

# Hope

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*Writing exercise using “We all hope, it’s what keeps us alive”.*

The outing to the Puzzle Palace had been a great success and on the way back to Norwich the Lincoln Domain delegation were buzzing about it. The biggest question on everyone's lips was, ‘Why? Why had the alien Visitors built it?’

Back at the guest suite Alex enjoyed a shower and changed into civilian clothes. Sitting and reading through the Professor's notes again, he heard a knock at his door. A member of First Minister Gerrold’s staff asked him if he would come with him to meet Gerrold. He took him to a small office at the back of the building where Gerrold was waiting for him. Thanking and dismissing his staff member, he showed Alex to a seat and shut the door.

‘This is a little awkward since I know you are a spy.’

‘A spy? Now wait a moment, I am our First Minister’s security adviser and I admit that I have been asked by my Regent to investigate, as far as is possible, the current political situation here in NorSuff. It hardly makes me a spy.’

‘Very well. Nevertheless, it would be fair to describe you as one who is not entirely what he seems.’

Alex gave this some thought and decided he didn’t mind the description.

‘That I would accept.’

Gerrold sighed, ‘Good. That at least eases my conscience somewhat. Let me tell you about a woman who insisted on talking to me. Ordinarily, I would not engage in conversation with random members of the public, but this one is far from random.’

‘In what way is that then?’

‘Best you find out for yourself. She said that it was imperative that she spoke with a particular member of the visiting delegation from Lincoln. Specifically, one Major Alex James, and she added that you are not entirely what you seem.’

Alex smiled, ‘That could mean anything.’

‘Nevertheless, will you speak with her?’

‘Intriguing. Did she give any indication of what she wants to talk to me about?’

‘She was very mysterious: just said that the future of this Domain and others depended on it.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘In the Regent’s palace, in a visitor’s waiting room. I will take you to her.’

The guest suite was only a short walk from the palace and Gerrold took Alex to a side entrance that led into a corridor with many doors leading off it. A guard stood by one of them and opened it when he saw Gerrold approach.

‘I will leave you with her. Call the guard when you are ready to go.’

Stepping through the door he was immediately reminded of his own Regent’s palace. The room was opulent, with paintings on the walls of people and places clearly executed by talented artists. The carpet was hand-woven with an intricate pattern of geometric shapes. The brocade curtains matched the carpet.

Most striking, however, was the woman sitting in a corner of the room. She had deep red hair, natural, not dyed, with a strong oval face and a thin nose that gave her something of a hawk-like appearance. The eyes were large, green and very penetrating. Alex was momentarily at a loss; he was taken aback by her arresting appearance. Recovering his composure, he said, rather awkwardly, ‘Good day to you, I’m Alex James.’

She stood and took his proffered hand. Keeping hold of it, she led him to a chair near hers.

‘Please come sit near me,’ she said.

Her voice, like her appearance, was also arresting. Strong and resonant. Just those five words were enough for him to want to hear her say more.

His wish was granted. As he sat down she started to speak.

‘People need hope, Major James, we all hope, it’s what keeps us alive. This Regent allows his lords and lordlings to treat their poorest people like slaves. They have empty lives of drudgery and grinding poverty.’

‘My family was poor,’ said Alex. ‘The whole village was poor. We had little to hope for. In my case it was the annual testing. When I was sixteen our Regent’s men came to the village and put the young people through a series of trials and as a result I was chosen to be trained as a Regent’s Guard. I escaped that life into the one I have now.’

‘Your Regent at least recognised the importance of offering some hope, however small. This one offers nothing.’

‘My Regent is a murderous swine, but that’s not relevant. Why are we having this conversation?’

‘Because I need your help. More than that: I need your collaboration.’

‘My collaboration? I’m sorry, who exactly are you?’

‘My name is Rosalind. I am descended through nine generations from the Red Angel.’

‘Are you talking about one of the humans who came to Earth with the alien Visitors? I am only vaguely acquainted with the story.’

‘When the Visitors came to save the small remnant on Earth from the Slavers, they had with them four humans from worlds colonised nearly a thousand years ago. They came to bring greetings and messages of hope. They were called the Angels, an ancient word that means “messengers”. One of them, known to history as the Red Angel, fell in love with an ordinary human and stayed on Earth. She had children and I am descended in a direct line from her.’

‘I would have thought you would be famous and in a position of power.’

‘On the contrary, as you have demonstrated, few people know of my family and it is in constant danger. We live in hiding and I am taking a great risk making myself known to Gerrold.’

‘Then why have you taken this risk?’

‘Because you and I together will bring down the Regents and return hope to the people of the Broken North.’