

Finding Hope

Book Chapter

Gracyn Johnson

Ninth Grade

Sneads Assembly of God, Sneads, Florida

1,800

Jaina lives unhappily and without hope in a world of hunger, famine, and empty-eyed “Serpents”. She’s accepted her life as it is and doesn’t expect anything to change. Though she finds herself inexplicably drawn to Angeline, who also lives within her camp. Angeline has a message of hope, but no one wants to hear it, so she keeps to herself until the time is right. In a moment, Jaina finds herself in danger and everything is changing. What she thought she knew – she didn’t. She’ll need every word Angeline has ever uttered to save, not just herself, but her people as well. Though more importantly, she’ll need to believe, although the concept is completely foreign to her. Can she overcome the evil Serpentine to save herself and her people? Not by herself, no, but in this heroic journey Jaina finally understands that she’s not alone and she never has been.

We call them Serpents, the ones who are lucky enough to work for Serpentine. I suppose the definition of “lucky” is up for debate, but they are properly clothed and fed well, and that makes them luckier than us. But, they are also soulless. That’s the price they pay for their security; their souls. You look into their eyes, and nothing looks back, they’re empty. But sometimes, particularly on days like today, I sort of envy them.

I’m not a Serpent, my name is Jaina and I’m a, well, a nobody, really. We live on the outskirts; we survive on the crumbs and we do our best to avoid the Serpents. We work together to survive, but one by one we are losing our people. They are falling to the temptation of the so-called security that Serpentine offers. Husbands and fathers willingly walk into Serpentine’s Lair thinking they can better provide for their families. But once they go in and lose their souls, they never remember the family they went in for. They think they will, they always think they’ll be strong enough, but they never are. They leave their loved ones far more broken than when they were with them.

The truth is, we feel a change coming, an electricity in the air. We are unsettled and uncomfortable while we wait. Impatience and hunger are gnawing at us all. I get up and walk away from my tattered tent, trying to get some air but the hot stillness follows me everywhere I go. Seeking refuge near the water well and hoping I can pull up some cool water today, I see old Angeline and am careful not to let her see me. Not that it matters, she’s lost in her own world. As usual she’s talking to herself, arms raised, head tilted back. We all think she’s crazy, but we don’t have the heart to make her leave. She’d die on her own and she’s no harm, although she is persistent in her craziness.

I manage to get a few gulps of tepid water from the bucket and decide to sit down and watch Angeline from a distance, because there's nothing else to do. She seems so peaceful and I notice there are tears running down her face. She lowers her hands, bows her head and mumbles a few more words. I'm about to leave when I notice her become very still. Her back to me she says, "Jaina. Do you know what your name means?" My stomach fills with dread, I didn't think she'd seen me, but now that she has, I feel I can't just walk away. "No, Angeline, I don't. Just a name Mama made up, I guess." Her crinkled face lifts in a smile and she replies, "Oh no, Jaina is Hebrew and it means 'Gift of God'. God knew you even while He knit you together in your mother's womb, and He loves you today." I smile at Angeline but it's a sad smile. This is what I mean by her craziness. She earnestly believes there is some greater good out in the world. I really wish I could believe it with her, but when I look around and see dry earth, famine, children that are too thin, and am haunted by the empty eyes of the Serpents we used to know...I just can't. I start to turn away, but Angeline grabs my hand, "It'll all change soon. He tells us to have hope." Poor Angeline.

As darkness falls, we all go into our tents for the night, nothing good ever happens after nightfall here. Nothing. That night I have a dream for the first time in years, so I wake up pondering why. Probably because I talked to Angeline, her crazy words were the last I heard before I slept, I'm sure that's the reason.

The days pass in monotony, but the nights, well, they are very different. I'm dreaming every night now even though I have avoided Angeline and have not spoken about my dreams to anyone. I alternate between trying to find meaning in the dreams and telling myself there is none. Even though I'm weary of my dreams, I feel a bubble of hope rising in me, which I know is stupid. I've never had any reason to hope and I can't believe a nighttime hallucination has

me feeling this way. But it does. In my dreams I see a man, but somehow, I know he's more than a man. Don't ask me what that means, I have no idea. He says if I'll believe in Him, I can have eternal life. But I don't understand why anyone would want to live in this scarcity forever, so none of it makes any sense. I feel so peaceful when I see Him though.

Later that day I'm helping harvest what little produce we can grow in our meager garden when I see Serpents approaching. Women grab young children and disappear inside of their tents and what few men we have left draw together in an attempt to cut off the Serpents from our encampment. The effort is in vain, if the Serpents want to get through, they will. I draw a bit closer to see what's happening. A weathered arm reaches out and pulls me behind a tent. Initially I'm startled and lift my gardening tool in defense but see that it's just Angeline. She lifts her finger to her lips as if to say be quiet and pulls me into the wood-line. "Angeline, I almost hit you!"

"Be quiet, child. They're here for you."

"Who is?", I ask, looking around wildly. "The Serpents? Why?"

"Hush and listen now, Serpentine will have sensed your dreams and sent them after you. You're dangerous to him if you start believing."

"Wait, I never told you about my dreams,"

“I know, but He did. I told you, He loves you and He wants you to believe in Him. You can help the others believe too. I can’t lead them to Him like you can, I’m not from here, they think I’m crazy, but you, Jaina, Gift of God, YOU can.”

I’m too stunned to reply; that’s too much to take in and I can hear the ruckus behind us drawing nearer. What if she’s right? I mean, not about the dreams, but about the Serpents being here for me. I don’t have time to ponder this further because a strong hand grabs my arm and says, “Let’s go, Serpentine wants to see you.”

My arms flail, “Jacob! Jacob, don’t you recognize me? It’s Jaina! I know your family! I know you didn’t want to go to Serpentine, you felt like you had to, but Jacob it didn’t help them! They just lost you on top of everything else! JACOB! Can’t you hear me?!”

He never flinches, his eyes are empty, he’s gone. I go along willingly, there’s no sense in struggling, he can easily overpower me. I just hope whatever awaits me doesn’t result in having those empty eyes.

I’m tired and thirsty by the time we arrive but I’m too distracted to care. I’ve never been here before and I’m in awe of it. It’s big and clean and basically everything our camp isn’t. But there’s also a heaviness, I can’t quite place it, but I don’t feel safe here. I see so many Serpents and I’m struck each time I see their empty eyes. How does Serpentine do this to them? I’ve never seen him, Serpentine, I’ve only heard stories. But after seeing the Serpents and their empty eyes, and the men like Jacob who left camp to help his family but never return, I know I don’t want to be here. My stomach is in knots. I’m passed from one empty-

eyed Serpent to the next as we wind deeper and deeper into this palace my people call the Lair. My anxiety increases with each step and just when I think I'll faint, we arrive.

I'm shown into a dimly lit room with a huge, glowing fireplace ablaze with such a flame that I feel the heat on my face even across the distance. I see a man standing in front of the flame, he's wearing a black suit and I don't know how he can tolerate the heat radiating from the fire. He turns and looks at me with piercing silver eyes and I'm terrified although he's made no move to harm me. I'm also confused by how young he looks, my people talk of Serpentine as if he's been around for many decades but this man standing in front of me is young-looking and I'd even say, oddly handsome. His dark hair frames his glowing face and piercing eyes and I'm struck again with conflicting thoughts.

"Jaina. I've been waiting for you."

His voice is unlike anything I've ever heard before. It's deep and on the surface, it sounds like a man's voice, but there's something underneath, like a high-pitched tone. It almost sounds like.... screams.

"W-Wh-Why?"

He smiles, and walks closer, and as he does, I noticed his skin for the first time. From across the room it looked smooth, but as he gets closer, I see flesh colored.... scales? I blink my eyes hard to try to see more clearly. They're still there and he laughs as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Maybe he does.

“You’ve been having dreams. Dreams can be dangerous. They give people ideas. You’re not getting any ideas...are you?” His eyes glint and I sense a threat beneath the question.

“No. Of course not. Dreams are just hallucinations; they don’t mean anything.”

Serpentine nods as if he agrees but I can see his mind is busy and mine is too. Angeline was right. She knew I was behind her at the well even though her eyes were closed, she knew about my dreams even though I never told anyone, she knew the Serpents were coming to get me, she even knew why. If she was right about all of that, then... I strain to remember every “crazy” word she’s ever said. I sense that her crazy talk is my way out of this horrible place and that even more than my own safety hangs in the balance. Everything hangs in the balance. I remember Angeline talking to herself.... she *wasn’t* talking to herself. She said, “Believe in *Him*”.

I look up to see Serpentine watching me, he seems to know that I’ve come to some sort of internal resolution and he looks angry. I steel myself as things become clearer to me. My dreams and all the things Angeline has said over the years are coming back to me in flashes. I lift my head high. I know what I must do.