

# WRITTEN IN WATER

BY

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LEE

It was a still summer night, colored through by darkness. A snow-white star fell out of the sky and into the black field half a mile from the house. Ten minutes later, Jaina had walked from the house, through the fenced garden patch, the creaking gate, toward the place where the star had fallen. Presently, she was standing over a young man, lying tangled in a silver web, on the burned lap of the earth.

"Who are you?" said Jaina. "What's happened to you? Can you talk? Can you tell me?"

The young man, who was very young, about twenty-two or -three, moved his slim young body, turning his face. He was wonderful to look at, so wonderful, Jaina needed to take a deep breath before she spoke to him again.

"I want to help you. Can you say anything?"

He opened a pair of eyes, like two windows opening on sunlight in the dark. His eyes were beautiful, and very golden. He said nothing, not even anything she could not understand. She looked at him, drinking

in, intuitively, his beauty; knowing, also intuitively, that he had nothing to do either with her world, or her time.

“Where did you come from?” she said.

He looked back at her. He seemed to guess, and then to consider. Gravely, gracefully, he lifted one arm from the tangle of the web, and pointed at the sky.

He sat in her kitchen, at her table. She offered him medication, food, alcohol, and caffeine from a tall bronzed coffee pot. He shook his head, slowly. Semantically, some gestures were the same. Yet not the same. Even in the shaking of his head, she perceived he was alien. His hair was the color of the coffee he refused. Coffee, with a few drops of milk in it, and a burnish like satin. His skin was pale. So pale, it too was barely humanly associable. She had an inspiration, and filled a glass with water. The water was pure, filtered through the faucet from the well in the courtyard, without chemicals or additives. Even so, it might poison him. He had not seemed hurt after all, merely stunned, shaken. He had walked to her house quietly, at her side, responding to her swift angular little gestures of beckoning and reception. Now she wanted to give him something.

She placed the glass before him. He looked at it, and took it up in two finely made, strong, articulate hands. They were the hands of a dancer, a musician. They had each only four fingers, one thumb, quite normal. He carried the glass to his mouth. She held her breath, wondering, waiting. He put the glass down carefully, and moved it, as carefully, away from him. He laid his arms across the table and his head upon his arms, and he wept.

Jaina stood staring at him. A single strand of silver, left adhering when he stripped himself of the web, lay across his arm, glittering as his shoulders shook. She listened to him crying, a young man’s sobs, painful, tearing him. She approached him, and muttered: “What is it? What is it?” helplessly.

Of course, it was only grief. She put her hand on his shoulder, anxious, for he might flinch from her touch, or some inimical thing in their separate chemistries might damage both of them. But he did not flinch, and no flame burst out between her palm and the dark, apparently seamless clothing which he wore.

“Don’t cry,” she said. But she did not mean it. His distress afforded her an exquisite agony of empathic pain. She had not felt anything for a very long time. She stroked his hair gently. Perhaps some subtle radiation clung to him, some killer dust from a faraway star. She did not care. “Oh, don’t cry, don’t cry,” she murmured, swimming in his tears.

She drove into the morning town in her ramshackle car, as usual not paying much attention to anything about her. Nor was her program much changed. First, petrol from the self-service station, then a tour of the shops, going in and out of their uninviting façades: a tour of duty. In the large hypermarket at the edge of town, she made her way through the plastic and the cans, vaguely irritated, as always, by the soft mush of music, which came and went on a time switch, regardless of who wanted it, or no longer did. Once, she had seen a rat scuttle over the floor behind the frozen meat section. Jaina had done her best to ignore such evidence of neglect. She had walked out of the shop stiffly.

She had never liked people very much. They had always hurt her or degraded her, always imposed on her in some way. Finally she had retreated into the old house, wanting to be alone, a hermitess. Her ultimate loneliness, deeper than any state she had actually imagined for herself, was almost like a judgment. She was thirty-five and, to herself, resembled a burned-out lamp. The dry leaf-brownness of her skin, the tindery quality of her hair, gave her but further evidence of this consuming. Alone, alone. She had been alone so long. And burned, a charred stick, incapable of moistures, fluidities. And yet, streams and oceans had moved in her, when the young man from outer space had sobbed with his arms on her table.

She supposed, wryly, that the normal human reaction to what had happened would be a desire to contact someone, inform someone of her miraculous find, her 'Encounter.' She only played with this idea, comparing it to her present circumstances. She felt, of course, no onus on her to act in a rational way. Besides, who should she approach with her story, who would be likely to credit her? While she herself had no doubts.

But as she was turning onto the dirt road that led to the house, she became the prey of sudden insecurities. Perhaps the ultimate loneliness had told, she had gone insane, fantasizing the falling star of the parachute, imagining the young man with eyes like golden sovereigns. Or, if it were true.... Possibly, virulent Terran germs, carried by herself, her touch, had already killed him. She pictured, irresistibly, Wells's Martians lying dead and decaying in their great machines, slain by the microbes of Earth.

Last night, when he had grown calm, or only tired, she had led him to her bedroom and shown him her bed. It was a narrow bed, what else, fit only for one. Past lovers had taught her that the single bed was to be hers, in spite of them, forever. But he had lain down there without a word. She had slept in the room below, in a straight-backed chair between the bureau and the TV set

which did not work anymore. Waking at sunrise, with a shamed awareness of a new feeling, which was that of a child on Christmas morning, she had slunk to look at him asleep. And she was reminded of some poem she had read, long, long ago:

*How beautiful you look when sleeping; so beautiful  
It seems that you have gone away....*

She had left him there, afraid to disturb such completion, afraid to stand and feed parasitically on him. She had driven instead into town for extra supplies. She wanted to bring him things; food he might not eat, drink he might not drink. Even music, even books he could not assimilate.

But now—he might be gone, never have existed. Or he might be dead.

She spun the car to a complaining halt in the summer dust. She ran between the tall carboniferous trees, around the fence. Her heart was in her throat, congesting and blinding her.

The whole day lay out over the country in a white-hot film. She turned her head, trying to see through this film, as if underwater. The house looked silent, mummified. Empty. The land was the same, an erased tape. She glanced at the blackened field.

As she stumbled toward the house, her breathing harsh, he came out through the open door.

He carried the spade which she had used to turn the pitiful garden. He had been cleaning the spade, it looked bright and shiny. He leaned it on the porch and walked toward her. As she stared at him, taking oxygen in great gulps, he went by her, and began to lift things out of the car and carry them to the house.

"I thought you were dead," she said stupidly. She stood stupidly, her head stupidly hanging, feeling suddenly very sick and drained.

After a while she too walked slowly into the house. While he continued to fetch the boxes and tins into her kitchen like an errand boy, she sat at the table, where he had sat the night before. It occurred to her she could have brought him fresh clothing from the stores in the town, but it would have embarrassed her slightly to choose things for him, even randomly off the peg in the hypermarket.

His intention had presumably been to work on her garden, some sort of repayment for her haphazard, inadequate hospitality. And for this work he had stripped bare to the waist. She was afraid to look at him. The torso, what was

revealed of it, was also like a dancer's—supple, the musculature developed and flawless. She debated, in a dim terror of herself, if his human maleness extended to all regions of his body.

After a long time, he stopped bringing in the supplies, and took up the spade once more.

“Are you hungry?” she said to him. She showed him one of the cans. As previously, slow and quiet, he shook his head.

Perhaps he did not need to eat. Perhaps he would drink her blood. Her veins filled with fire, and she left the table, and went quickly upstairs. She should tell someone about him. If only she were able to. But she could not.

He was hers.

She lay in the bath, in the cool water, letting her washed wet hair float round her. She was Ophelia. Not swimming; drowning. A slender glass of greenish gin on five rocks of milky ice pulsed in her fingers to the rhythm of her heart.

Below, she heard the spade ring tirelessly on stone. She had struggled with the plot, raising a few beans, tomatoes, potatoes which blackened and a vine which died. But he would make her garden grow. Oh, yes.

She rested her head on the bath's porcelain rim, and laughed, trembling, the tips of her breasts breaking the water like buds.

She visualized a silver bud in the sky, blossoming into a huge and fiery ship. The ship came down on the black field. It had come for him, come to take him home. She held his hand and pleaded, in a language he did not comprehend, and a voice spoke to him out of the ship, in a language which he knew well. She clung to his ankle, and he pulled her through the scorched grass, not noticing her, as he ran toward the blazing port.

Why else had he wept? Somehow and somewhere, out beyond the moon, his inexplicable craft had foundered. Everything was lost to him. His vessel, his home, his world, his kind. Instead there was a bony house, a bony, dried-out hag, food he could not eat. A living death.

Jaina felt anger. She felt anger as she had not felt it for several months, hearing that spade ring on the indomitable rock under the soil. Still alone.

When the clock chimed six times that meant it was one quarter past five, and Jaina came down the stairs of the house. She wore a dress like white tissue, and a marvelous scent out of a crystal bottle. She had seen herself in a mirror, brushing her face with delicate pastel dusts, and her eyes with cinnamon and charcoal.

She stood on the porch, feeling a butterfly lightness. She stretched up her hand to shield her eyes, the gesture of a heroine upon the verandah of a dream. He rested on the spade, watching her.

*See how I am*, she thought. *Please, please, see me, see me.*

She walked off the porch, across the garden. She went straight up to him. The sun in his eyes blinded her. She could not smile at him. She pointed to her breast.

"*Jaina*," she said. "I am *Jaina*." She pointed to him. She did not touch him. "You?"

She had seen it done so frequently. In films. She had read it in books. Now he himself would smile slightly, uneasily touch his own chest and say, in some foreign otherworld tongue: *I am*....

But he did not. He gazed at her, and once more he slowly shook his head. Suddenly, all the glorious pity and complementary grief she had felt through him before flooded back, overwhelming her. Could it be he did not know, could not remember, who he was? His name, his race, his planet? He had fallen out of the stars. He was amnesiac. Truly defenseless, then. Truly hers.

"Don't work any more," she said. She took the spade from his hand, and let it drop on the upturned soil.

Again, she led him back to the house, still not touching him.

In the kitchen, she said to him, "You must try and tell me what food you need to eat. You really must."

He continued to watch her, if he actually saw her at all. She imagined him biting off her arm, and shivered. Perhaps he did not eat—she had considered that before. Not eat, not sleep—the illusion of sleep only a suspended state, induced to please her, or pacify her. She did not think he had used the bathroom. He did not seem to sweat. How odd he should have been able to shed tears.

She dismissed the idea of eating for herself, too. She poured herself another deep swamp of ice and gin. She sat on the porch and he sat beside her.

His eyes looked out across the country. Looking for escape? She could smell the strange sweatless, poreless, yet indefinably masculine scent of him. His extraordinary skin had taken on a water-color glaze of sunburn.

The day flickered along the varied tops of the reddening horizon. Birds swirled over like a flight of miniature planes. When the first star appeared, she knew she would catch her breath in fear.

The valves of the sky loosened and blueness poured into it. The sun had gone. He could not understand her, so she said to him: "I love you."

"I love you," she said. "I'm the last woman on Earth, and you're not even local talent. And I love you. I'm lonely," she said. And, unlike him, she cried quietly.

After a while, just as she would have wished him to if this had been a film, and she directing it, he put his arm about her, gently, gently. She lay against him and he stroked her hair. She thought, with a strange ghostly sorrow: *He has learned such gestures from me.*

Of course, she did not love him, and of course she did. She was the last survivor, and he was also a survivor. Inevitably they must come together, find each other, love. She wished she was younger. She began to feel younger as his arm supported her, and his articulate fingers silked through and through her hair. In a low voice, although he could not understand, she began to tell him about the plague. How it had come, a whisper, the fall of a leaf far away. How it had swept over the world, its continents, its cities, like a sea. A sea of leaves, burning. A fire. They had not called it plague. The official name for it had been 'Pandemic.' At first, the radios had chattered with it, the glowing pools of the TVs had crackled with it. She had seen hospitals packed like great antiseptic trays with racks of the dying. She had heard how silence came. At length, more than silence came. They burned the dead, or cremated them with burning chemicals. They evacuated the towns. Then 'they' too ceased to organize anything. It was a selective disease. It killed men and women and children. It could not destroy the animals, the insects, the birds. Or Jaina.

At first, the first falling of the leaf, she had not believed. It was hard to believe that such an unstoppable engine had been started. The radio and the television set spoke of decaying cylinders in the sea, or satellites which corroded, letting go their cargoes of viruses, mistimed, on the earth. Governments denied responsibility, and died denying it.

Jaina heard the tread of death draw near, and nearer. From disbelief, she came to fear. She stocked her hermitage, as she had always done, and crouched in new terror behind her door. As the radio turned dumb, and the TV spluttered and choked to blindness, Jaina stared from her porch, looking for a huge black shadow to descend across the land.

They burned a pile of the dead on a giant bonfire in the field, half a mile from the house. The ashes blew across the sunset. The sky was burning its dead, too.

A day later, Jaina found little fiery mottles over her skin. Her head throbbed, just as the walls were doing. She lay down with her terror, afraid to die. Then she did not care if she died. She wanted to die. Then she did not die at all.

A month later, she drove into the town. She found the emptiness of the evacuation and, two miles away, the marks of another enormous bonfire. And a mile beyond that, dead people lying out in the sun, turning to pillars of salt and white sticks of candy, and the fearless birds, immune, dropping like black rain on the place.

Jaina drove home, and became the last woman on earth.

Her life was not so very different, she had been quite solitary for many years before the plague came.

She had sometimes mused as to why she had lived, but only in the silly, falsely modest way of any survivor. Everyone knew they could not die, hang the rest, they alone must come through. They had all been wrong, all but Jaina.

And then, one night, a snow-white star, the silver web of the alien parachute, a young man more beautiful than truth.

She told him everything as she lay against his shoulder. He might still be capable of dying, a Martian, susceptible to the plague virus. Or he might go away.

It was dark now. She lifted her mouth to his in the darkness. As she kissed him, she was unsure what he would do. He did not seem to react in any way. Would he make love to her, or want to, or was he able to? She slid her hands over his skin, like warm smooth stone. She loved him. But perhaps he was only a robot.

After a little while, she drew away, and left him seated on the porch. She went into the kitchen and threw the melted ice in her glass into the sink.

She climbed the stairs; she lay down on the narrow bed. Alone. Alone. But somehow even then, she sensed the irony was incomplete. And when he came into the room, she was not surprised. He leaned over her, silently, and his eyes shone in the darkness, like the eyes of a cat. She attempted to be afraid of him.

“Go away,” she said.

But he stretched out beside her, very near, the bed so narrow.... As if he had learned now the etiquette of human love-making, reading its symbols from her mind.

“You’re a robot, an android,” she said. “Leave me alone.”

He put his mouth over hers. She closed her eyes and saw a star, a nova. He was not a robot, he was a man, a beautiful man, and she loved him....

Twenty million miles away, the clock chimed eight times. It was one quarter past seven, on the first night of the world.

In the morning, she baked bread, and brought him some, still warm. He held the bread cupped in his hands like a paralyzed bird. She pointed to herself. "Please. Call me by my name. *Jaina*."

She was sure she could make him grasp the meaning. She knew he had a voice. She had heard his tears, and, during their love-making, heard him groan. She would teach him to eat and drink, too. She would teach him everything.

He tilled the garden; he had found seedlings in the leaning shed and was planting them, until she came to him and led him to the ramshackle car. She drove him into town, then took him into clothing stores, directing him, diffidently. In accordance with her instructions, he loaded the car. She had never seen him smile. She pondered if she ever would. He carried piled jeans with the same eternally dispassionate disinterest: still the errand boy.

During the afternoon she watched him in the garden. Her pulses raced, and she could think of nothing else but the play of muscles under his swiftly and mellifluously tanning skin. He hypnotized her. She fell asleep and dreamed of him.

She roused at a sound of light blows on metal. Alarmed, she walked out into the last gasps of the day, to find him behind the courtyard, hammering dents out of the battered car. She perceived he had changed a tire she had not bothered with, though it was worn. She relaxed against the wall, brooding on him. He was going to be almost ludicrously useful. For some reason, the archaic word *helpmeet* stole into her mind.

Over it all hung the smoke of premonition. He would be going away. Stranded, marooned, shipwrecked, the great liner would move out of the firmament, cruel as God, to rescue him.

She woke somewhere in the center of the night, her lips against his spine, with a dreadful knowledge.

For a long while she lay immobile, then lifted herself onto one elbow. She stayed that way, looking at him, his feigned sleep, or the real unconsciousness which appeared to have claimed him. *It seems that you have gone away*. No. He would not be going anywhere.

His hair gleamed, his lashes lay in long brush strokes on his cheeks. He was quiescent, limpid, as if poured from a jar. She touched his flank, coldly.

After a minute, she rose and went to the window, and looked out and upward into the vault of the night sky. A low blaring of hatred and contempt ran through her. *Where are you?* she thought. *Do you see? Are you laughing?*

She walked down the stairs and into the room where the dead TV sat in the dark. She opened a drawer in the bureau and took out a revolver. She loaded it carefully from the clip. She held it pointed before her as she went back up into the bedroom.

He did not wake up—or whatever simulation he contrived that passed for waking—until the hour before the dawn. She had sat there all the time, waiting for him, wanting him to open his eyes and see her seated facing him, her hand resting on her knee, the revolver in her hand. Pointing now at him.

There was a chance he might not know what the gun was. Yet weapons, like certain semantic signs, would surely be instantly, instinctively recognizable. So she thought. As his eyes opened and fixed on the gun, she believed he knew perfectly well what it was, and that she had brought it there to kill him with.

His eyes grew very wide, but he did not move. He did not appear afraid, yet she considered he must be afraid. As afraid of her as she might have been expected to be of him, and yet had never been: the natural fear of an alien, xenophobia. She thought he could, after all, understand her words, had understood her from the beginning, her language, her loneliness. It would have been part of his instruction. Along with the lessons which had taught him how to work the land, change a tire, make love, pretend to sleep.... About the same time, they must have inoculated him against the deadly plague virus, indeed all the viruses of Earth.

“Yes,” she said. “I am going to kill you.”

He only looked at her. She remembered how he had wept, out of dread of her, loathing and despair. Because he had known there would be no rescue for him. Neither rescue from her planet nor from herself. He had not fallen from a burning spacecraft into the world. The craft had been whole, and he had been dropped neatly out of it, at a designated hour, at a calculated altitude, his parachute unfolding, a preprogrammed cloud. Not shipwrecked, but dispatched. Air mail. A present.

The great silent ship would not come seeking him. It had already come, and gone.

Why did they care so much? She could not fathom that. An interfering streak—was this the prerogative of gods? Altruistic benefactors, or simply playing with toys. Or it might be an experiment of some sort. They had not been able to prevent the plague, or had not wanted to—recall the Flood, Gomorrah—but when the plague had drawn away down its tidal drain, washing humanity with it, they had looked and seen Jaina wandering alone on the earth, mistress of it, the last of her kind. So they had made for her a helpmate and companion.

Presumably not made him in *their* extraterrestrial image, whoever, whatever they omnipotently were, but in the image of a man.

She was uncertain what had triggered her final deduction. His acquiescence, the unlikely aptness of it all, the foolish coincidence of survivor flung down beside survivor, pat. Or was it the theatricality which had itself suggested puppet masters to her subconscious: the last man and the last woman left to propagate continuance of a species. Or was it only her mistrust? All the wrongs she had, or imagined she had suffered, clamoring that this was no different from any other time. Someone still manipulated, still *imposed* on her.

“Well,” she said softly, looking at him, it appeared to her, through the eye of the gun, “I seem to be missing a rib. Do I call you Adam? Or would it be *Eve*?” She clicked off the safety catch. She trembled violently, though her voice was steady. “What about contraception, Adameve? Did they think I’d never heard of it, or used it? Did they think I’d risk having babies, with no hospitals, not even a vet in sight? At thirty-five years of age? When I dressed up for you, I dressed thoroughly, *all* of me. Just in case. Seems I was wise. I don’t think even your specially designed seed is so potent it can negate my precautions. In the tank where they grew you, or the machine shop where they built you, did they think of *that*? I don’t want you,” she whispered. “You cried like a child because they condemned you to live on my world, with me. Do you think I can forgive you that? Do you think I want you after that, now I *know*?”

She raised the gun and fired. She watched the sun go out in the windows of his eyes. His blood was red, quite normal.

Jaina walked across the burn scar of the field. She pictured a huge wheel hanging over her, beyond and above the sky, pictured it no longer watching, already drawing inexorably away and away. She dragged the spade along the ground, as she had dragged his body. Now the spade had turned potatoes, and beans; and alien flesh.

She stood in the kitchen of the old house, and the darkness like space came and colored the sky through. Jaina held her breath, held it and held it, as if the air had filled with water, closing over her head. For she knew. Long before it happened, she knew. She only let out her breath in a slow sigh, horribly flattered, as the second snow-white star fell out of the summer night.