were their only child and there was no telling if you would even make it to adulthood, let alone achieve something, and even being accepted into that school is quite an accomplishment.

"What was most impressive about your speech, in my opinion, was that you had no notes or queues. You spoke for about ten minutes, unwaveringly and intelligently. You brought in scripture, oral stories from Abraham, and you were modest and appreciative. I remember thinking that I had heard speeches from senators that were not as well thought out, appropriate, or articulate as yours." Proculus wondered if Saul remembered just how nervous he really was giving that speech.

June came in quietly, placed another flask of wine on the desk, kissed her husband goodnight, and withdrew. Proculus knew Rebekah would be watching from the door and would bring in more flasks as needed.

The night continued and the conversation degenerated. Long stretches of silence fell between the two without either of them noticing and when they did talk, it was only partially intelligible. The men stayed that way, becoming increasingly incoherent, until they noticed the night being swept away by dawn. When Saul noticed the brightening day, he stood to leave but fell back into the chair. He concentrated, gathered his strength and this time made it upright. Proculus had been wondering how long it would take, but he did not want Saul to walk the streets at night, so he had not pushed. Saul staggered to the door, managed to mumble something that Proculus guessed was 'farewell,' and left.

Proculus came out of the library to find June already awake with the household staff preparing for the day. She smiled at her tired and inebriated husband. "You need to get to bed."

"What makes you say that?" Proculus replied sarcastically with a half-smile as he struggled to remain upright. "Wake me if you hear from Saul, otherwise let me slumber."

* * *

Saul staggered home, spending almost an hour trying to find the place where he was staying. He knew it was near the south side synagogue, but he'd only been there a couple of days and wasn't sure which house it was. The sun was a hand's width up in the sky when he

sobered up enough that he was finally able to recognize the house. The couple was awake and gave Saul a disillusioned look as he made his way to his room without a word. Saul avoided their stares as his face flushed. *At least they don't have children to see this display.* He collapsed onto his bed, asleep.

Saul found himself on the road to Damascus in what seemed to be the predawn hours. Traveling here made some sense to him since that was where he had been heading when he had stopped at Antioch. However, it still felt all wrong; he had this terrible sense of loss as if he hadn't a friend in the world and yet he was traveling with two other men. He looked over at them and realized he had no idea who they were and they didn't seem interested in him either.

A butterfly, with white wings and patterns the color of moss, flew past him and he cocked his head in wonderment; what was a butterfly doing out here where there was no vegetation except some scrub brush?

Then, he wondered what had happened in Antioch. He didn't even remember leaving and couldn't recall whether he and Proculus had come to any kind of resolution or what the plan was. He stopped and looked around realizing that this was the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, not from Antioch; how did he get here?

His supply donkey stopped with him and then the two fellow travelers stopped to see what the problem was. At that point, the sky began to brighten, but not like a sunrise. Instead, the entire sky brightened at once. Saul could see it and his forehead crinkled in concentration trying to figure out what could cause such an event even as he realized the other men didn't seem to notice.

The brightness coalesced to a single point that seemed to center half way up the sky. "That appears to be directly over Jerusalem," Saul said aloud. The two men turned towards Jerusalem, but didn't appear to react to the light.

The light began moving directly towards Saul; he wasn't sure how he knew this because it's apparent size stayed the same, even as it got closer. He was, nevertheless, positive it was heading straight for him.

As the light settled into a position directly in front of Saul about twenty feet away, Saul noticed his two companions go into a stupor, not aware of the light or, apparently, anything else as they continued to stare in the direction of Jerusalem. The light concentrated its obvious and intimidating power on Saul and in a loud deep voice spoke stridently, "Saul, why are you persecuting my people?"

Saul fell to his knees in supplication. The butterfly that had been flitting about fell dead right in front of him and he looked around to see what had killed it. Then he saw another butterfly, but as he noticed it, it too fell dead on the sand. And then another and another, and then hundreds all around him. Saul gave up trying to figure out what that could possibly mean and returned his attention to the strange talking light. He had no answer to its question, so instead he stammered a question of his own, "Who... who are you?"

"I am The Teacher, Saul. You have been persecuting my people and you must stop."

"I know, I know. But I persecute the Pharisees more." As soon as he said it, he realized how wrong it sounded.

"It matters not; they are all my people. You must stop."

Saul began to feel all the pains of the people he had been persecuting and remembered all the wrongs he had committed in his effort to exact revenge upon them. He began to cry.

The presence let him empathize and then said, "Saul, you must travel among my people, the communities of my followers. Go as a student and learn their ways. They will accept you and teach you the path to the Kingdom of God. You will take their message to all the peoples of the world. Saul, go and save my people.

"The One True God has spoken." The light vanished with a popping sound that startled Saul and woke his two stupefied companions.

Saul looked around for the dead butterflies, thinking they might be proof of what had happened, but they had all disappeared.

Saul woke up soaked in perspiration and trembling. The dream had been so realistic that he had trouble orienting himself. He sat up on the straw covered cot and struggled to contain his shame and contrition. He stood up to head back to Proculus' house, but became instantly dizzy and fell back to his bed. With a concerted effort, he was able to stand, throw water on his face from a bowl near the bed, and leave the house. He tried to run but that proved impossible so he walked, as quickly as he could.

When he arrived, Rebekah called to June while Saul waited. He was wearing the same disheveled clothes, now with bits of straw on them, and he stank of perspiration and too much wine. When June saw him, her eyes brightened and she let him in immediately. She told Rebekah to fetch a steamed cloth to freshen his face.

She left Saul sitting in the foyer and headed towards the bedrooms. On the way, she passed Rebekah, took the steamed cloth from her, and told her to fetch another one for Saul and to lead him to the library when he was ready. She then disappeared, presumably to find Proculus.

* * *

Twenty minutes later Proculus entered the library refreshed, but moving slowly. Saul hesitated and then, before Proculus could even sit down, blurted out in an excited voice, "I had the most realistic dream, more like a vision, I had to come tell you about it."

Proculus' eyelids were half closed and his mouth was hanging open as he stared at Saul.

Saul ignored Proculus' fatigue and continued, "It was The Teacher of Righteousness, telling me that I had to spread the word about his teachings." After rethinking the dream, he added, "Well, he really said that I should travel among his followers and learn about them first, as a student I think, and then I should spread the word about the Kingdom of God."

Proculus said, "I have thought for a while now that you were the right person for this role. It was just a matter of your confidence." He took a few breaths and blinked to clear the sand from his eyes. "Why don't you tell me all about this vision of yours, from the beginning?"

Saul went through the entire dream, though he left out the bit about the butterflies since that seemed irrelevant.

"Interesting," Proculus said introspectively, "The Teacher had a set of disciples that spread out around the Republic and they established communities of followers. We know the location of some of them. It seems like the appropriate course is for you to travel among them to learn about their ways and their teachings."

“The part about ‘The One True God has spoken’ is rather unusual. Does it mean that God told The Teacher to tell you this or that The Teacher is God or that the light represented both?” Proculus leaned back in his chair and stared at Saul. He concluded, “Saul, this is truly astonishing. We have the makings of a plan that can accomplish what you and I have been discussing and now it appears to have divine sponsorship as well.”

They both sat for a while, the energy draining like rainwater as the long night caught up with them and the adrenaline ebbed. Proculus offered, “Please lie here and get some rest and I will go back to bed and do the same. Then, in a few hours when we are rested and more alert, we can discuss plans.”

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The two men slept until early afternoon and then took their time refreshing and drinking plenty of water. They sat down in front of Proculus’ desk where he had a map of the Roman Republic spread out. Saul leaned over it with interest. As he opened his mouth, Proculus interrupted.

“Before we look at the map, we should talk about next steps.”

Saul leaned back in his chair, apparently confused. Proculus saw he was let down, but it made no difference. “First, you will need to resign as an enforcer of the Sadducees. You should not just disappear as they might send people to look for you. You have to give them some reasonable explanation.”

Saul offered, “That’s easy enough; they already know I’m not happy. I can simply tell them I’ve found work here in Antioch and they’ll believe me.”

Proculus smiled and added, “It is somewhat true if you look at this as work for me.

“Next, I have a servant, Daniel, whom I have asked to travel with you. He is literate, can write to me about your progress, and can help in sundry ways. You can think of him as your servant, however he is a freedman, not a slave, and do not treat him as one. He is away right now or I would introduce him.

“We should also talk about timing, but that may depend on where you go, so I will save that until we discuss the route.”

“I want to get going right away.”

Proculus appreciated his enthusiasm, “Yes, but depending on where you go it may be easier to start in spring or fall. It is spring now, so heading north into Cappadocia would make sense and there are some other reasons why that is a good start. Moreover, this exploratory trip could take a pair of years, so we should not rush.”

Saul appeared frustrated, but Proculus continued, “We also need to discuss your goals for the trip and possibly the position you should take.”

“I thought that was... I’m to be a student and learn The Teacher’s ways through the communities his disciples left.”

“Yes, but part of that is to make sure you do not attempt to preach yet and, more importantly, you should not mention the vision.” When Saul’s mouth became a tight line, he added, “At least not yet. People do not know you as a prophet or even as a follower of The Teacher, so for them to hear that you received a vision, especially when none of them have, would make them see you as a fraud.”

Saul looked down and Proculus sat silent, letting him think. “I understand that; I’ll keep the vision to myself... for now,” he said.

Proculus examined the map. “These circles are where I have heard there are communities of Essenes. The ones I am most sure of are in Cappadocia, Mesopotamia, and down in Egypt.”

The two studied the map for hours talking about various routes Saul could take and where they might find Essene communities. In the end, a northern route proved most appropriate because they knew there was a community in upper Cappadocia somewhere and Saul knew an Essene couple, who had moved to Trapezeus. They could also travel through Caesarea, which was not a place Saul could linger since he had spent time there persecuting the Pharisees, but they could resupply.

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Saul realized he hadn’t eaten since the evening before and that he was famished. He said so and the two men agreed to meet the next morning to continue their discussions. They left the library and June saw them. She walked up and pleasantly asked, “Saul, will you join us for a meal?”

Saul blinked in shock, taken aback at her effrontery. *Why would she ask me that again?* He started to object, “I...” and then stopped. Eventually his mission was going to be to go out amongst the Gentiles, eat their treif food, and convert them to Judaism. He was going to have to bend the Abrahamic rules, the covenant, in order to do that and it would probably start by eating non-kosher foods with gentiles.

He looked back and forth between Proculus and June a few times, but their faces were blank, almost accepting. Finally, he answered, “Certainly,” though it pained him to do so.

As Proculus and June walked toward the kitchen, they touched their fingers gently together.

* * *

Preparations for the trip took three days. They acquired two asses to carry supplies, two horses that were young enough to have the stamina for a long trip, and enough nonperishable food stuffs to last them through the first leg of the journey. Proculus also gave them a bag full of denarii each, commenting that it would not last the entire trip, but might last a year or more, especially if they could augment it by working whenever they stopped for a long period. Finally, Saul and Daniel were ready to leave on their trip. Daniel was saying a heartfelt and tearful goodbye to Rebekah, while Saul, Proculus, and June were laughing and joking animatedly.

After they left, Proculus retired to his library to write a letter to Maximus, his most trusted friend, and the only other person who knew the full extent of the plan. Maximus would be surprised and a little chagrined that he had not been here to meet Saul himself, but he trusted Proculus.

They were also going to have to start considering Tiberius Caesar. The High Council in Jerusalem would never agree to the plan, let alone recognize a need for urgency without significant contention with Rome. Tiberius was just too evenhanded and the council would never be convinced of the looming dangers Rome represented. The Jewish leadership had to feel threatened in order to approve of the changes.

Somehow, Tiberius' reign would have to end

