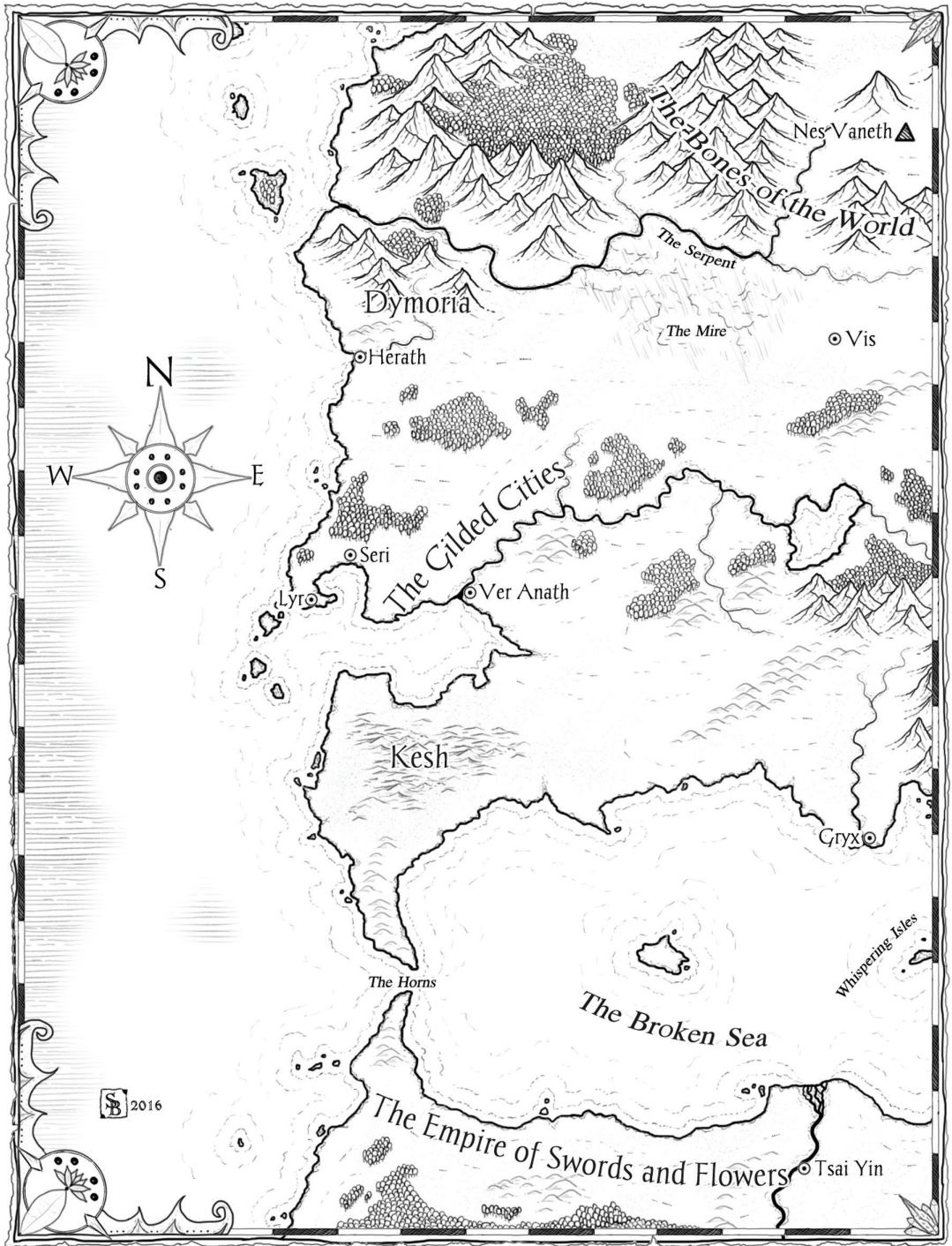


THE  
MANTICORE'S  
SOIREE  
AND OTHER STORIES



ALEC HUTSON



# ARAEN

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The Fens

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The Blightwood

The Spine

The Menekarian Empire

The Shattered Kingdoms

Uthmala

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The Eversummer Isles

2016

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*For Chen Ling, my shining light*

“The Boy Who Would Be King” by Alec Hutson. Originally published in *Ideomancer Speculative Fiction Magazine*, April 2004

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# CHALICE AND CHANCE

A story from the world of *The Crimson Queen*

**“THE ALE IS FOR** that young fella with the scar.”

Merik set the flagon down on the bar’s cracked slate countertop, just out of her reach. Nel glared at the old man, giving him what her mama called her ‘dragon eyes’. He smirked and began wiping up a puddle of wine someone had spilled earlier, ignoring her.

Nel went up on her toes, straining to reach across the bar; her fingertips brushed the dented tin flagon, causing it to rock dangerously.

“Don’t you go spilling any, imp!” admonished the old barkeep, pausing in his cleaning to wag a gnarled finger at her.

“God’s blood, Merik. Don’t torture the poor girl.” Red Verise stopped her preening, snapping shut her little silver hand mirror, and slid the flagon close enough to Nel that she could grip its battered handle.

“There you go, love,” the Dymorian girl said, smiling at her.

“I could have gotten it myself,” Nel mumbled back, struggling to lift the heavy drink without any of the ale sloshing out.

“Course you could have,” Verise replied lightly, brushing away a bright red curl that had fallen across her face. “But us ladies of the Moon should help each other, you know?”

“Hold it like this, Marinel,” the pretty dark-haired girl sitting beside Verise said, reaching down with a muslin-draped arm to guide one of Nel’s hands beneath the flagon. “You won’t drop it this way, I promise.”

Merik snorted. “Learn that up in your big Bright Quarter house?”

The dark-haired girl, Kai, slid from her stool to crouch beside Nel. She smelled like oranges and jasmine, which for Nel summoned memories of wandering through the spring market with her mother.

Kai pressed her palm to the small of Nel’s back, making her stand straighter. Then she ran her fingers through Nel’s hair, smoothing out some of the tangles. “Shoulders back, chin up,” she said in a prim voice, and Nel couldn’t stop the giggles from bubbling up inside.

“Now you could be a proper lady’s maid,” Kai said, winking at her.

Nel made a face. “I don’t wanna be a lady’s maid.”

The dark-haired girl leaned closer and whispered, “That’s all right. Neither did I.”

A ripple of laughter passed through the girls clustered at the edge of the bar, but Nel didn’t get angry, as she didn’t think they were teasing her.

Kai gave her a gentle push. “Now go deliver that drink. And don’t forget to remind the handsome ones that there are beautiful ladies waiting for them out here.”

“Handsome and *rich* ones,” Red Verise amended, and the girls laughed again.

Nel rolled her eyes and turned away. Balancing the brimming tankard carefully, she threaded her way between the tables and low cushioned couches that littered the tavern’s common room. The ale sloshed when her toe bumped a chair’s leg, but at least there wasn’t any chance she’d spill it on anyone – the Moon was empty tonight, except for the group of bravos and gamblers sequestered in one

of the private rooms. A year ago that hadn't been the case: every table had been filled, girls in diaphanous wisps of cloth clinging to men attired in the brocade and silks popular among Lyr's wealthy. Dreamsmoke had hazed the air, and on the stage Red Verise had plucked a slim ivory keppa, its ghostly notes trembling beneath the hum of conversation. Sometimes late at night her mother had even climbed onto the stage and sung for the crowd the same old Lyrish ballads that she sang to make Nel fall asleep.

She hadn't sung in the common room for a long time. Something had changed in the city – Nel didn't really understand what, but she had caught fragments of worried talk among the girls: there was a new archon, he had made some rules about places like the Moon, and now a lot of people didn't want to come here any more.

As Nel approached the carved wooden screen that separated the private room from the rest of the tavern, someone behind it cursed loudly, a harsh voice that made her shiver. She slowed, glancing back nervously at Merik, but the barkeep shooed her on impatiently. Swallowing away her fear, she slipped around the screen.

Five men were seated at a circular table of black wood, intent on a game of chalice. Empty tankards and bottles littered the table, as well as a spent dreamsmoke lamp. The game's hoard was sizeable, a pile of gold and silver pieces that made Nel's fingers twitch. It was more money than she had ever seen in one place. Each gambler had a row of cards turned upside down in front of them, and as Nel approached the table, one of the older men – a sickly looking fellow with jaundiced skin and a scraggly black beard – pushed a card forward and placed a silver kellic on it, then gestured toward a young man in a silken doublet. A livid scar curved down the side of this youth's face, so Nel moved tentatively in his direction, holding out the tankard. He didn't spare her a glance, focusing instead on the card that had been put forth.

"Challenge," the man with the patchy beard said. "Do you accept?"

The scarred man shifted his gaze to the older gambler, and Nel saw venom in his eyes. *Real dragon eyes*, she thought.

"Again, Tarris? Haven't you bled me enough, you old snake?"

The older man shrugged. "Nothing personal, Baern. You just seem to be giving money away tonight." Nel noticed to her surprise that a small boy hovered behind the older gambler, his hand clutching the roughly patched sleeve of the man's shirt. His dark, solemn eyes briefly found hers, and then he quickly looked away.

The scarred man's mouth twisted. "Very well. I accept." He placed a kellic down, then flipped one of his cards, revealing the faded image of a strange-looking rooster with scaly legs.

The older gambler, Tarris, pursed his lips. He turned over his own card, showing an ancient man draped in white robes holding a silver orb.

"Cockatrice beats vizier," Baern exclaimed, snatching up his opponent's coin and placing it with a flourish on the small stack he had amassed beside his run of cards. "Looks like your luck has turned." Without glancing at Nel, he reached out toward where she waited, and obediently she passed him the tankard. He took a long pull, then set it down hard enough that some of the ale slopped over the rim.

Nel knew that she should scurry out of the room, but something made her linger. She wasn't sure what, exactly; it felt to her like the air had suddenly sharpened. The younger man in his rich clothes with his cruel smile didn't seem to notice. Neither did the other gamblers, as they continued checking their hidden cards or making coins dance upon their knuckles, murmuring to each other. But there was an odd glint in the older man's eye as he watched Baern smirk at him from across the table . . . and the look on the face of the boy behind him was even stranger. His brow was furrowed in concentration, his lips slightly parted, as he studied the cards upon the table. Nel thought she saw his hand tug slightly on Tarris's sleeve.

"Challenge," the older gambler said again, and Baern's eyes widened.

“Truly? You’ve lost your vizier, old man. I know you can’t have more than a few of the lesser beasts and maybe a royal or two left in your run.”

“Challenge,” Tarris repeated, slipping a coin onto one of his cards as he nudged it forward.

Now Baern looked almost gleeful. “Going out in a blaze of glory, eh? I can respect that, foolish as it is.”

He flipped one of his cards: a faded dragon uncoiled across a wash of blue sky, fire leaking from its mouth. “The wyrm. Unless that’s a knight, I’m another silver richer.”

Tarris turned his card, showing a stately woman wearing a golden crown.

“What bad luck!” Tarris chortled, snatching up the kelic. “Dragon eats empress!”

He leaned back in his chair and shared a triumphant smile with the other gamblers. Before he could even place the recently won coin on his pile, though, Tarris spoke again.

“Challenge.”

Surprise flitted across the younger man’s face, quickly replaced by pity. “You’re addled, old man. If you were half the chalice player I am, you’d know what I’m holding. But I accept.”

He turned his final card, snapping it with obvious pleasure onto the table. A man sat upon a gleaming silver throne, a crown that looked to be the twin of the one worn by the empress on his brow. “The emperor. Game’s mine.”

Tarris nodded slightly, his expression unreadable. Then he showed his card.

A collective gasp went up from around the table. Nel craned her head forward, trying to make out what he was holding. It wasn’t some fantastical monster or resplendent warrior or haughty noble. Just a battered copper cup.

But she knew what it meant; you couldn’t grow up in a tavern in Lyr and not. It was the only card that could beat the emperor – a

poisoned chalice. Not only had Tarris won the challenge, he had also claimed the entire hoard; Nel had never seen this actually happen, and she had watched a hundred games of chalice unfold on this very table.

Only a master could have set up the sequence of challenges necessary to reach this outcome. Baern had been played, and as the realization dawned, his shock quickly gave way to anger.

“Bastard!” he snarled, shoving away from the table and standing. “Bloody lucky bastard!”

Tarris looked on calmly as Baern spat on the floor, glaring at him. Then the scarred youth whirled and strode out of the room, nearly knocking Nel over.

She caught herself and dashed to the edge of the screen, peering around its cracked edges as Baern approached the bar and the surprised girls. He grabbed Red Verise’s pale arm, pulling her off her stool. “With me, whore,” he said roughly, dragging her toward the stairs that led to the rooms.

Nel saw Cook’s bald head emerge from the kitchens at the commotion, and the big man started to follow them, his truncheon at his side, but then Red Verise glanced back and shook her head sharply.

“She’ll be fine,” Merik was saying as Nel hurried back to the bar. “Red knows how to handle ones like that.”

Kai twisted her satin handkerchief nervously, staring at the second-floor landing where her friend had vanished. “Yeah. You know who that was, though?”

“He’s a Vhalus scion? Has the look of that brood.”

“Baern ri Vhalus, first born of Menosh ri Vhalus.”

Merik whistled. “That’s as rich a name as we’ve had in here. His first time?”

Kai nodded. “I heard . . . I heard he used to spend his days at the Laughing Toad. But he was banned a few days back.”

Merik’s gaze drifted to the stairs. “Did he hurt one of the girls?”

“No. Senna – you remember Senna, the girl with the dead eye who sells oysters and clams – she told me he was plenty rough

with the girls, but the reason he was told don't return was because he killed someone right there in the common room."

Merik scratched at his chin thoughtfully. "And the watch didn't take him in?"

"The other man came at him first, is what Senna told me. Pulled daggers while Baern was playing chalice and went to stab him, but Baern got out of the way and ran him through with his sword. Since he didn't start it, he wasn't brought before an archon."

"His father probably dices with the archons anyway," Merik grumbled, but Nel thought she saw him relax a bit. "So he killed someone in self-defense. Can't blame a man for that."

"Aye. But still, the Toad wanted him gone, for a while at least. So that's why he came here to play chalice tonight."

"Daddy's money ain't going to spend itself," Merik said. Then he caught sight of Nel hovering beside the bar and scowled. "Imp! Off to the kitchens and help Cook do some cleaning. I don't think you'll be needed out here anymore."



There wasn't much to do in the kitchens, either. While Cook busied himself preparing a stew for later, Nel washed the day's dirty plates and cups, dunking them in a bucket of cloudy water and then giving each a quick wipe with a rag. Nel liked it in the kitchens, even though she complained loudly every time Merik sent her there; if he knew she secretly enjoyed her time helping Cook, then she suspected he'd find other, more horrible tasks for her to do, like emptying the chamber pots or sweeping the common room floor.

It was warm, for one thing: there was almost always a fire going in the hearth for a soup or a pot of mulled wine, and sometimes in the cold and rainy winter months it was the only place in the Moon where she felt the chill leave her fingers and toes. And then, of course, there was Cook, bustling around the kitchen

with surprising grace despite his hugeness, usually humming a tune from his childhood in the Eversummer Isles. Sometimes he'd sing as he chopped vegetables or sliced up a goat shank, and even though she couldn't understand the tumbling words, Nel imagined she could hear the hiss of surf on distant shores and smell strange flowers that would have wilted if brought to this cold stone city of rain and fog.

Nel was so lost in her thoughts and the rhythm of her work that it was Cook who first noticed the sound of pebbles striking the small door that led from the kitchen to the alley behind the Moon. He cocked his head, breaking off his gentle humming. "Eh. Little one, your strays have come, yes?"

Another small rock rattled off the door, and Nel set aside the cup she'd been polishing. She glanced around the kitchen, noticing how bare it looked. A small mound of limp gray vegetables, a few strips of dried meat hanging from the rafters, and a single ironhead on Cook's cutting board, the fish's milky eyes telling her that it had been caught days ago. Times were hard. "Do we have anything?" she asked, without much hope.

Cook reached down beneath the table he stood beside and pulled out a ragged hunk of bread. "Had to hide this, otherwise the girls would've devoured it. Eh. Greedy creatures they are."

Nel grinned and hurried to take the bread from Cook; he bent down, and she went up on her toes to lightly kiss his smooth brown cheek. He smelled like old wood, same as the beautifully carved dolls her mother kept in their room. She loved him then, as much as she had loved anyone other than her mama.

"Go on, then," he said, and clutching the bread to her chest, she dashed across the kitchen to the door. She pushed it open, shivering as tendrils of cold, damp air slipped past her.

Jumbled shadows filled the narrow alley, broken crates and shattered furniture that the last shreds of twilight had transformed into a ruined cityscape. Nel stepped out onto the cobblestones, feeling something soft squelch beneath her slippers. She hoped it was a

rotten vegetable and not a clump of night soil tossed out of one of the windows above. In the darkness she couldn't quite tell what it was, but the smell in this alley wasn't any worse than usual, so she breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Oy!" she called out, peering into the gloom. "Where are you turnip-heads?"

For a long moment nothing moved. Nel tapped her foot impatiently, but then slowly shapes came out from the shadows, creeping forward like skittish dogs. As they approached the light puddled around the open door, faces emerged from the blackness: Bethany, hiding behind her curtain of matted yellow hair; tiny albino Bone, his eyes a pale pink; and Samwin, who was a little taller than Nel, even though she thought she must be older. Nel saw hunger in the way they stared at the bread; times were not only hard at the Moon, she knew.

"Where's Ben?" she asked, straining to look past the three urchins. Sometimes the big boy hung back, waiting to make sure it was safe before joining the others.

"Ben's gone," Bone said, tugging at his torn shirt.

"Where'd he go?"

"Joined the Red Wolves," Bethany replied in her small soft voice. "He'd been doing little jobs for them for a while, running messages, keeping lookout. Then one night they came and offered him a spot in the gang, said someone had been gutted an' they wanted him to take his place. Made him cut his hand an' press palm right there where we was hiding. I saw the whole thing. He left with them and we never seen him since."

"How long ago?" Something about this didn't sound right to Nel.

"Five nights, I think," Samwin whispered, his eyes finding hers. *Don't tell them what you're thinking*, his look said.

Five nights, and Ben hadn't been back, even to just give them a few scraps? That wasn't like him at all. He always took care of them.

"He's gonna bring us something good soon," Bethany said, and Bone nodded. "Maybe some meat."

"Well, I don't got any meat," Nel said, ripping the bread she held into three good-sized chunks, "but I got bread. Who wants it?"

"Me!" Bethany and Bone cried at the same time, scurrying closer.

Nel laughed and threw them the bread, and they tore into it ravenously. The last and biggest piece she tossed to Samwin. He caught it, but instead of joining Bone and Bethany, he tucked the bread away, watching the other two with solemn eyes. *Just like Ben used to do*, Nel thought. *They're his responsibility now. If they wake up crying from hunger later, he's got to have something to give them.*

Nel swallowed back a tightness in her throat, wishing she had more to share.

Something shifted near where the alley emptied onto the Street of Silk, and they all turned toward the sound, the urchins tensing to flee. If it had come the other way, in the direction of the Warrens, Nel would have been more nervous; likely this was just some drunk stumbling out of one of the taverns. Nevertheless, Nel spared a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure Cook was still in the kitchen.

"Who's there?" she called out. "No more bread, if that's what you're after."

A small shadow detached from the darkness and crept closer. Nel's little knot of fear untangled when she realized from the size that it must be another child approaching. Though they could be dangerous as well – in the Warrens some children had turned feral, Ben had once told her, and were as vicious and cruel as the thieves that ran those streets. *Ben wasn't vicious or cruel, though. How could he join a gang?*

"I don't want any bread," a boy said as he stepped into the light. To Nel's surprise it was the same black-haired boy from this evening's chalice game.

She held up her hand to keep the urchins from scattering. "It's all right, I know him. He was in the Moon earlier."

The boy shifted uncomfortably as they stared at him. His clothes were well made, she thought, but worn and frayed, and so small that in a few places the seams had started to come undone. Still,

he wasn't the sort she expected to see wandering the alleys of Lyr, especially this close to the Warrens.

"What's your name?" Samwin said, apparently satisfied that this newcomer wasn't a threat.

The boy cleared his throat, glancing at each of them in turn. "Vhelan. I was out on the street and heard you all here."

Nel shook her head. "Stupid. Don't you realize these alleys empty into the Warrens? We could be a gang just waiting to jump on the merchants that come slumming in the Silk."

Vhelan's calm eyes found hers. "You didn't sound dangerous."

Nel snorted. "Shows what you know. Plenty of smart bosses get kids to lure rich folk like you into the shadows so they can stab them and take their purses."

The boy peered past them, to where darkness swallowed the other end of the alley. "The Warrens are down there? I've always wanted to see if the stories were true."

"Every one of them is true, and worse besides," Nel said, crossing her arms. "You'd have your throat slit before you could take ten steps. Kill you just for your teeth so they could make buttons out of them. Then they'd sell your body to the chop pot men, an iron bit for every arm and leg, and two for your head. Cheeks taste the best, that's what I heard."

Bone's eyes had gone round as silver kellics, but Vhelan didn't seem scared at all. "Truly, the cheeks? I didn't know that."

"What are you doing out here, anyway? With the chalice win your father had tonight I'd have thought you'd be off celebrating, eating pheasant and drinking firewine."

"Tarris isn't my father," Vhelan said quickly, "just someone who took me in when my uncle died. And he *is* off celebrating, throwing coins around in the Toad. Come tomorrow we won't have enough money to buy porridge, I'm sure. It's happened before."

That impressed Nel. "Truly? I never seen anyone win so much at chalice in one sitting. He'll spend it all?"

"Down to every last bit," Vhelan said, his mouth twisting. "And then he'll have to borrow more money to buy into the next game. And if we don't win enough that night, he'll lose another finger. You notice he was missing three on his left hand?"

Nel thought back, and she remembered that the old gambler had kept one of his hands hidden under the table. She resolved to get a good look the next time he was in the Moon.

"You say you was just at the Laughing Toad?" Samwin asked.

Vhelan nodded. "For a little while. Tarris got angry at me for asking for a few coins to buy some of those honeyed locusts the ragman sells outside."

"I know those!" Bone cried, clapping his hands together. "I'd give anything to try one. Must be what they eat every meal of the day up in the Bright."

"You hear anything funny when you was out on the street?"

Vhelan cocked his head at Samwin's question. "No. Just music from the taverns, maybe a few cats fighting."

Bethany turned toward Samwin. "I bet the ghost only comes real late."

"Ghost?" Nel interrupted, a little thrill going through her. She loved ghost stories.

Samwin frowned at Bethany, as if annoyed because she'd spilled some secret.

"Yeah," the big boy said slowly. "Two nights ago, well past midnight I think, we was near the Toad looking to see if anything had been dropped."

*Or, Nel thought, looking to see if anyone was sleeping off their ale in the streets and had foolishly not spent all the coins in their pockets. Stealing from drunks was a dangerous but tempting pastime for the street urchins of the Silk.*

"And then we heard it. You know that building that burned last month next to the Toad?"

Nel nodded. She remembered the fire bells clanging, everyone rushing out to throw buckets of water on the blaze. Merik had told her later that the whole district had nearly gone up.

“Well, we heard a ghost. Must’ve been one of the folks who got dead. Moaning and crying.”

“Did you go inside?” Nel asked, imagining a ravaged specter walking the charred halls. Maybe holding a baby or a cameo of their beloved, gobs of spectral fire dripping down from their still-burning hair. She shivered at the thought.

“Course not,” Samwin said. “And we haven’t been near the Toad since.”

“I would have gone inside,” Nel said confidently, throwing her head back a little. “I ain’t scared of ghosts.”

“Would you really?” Bethany whispered, gazing at Nel with newfound respect.

“Nah, she wouldn’t,” Samwin said. “Not if she’d heard what we did.”

“Would to! I’ll go right now!”

“I don’t want you to go,” Bone said, tears glimmering in his eyes. “Who’ll give us bread if the ghosts get you, Nel?”

“Ghosts can’t hurt you,” Nel told them, passing on some of Cook’s wisdom. “They just have a story to tell and want you to hear it.”

“Please don’t go, Nel,” Bone persisted. His cheeks were shining wetly now in the light spilling from the kitchen. “Promise me.”

Nel clasped her hands together, just like the bravos did when they vowed a vendetta or some other oath. She didn’t want to upset Bone. “I promise,” she said, and saw relief in the faces of the urchins.

Vhelan, however, looked interested. He opened his mouth, but snapped it shut when Cook’s shadow darkened the doorway.

“Little one, you’re letting all the warmth out. Come inside.”

Nel saw how the other children drew back from Cook, even though she'd told them many times he wasn't scary at all. "All right," she said to them, turning away. "I gotta help. Don't go hunting any ghosts without me."



The old gambler and his boy came again the next evening. He won big for a second night, though without playing the poisoned chalice, and after scooping up his winnings he'd tossed Vhelan a silver kellic and told him to find supper somewhere – he was going back to the Laughing Toad and didn't want him underfoot. Vhelan grimaced but said nothing. After he'd left, Nel had told Vhelan that he should keep the coin, and together they could scrounge for food in the Moon's kitchen.

They dined on cold slices of an eel pie Cook had baked earlier, washing the deliciously creamy and marshy bites down with ale stolen from one of the barrels behind the bar. After swallowing her last mouthful of flaky crust Nel belched and settled herself against the wall in the little hiding spot they'd found under the storeroom stairs, lacing her hands contentedly across her full belly.

"Cook sure can cook," she sighed, picking at something in her teeth. "Wonder if that's why his mama named him Cook."

Vhelan cocked an eyebrow at her, and Nel snorted. "Joking. I'm not simple – I know his name's just a lucky coincidence."

Then Vhelan did laugh, until his face turned red and he was lying on his side. When he finally stopped, he wiped his eyes dry and pulled forth a pouch.

"You play keepsies?" he asked, pouring out a handful of smooth round stones.

"I'm the best player you ever met," Nel replied, scooping up one of the little rocks and studying it critically. "Though I never

saw such a sorry bunch of stones. You got them all notched up like the chalice cards your friend uses?”

“Tarris isn’t my friend,” Vhelan said, his mirth vanishing. “And he doesn’t use marked cards.”

Nel flicked one of the stones experimentally, testing how it tumbled. “Then how come you’ve won big the last two nights? You telling me he’s just brilliant at chalice?”

“He’s not.”

“Then how come he wins?”

Vhelan licked his lips. “Because . . . because I help him.”

Nel didn’t let anything show in her face, but inside she smiled. She’d been right about that little tug she’s seen the boy give the old gambler, just before he’d started the big run that had ended in the scarred man’s emperor drinking from the chalice.

“Oh, so you’re good at the game?”

Vhelan glanced around nervously. “You can’t . . . you can’t tell anyone. Tarris said if the other players found out, they’d cut us up and throw us into the harbor for the wraithfins. I just know sometimes, all right? It’s a feeling, and if I follow it good things happen in the game. Usually.”

“Usually?”

“Sometimes the sense I’m talking about, it isn’t there. Those nights Tarris might lose a finger, if he’s borrowed money to buy into the game. I keep telling him he’s got to be careful, put some aside so he doesn’t have to go to the moneylenders, but he never listens.”

“And then it’s your fault when the game don’t go good?”

Vhelan looked away. “Yeah.”

From his face Nel could tell he was remembering something bad. So she punched him on the shoulder, hard.

“Ow!” Vhelan cried, his eyes widening in surprise and pain.

Ignoring him, Nel hopped to her feet. “I’m gonna go get my stones. Be back in a cat’s lick.”

"Maybe I'll just leave," Vhelan muttered sullenly, rubbing his arm.

"Don't you dare," Nel replied lightly. "I want to win that kelic off you."

She dashed out from under the stairs, wended her way between the barrels of wine and ale that filled the storeroom, and burst into the tavern's common room. It wasn't empty, which was unusual: two swordsmen in orange-and-black livery were seated at one of the tables, intent on a game of tzalik. Not nightwatchmen, because the watch dressed in the blue and purple of the archon council. Must be guards for someone important visiting a girl. Behind the bar Merik frantically motioned for her to come over, but she pretended she hadn't seen him, and instead bounded up the stairs to the second floor.

Nel slowed when she reached the room she shared with her mama; she should be awake, but her mama had been so sick lately that she'd been sleeping at odd hours, and spending most days in bed. Earlier today she'd looked better, though, and had even told Nel that she might come downstairs this evening.

The door was closed. Usually the doors of this hall were only shut when girls were entertaining, but surely her mama wasn't well enough to be doing that. Nel nudged the door open a crack and peered inside.

Her mama sat on the edge of the bed they shared. She was wearing her favorite outfit, the one she sometimes sang in, a long red dress that left her shoulders bare and clung tight to the rest of her. Nel had noticed that a lot of people watched her closely when she wore that dress. Her delicate, pale face – so different from Nel's, who everyone teased looked like a boy's – was tilted upwards, and she stared with wide, admiring eyes at the man looming over her.

It was the young chalice player from the night before, the scarred man who had dragged Verise upstairs. His silken shirt was unbuttoned, revealing livid red marks criss-crossing his chest. This demonstrated that he was a real bravo, someone who had fought

and survived many duels. He reached out and cupped her mama's chin, his fingers digging into her cheeks.

Quietly she shut the door. Her mama had said to never come in if she was with a man, and it was one of the few rules that Nel had never broken in her life.

But there was something hard and sour inside her chest, pressing on her heart. This wasn't right; her mama was sick. Two nights ago she'd been moaning in her sleep, her skin as cold and wet as if she'd been out in the winter fog. When she'd woken up she'd complained about being too hot and wanted to get out from under the blankets.

Nel squeezed her hands into fists, concentrating on her nails cutting into her palms. She didn't want to think about her mama or the scarred man right now. She turned away from the door, keeping that fierce small pain centered in her thoughts as she made her way back to the stairs. When she reached the first step, she let her gaze wander around the common room, passing over the empty tables and couches, the two swordsmen playing tzalik, and Merik staring angrily up at her . . .

"Imp!" cried the barkeep, his face flushed. "You come down here right now!"

Nel felt that little seed of sourness in her chest open up, and inside she found there was anger, bright and hot. "No!" she yelled back, rushing down the stairs. "You leave me alone, you old goat!" She glimpsed shock in the barkeep's face, then she turned away from him and ran for the storeroom. There was wetness on her face, and she rubbed frantically at her cheeks as she dashed around the ale barrels, quick as a darting mouse.

Vhelan's eyes widened when she burst into their hiding spot, breathing hard. "Are you all right?" he asked, glancing behind her as if he expected to see the city watch hard on her heels.

"I'm fine."

"Are you crying?"



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alec Hutson was the Spirit Award winner for Carleton College at the 2002 Ultimate Frisbee College National Championships. He has watched the sun set over the dead city of Bagan and rise over the living ruins of Angkor Wat. He grew up in a geodesic dome and a bookstore and currently lives in Shanghai, China. *The Crimson Queen* is his first book.