

"Father is dead."

The announcement sucked the air out of the room, and Azariah's hand froze over the scroll he was copying.

"How do you know that, Daniel?" Hananiah asked, his dark brows knit together in a frown.

"Baruch just brought the news. They're bringing him home in his chariot." Daniel's folded hands and immaculate robe gave an appearance of calm, but grief stiffened his back and tightened the muscles around his mouth.

"It can't be," Mishael said.

"Why would Adonai, the almighty one, allow this?" Hananiah asked.

"You've heard the prophets," Daniel said,

"But Father was a godly king—this wasn't supposed to happen!"

"Yeah, I know. That's what we thought, anyway."

"He shouldn't have gone out to meet Pharaoh Necco," Mishael said.

"Wh..." Azariah tried to talk, but no words came out. He swallowed hard and tried again. "What will we do now, Daniel?"

Daniel came over and messed up Azariah's hair—just like he'd done since Azariah was two, and Daniel had towered over him from his three-year-old height. "I don't know. We'll stick together if we can."

Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael had grown up together in the concubine quarters of the palace in Jerusalem where their mothers shared the top floor of a corner house. They all inherited dark curls and a strong jaw from their father, King Josiah, but their faces showed little resemblance otherwise. Daniel's nose promised to dominate his adult face and his grey eyes reflected a wisdom beyond his years. He led their little band, and Mishael, with a slightly crooked smile and strong fists, defended it. Hananiah's height gave him an advantage in spying out the lay of the land. His brown eyes looked almost too large for his long face, but they missed few details. Azariah took care of any missions requiring an ability to fit into small spaces. His upturned nose and single dimple gave a lopsided and impish charm to his smile that often helped him talk his way out of trouble. When Hananiah and Mishael joined Daniel in the princes' quarters last month, they'd talked the guardian into letting Azariah go with them, though he was technically too young. Now they all shared a small upper room in the section for concubines' sons.

"Who'll be king now?" Hananiah asked.

Daniel shook his head. "I don't know. Father never named an heir."

"Will Hilkiah decide?" Mishael asked.

"No. The high priest doesn't decide these things."

A wailing rose from the outer courtyard and spread beyond the wall. The sound drove home the terrible truth: Josiah was dead. It was true, then; Josiah was dead.

Azariah put his head down on his arms and wept.

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The following days passed by in a blur. Soldiers carried Josiah's body home and buried him in the tombs of the kings. The people anointed twenty-three-year-old Prince Jehohaz to be king of Judah, and he immediately ordered altars to be built to offer sacrifices to Baal.

"Daniel, why does Jehohaz want to make offerings to Baal?" Azariah asked. The brothers sat on a section of the wall of the palace where no one could hear. "Why doesn't he listen to Jeremiah the prophet?"

"He doesn't like what Jeremiah says."

"But if he prayed like Father, wouldn't Adonai, our Deliverer, have mercy on us?"

“I believe he would, Azi, because of the way he had mercy on our forefathers, but Jehoahaz doesn’t believe that. Some of his friends worship Baal, and they’ve convinced him that Baal will help him.”

“The prophets have warned against doing that,” Hananiah said. “Why doesn’t he listen?”

“Because he’s been listening to Ahimaaz.”

“Who’s Ahimaaz?” asked Mishael.

“A man from Lachish who claims to be a prophet of the Lord Adonai.”

“What’s he saying?” Hananiah asked.

“That the Eternal One will protect Jerusalem, and we’ll have peace.”

“What does Jeremiah say?” Mishael asked.

“That Ahimaaz will die.”

Hananiah snickered.

“I meant what does Jeremiah say about Jerusalem right now?” Mishael said.

“Oh, the changes are so new, I haven’t heard. He’s been saying that the Righteous One will pour judgment out on Jerusalem.”

Azariah fidgeted and kicked the wall with his heel.

“Ahimaaz does have a nicer message,” Hananiah said.

“Not if it isn’t true.” Daniel sounded exasperated.

“Why wasn’t Jehoiada made king?” Azariah asked. “He’s older than Jehoahaz, and he wouldn’t sacrifice to Baal.”

“The people wanted Jehoahaz,” Mishael said.

“Besides,” Hananiah said, “I saw Jehoiada setting up an Ashera pole.”

“No, Hanni, it can’t be!” Azariah said. “He told me that we must always keep the law.”

“Only because he wanted to make Father happy.”

Azariah scowled.

“Some people do or say whatever they think best at the moment,” Mishael said. “Some of our brothers think the almighty Adonai has no power.”

“But what about Sennacherib and Hezekiah and the way the whole Assyrian army was struck down?” Azariah flung his arm out toward the fields beyond the city wall.

“That was almost ninety years ago. It’s forgotten.”

“And we have men like Baana running around saying that the reason Father died is because he destroyed the altars of Baal and Baal is angry,” Hananiah said.

“So what can we do, Daniel?” Azariah asked. “Jehoahaz won’t listen to us—he thinks he knows everything because he’s ten years older than we are.”

“Shh!” Hananiah poked Azariah with his elbow and glanced around to make sure he hadn’t been overheard. “Careful what you say, Azi. We’re not safe anymore.”

“We can only decide to be faithful ourselves,” Daniel said. “Maybe that will be enough to put off the wrath of our God, Adonai, for a while.”

“Sure,” Mishael said. “Jeremiah said, ‘Go search through the squares of Jerusalem and see if you can find even one man who does justice so that I can pardon her.’”

“I’ll be faithful,” Hananiah said. “I’ll vow.”

Azariah frowned. Could they really make a difference?

“Let’s do it together,” Mishael said.

Azariah’s heart pounded so hard that he was sure his brothers could hear it, but he nodded.

“Right!” Daniel said.

They all stood up and put their right hands together.

“We vow that we will not bend the knee to false gods,” Daniel said.

“We will follow the law,” Mishael said.

“We will seek truth,” Hananiah said.

"And do justice," Daniel said.

"Even if we die," Azariah said.

They stood there for a minute, not sure what to do next.

"Let's go to the temple and offer a sacrifice," Daniel said, "to seal our vow."

Later that night as Azariah lay between Hananiah and the wall, he wondered if that would be enough. Jeremiah said that Adonai the Holy One was angry because of the sin of Manasseh, his great-grandfather, so the whole nation of Judah would have to bear the consequences. Well, there was nothing he could do about that. He rolled over and pulled the covers over his head.