

MICHELLE WEST

— SHORT STORY —

The Law  
*of Man*

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# THE LAW OF MAN

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## INTRODUCTION

This was one of the few short stories that started life without an anthology or an editor to give it a home—and when I say started, I mean that; I hadn't finished it. Time to write was still a desperately prized thing, given small child, and I had novel deadlines. I had started it, set it aside, and when I was asked for a story for *Elf Fantastic*, I brought it out again.

I had meant it to be something other than it ended up being, because I was thinking — at the time — about the coming of new religions into an older world. But stories grow and change; they have an organic sense of life that one denies — or at least that I deny — at some peril to the story itself.

Without a specific editorial request, I really hadn't considered market, or how to market, or where to send it, either. One of the things that the anthology invitations gave me was a clear home for the stories, a mandate to write them that *also* didn't make me feel like garbage because I wasn't using scant writing time on the novels for which I had contracts.



## THE LAW OF MAN

**I**t is twilight; the light of day is fading and the night's fall is imminent. With the passing of the day, many things change; the shadows hide much from eyes that are not meant for the dark. Mortal eyes.

But our eyes see well the nuance and the subtlety.

There are circles beneath my feet, ill-travelled these many years, but there nonetheless for those with eyes to see them. In such circles, we once gathered our mortals, and took with them an evening's pleasure, be they unwary enough to heed the strains of our music. In such a circle, we will gather again; my kin are waiting my return. But these circles, these circles we will not dance in again while I live.

And I will live, I fear, forever.

It is cool; the coming evening will rim the forest trees in frost, will curl the fallen leaves with a white, hoary edge that will sharpen and make crisp their tiny deaths.

Leaves, like mortals, die so quickly.

And what is death to one of our kind?

In the dawn of our time we gathered our mortals with impunity undreamed of now. Where in the spring and high

summer we danced in glades such as these, we walk now in winter, for in winter, there are few indeed of the priests whose travels have almost destroyed these lands.

Ah. Archeraon calls me. He is cruel. I believe that he chose these circles because he, as I, remember what started within them. Her story.

He knows it, and he does not know it, and he hopes to catch it, pull it from me in the wilds of the dance itself. I will tell it, I think, but not for Archeraon. Never for he. I call out to him. I tell him to wait; merely to wait; I have set my snares, and when a human trips them, I will draw him in and then we may begin.

Yet the circles have done Archeraon's work.

The story is upon me, and I must tell it, or the memories that are too sharp and too clear will cut me enough that he'll see the pain. I would not expose that pain to him to save the eternity before me.

Let me begin this story within these circles, before the ghosts of old dances, ancient offerings, making of the words that tell it a tighter binding than I have yet known; speaking the truth, finally, because in our lands truth is something that no one expects, and to speak it is to make of it a lie.

And if it is a lie, perhaps the telling will ease me, and I might be free to turn once again to the pleasures of a court that ruled the world in dawn and rules it still in twilight.



INNOCENCE HAS ALWAYS FASCINATED our people, because it has been so long since we have known that state, we have forgotten the knowledge of it. Human children, especially the very young, are a source of amusement that the most jaded of us — even the Queen herself — have never been

proof against. They know nothing; they are easily twisted; they are easily lied to, if the will is strong and the heart is steady.

Mortality has a feel and a texture that is unique. In the beasts of the forests and the birds of the air, there is a taint that speaks of growth, of age, of *change*. We surround ourselves, always, with them; they are beautiful to us, more so than mortals will ever understand.

It is change that fascinates us; change, decay, the impulse towards death that every life knows. It is as if knowledge, once gleaned, cannot be contained by mortal frailty; it erodes the spirit and the body until they are at last severed.

We study this erosion with fascination, as I have said — but much less so now that the Law of Man has come to the lands of mortals. For the mortals are not without will, not without fire; death does not prevent them from attaining a greatness that echoes throughout the lives of their descendants. They have dreamed their bloody dreams, and out of the sleep that we do not — can never — know, they have fashioned their law. They call this law God, and they worship it with the full force of their brief and petty lives; they burn for it, kill for it, die for it — just as they do for gold and jewels, magic and beauty.

We take no law but Hers; we obey no force but She. But we know that this Law of Man is a force made real, and made potent.

Where once we walked without caution, we must now display a cunning that we reserved for the games of the Court. Where once we walked in splendour, in raiment dazzling to the mortal eye — where once we chose to wear a glamor bright and bold and so beautiful the remainder of their lives would seem tawdry and dull by comparison — we

must walk in secrecy, or in the isolated places the law of man has not yet touched.

It is harder to catch mortals; they must stumble into our wild hunts, our places of secrecy, the dells at the night hour of the moon dance. We catch them by a whisper of midnight wind, a hint of the perfume of flowers so fragrant they have never graced a mortal forest, a glimpse of light that glitters more brightly than anything but the sun, but more delicately, more darkly.

And we ensnare by the song of the dance, by a music so wild no words will ever contain it or force it too, even the law of the Queen herself.

And this is a story begun by such a dance, and the life that it brought us when the circle was, at last, broken.

#

An infant, taken almost direct from its mother's womb, is a creature beyond price — or beyond any price that would fit such a short and meagre telling as this. We have our songs and our lays to remind us of the value and the lure of a babe; whole courts have fallen when the siren cry of a child's hunger has proven too much of a temptation to the listeners. The songs would take years to sing, for our songs are our history, and reflect much.

Even this will become part of it, but it will not be told as I will tell it now while I have this short space of private time before the dance.

Suffice it to say that, at the time of evereve in the the slender crescent of the pale moon, such a creature was brought over human field and enclosure, to me. It was a work of daring, and a work of fear; no one of our kin was responsible for the gift.

No, it was an old mortal woman, with a servant's worn clothing and bent back, who came to the circle in which we

dance. She sat in its centre for but a human hour, holding to her chest a bundle that her arms — and her heart — found heavy. She was lovely to behold, and we stopped our preparations for the dance itself to watch in her in the thin light.

Her skin was pale and spotted, and hung over her bones like a fine, heavy silk, with folds and creases that spoke of a texture uniquely human. The harper began to tease her shadows into the weave of the circle's ground to hold her there while we watched. But her ears were keen and she heard his notes and his whispered song.

"Aye," she said, gazing into the darkness, "I know you're there. And I've come with a boon to ask, and I'll pay the price of its asking." Her voice was a creak and a rustle, like dry leaves to a tree making ready for winter.

It was I who answered her as she stood at the circle's heart. "We cannot decide the price before we hear the boon you would have us grant. Tell us, mortal."

She looked up, and up again, for we are a tall people, and I among the tallest of our number. Her eyes teared; a trail of liquid glinted along the folds and creases around her dark irises.

*She has seen us before*, I thought, for there is a look of recognition across a human face that is unmistakable; wonder, awe, and a curious sense of relief. There are always tears.

"This is the boon I crave of you." She held the bundle high, and then unwrapped it carefully. There, at the centre of the rough cloth, a child slept. It was frail, tiny, and silent. "There's a new law taking the land, and there are new men and a god of a type that has never entered our villages before.

"They've words and a magic like iron — cold and hard, for all that they speak of their lord's love — and they've

come to take our children into the waters of their baptism, and steal their souls.”

I nodded gravely. “It is the Law of Man,” I whispered to my brethren. “It has come to reach out to us, even here.” I stepped forward, hands outstretched, and she bundled the babe away from my sight. Almost, I reacted with anger, but not quite; even if she showed insolence, she had brought the rarest and most precious of gifts into my presence. I was willing to let her speak. “Your boon?”

“I’m a child of the old ways,” the woman said roughly. “And my daughter, the child’s mother, was as well, before this night.” Her tears fell again, but they were all of anger; the wonder was lost. “But she’s dead, and gone to what we were promised. I remain, and this, her only daughter.” She held the child high. “I would have this child kept from the new god and his soldiers. Raise her in the old ways — or even in your own — for our mark is on her, and when she dies, she’ll come to us.” She wiped the tears from her eyes with a dirty, sweaty hand. “She’ll come to us, and we’ll have peace then.”

“It is a rare task that you ask of us.”

“Yes,” the old woman whispered. “It is. In the old days we would have warded and guarded her against you. She might see you — as I have seen you — in the morn of her womanhood, but no more than a glimpse.

“Now, we would give you to her; you’re part of the old ways, and no matter what her life will be with you, and no matter how you shape it, her spirit will still come to us, mother and grandmother.” She started her tears again, and they fell almost hypnotically. “A mother takes care of her children in this world or the next. A mother does all that she can to protect ‘em.”

“I see.” I looked down at her, standing beside the harper.

I lifted one hand very slowly, and he began to play. Breeze lifted the hem of my robes and sent them, like shadow, scuttling over the tops of the grass. "Then I will ask of you only this price: Dance with us."

She lifted her head and met my eyes, and I saw that she knew what the end of the dance would be. We had her, anyway; the strains of the harp had already touched her aged blood with the wildness. But she did not deny it, or even make the attempt. Human dignity is, in itself, a thing of grave beauty. It does not always last, of course — but sometimes it outlives the life that clings to it, and when it does, it is a rare gift indeed — a thing of beauty. Human dignity does not come at the expense of fear, after all; the fear lies beneath it, held at bay like the dogs of the wild hunt. And it is always a curiosity to us, a part of a larger game, to see whether the fear will win out, ere the end.

"I'm old," she said, as she rose stiffly, "and I'll dance very slowly and very poorly."

"You will be a thing of beauty," the harpist replied, before I could. "I am Kallaran, and I would be honoured if you would partner me."

The old woman curtsied, a clumsy, artless motion that was made beautiful by its lack of artifice. Then she bent her wizened face over the bundle she held, and brushed her lips across the infant's forehead.

I held out my arms, and she placed her granddaughter in them. Almost, she spoke — but the music started and carried her words away; it carried all words away.

For the first time in millennia, I did not join the circle. Instead, I held the small child, and fashioned for her a song of sleep. I built it strong, and made of it a quiet place, for she was too young to join in the dance, but mortal enough to be affected by it should she hear the strains of its calling.



AFTER THE DANCE, I saw to the old woman's body. It lay as if in slumber, artfully arranged, but death had visited her, and left us with the shell. One or two of my kin were already watching her; if left there, they would stay to see time's march across features that no longer lived in the days and weeks to follow.

But she had brought me the babe, and I was conscious of some small debt to her. I ordered her buried in the manner of her people, although it grieved Archeraon much to see it done, and then I left the circle for the season, carrying the child close and binding it to me with my inner vision.

"The child is mine," I told the Court. As I said, it is rare indeed that one so young and so unformed comes to us — and over such a temptation have wars been fought, although they are not the wars of human kin and nature.

"If you can keep the child, it is indeed yours," Archeraon said, for he was still angry at the loss of the body to the earth and the worms of the upper soil. "But there is much in our lands to entrance one merely human, and we will deny her none of that should she express an interest and a will to follow it. Of course," he added, as he bowed so deliberately and lowly, "what of interest could attract her when she has the attention and the gifts of one of the greatest of our number?"

Oh, he was clever; he was always clever. Were we to be ruled by a King, in the mortal fashion, and not a Queen, it would be Archeraon for eternity, and we his handmaidens and courtiers.

"What indeed?" I said, for he had left me little room in which to say anything else.

“Then we abide by the mortal gifting,” he replied, and he maintained his bow. In time, I rose, and he with me. But it was in my arms that the child left the clearing and began its life in our lands, and he did not forget.

Nor did I; our memories are longer than our lives, and it is said that our lives are without end.

The blush of infancy had left her before we returned to our lands. Time’s passing, in these lands, was at its swiftest, and I made haste to repair to the court of the Queen. Mortality could not, of course, be removed from the mortal; what was born, died. It was the law of the living. Even so, in the court of the Queen such passage of time might be slowed, even as the rivers were that passed through the Queen’s demesne; for if the law of the living prevailed, so too did the law of the Queen.

Did we tarry? I believe so, now. Because she grew so wondrously quickly, and we were each of us afraid of missing the moment in which her wrinkled flesh became smooth and soft and perfect; of missing the first tooth, the changing colour of her baby eyes, the ability to sit, to grip. It passed so quickly we had to bear witness, for few enough of our number had seen a babe grow, and few would; we could not waste the opportunity.

The child was unnamed; the naming of a mortal held power, and I wished that binding performed in the court, not in these lands in which life ebbed so quickly. But named or no, she grew; before we had reached the true road, she learned to speak our tongue because our tongue was the only tongue which had touched her ears. Her voice was a strange lilt, a squeaking song, a tortured attempt at speech; the world was new, to her, and as we gathered to watch, as we made of her a window through which the world might

yet be viewed, it became new to us as well. Dangerous. Beautiful.

She listened to the voices of the animals that we rode, speaking as we spoke. But more than the voice binds our creatures to us, and try as she might, she could not understand the words they framed in reply - which is just as well, for they were words of warning, a caution meant to spoil my child by adding to her life a darkness and fear of captivity.

For she was, of course, a captive; it was mine, all of her too-short life, and I had laid my wards around her and upon her that others of my kind might understand that my claim was made and my wrath invoked by he who would dare to taint it. I would have struck the animals dumb, but Archeraon would not allow it; in the matter of the child, there would never be peace between us.



THE LAW of Man was a swift and ugly blossom, but it did not flower and die; it grew roots so long and deep they were like the glittering mines — cold and hard and dark. We did not fight it well, for it grew, it seemed, in a season, and by the time we were prepared, so too were the men who built it.

It was Nimradel who came to the Court to tell us of the bells; Nimradel who dared to whisper about the song of man in the Court of the Queen. He came to her, wind-touched and haste-spiced, his raiment a sorry spill of fabric without so much as a spoken glamor to smooth it into perfection.

“What is this?” She said, for she took poorly to the interruption.

He was brave enough, and foolish in his way, but he was no mortal, to be punished and humiliated for daring her

wrath; none of the court dared her wrath without reason, especially not so cunning a one as Nimradel. He fell to his knees before her, and he spoke his words to the ground without once lifting his face.

Had we not been able to hear, we would have known the word was bad indeed.

“The Law of Man,” he said softly, “has taken the Brighten grove. The trees have been felled and taken to burn; their leaves are scattered across the land.”

The Brighten grove was the Queen’s grove. Built into the hillocks and the glittering, cold stream were passages between her court and the dying lands. The living lands.

“The road?” She said, in command.

“We could not close the ways,” Nimradel replied. “Mor-denel fell in the attempt.” His voice was as harsh as any mortal’s that had graced the Queen’s court. “They are building, there, in the land beside the river. The Law of Man. And in the tower that rides the shoulders of their ugly dwelling, there is a bell.”

“A bell?”

“It peals,” he said softly, “with the voice of iron, cold and hard; it takes no glamor, and accepts no silence. The music that comes from that bell would break the dance itself.” He shuddered. “We cannot see this new castle that they have built; not clearly. The bells protect it; we cannot approach.

“The beasts that we ensnare fly only as far as the edifice itself; the bell frees them. They do not return to us word of what they’ve seen.”

“But *nothing* can break the dance.”

All eyes turned then, even Hers, as my child spoke. Out of turn, out of place, her words far sweeter to my ears than Nimradel’s, she stepped onto the green, and the flowers there parted, shying away from the weight of the ball of her

heel. She had learned much from us of grace and movement, but she was still mortal, and would remain so; she walked with weight, whether she willed it or no, and when her thoughts ‘wandered’, she was not careful.

She was not cautious, my child.

“Anna,” The Queen said, enchanted, I think, in spite of her inclination. “If Nimradel believes that these ... bells ... can break the dance, he believes so with reason. Mordenel fell, and he rode with the host.”

A reminder, to Anna, that she never would. She was younger than any of us had ever been, younger than we knew how to be. Younger, I think, than most of us could even comprehend. But I who watched her knew.

I touched her shoulder, quickly, and pulled her back to me; I did not trust her exposed before my kin. She came, but not gladly. The Queen was her law, and the rule that governed her life, and although she knew herself for a mortal, she felt little enough for their passing or their deaths when she happened upon them; she was *ours*, of us, in a way that those who came late in their lives could not be. And yet.

I should have known, then.

But although I cautioned her to silence, she was willful, astonishingly willful, beautiful in her unbroken pride. “The touch of iron does not touch me.”

“No, little Anna, it does not,” Archeraon said; her voice had stolen mine for a moment, but he was ever watchful.

“And these bells — how would they hurt me if I heard their song?”

“They would not.”

“The bells would not,” I said, perhaps a little too sharply, “but the men most certainly would. Think, child. Iron affects us, yes — but if that iron were made into a sword, it

would affect you no differently. You would perish, as your mother did, at the hands of these Men of God.”

“I know the hidden ways,” she replied, defiant, eager as ever to help. “I would not need to come within the reach of their swords. The bells, I might see at a distance; I could tell you of them.”

Archeraon said softly, “you are brave, to offer us such a gift.” He understood her well.

But the Queen understood, as well. Turning, to me, Archeraon and Nimradel forgotten, she said, “Will your bindings hold her?”

And I lied. I lied, not knowing how to tell her the truth. “Yes,” I said.

She had no reason to distrust my word — for who among us would eagerly risk the mortal that Anna was?

“Anna,” she said, “If you would do this in Our name, and in Our service, we would be grateful.”



BUT PERHAPS IT WAS NOT SO MUCH A LIE AS THAT.

Not all bindings are magical in nature, although few of my kin remember that singular truth, if we ever knew it at all. It is a mortal truth, and Anna was a mortal child, for all that she lived in the court, the hidden court, with no mortal parent to teach her the weaknesses that plague her kind. She knew me as her mother, as her only parent; I placed no binding on her but my presence in the spate of her dwindling years; I laid no spells upon her but those that might keep her within our lands, for otherwise she would age and pass more quickly than I — than any of us — desired.

She could not speak of love, of course; there was no word for it in the Court if it were not the name of the Queen,

and her name we did not speak, not even I. But she was, like all mortal creatures, a thing of flesh and substance. More than once I woke to the feel of her arms around my neck, to the breeze of her breath, the sighing passage of air between half-opened lips. More than once she would seat herself at my feet and ask, plaintively, if I would not brush and bind her hair in the fashion of our kin. Her hair was not our hair — it was too thick and too prone to damage — but more often than not I would accede, and we would sit thus, whiling away the hours.

She did not understand that she was beautiful to us. But she understood how important she was to me. I knew she would not leave me.

And was that not, after all, what the Queen asked?

And yet.

#

“Why are you so angry at me?”

“I am not,” I told Anna, “angry.”

“I thought you’d be happy with me. Or at least proud. Isn’t it time I proved myself to the Queen and the Court?” She shrugged herself into her common dress, a thing of rough, stiff linen. She looked and she sounded so mortal the court of the Queen might never have touched her at all; the fey peace was gone from her face.

“You sound so ... human,” I said, and I recall my voice perfectly.

Because she did sound human, suddenly. Her cheeks adopted that shade of purple red that was both fascinating and ugly. She looked down at her feet, her jaws compressing the lower line of her face.

“You all do it,” she said, accusation in her tone.

“We all do what?” I turned from her, to the forest, to the

dark shadows that were the daylight haunt of the Queen's court between seasons.

"You all prove yourself to *her*." She could be so sullen when she chose it.

"We do not prove ourselves to her for any reason other than our survival."

"You're lying."

"Perhaps. Truth shifts so much between decades, a lie serves just as well with the passage of time."

"I never do anything right in your eyes, do I?"

Had there been the slightest contrition in her words, I might have answered differently; there was only anger's edge. "You do as you please, Anna."

"You *are* angry."

"Anna, I am of the court. I do not feel pride in the sense that you mean the word. I have pride, yes — but you want me to feel pride *in* you — and that, that is not the way of my kind. You are Anna. If you are proud, that is a matter of yourself.

"What you want from me — this pride *in*, these feelings *for* — I cannot give you. Not a single one of us can."

"Archeraon can."

She said it to wound; that was her way, in anger. She was of us, and she could never be of us; she did not understand that her words took no root, found no purchase. "And if you choose to believe him, you will prove yourself, ultimately, human."

She flushed, darkening to the shade of red that I had grown to dislike. "Why do you say things like that? Why don't you ever just tell me the truth?"

"Anna, child, the one thing that I have never done to you is lie." And that was true, but she heard truth so rarely she

could not separate it from her desire. “If you wish to play games with Archeraon, you may.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

“No.”

She stormed around the room like an angry girl. Which, raised by me or no, she was. At last, she said, “Don’t you care at all?”

*Of course, I thought. You were given to me. Your life has been mine since the moment the old woman’s responsibility ended. If I choose to shelter you, or to indulge you, or to hunt you when it is the season, all of these are my right by the Queen’s law. Archeraon seeks to steal something, from me, from one of his kin. He has sought you, and your life, since the day that I answered the old woman’s call before the spring circles. And I grow weary of his games.*

*He will pay.*

But I did not speak. We had had this argument before, and no words were the right words in which to cloak it. She did not, she *would not* understand.

“Come,” I told her. “You made your offer, and the Queen accepted it. You will give her what she desires.”



ARCHERAON WAS THERE to greet us. I half-expected it, but although I snared my path with magical traps, they none of them caught his scent. And why would they? He rode, and no part of his shadow touched ground; he left not even that hint of his presence to warn me.

He played his game, and he played it well.

“Archeraon,” I said, before he could speak. “You would do well to remember whose quest this is, and at whose request it was undertaken.”

“Ah, but I do remember. I have come to offer safe passage across the ford to the lovely Anna, the hope for our salvation.” His smile was sharp as dagger’s edge.

“Archeraon, if this is a game —”

“It is, of course,” he said, bowing slightly upon the back of his light footed mount, “but inelegantly timed. The cursed bells of the Law of Man have eroded some part of our Lady’s enchantments; the ford, held back from its natural course these many years is attempting to right itself in a moment or a day. You, of course, will have no difficulty forging your path; it is only water, after all.” He turned to Anna, to my child. “I know that, given time, you would have no difficulty crossing either, little Anna. But we do not have time. Will you accept my offer and ride with me?”

She turned to look at me, and then took his hand in silence; I do not think a word could have escaped the tight press of her lips. He lifted her, effortless; she seemed a small thing as her feet left ground, fragile for all that she was of heavier build than any of my kin.

They rode into the roaring water then.

And the water swept them away.

I heard Archeraon’s cry, and to this day I do not know if it was genuine. And if I knew, if I knew for certain that it was not, Archeraon would be a stone in the standing ring — and aware for every immortal minute, trapped there, of all that he might never know again: the glory of the sun’s rise and fall, the growth and the death of seasons, the music of the dance.

And does it matter?

She was swept away that day, still cloaked in her youthful anger. Away from the grip of Archeraon and into the land of man.



I KNEW it before he returned to me bearing the signs of the water's anger, the river's welter glistening off the tangled length of his hair, his clothing rent and damaged, and his mount, in which he placed a particular pride, nowhere to be seen.

He could have smoothed away the water's damage, spoken a word or two to conceal it beneath an artful seeming; he chose not to, and indeed, chose wisely. To display weakness before our kin was almost never done — and when it was done, it was done after the risks had been weighed and measured.

He came to me, almost humble, and because of it I stayed my hand.

"It is not to me you will have to answer," I told him, as the water rolled up the bank, lapping at the enchanted ground as if it were a beach.

"I know it. Is Anna dead?"

He thought as the Queen thought, that the ties between the child and I were formalized by magic and ritual. "Who can say?" I answered quietly. "The Queen's own magic was no proof against the Law of Man, or the river would never have returned to its natural course. I do not feel her, if that is what you ask — but if you ask me what I believe, then no, I do not think her dead."

He straightened as I spoke. "Then if she is not dead, I believe that she will return to us of her own accord. We are," he added, his gaze veiled, "all that she has ever known."

"Of course." I turned to him then; I forced myself to lay hand upon his shoulder. "Her mother would have run to us as well."

And to that, there was little enough he could say.



THE TOLLING of the bell was an evil that could not be tolerated save at this, our twilight hour. The Queen took no council and kept none save her own, but among ourselves, the matter of man's encroachment was keenly discussed. I think, now, that we were watching the sun set without understanding the glory and the beauty of what we saw; there will be no others.

"Let us," Nimradel said, for Mordenel's loss rode him hard, "call the hunt. The wild ways are not yet dead, not here; the ground remembers the passage of the hunter."

He was not the only man to speak thus. For he spoke a measure of truth; the ground did indeed still bear the marks of the hunt's last passage.

"The Law of Man is strong," I replied, "for all that it is newly proclaimed. Call the hunt, and the priests will come, with their chants and their iron and their god."

"And would you have us flee this, the heart of our dominion? Would you have us give way for fear of — of *men*?"

I forbore to mention that we had done just that over the centuries, coming, each of us, from the wilds of forests which no longer contained the shadows by which we lived, the hidden recesses, the moon's wild music. Because Anna was there, somewhere, and her time was passing quickly.



I TOOK to the still waters, to gaze upon them, to find in them an answer to my dilemma. Water is a deep magic, a steady magic, one that requires patience. Although we live a longer span of years than any of us yet know, patience is not a skill

that we develop without cost and struggle; the measure of our time is still precious to us, no matter how long it might extend. There are always deaths that wait, and if time is not one of them, it does not change the fact: We are only immortal. We are not invulnerable.

I knew the truth of this better than any of our kin, and because I accepted it, I learned to be patient, to offer to the task at hand — to any task I chose — my time, my dedication, my effort, over and over again, until the task was done.

The water's stillness was a mirror, and in it, I saw many things: First, myself, skin white as snow, eyes of changing colour, hair a pale, long skein that caught light like spider's web. Beneath this face, this seamless mask long since perfected by art and glamor to resemble all of our faces, I saw time, time's tracks, a horrible intimation of something that the kin of the Court did not know: Age.

Almost, I recoiled, pulling my hands from the water's surface. Almost. But the truth that I desired lay beyond that image, that vision; I had to know it, and its horror, to find what I sought — for the water plays its tricks, and it demands its price, before it surrenders the knowledge that it holds at its heart.

It named me: Fallen. The price that I paid for a sight of my Anna was high: I accepted the truth of its name.

All the things that I could not, by rearing, take out of my Anna she had given to me, and she owned me in the giving. Such a dangerous creature, my child.

Although the Law of Man was strong, the truth of the waters was stronger still, and so it was, standing among the eternal lilies of the Queen's court, that I saw her.

She was greatly battered; her skin was grey and purple and tinged by a bright yellow the like of which I had never seen. I thought her teeth might be broken until she spoke,

and when she spoke, when the waters finally lifted their curtains enough that I might hear her words, her teeth no longer mattered.

For she spoke in a voice as ugly as I had ever heard from her lips.

And she spoke, halting and broken, in the tongue of Man.



I DID NOT DISCOVER MORE that day, but the next, when the dawn's light made the horizon a blaze of pretty colour, I made my way to the waters. Archeraon watched me, and I stood, torn between my pride and his pleasure, and this second day, I did not call upon the water's gift.

But the third day, the third day I left him and found a well of still water in my own domain, and there, with greater effort, I sought my child out.

I found her, although the way was hard and difficult.

The bruises were gone from her face, the swelling from her lips. She had aged, and quickly, but not so much that the members of the Court who had not made her life their study would recognize the loss of time in her features. Her hair had been cut. Sheared from her shoulders as if she were no more than a mortal's daughter, a thing of man. The clothing she wore must have chafed at her skin, as the life she led chafed at her spirit.

Or perhaps, like any human, she had settled into the life that was forced upon her; she had grown to think that it was the life that she desired. A mortal mind is a dangerously weak place, a thing of seasons and time.

I had thought that the Law of Man had trapped her, and it had, but it became clear that the cage was not entirely

unpleasant. She stood at the side of an older woman, a plump one with a gap-toothed grin and sun-stains across the breadth of her broad face.

“We’ll not be asking questions today,” this woman told my Anna. “Today, the father’ll be off with the bishop. But you mind what I told you — it was an act of God hisself that brought the father to your side when the river flooded — and you should offer your thanks to the lord and his blessed Mother.” She wiped her brow with the back of her sleeve, washing her face in her sweat. Setting aside her hoe — her iron-tipped, terrible reaver of dirt — she looked at my child with a softening expression.

“You still don’t remember your parents.”

“No.”

“Aye, well. Don’t you worry. They weren’t like me,” the old woman said. “Look at your hands. You’ve made a mess of ‘em just doing an honest day’s work. No, you’re highly born, and the father knows it. He’s looking, lamb. And he won’t stop ‘til he finds your family. I think he’s hoping the bishop might help.”



BY AFTERNOON OF THAT DAY, weeks had fled her face, and the sun’s touch was darker where it fell across her skin. She was put to work, but the work that she did was always too fine and too slow a work for her mortal companions; they marveled at her, and about her, while they waited on word.

By evening — ah, by evening, the worst of my fears came true. Wandering in the light forests that survived the clear-cutting that the Law of Man demanded, my child met a man. And he, a young man, a robed boy with a grave and serious face. They stumbled into each other unaware, and

then stood a moment, blushing and stammering; it was my child who took the lead in the end, by lowering her face and backing away as if she were a suddenly wild creature.

And he said, "Wait — I've heard of you. You're father Ingbrook's lost girl."

I pulled away from the waters, then.

But although I travelled to the Queen's court, I received no audience; she took none. In the matter of the tolling bells, she had not yet made her decision. And I could not wait much longer.



#### THE EARTH REMEMBERED US.

It remembered the blood we had shed, and although the Law of Man shed blood in its time, it was tied to a master that did not recognize, did not desire, the hollows of earth, the wild heaviness of the ground.

Iron and earth are tied, and it is earth magic that is hardest to work, hardest of all magicks to wield. And how is that difficulty measured? In time, of course.

Time. I had all of eternity, and less than a short mortal life, and the loss of the one would echo through the length of the other. Yet there was no hunt, not yet; and the waters had given me warning, but they would not carry me past the tolling bells of man, of men.

I, who had made the study of water my speciality now turned my will in a different direction: the ways of earth. Those passages were the darkest, but they were simplest to reach, for the price that the earth demanded was a part of the hunt itself. The forests became my home for one week, and for that week I took bow and spear and snare, forsaking the garments of the twilight court for those of the host.

I took deer, and fish, and great flying bird, cloaking myself all the while in the colours of the trees, the turning leaves, in the scent of the forest-heavy breeze. I could have called them to their deaths, were their deaths for any other sport but this. But the earth demanded blood, and the blood of the fallen could not be willingly granted — unless it were my own.

I felt young again, a moment, arrow nocked and bow drawn, waiting for the whisper of the breeze to turn against me, to carry my scent, and the sounds I might make, away from my prey, proud hawk seeking, as I sought, sustenance. I felt wild as I paced the proud stag, antlered in his season, king of his herd and willing, with young at his feet, to stand defiant against the forest's hunters.

Last, of course, a creature from the deep element, a fish, multi-hued and gasping, silent, for the breath I would deny it. Another time, and each of these hunts would have had a resonance that would have satisfied an urge to restlessness for a decade. But I did not have a decade. I did not have a month.

To the earth, I brought these kills, and to the earth, I gave them. Then I planted roots, of a sort; I waited, moved by breeze and sun and the rising of the dew, but by little else. A three-day later, the ground opened at my behest and swallowed me whole.



WHEN IT RELEASED ME, I could see the shadows cast by the light of the torches that illuminated the edifice built to proclaim the Law of Man where all might see it and obey.

The bell hung like shadow in the belfry high above the earth's floor. In the evening it was silent; the night was our

dominion, but palely. If I stood upon this tainted ground when the bells broke dawn, I would suffer Mordenel's fate.

And I had not come all this way, through the tunnels beneath the water and the cold, cold iron, to suffer that fate. My Anna was here. Beneath the ford, the earth waited, satiated; it would wait until the voice of the bells told it to sleep.

There were huts of pressed mud and reed, cabins dark and gloomy from which light struggled for escape as the fires burned low and lower still. The time for repast had ended; they slept, these wary creatures, these ugly, fascinating, dying mortals.

And I cared for the fate of only one of them.

I knew where she was, of course. I knew it, as we all know the location of things that we possess. But as I approached the small house, I knew more, and I froze on the other side of the wooden walls. Had it been so long? The hunts, surely, hadn't taken more than a seven-day. Or had they? In the Queen's forest it was hard to remember time as a fact without — without a mortal by which to measure its passing.

I stood outside the house as the moon's passing lengthened shadows cast by things with deep roots; the trees. Myself. Stood, listening, for we can hear much, and what we hear, we seldom forget.

Her voice came through the open cracks of shutters that possessed not even the thinnest of glass, came against the breeze and the sound of crickets and the whisper of night creatures slinking from one hole to another. She was singing.

And the song was a song that she had not learned in the realm of our kind — yet it caught at me, pulled me, twisted me. The greatest of our harpers might have ensnared a mere mortal and forced them into the circles,

to dance their lives away at our behest with more difficulty.

“Anna,” I said, speaking while I *could* speak. “Anna, child, come.”

But the song continued unabated, soft and warm and full of a mortal clinging. I had arrived late, too late.

No. Was she not my child? Had I not taken her, from her granddam’s arms, had I not raised her, protected her, taught her, had I not schooled her in the wonders of the Court itself? She was *mine*, and the land itself bore witness to my claim, for I stood here, upon these shores, with the tower of man’s God a mute and silent witness.

I gestured, and the door came; it flew open, given wings by the words that I whispered to its wooden timber. And there, in the moonlight of the midnight hour, she stood. And she was not the daughter of my dreams or of my memory, for the years had been leached life from her as I hunted and struggled to open the road I might travel to reach her.

Her brow creased; she gazed at me as if I — as if I were a stranger. “Hello?” she said, and I recognized her voice, even given to man’s ugly language as it was.

“Anna,” I said, in our own sweet tongue, “it is I, Sioban. The Law of Man holds these lands fast; it is only at night that I might come to you at all — and it is only for this one night. The earth waits us; the ways are open briefly, briefly. Come, child,” I said.

She took a step forward, and in her arms I saw the thing for whom she sang: a swaddled bundle, an infant younger, even, than she had been when she had been given to my care and keeping.

“Sioban?” She said, and she spoke my name as only she could speak it, although time had robbed her voice of its

heights. She stepped forward again, a step, another — and then she stopped, wrapping her arms more tightly around her infant child. I saw it all, in her eyes, the passing of an age; I saw our court, I saw her wonder, I saw the yearning — all clear, as if I gazed at the still waters, the lips of a spell bringing to their surface the depths I desired.

I lifted my hand, and she, one of hers, and I knew, then, that she would not come.

“Leave it,” I told her. “Leave this. This is not the life that you knew — this is not the life you were meant for. The waters —“

“It is the only life I know,” she answered, tiredly. The lines in her face caught the shadows and held them, and the shadows there were not mine to work. “I have a husband, Sioban, and two children.”

“What of them? You belong with —“

“I never belonged with you. You were all so beautiful, so perfect, so distant, so cruel. These men, these women — they’re not what you were, but they’ve given me the kindness that they can, all of it. They —” she hesitated, and then she said, softly, “they love me. If you had ever loved me, Sioban — if you understood what it was, what the need for it meant — I would never have climbed up on Archeraon’s mount.” There was a momentary anger in her voice, and then, worse than anger or defiance, a terrible, terrible pity.

“This is my daughter,” she said, holding the babe, “and my son is sleeping inside.” She did not tell me their names, and I knew she would not; she knew us too well. “My husband is a difficult man, but he tries to be a good one.”

“What is this? Good? Anna, you cannot have forgotten everything that we taught you.”

“No. And it hurts me, to see you standing there as perfect as you were when I left you years ago. But I —” She

stopped speaking then, her arms tightening reflexively around her babe.

No mortal could have heard what she heard. I take pride in that, for she heard it, although its sound was faint. Her skin paled, paled almost to the white that it had been when she had lived by my side in her youth.

“You cannot — you cannot call the hunt —”

“I did not call it,” I told her softly.

“But you knew.”

“I knew only that the Queen considered. We, none of us, have the ear of the Queen, as you well know.”

The moon was round and full and silver. The wild dogs were howling beneath its august light. They had power; we both knew it. We stayed thus, listening. And then she heard them, as I did: the hooves of the host. The host was riding.

“Anna,” I told her softly, “leave this place. Now. There will be nothing left for you in it. Come with me, and you might save your life.”

“No,” she said softly. “These are my children, and these my people, and I will not leave them.”

“Anna, please —” but I knew from the set of her lips that the only choices I had were beguilement, and such a spell against one who knew my name was not a spell easily cast. Or quickly. And she had so little time.

“Help me,” she said softly.

“I do not know how. I can no more turn back the hunt than you.”

“Hold her,” she told me. “Hold my child. Keep her from harm.”

She turned from me, then, and ran into her little dwelling. I heard her voice, her human voice; I heard the fear in the words that she used to wake her husband and her child from their sleep. And as her voice grew hoarser, I

heard her slipping away from me, as if the past were a dream that she had finally broken by waking, as if she were a river finally caught by the sea.

She ran past me, and after a moment her husband followed, lamp bobbing wildly in the darkness of the moonlit night. He returned for his children, seeing me as a shadow the trees cast against the ground. I set the bundle upon the ground and stepped back, that he might see it in time; he caught it up, shouting to the young boy who could barely understand the words he spoke, *follow, follow*.

And I watched as they struggled to wake their distant neighbours; as they struggled and gave up their struggle.

What had the water named me?

*Fallen.*

“Anna! Anna, child, Anna.”

She came to me, came to me at a run, her skirts snapping the thin dry branches that skirted the ground beneath the rounder girth of wild bushes.

“You cannot outrun the hunt. There is only one place that has any safety for you and your own, and while you might reach it in time, they will not.” Her husband and her son and the bundle that he carried. “Run, child. Run to the tower of the Law of Man. Peel the bell, peel it for all that you are worth. Only you will reach those grounds in time, but I will give you one last gift: a glamor. They will listen to you when you speak of the hunt. They will aid you when you call down the Law of Man upon the host.”

Her eyes grew round, as round as they often had when, as a child, she discovered something wondrous and new and unknown. “Sioban,” she said, softly.

“*Hurry,*” I told her.

And then, I bid farewell to my child. And I returned to the earth, to its safety, in haste. For if the bells of the tower

were not certain protection against the wild hunt — and they were not, could not be, if the Queen herself rode — they were more than enough, at this small distance, to sunder my ties with the earth.



THE HOST DID NOT FAIL in the hunt, but it did not succeed; three men, it brought back, and three strong men at that — but not one of them the men who spread the Law of Man across our dwindling lands.

I did not choose to visit the Court when these three prizes were brought before the Queen, for although she was splendid in her wrath, and glorious, I had other concerns; concerns of my own making.

For I had promised, on the eve of a dance not long past, that I would keep a child from the Law of Man, and I failed. Failure is the one thing that we cannot abide in ourselves.

And yet, and yet. If I have failed with the granddaughter, let me consign, instead, the greatgranddaughter.

Yes.

Anna was too frightened to think, and too determined; she accepted the gift I offered without once pausing to ask the cost of it.

And you, my child, my babe, you are the price that she paid. I do not know what she felt when the hunt retreated and her husband gave her her swaddling clothes, empty of life and warmth.

I do not know if she hated me, or if she was angered, or if she went to the lords of the Law of Man and began to plot her vengeance. Plot as she might, she made her choice; she accepted the glamor I placed upon her.

I hope she is happy.

I made my mistakes with my Anna, and I will not make them with you, for I know what I am now. I know why the water named me.

And I will keep you, little child, for as long as your life lasts, hidden from the Court and the Queen and Archeraon. I will age, although they will see no signs of it across the perfect lines of my face, and as you grow, I will grow.

*Fallen.*

I will love you, as your mother would have loved you, as no one of my kin but I might ever do.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle writes as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West; she is also published as Michelle Sagara West (although the Sundered books were originally published under the name Michelle Sagara).

She lives in Toronto with her long-suffering husband and her two children, and to her regret has no dogs.

Reading is one of her life-long passions, and she is paid for her opinions about what she's read by the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. No matter how many book shelves she buys, there is Never Enough Shelf space. Ever.

Although she doesn't have a newsletter, if you subscribe to her blog, you will get everything that's posted there—book news, cover reveals, random answers to questions, etc.

If you would like news about new books as they're published—with no other clutter—sign up for my news only mailing list.

Either can be found here at her web-site.





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Silence

Touch

Grave

## OTHER SHORT STORIES

The first six stories released are connected to the Essalieyan Universe of the novels I write for DAW as Michelle West. Since those are my most asked-for short stories, those are the ones I wanted to make available first. The rest of the stories will be released in chronological order from the date of their first appearance, which are listed in brackets beside the titles, along with the anthology in which they first appeared. All of the stories have introductions (which will probably come through in the samples if you've already read the stories but want to read those.)

*In the Essalieyan universe:*

1. Echoes (2001, *Assassin Fantastic*)
2. Huntbrother (2004, *Sirius, the Dog Star*)
3. The Black Ospreys (2005, *Women of War*)
4. The Weapon (2005, *Shadow of Evil*)
5. Warlord (1998, *Battle Magic*)
6. The Memory of Stone (2002, *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary DAW Fantasy*)



7. Birthnight (1992, *Christmas Bestiary*)
  8. Gifted (1992, *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*)
  9. Shadow of a Change (1993, *Dinosaur Fantastic*)
  10. For Love of God (1993, *Alternate Warriors*)
  11. Hunger (1993, *Christmas Ghosts*)
  12. Four Attempts at a Letter (1994, *By Any Other Fame*)
  13. Winter (1994, *Deals with the Devil*)
  14. What She Won't Remember (1994, *Alternate Outlaws*)
  15. The Hidden Grove (1995, *Witch Fantastic*)
  16. Ghostwood (1995, *Enchanted Forests*)
  17. When a Child Cries (1996, *Phantoms of the Night*)
  18. The Sword in the Stone (1997, *Alternate Tyrants*)
  19. Choice (1997, *Sword of Ice: Friends of Valdemar*)
  20. Turn of the Card (1997, *Tarot Fantastic*)
  21. The Law of Man (1997, *Elf Fantastic*)
  22. Flight (1997, *Return of the Dinosaurs*)
  23. The Vision of Men (1997, *The Fortune Teller*)
  24. By the Work, One Knows (1997, *Zodiac Fantastic*)
  25. Under the Skin (1997, *Elf Magic*)
  26. The Dead that Sow (1997, *Wizard Fantastic*)
  27. Kin (1998, *Olympus*)
  28. Step on the Crack (1998, *Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*)
  29. Diamonds (1998, *Alien Pets*)
  30. Sunrise (1999, *A Dangerous Magic*)
  31. Elegy (1999, *Moon Shots*)
  32. Return of the King (1999, *Merlin*)
  33. Work in Progress (1999, *Alien Abductions*)
  34. Water Baby (1999, *Earth, Air, Fire and Water*)
  35. Faces Made of Clay (2000, *Mardi Gras Madness*)
  36. Sacrifice (2000, *Spell Fantastic*)

37. Shelter (2000, *Perchance to Dream*)
38. Pas de Deux (2000, *Guardian Angels*)
39. Déjà Vu (2001, *Single White Vampire Seeks Same*)
40. To Speak With Angels (2001, *Villains Victorious*)
41. Lady of the Lake (2001, *Out of Avalon*)
42. Truth (2001, *The Mutant Files*)
43. The Last Flight (2001, *Creature Fantastic*)
44. The Knight of the Hydan Athe (2002, *Knight Fantastic*)
45. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
46. The Nightingale (2002, *Once Upon a Galaxy*)
47. A Quiet Justice (2002, *Vengeance Fantastic*)
48. The Augustine Painters (2002, *Apprentice Fantastic*)
49. How to Kill an Immortal (2002, *The Bakka Anthology*)
50. Fat Girl (2002, *Oceans of the Mind VI, ezine*)
51. Diary (2003, *The Sorcerer's Academy*)
52. Winter Death\* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)
53. Dime Store Rings (2004, *The Magic Shop*)
54. To The Gods Their Due (2004, *Conqueror Fantastic*)
55. The Stolen Child (2004, *Faerie Tales*)
56. The Rose Garden (2004, *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*)
57. The Colors of Augustine (2004, *Summoned to Destiny*)
58. Unicorn Hunt (2005, *Maiden, Mother Crone*)
59. The Snow Queen (2005, *Magic Tails*; with Debbie Ohi)
60. Shahira (2006, *Children of Magic*)

\*Set in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar, as the anthology titles suggest

