

# Finding Hope

by Gracyn Johnson



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 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 they were before.

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 to us.

I manage to get a few gulps of tepid water from the bucket and decide to sit down and watch Angeline from a distance. She seems so peaceful, but 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 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, 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 since before my parents disappeared. I wonder why I'm dreaming again. Probably because I talked to Angeline and her crazy words were the last that 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. It's been many years since I've 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. But I do know that I feel overwhelming peace when I see Him.

Later that day, as I'm helping harvest what little produce we can grow in our meager garden, I see Serpents approaching. Women grab young children and disappear inside of their tents. 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 I 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 has 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 I know I don’t want to meet him. I think about the men like Jacob who left camp to help their families but never

returned. 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. 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. Judging by his appearance, this man could not have been, but I *know* this is him. His dark hair frames his glowing face and piercing eyes and I'd even say he's oddly handsome. I'm struck 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 beneath, like a high-pitched tone. It almost sounds like.... screaming?

"W-Wh-Why?"

He smiles and walks closer and, as he does, I notice 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, Jaina?” 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. I’m realizing that much 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 had said over the years are coming back to me in flashes. I lift my head high. I know what I must do.

“You won’t win. I know you’re accustomed to winning. But you won’t win me, you won’t win the rest of the people. And the ones who are currently here, under your spell? I’m going to free them too.” I hold my head high. I feel empowered, strong, emboldened by my realizations.

Serpentine looks stunned at my words, at my brazen outburst. Then, he throws his head back and releases a huge, roaring laugh. It isn't a joyous sound; I sense the screams beneath his voice again, much louder this time and I flinch at the pain I hear in them.

I square my shoulders, determined not to lose to my newfound faith and suddenly everything is black. Serpentine struck me hard across my face and head and I lose consciousness.

I wake up in a cold, dark place with a throbbing head and I'm fighting feelings of hopelessness. I was foolish to think I could face Serpentine alone. Angeline has convinced me to believe, but it's all new to me. My current circumstance shines a bright light on my foolishness and pride. I must humble myself and ask for help. Believing is not enough without actions that show I believe in Him. I take a deep breath and push myself onto my knees. I've seen Angeline talk to God many times; I just didn't realize it at the time. I bow my head in reverence. I take time to gather my thoughts and feel these new emotions. I'm overwhelmed but in the best possible way.

"God. I've never talked to You before, but You've talked to me. You've shown Yourself to me many times; in my dreams and through my friend, Angeline. Today, I'm talking to You and showing myself to You. I need Your help like never before. I'm trapped here, God. I'm scared. But I'm also grateful because it has caused me to finally SEE You, to finally HEAR You. Thank You for Your patience. I'm humbling myself, God. I can't get myself out of this. I tried. I need You. Help me overcome Serpentine. Help me free the men who have become Serpents. Help me free my people from this oppression. Help me lead them to You. I thank You, God for loving me and for hearing my pleas. Amen."

I kneel there a while longer, embracing this new relationship. I think I feel rumbling beneath my knees, but still my eyes are closed. I hear something but I'm too engrossed in the moment to care.

Finally, I open my eyes and prepare to stand when I realize that I'm free. There are no walls surrounding me anymore. It isn't dark. At some point during my prayer, walls have fallen. I instantly raise my hands and look to the heavens and shout, "Thank you!" And then I run. I have to get home, I have so much to do.

All the way home, breathless and panting, I'm thinking of how I'm going to tell them, how I'm going to make them understand. I know I have very little time, but I also know God is on our side and that makes all the difference.

Finally, I arrive and I start shouting for everyone to meet me in front of our camp. They come hesitantly. I understand, we've never had anyone return from the Lair with their soul still in their possession before. I hastily stack some discarded boxes and climb up so everyone can see me. "Please listen! We don't have much time but I know you're confused. I am still myself; I did not give Serpentine my soul. But my strength was not my own, nor was I able to escape on my own. We've all been feeling something; a yearning, a calling. I know you've felt it. We've been restless because we knew something was coming. It's God. GOD! He was calling to us, wanting us to turn to Him, to believe in Him! God saved me in the Lair and He wants to save you too! Angeline is not crazy. She's known God all along and she's loved us through our ignorance. Friends, I'm telling you, this is the only way. God is the only way to life. I'm begging you to kneel as you've seen Angeline kneel, talk to God as you've seen Angeline do.



He's waiting, He wants to hear from you. Tell him your heart, He already knows, but He wants you to tell Him! He wants you to need Him."

I'm in tears now. I'm practically sobbing but as I look around our barren encampment I see looks of hesitation and faces filled with questions. Then I see Angeline slowly make her way to the front. She gives me a knowing smile and gently kneels. She bows her head and raises her hands. We've seen her this way so many times before, but now we know what she's doing and a powerful wave of emotion sweeps through the crowd. One by one the people fall to their knees. I hear praises, and repentance, and cries for help. I fall to my own knees to give thanks for all that He's doing here in the hearts of my people.

Weeping with so many emotions I climb again atop the boxes. "Now that you've felt the love of God, we need to come together and pray for our friends and our family who are still inside of the Lair. I believe they can still be reached and saved! I believe God can put life back in their eyes!"

As I'm crying out to God with the others to save the Serpents, I remember a song from years ago. My Mama used to sing this song, she's been gone for years and I barely have any memory of her, but this song has just pushed its way into my heart and mind. Without stopping to consider if I should, I start singing.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound*

*That saved a wretch like me*

*I once was lost, but now I am found*

*Was blind, but now I see*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear  
And grace my fears relieved  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed  
Through many dangers, toils and snares  
We have already come  
'Twas grace has brought us safe thus far  
And grace will lead us home  
When we've been there ten thousand years  
Bright, shining as the sun  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we first begun  
Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now I am found  
Was blind, but now I see*

As I finish the song, I am astounded to realize the people had been singing with me. They know it too. These people...they are my family. If only...

“Look!” A little boy points behind us and we all turn to see the Serpents, no, OUR PEOPLE, returning to us! Their eyes show so many emotions I wonder how they ever could've been empty. They're home. Grace has led them home.

As I watch the reunions that are happening, I realize, we once were blind, but now we SEE.