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Three months passed without any change, and Azariah's hopes grew. Then early one morning the watchmen on the towers began to shout, and the gates of the city swung closed. Azariah ran up to the walls of the palace and searched the horizon. A cloud of dust hung over the road to the north.

"Who is it?" he asked a guard.

"The army of Egypt, Prince, returning from Carchemish."

The pit of Azariah's stomach went cold. He stood rooted in fear and prayed.

The Egyptians soon forced the gates open, and Pharaoh Necco rode his chariot up the streets of Jerusalem all the way to the palace with trumpets blaring and flags flying. Azariah wanted to run and hide, but Jehoahaz sent for all the princes, and a servant came looking for him. Would Pharaoh kill them all?

Azariah took his place behind Daniel in the great hall, thankful that he was young and could stand in back. When they all assembled, Pharaoh strutted back and forth to survey them all, his footsteps echoing in the oppressive silence. At last he came to stand before Jehoahaz.

"I killed your father."

King Jehoahaz made no reply

Azariah saw the muscles of King Jehoahaz's jaw tighten, but the king pressed his lips together and made no reply.

"Judah is nothing, and your god cannot defend you. I have triumphed!"

With a swift movement, Pharaoh backhanded Jehoahaz across the face, knocking him to the floor.

"Put him in chains," the pharaoh said to his guards.

Azariah's skin crawled, and his head spun.

Pharaoh pointed at Eliakim, who stood closest to the throne.

"You look like a man of sense," Pharaoh Necco said. "You will be my vassal. Look well at what I have done to your brother. Obey me, or I will do the same to you."

Eliakim bowed to Pharaoh, and Azariah felt a surge of anger. Adonai, the one true God, was not too weak to save. Hadn't Moses and King David and scores of others proved that? Jeremiah said that the enemy would come from the north, but surely he hadn't meant Egypt!

"What's your name, Prince?" Pharaoh Necco asked.

"Eliakim."

"No longer. I shall give you a new name so that you will remember that I have put you on the throne. You are Jehoiakim. As my vassal, you will pay me a levy of one hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold every year."

Eliakim bowed low. "As you wish, O King."

An uncircumcised pagan making demands of the king of Judah! Azariah burned with shame. He swallowed his anger and fixed his eyes on the embroidery of Daniel's robe. The familiar pattern and colors looked inappropriately bright for this disgrace. Pharaoh Necco swaggered up and down the hall and stopped near the door to look back at them all with his hands on his hips.

"Do not harm any of your brothers, Jehoiakim. Next year, one of them might please me better, and I may decide to put him on the throne."

Pharaoh threw back his head and laughed. Then he held up a warning finger.

"Remember who your lord is now," he said. He swept out of the room, and guards dragged the deposed King Jehoahaz out after him.

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After Pharaoh and his army had gone back to Egypt, things got back to normal, sort of. Egyptian officials set up an office in the palace, defiling it with their presence. Jehoiakim raised

taxes, and the people grumbled, but they went to work just like before. Worship at the temple ceased, and altars to Baal, Ashera, and Egyptian gods sprouted all over the city.

Though life went on, it somehow seemed suspended, spinning in a loop and not making any progress. The days melted into one another.

One morning, about five months after Pharaoh Necco left, Azariah's brothers pounced on him and pulled him out of bed.

"Happy birthday, Azi!" Hananiah pelted him with a pillow. "You're a real man now!"

Azariah laughed and grabbed his own pillow and swung it at Hananiah and caught him in the midsection. Then he stood up and stretched. "Am I as tall as you now?"

It felt good to laugh.

"You won't get that tall overnight, little brother," Mishaël said. "You have to catch me first." He stood only a few inches shorter than Hananiah but was stockier, and his hair curled in wild directions. He wore his clothes with a comfortable slouch that Azariah liked to imitate.

"Father said I'd grow when I was twelve," Azariah said. "I'm tired of being short."

His brothers laughed.

"You could have worse problems," Hananiah said.

"That's easy enough for you to say—you're tall. I do wish Father was still alive."

"I know," Daniel said. "We didn't think Jehoiakim would remember your birthday." He twisted a curl of Azariah's hair around his finger and gave it a tug. "But we do—here." He handed Azariah a small bundle.

"Thanks, Daniel." Azariah unwrapped it and found a beautiful little prayer box made of ivory and gold. "Wow. This is just like the one Father gave you!"

"It's from all three of us," Mishaël said. "We knew Father would want you to have it."

"It's beautiful."

Daniel smiled and punched his arm.

"We'd better go," Hananiah said. "We don't want to be late for breakfast."

Azariah pulled on his robes, combed his hair, and ran out the door after his brothers. Ahikam, the temple secretary in charge of their education, would make them copy boring passages for an hour if they were late.

They wolfed down their breakfast and hurried to the schoolroom where other princes were settling down to work. Josiah had insisted that all of his sons learn the Pentateuch, the psalms of King David, and the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ahikam made them copy the scrolls so they learned to write as well.

Azariah picked up his quill and scroll and sat down with a sigh to copy his daily portion from the census lists in Numbers. Hananiah and Mishaël neared the end of Psalms, and Azariah wished for the thousandth time that he could study the Psalms with them. He'd memorized many psalms already and loved to sing them in the temple. Daniel had finished the course in record time and now studied the book of Joshua. Ahikam also allowed Daniel to borrow the scroll of Isaiah the prophet to read on their own, and Azariah found it fascinating—at least he could look forward to that.

He hadn't been working very long when the door opened and King Jehoiakim walked in, flanked by his personal servants.

"Ahikam," he said, "Pharaoh Necco desires that the princes learn Egyptian. I shall send a tutor over this afternoon. It is of utmost importance, and I desire that they study trade and business as well."

Ahikam bowed low. "Of course, my king, whatever you wish."

Jehoiakim walked around the room, inspecting the work of his younger brothers. When he got to Daniel, he stopped and frowned.

"Why are you studying this scroll? It's not required."

"I've finished the course, King Jehoiakim."

"Have you? Then I want you to study with Baana, the priest of Baal."

"May the king listen to my petition." Daniel rose and bowed to Jehoiakim.

"You may speak."

"I have taken a vow to remain faithful to Adonai, the God of Israel. I will not study with a priest of Baal."

"You will if I decree it."

"I am your servant, my king," Daniel said, and he bowed again, "but as surely as the Lord Almighty lives, I will not serve Baal." Daniel spoke quietly, but there was no mistaking his determination.

A slow flush of anger crept up Jehoiakim's neck. He slammed his hand down on Daniel's copy and then with a swift move he threw it across the room.

"Very well, then. I am in need of a servant to oversee the work here in the city and the trade with Egypt. You, Daniel, will go to the merchant, Tikvah, whose dirty little shop is just inside the Water Gate. You shall spend your mornings and early afternoons with him, learning his trade and smelling his stench. Learn who has money and how they make it. I need more money to pay Pharaoh Necco, and you shall find it for me. You will return here to study Egyptian in the late afternoon, and you will report to me once a week."

He looked around the room at the other princes, his eyes flashing.

"The rest of you will study with Baana. I believe they've had more than enough of this, Ahikam. Unless there are others who'd rather have a menial little job."

Hananiah rose to his feet, followed by Mishael. Azariah swallowed hard and tried to take a deep breath and make his trembling hands be still. He quietly slid off his chair and stood with his brothers, hiding his hands in the sleeves of his robe.

"Ah yes—the concubine boys." A blood vessel pulsed visibly on Jehoiakim's neck. "You four always stick together, don't you? Can't have one different from the others. You're all determined to disobey me?"

"We will serve you, my lord," Mishael said, and they all bowed low, "but we will not serve Baal."

Jehoiakim walked over to Hananiah. "You're certainly tall enough and appear strong as well. Go outside the city to Shelemiah the farmer, and apprentice yourself to him. Return only for lessons in Egyptian. At the end of the month, report to me."

Hananiah bowed, and Jehoiakim moved on to Mishael. Azariah could see Mishael breathing hard, but his round face remained impassive.

"You, Mishael, shall work with a shepherd. Learn what you can about breeding stronger sheep. A bigger flock means more money." Jehoiakim leaned close to Mishael's face. "And it'll do you good to learn how to clean a sheep pen." He threw back his head and laughed, then he sauntered all the way around Azariah with his hands on his hips, looking him over as if he were livestock.

"Little Azariah. I'm surprised your mother let you out of her sight—you must be all of, what, eight years old? Nine?"

"I'm twelve, my king."

"Twelve?" Jehoiakim looked at Ahikam for confirmation, and Ahikam nodded. Jehoiakim snorted. "Is this little runt good for anything, Ahikam?"

"May it please the king—he has a good hand and copies and reads well. He also memorizes quickly and has learned the language of Ebedmelech, the Ethiopian."

"Has he, indeed? And you would stand up with your brothers and defy me?" There was a glitter in his eye that made Azariah's stomach knot.

"I do not wish to defy you, King Jehoiakim."

"Then go and study with Baana, the priest of Baal, and I'll give you a double portion so you grow. You shall have a room near mine and be my personal helper."

"Will you hear me, my lord?" The words stuck in Azariah's throat, his voice a raspy whisper.

“Speak.”

“I’ll gladly serve you in any way that I can.” Azariah thought for a minute about having a room by the king and a place of honor, and he longed for it but not at that price. “But I’ve also taken a vow, and I will not study with the priests of Baal.”

“What?”

The word came in a roar. Jehoiakim planted both of his hands on Azariah’s table and leaned closer to him, his face nearly purple with rage. Azariah trembled and clutched the chair back for support, but words from the scroll of Exodus hammered in his head and began to spill out of his mouth.

“And God said, ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make any carved images, or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth or that swims in the water.’” The words flowed on like a river. “You shall not bow down and worship them, nor serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”

“Enough!”

Jehoiakim overturned the table, and Azariah dodged as the ink pot flew past and smashed on the floor behind him. He stopped talking, but great peace filled the whole inside of him, and he wasn’t afraid of Jehoiakim any longer. He lifted his head high and looked the king in the eye.

“The little cockerel crows like a rooster,” Jehoiakim said, his voice quiet but menacing. “Ahikam, I will not have this sort of mockery going on in my palace. You’re dismissed.”

Ahikam bowed almost to the ground.

“As for you, Azariah, you shall become a *potter*.” Jehoiakim spit out the word like it was poison. “Go to the house of Joash and learn his trade. You shall no longer eat at my table, but shall eat as the potters eat and come to the palace only to sleep in your little concubine corner.” He was shouting now. “Since you’re able to learn languages without the aid of a teacher, you may not return to the palace for lessons, but if you cannot converse in Egyptian in two months’ time, I shall sell you as a runt of a slave to Pharaoh Necco when he returns next year.”

Jehoiakim turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, but his voice carried back from the hallway. “See to it that their new masters make them work hard.”

For a moment no one moved, then they all drew a collective breath.

“Azariah, what made you do that?” Jehoram, a prince slightly older than Daniel, asked. “You could’ve had a position above us all!”

Azariah felt light-headed, and he maintained his hold on the chair. Dread filled him, yet joy coursed deep in his heart.

“I will not serve Baal,” he said.

“Adonai, the God of Israel, hasn’t protected us—maybe Baal will.”

“You mustn’t talk like that, Jehoram,” Daniel said. “The Lord Adonai’s mighty arm is not too short to save us even now.”

“Well, I don’t see him doing it. You’re all fools.”

Four servants came to escort Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to their new posts, and all talking ceased.