



Emeth  
A Calormene

# Emeth, A Calormene

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# Preface

The story that you are reading is incomplete. It is, in fact, a middle. You will learn of the early life of its main character, Emeth, through episodes of his life up until a few weeks before its end...or what seems to be its end. To learn about the real Emeth as the author C. S. Lewis created him and to learn more about his ending, you must read *The Last Battle*.

For my Emeth, I use *The Last Battle* as my central touchstone, but also take up the Chronicle of Narnia which tells us the most about Emeth's home country of Calormene, *The Horse and His Boy*, as a key secondary source. Moreover, I create a bold connection between these two novels that is pure invention. I do so to create a dramatic backstory for Emeth and to try to tease out some of the mysteries of his momentous choice on the very last day of the world that contains both Calormene and Narnia.

So, yes, for all of my lofty aims and pretenses, this story is simply a piece of fan fiction. It is, however, fan fiction with some rather heady intellectual goals, to consider aspects of race and culture and speculative theology.

You have been warned.

What follows in the introduction is a lengthier explication of my ends. If you prefer a story unadorned by explication, you might choose to proceed to the first chapter.

And, so, without further ado, and if I may borrow a phrase, "Onward and upward!"

# Introduction - Admiration & Critique

The story of Emeth has always been a bit of a puzzle and a problem. A puzzle because one wants to know more about him; a problem because in reaching Aslan's Country and being welcomed by Aslan, himself, Lewis seems to be straying from Christian orthodoxy.

I experienced neither the puzzle nor the problem, upon first hearing the story of Emeth when it was read to me and my brothers by my mother. But certainly in the second or third (or fifth) encounter, as my own theological understandings grew, I became aware of its vexed theological implications.

How could a practitioner of another faith be redeemed, be counted as faith-filled by the great lion Aslan? In fact I used to joke that were I to be ever blessed with children, that I would simply not read them the last part of chapter 13 and the first part of chapter 14 of *The Last Battle*.

And what if my children were to ever ask me, "Daddy what happened to the Calormene in the previous chapter? Did he get into Aslan's Country, too?" I would simply answer, "Well, honey, we don't really know."

Of course I would do no such thing, because it would not do to injure Lewis's tale so. Instead, I would have talked with them about the implications of Emeth's welcome into the New Narnia.

And it is my aim that this story, a fictional meditation on the life and faith of Emeth, will be an even more eloquent and thought-provoking answer to that question. And, to be completely candid, my constructions of an "answer" to the problem of Emeth, may not even be one to which I can fully subscribe.

But in the words of Hamlet's famous caution, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Another and perhaps even more pressing concern for me though is to consider a question that applies to Lewis' description Emeth and to the Calormenes at large. It is to take up the accusation of racism that has been charged to Lewis' account largely for his description of the people of Calormen.

None of these charges echoed in my own youthful mind as I first read the Chronicles, even as I lived in a land very much like Calormen and also had the skin color myself of, at the very least, a half Calormene and half Narnian (the skin tone of Ram the Great of Archenland I like to imagine). As I grew up, though, these accusations did begin to trouble my heart and my mind as I saw that perhaps they had some validity.

I am sure that there are other sources which have chronicled this fault in Lewis better than I will do here. But just to draw a brief sketch, when Lewis writes in *The Horse and His Boy* about Shasta's "blood" being the factor that draws him to the North, it is a little troubling. And later in describing the Narnian Talking Animals and people in the streets of Tashbaan, he writes, "The rest were all humans; grown-ups, but young, and all of them, both men and women, had nicer faces and voices than most Calormenes." Such descriptions are at the very least jarring to modern ears.

And as much as I love him, I do view this as a fault in Lewis, one which is mirrored somewhat in the work of his fellow Inkling J. R. R. Tolkien in his descriptions of men from the Southern and Eastern regions of Middle Earth.

I will not follow the current tendency to completely disavow an individual and his work due to a failing, though, to determine that they simply should not be read, to cancel.

I love Lewis and owe him a great debt and continue to regularly read his works with pleasure and for my edification. But I am not willing to completely excuse him either as simply expressing thoughts and ideas of his time and place. While this is certainly true to some degree, Lewis has been such a lodestar and guide for so many of us with his insights about human nature and Christianity and the implications of postmodernity that it is difficult not to expect more from him in this area as well.

On the other side of the ledger, though, it is patently true that Aslan, the great Christ figure that Lewis created, is not a respecter of persons or races and that he relates to each person (even if that person is a creature) individually, as exemplified by his relationships with Aravis and Emeth, and everyone in all of his dominions.

And, though as we are often told that Aslan tells no one anyone's story but their own, perhaps the two stories of redemption of these two individuals may serve as templates for the stories of numerous others in Calormen and other lands.

It should also be noted that Lewis does not completely discount the glory of Calormen as a nation and a culture. Though many of his descriptions of Calormene culture have a negative tint to them, he lauds some elements of the culture such as its rich tradition of storytelling.

And there are also some almost incidental descriptions of places in Calormen which depict scenes of real beauty, scenes which resonated with me even when I was child. It felt like he truly understood some of the serendipitous pleasures to be found in a hot and dusty land. "Palm trees

and pillared arcades cast shadows over the burning pavements. And through the arched gateways of many a palace Shasta caught sight of green branches, cool fountains, and smooth lawns.”

Perhaps such descriptions are only the product of a sort of Orientalist, fetishized vision of the East, but they do nonetheless evoke an appealing sense of place.

It is also important to note that in the very last chapter of *The Last Battle*, when everyone who has seen the “beatific vision” of Aslan is in what amounts to the Narnian version of the “the new heavens and the new earth,” Lucy can see both Calormen and Tashbaan in the distance. A little further into the chapter, Faun Tumnus explains about how things that the children thought had been destroyed in historical time actually still exist in that place:

“So it was,’ said the Faun. ‘But you are now looking at the England within England, the real England just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England no good thing is Destroyed.’”

There is then obviously something good in Calormen, in its land and culture and its people, that Aslan has chosen to preserve in the renewed Narnian cosmos.

In light of these considerations, I have set myself two goals. The first is to explore the nature of Emeth’s faith by imagining his life story from before he ever came into Narnia.

And in the process of doing this, I hope also to accomplish my second purpose which is to create a more detailed, rich, and nuanced picture of Calormen, to flesh out some of the glories of its culture that Lewis only hinted at and to create some imagined ones of my own.

Why do I presume to do this? Because Lewis, himself, encouraged us to do so. Writing to a child he said that she should write her own Narnia stories. Clearly in saying this he was not giving carte blanche to anyone wishing to publish derivative works. But he did give us permission as his readers to imaginatively fill in gaps about things that intrigue us.

And that is simply what this story is. It is an imagining, or in Lewis' own term, "a supposal." It is a personal exercise to reconcile some things about the Lewis's Chronicles that have been a challenge to me and to others, and hopefully to do that artfully.

In his novel *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis took the artistic liberty to change a few elements of the traditional myth of Cupid and Psyche--long in the public domain :) -- to set the stage for some of his own thematic ends. I will do the same with his own stories. I hope not to do any true damage by any sub-creation of my own, but I obviously must need add to the very brief self-chronicling of Emeth's life that Lewis provides in *The Last Battle*. I must push the furniture of that story apart, so to speak, to include some more pieces.

A problem that arises, though. If I do my job well and if the events and relationships which I describe in my story were half as important to Emeth as I intend them to be, surely they would be referenced in the conversations in *The Last Battle*. But, alas, that is a problem of continuity that I will simply have to live with, even as I create it.

One of the key imagined relationship that I have created and which is foundational to my entire story is described in the very first chapter.

And so we begin.



# Chapter 1 - Son of the Faithless One

“The Faithless One! The Faithless One! Son of the Faithless One!”

It had happened again. It had happened again and it stung, the same as it always did. Only a few minutes earlier they were playing and taking turns at seeing who could throw a spear the furthest. It was only the thick wooden stick of the night watchman really, which they had stolen while he slept during the day, but they had taken turns throwing it with as much vigor as any city champion at the great summer tournament in Tashbaan. At least they threw it until Sirka had woken up and stumbled from his clay hut and then chased after them to retrieve his prized possession. He was surprisingly fast.

Next their play had turned to soldiering and to swords, which they had cut off from an obliging gum tree. But its branches were straight and thin and the boys longed for something that more closely mimicked the ever so slight curve and broad blade of the Calormene scimitar. It was Shamash, the butcher’s son, who had first made the suggestion.

“Emeth, get us your brothers’ practice scimitars so that we can be like real soldiers in the Tisroc’s armies.”

He had seen the scimitars hanging high on a stable wall one day when he had been on a delivery of meat for his father, each had a round shield and lance beside it. There were six sets in total.

“Well....well, I don’t really want to,” Emeth had stammered back. “And if he found out, my father would beat me.”

“Come on, Emeth! Bring out the scimitars!” a chorus of voices had cried out.

Yet, Emeth just shook his head. Until someone hidden in the back of the group of boys had said, “Bring them out. Your brothers certainly don’t need them now.”

The last line had been spoken when there was a lull in the voices and rang out clearly. There were audible gasps mixed with tittering laughter, and then silence.

A flash of anger had passed across Emeth’s face. He knew that very likely soon he would either fly in a rage towards the speaker or begin to cry. Very carefully he had mastered himself and said, “I will not get the scimitars. I think I will go home now.”

He had turned and began to walk away, when behind him the voices cried out again.

“Perhaps they’re not scimitars at all. Perhaps they are accursed Northern blades, straight as a shooting star.”

“And just as weak,” someone added, to a roar of laughter.

“Northern blades for a Northern house!”

And then finally it came, “Faithless blades for the Faithless One!” And then the chant was taken up by all the boys.

Then Emeth’s face began to burn and his fists clenched with anger. He thought about turning back and knocking down Shamash who had begun all the trouble. The others boy would not touch him if he had done so.

Even Shamash would have tried not to hurt him in their fighting. They might well jeer at a Tarkaan's son of a disgraced house, but even simply touching one was quite another matter, much less harming him. Emeth merely turned and glared at them and then turned away again as the jeering continued.

He walked from the field of hard clay at the edge of the desert toward the small city of Tehishbaan. Behind it the sun was setting into the low Western hills. In the marketplace the shopkeepers were just finishing splashing water on the ground in front of their establishments to settle the day's heat and dust in order to reopen their shops for the evening. As he passed, they each touched their foreheads in turn, bending ever so slightly to show respect, though their unfriendly faces betrayed their true feelings.

"What good is it to be a Tarkaan's son," he thought to himself, "if any beggar's brat can insult me and all the people hate me." He then began to think of his brothers' scimitars and then about his brothers themselves. Hot tears began to roll down his cheeks.

"No, I musn't cry here," he thought, brushing his tears away, "it would dishonor father."

He would not cry in the marketplace of Tehishbaan and add to the hatred that still overflowed from the hearts of the people of the city. He would not add to constant murmuring of whispers of the Curse of Kidrash Tarkaan, of whom Emeth was a descendant, the curse that had been talked of in all of Calormen for over 1500 years.

Father to a false and traitorous daughter, the curse had driven Kidrash from his family's ancestral home in Calavar far away in the East when his daughter had betrayed Calormen by fleeing to the accursed Northern

lands. And the curse had gone before them and was there to meet him in the streets Tehishbaan in the disdainful looks of his new subjects.

When his daughter had fled, Kidrash Tarkaan's life had been spared, for even a Tisroc cannot easily kill a Tarkaan descended from Tash himself with noble blood running through his veins. Though he could make it so that such a Tarkaan might wish that he were dead. With his wife and remaining son and all his household Kidrash Tarkaan had made the trek across the Western desert to take up the title of a lord who had died at the hands of the Western rebels, while a more deserving Tarkaan took up Kidrash's esteemed titles and rich lands in fertile plains of Calavar.

Though Kidrash had soon subdued the rebellion, saving the Tisroc a great deal of trouble, there would never be honor in the title of Tarkaan of Tehishbaan, Lord of the Western Wastes. And so the disgrace continued generation after generation for 1500 years.

Every Tarkaan who was his descendant had borne the shame in the way that seemed best to each of them. In some generations, the Tarkaans had lived lives of quiet withdrawal, seldom appearing outside of their palace walls. Even their wedding feasts and birth celebrations had been quiet affairs, which were small in number in any case as few Tarkaans had wanted to align with such a house unless from greatest need.

Tarkaans of other generations, though, as if rebelling against their fathers, had gone out into the world with great vigor, scorning their family's shame, and spilled their blood and treasure in the Tisroc's wars far beyond the due of any noble house. Many of these had won great, if grudging, renown and vast wealth. They had improved the stature of the city of Tehishbaan and its surrounding lands until it had become a rich commercial center. But there had still been no erasing the shame, as Calormenes could never forgive treachery.

Emeth's father Harpa Tarkaan had been a man of defiant action. He had been ashamed of what he saw as his own father's silent brooding and weak studiousness. At an early age he had sought to distinguish himself.

"Pfwah!" he had said as he spat upon leaving his home when he came of age, "The old man thinks of nothing but scrolls and desert journeys to nowhere."

And Harpa Tarkaan had become a great general and attained all that he endeavored and brought even greater wealth back to Tehishbaan. And each of his sons, too--six sons in a row--he had taught to be soldiers. As soon as each son learned to ride a horse while carrying a shield and a lance he had sent them to be pages to some distant lord, though he had to pay dearly each time for a privilege that was freely accorded to other noble lords.

And each son had gone, as their father had gone before them, to the Tisroc's wars. Yet, unlike for their father, fortune had not smiled upon them. Though each son had quickly begun to reflect the mettle of their father, one by one each had fallen in the wars. Whispers of the curse and the wrath of Tash grew in intensity.

Emeth had been born the seventh son, a full ten years after the sixth. And his mother, who was frail and his father's much younger second wife, had died only a few moments after his birth. And so he had grown up without a mother and barely knew his older brothers.

It was Adlan, who was the youngest son save himself, who he had loved the best. It was true that he was more like a young uncle than a brother to Emeth, but he had secretly shown him whatever he knew about riding and about arms in the few days at a time that he was at home. This had to be

done in secret for Emeth's father, ever more heartsick from the loss of his sons, did not wish for Emeth to be a soldier and forbade him from even talking about the wars.

It had been less than a year since Adlan had gone to ride against rebels in the South where he had fallen in the siege of Corfan. Whenever his father talked about it, which was often, he would grab the forearm of the listener and say through tears, "There were ten arrows. Ten arrows, I tell you, and not one was in his back."

Then his father had taken yet another funeral procession for one of his fallen sons, bearing Adlan's spice-laden body North Eastward across the desert to the Tombs of the Estranged which were North of Tashbaan in a small valley in the shadow of the Tombs of the Ancient Kings. His father had not allowed Emeth to accompany him. And when Harpa Tarkaan returned, Emeth saw that his face was as dim and grey as the desert after sunset, bereft of all joy.

It was in that moment that he had sworn that though he did not know how he, too, would become a soldier. Somehow he would go to the wars as his brothers had done. He would become the greatest warrior in all of Calormen and fight in the name of Tash, the Glorious One. And if the will of Tash allowed it, he would strike a blow against the treacherous North. He would remove from his family forever the Curse of Kidrash Tarkaan and the hateful epithet of "Faithless."

He would avenge his blood against his own blood. He would avenge the shame of Kidrash Tarkaan and all his sons through all the long ages. He would find a way to meet in clean battle or in a great duel the royal descendants of the Faithless One. Before Tash and before all of Calormen he would atone for the treachery of his ancestor who had fled across the

desert to become enemy and infidel, who had become Aravis, Queen of Archenland, mother to the greatest enemy Calormen had ever known.

## Chapter 2 - Of Carpets & Rhuhghazalians

Emeth awoke with a start and felt for his dagger. It was lying across his chest where he always placed it upon sleeping. Underneath the scabbard his tunic was wet with sweat. It was always so hot in Tashbaan, especially in the soldiers' quarters which faced west, far from the breezes of the sea which the Eastern buildings of the city caught, at least those in the higher inner circles of the city where the Tarkaans dwelt. Ah, if only he were at home in the West now, there beyond the desert where though the days could be unbearable at least in the night, the blessed night, the temperature always cooled after the sands exhaled the day's heat.

So it had been only a dream. Well, not entirely so. The feelings elicited by the children's mocking and his memories of Adlan were real enough. Each were threads from a vast collection of memories which some mad dreamweaver wove together differently each night into a phantasmic carpet. It was a carpet of distressing designs, though, instead of the lovely woven geometric forms or the bright flowers and birds that were the common designs of carpets in Calormen.

It did not seem to matter that those events were in the far distant past. It did not matter that in the intervening years he had seen the fulfillment of every dream he had dreamed for himself, every promise he had made to bring honor to his family. Every promise save one, the promise of vengeance for which he still longed. As he had grown into young manhood the physical blessings and skills that were a birthright he shared with his brothers had bloomed, and even his father could not help but be secretly pleased.

And then during one year's Autumn Feast in Tehishbaan, Emeth had suddenly stood up before the Pinion of Tash—for that is what they call his priests—and made a vow to follow in his father and brother's footsteps as a soldier of the Tisroc. And not even his father, Tarkaan though he was, could gainsay his oath.

He had become the soldier that he set out to be. He not only had become a skilled warrior, but had also come to be the most trusted lieutenant of a mighty Tarkaan, a Tarkaan who it was rumored was close in the councils of the Tisroc. Even with all of the strivings and successes, though, almost every night the dreamweaver skillfully wove a different collection of memories into the carpet of his dreams. Each morning he awoke with a heavy heart.

If Emeth's mind was full of carpets it may have been because all the day before had been full of them in his waking life. He had had to learn of the manner of their weaving and the materials of their making. He had had to learn of the differences in the patterns from each of the provinces.

If he had loathed every minute of his lessons, it was not because he was uncultured and did not appreciate beauty. He hated it because it was all done in service of a mission which Emeth felt was dishonorable. Moreover, all day he had to tolerate infernal heat, because though they were in the finest carpet shop of the carpet bazaar, the finest in all of Calormen, all had to be done in secret in a back room where the air was close and stifling, unstirred by the large fans which slaves were made to move in the large showroom in the front.

This store was in the heart of the old city. There between beggars and street performers and past sweetmeat and sugarcane sellers into ever smaller streets, even the most esteemed Tarkheena shopping for her

palace furnishings would have to dismount from her litter and walk the final narrow alleyway.

Emeth and a junior officer, Ramseef, had not made their way to the store from the carpet bazaar, though. Instead they had begun in the adjacent jewelry market and had walked a labyrinth of passageways, through the backs of shops and the slave quarters of regal homes. In some places they had to navigate narrow passages which only had thin walkways beside open sewers in order to arrive from the back of the carpet shop. Emeth had been ushered into a long thin room in which every wall from floor to ceiling was lined with rolled carpets. Ramseef had been ordered by their commander to stand guard outside the door, his scimitar unsheathed.

It was not even the droning of the thin old man who was his tutor and who sat cross-legged on a large embroidered cushion that had made him disconsolate. It was in fact the easiest day of work that he had had in months with constant cups of sweet smoky tea and a rich lunch. But it was just that a soldier in his duties ought not to be at his ease. And he certainly ought not be made to learn deceit.

When Rishda Tarkaan joined them just before the midday meal he exclaimed, "Oh, Emeth, my son. Why do thee sit here in the navel of the wealth of Calormen as one with the face of a flea-bitten dog in its remotest province?"

"My, Lord, soldiers are not made for wealth and ease," Emeth offered in reply.

"'Tis true, I have never seen thee truly at thy ease. But as for comfort and wealth, I heard no complaints when we garrisoned in the palace at Jawahar last spring, and thou sat on cushions in airy balconies being delighted by its greatest jewel."

Emeth reddened. He had not thought Rishida so attentive to his doings. He ignored the comment, though, and spoke openly of his heart, “My Lord, truly, 'tis not this day’s task that makes me downcast, but 'tis these merchants' weeds that I must wear. And the purposes of this day’s learning.”

He paused to think for a moment and then went on, “And while learning is a gift that is worth ten times an inheritance, this learning only to deceive...”

“As the prophets have said,” the little man on the cushion interrupted, “Deception is the hidden thread that binds together a masterpiece.”

“But, oh my teacher, there is a second part to that couplet which is seldom quoted with the first,” Emeth answered. “Deception is the hidden thread that binds together a masterpiece, but the gods will judge the weaver!”

“Oh, ho! It seems your young Tarkaan here is a warrior and a scholar,” said the old man to Rishda Tarkaan.

“A mystic warrior scholar more-like, who has often puzzled me with his questions. But he is as precise and deadly with a scimitar as he is judicious,” Rishda responded.

And then to Emeth he said, “Old Sheeman is right, deception, however unseemly, will be the hidden thread--the golden thread--that will make this mission a masterwork. It will make all the world the Tisroc’s carpet! So never you mind your second parts of sayings; mind instead this day’s lessons, oh merchant warrior!”

He had borne the remainder of the day as well as he might and then they had retraced their way out back to the jewelry market. It was an hour

before sunset and he had sent Ramseef back to the barracks. In his merchant clothes, he could walk the streets of Tashbaan incognito and the market was close to the great Temple of Tash, which he always greatly desired to visit but seldom was able to.

It was not the temple itself that he wanted to visit, which in any case he could not as it only opened for the great sacrifices and ceremonies of state. On such occasions its tall doors would open to the sounding of the horns and the worshippers would throng into the courtyard. The nobles would enter the temple itself, which was a wonderment of black marble hewn and shaped into numerous towers and courtyards and a great central dome, the roof of which was overlaid with silver.

The gates in the walls surrounding the courtyard, too, were ornate masterworks of silver plated wood that were set on hinges into outer walls that were as thick as ten men laying end to end. The great walls were made entirely of huge blocks of white marble as large as a house that were joined together into a solid mass so tightly that no joints could be seen.

And over the millennia, into the base of the thick walls entire rooms and passageways had been chiseled and carved all around the outer circumference of the temple walls. These rooms and apartments, which all faced outward and were more like dens of some burrowing creatures, were each home to what were known as the Multitudinous Wings of Tash, the many sects of his worship.

The amount of space allocated to each sect and the ornateness of its furnishings all depended on the power of the sect and the influence and the wealth of its followers. And from time to time the blood spilled in the streets of the Temple District was not only from animals being brought back from the sacrifices, but also from the clashing of sects for control of space in the temple walls.

It was in the walls of the Temple of Tash where the dreaded horns of Tashbaan were located. There were four horns set deep inside the walls with large passageways cut into the marble slanting downward from the horns to great openings facing each of the four corners of the compass. The horns themselves were winded by vast bellows made to work by the lowering of stones which were raised by pulleys requiring the strength of ten men.

In the marble passageways at the base of the horns the resonance increased ten-fold. Twice a day for the opening and closing of the gates, the horns would sound, and numerous times on feast days. It was a sound which one would not only hear but also feel in one's body if one were standing anywhere in the city. It was a sound which any visitor to the city would never forget her entire life, though she lived to a ripe old age.

Emeth walked toward a small door that was set in the wall very near one of the great openings of the horns. It was a simple wooden door and there were no doors close to it, and only one large window set high above the street. Emeth opened it and immediately proceeded up the very narrowest of stairways, carefully making his way up steps that had lost their edges and had been worn smooth from disciples climbing them over the years.

These stairs led to one of the four chambers of the Ruhghazalian sect, from the far West of Calormen, who were known for their piety and for being devoted to a set of esoteric desert rites in which they sought to experience Tash directly. It was for this reason that their chambers in the wall were beside the openings to the horns, in four sites around the temple. No other sect wanted this portion of the wall and the Ruhghazalians desired no other. Because from each of their main apartments they had chiseled a long series of connected compartments which paralleled and surrounded the passages that carried the sound of

horns. Each was just big enough for a single person to lie down in. And there on feast days the Ruhghazalians, with linen muffling their ears, would lay in a sort of slanted marble coffin to feel the “Breath of Tash” rumble through their bodies when the horns of Tashbaan were winded.

As Emeth entered the chamber a thin figure in white flowing robes and a thick turban that covered his entire head was sitting at a plain wooden table by the window reading a scroll. He did not seem to notice Emeth at first, but then turned and after a moment of puzzlement recognized Emeth. A broad smile lit up his entire face, pulling the wrinkles taut across his high, shining cheekbones.

“Emeth, my son, it is a delight to behold thee!” he said “But, why do thee appear in these merchant's garments?”

“Balkhi, my father. I would, for all my life, wish that I were not in these weeds. Even though in my soldier's uniform I could but hail thee from the street.”

He said this for the Ruhghazalian's, though they would let soldiers be counted amongst their number as novices, would not let soldiers complete the full rites nor permit them entry into their chambers in warrior garb. And Balkhi, the lone attendant of the chamber at the time, could not leave it in order to meet Emeth on the street until someone relieved him.

They both then sat on cushions of deep blue silk against the outer wall and Emeth told Balkhi of as much of his perplexity of heart and mind over his impending mission as he felt he could honorably do, though he would trust him with his very life.

Balkhi, however, was wise and also had heard the surmises of the astrologers and the rumors of furtive preparations being made for war.

“And, so, at last the Tisroc moves against Narnia and the North. And, you, my son, may finally meet your destiny.”

Feeling he no longer had to hide anything, Emeth said, “‘Tis as you say, my father. We travel first to the courts of Anvard and then into the heart of Narnia. I may not seek vengeance upon my first visit to Anvard, but when my tasks are done in Narnia I will return and seek how best I may avenge my house.”

“Emeth, oh my son, beware and consider that, truly, vengeance is a dish when eaten does not satisfy.”

“Is it not right then for me to seek to avenge my house from betrayal? Or, if not that, to at least take the glory and vengeance of Tash into the Northern lands?” Emeth asked in return.

“It is not mine to say how to satisfy the desires of thy heart, but I hope that thou mayst find the truth of all that I have tried to convince thee of over the course of our long friendship.”

Emeth did not answer, but only looked down in anger.

“We do not know the posture of the queen’s heart toward her former land,” Balkhi continued, “But there are intimations that she never completely forgot us. And it was written by one of our brothers who saw her son Ram the Great, a prince he was then, when he came in force to the Oasis of the Northern Desert to repel the Tisroc Rehabdin that he looked long toward the South toward Tashbaan and that his visage was not one of hatred.”

“Yes, and that conquest only added to our shame,” Emeth spat out.

“Nay, my son,” soothed Balkhi, “It is well known among the wise that he took the Oasis not from malice but to forestall the advances of Rehabdin who had secretly built up an army and was bent on revenge, almost before his father Rabadash had taken the boat journey to the Tombs of the Ancient Kings. And Ram took it only for a time.”

“But how can you speak of the queen’s heart, black heart as it must have been,” Emeth said, his face distorted.

“My sweet son,” Balkhi softly spoke, “It is only when we speak of this does the Breath of Tash falter in thy breast, that the light of his inner face dims. That it distorts into the image that the low ascribe to our Lord, the rotting grasping bird-god.”

“Is that not him then, too, the bloody god who cries vengeance! What of justice?”

“It is only the base who see him so,” Balkhi replied.

“But what of the blood? Thou hast often told me that however cruel and ostentatious the sacrifices, there is something in the shedding of blood.”

“Aye, there is that. The poor beasts take our blame. But thou well knowest that is but the beginning of our journey, the journey that many miss who view it as the ending.”

Emeth stood silent with a furrowed brow and a hand cradling his bearded chin.

“Do thee not see that the pursuit of virtue pleaseth our Lord Tash, to which so many pay no heed?,” Balki continued, “Have thee not felt his burning love in night visions in the desert? His golden, burning love?”

“Aye, there is that,” Emeth responded with a dreamy voice, “but, forsooth, each time I am enveloped in love, each time it appears I am about to see him face to face as one sees a friend, there is a confusion swirling of golden light. And I am once again left alone in the desert. Why should it be so?”

“It is a mystery, indeed,” his friend replied and then added, “The time for the horns draws nigh, dear Emeth, wouldst thou lie in the Chambers of Breath.”

“Alas, nay. Though still in these merchant weeds, my soldiers duty calls me.”

“Then, go, my friend, with the blessing of Tash, seeking to carry out his will, however dim it may seem to thee at present.” he said.

The old man rose and placed both hands on Emeth's head and blessed him and then clasped him in a fatherly embrace.

Emeth then made his way down the narrow stairs and toward his barracks in the city's Western district with the sun setting into the desert before him and glinting off of the gilded dome of the Temple of Tash at his back as the great horns began to sound.

# Chapter 3 - By the Tombs of the Ancient Kings

Emeth awoke and met Ramseef in the store room of the Western barracks. It was their last morning in Tashbaan; perhaps one of the last mornings they might ever have in Calormen. They ate a quick breakfast of flat bread and garlicky sausage and washed it down with wine. They put on their merchant garb over their soldier's clothes and made their way down a street that zigzagged to the Northwest corner of the city, West of the palace walls which stretched down to the channel of the river which flowed to the North of Tashbaan. Looking East he saw the temple of Tash silhouetted against the rising sun with the edges of its silver dome gleaming like the edges of the moon in an eclipse. Emeth turned and raised his hands and whispered, "For Tash the inexorable," before turning down the street.

From a small guarded gate they entered a turret at the intersection of the palace wall and the walls of Tashbaan. From there they exited to a small guarded landing by the river and climbed into a skiff and rowed into the current.

Emeth looked along the river toward the Northwest and thought of how he had been at its headwaters only that Spring, far away where the deserts ended in a rugged but beautiful land which pushed up against the mountains that separated Calormen and Telmar. It was even more likely that he would never see Jawahar again and jewel-like stars in the spare sky above the mountains. He would never see Lazuli again. Kidrash had called her the jewel of Jawahar for her beauty, and so she was, but for

Emeth the glint of her beauty had shone more brightly from recesses that Kidrash did not have the eyes to see. His heart ached.

The river, however, did not flow in that direction and he turned to look over his shoulder to make sure they did not miss the pier of the Tombs of the Ancient Kings. But before that pier there was another which held for Emeth even more personal import, though in his busy soldier's life he had never had a chance to visit it. He paused his rowing and Ramseef did as well and they floated by rough, dilapidated boards of a neglected pier. It was not a place held in honor.

Catching his long glance Ramseef asked, "What is yonder pier, my lord, and why is it thus debased?"

Emeth took some time to answer and then did so slowly, "The pier, Ramseef, is for the Tombs of the Estranged. Dost thou know their import?"

Ramseef was quiet for a moment and then answered, "I do my lord."

As every soldier who had entered under Emeth's command, he had heard of the disgrace in which his family was held. Upon coming to know him as a stern though judicious captain, though, he had almost completely forgotten that stain. He was a kindly lord, especially to those unjustly used.

"My brothers were each worthy soldiers," Emeth said quietly, "And the youngest, the best man I have known."

They floated on for a few more silent seconds and Emeth added, "But now let us put our backs into rowing or we will miss our target and float toward the bridge."

They had pulled on the oars with gusto and in a few moments were tied up to a smooth, well-tended pier of marble arches, with the river gurgling between them. It was clean and well-guarded but it was seldom used, for it was the pier for the road to the Tombs of the Ancient Kings and was only used when a Tisroc had died. At those times it would be lined with soldiers and the nearby bridge from Tashbaan would be crowded with people straining to see the ornate funeral barge make its way from the Tisroc's garden walls to the pier.

On this day only one sailor from the Tisroc's navy met them and tied up their skiff. They walked up the pier and then down the road and to the right of the tombs. There at the edge of the desert was a vast abandoned house with a large courtyard. The house had been abandoned because the Tombs of the Ancient Kings had crept ever closer to it along with their rumored ghouls. But if any of the men were afraid of the reasons the house had been abandoned, none of them dared show it. At roll call several days earlier Riishda Tarkaan had heaped scorn on such superstitions and threatened anyone exhibiting cowardice with being buried up to his head in the sand right in the midst of the tombs.

In the courtyard, there were other soldiers disguised as merchants and also some desert nomads who would guide their wains across the desert. It was not a large force, for this was only to be an advance on the division that Rishda would lead once a toehold had been established, first in Archenland and then Western Wilds of Narnia.

Two of the wains were loaded with the carpets and jewels and spices which they were expected to have as merchants. Another was loaded with supplies to cross the desert. But the bed of each wagon had not one but two floors, with a gap of six inches in between them, which could be cleverly hidden with a wide board nailed on the end.

As Emeth approached, a soldier shouted to him, “My Lord, the joists between the boards will allow no scimitars to be stowed, but only these long spears and these accursed straight Narnian blades.”

He and another soldier were placing weapons and mail in the spaces between the floors of a wain.

Emeth replied, “The weapon master has assured us that we will be most grateful for long spears in Narnia until our main force arrives, to stay well away from flashing tusks and horns and the spiked boots of Giants.”

The blood seemed to drain from the soldiers’ faces as they heard of weapons of some of the rumored inhabitants of the Northern lands. They had long heard of fierce men and Talking Beasts and Giants and a great demon in the shape of a lion who ruled them all.

“Yes, you do well to be sober. But we will prevail,” Emeth continued. “And when Rishda Tarkaan arrives, we will dispose of these weeds of deception and carry our scimitars with honor. Then it will be the Narnians who will fear.”

After all had been placed in the secret compartments, a heavy plank had been nailed to the back of each double floorboard which was vigorously rubbed with mud and sand so as to appear of one piece with the wagon. In the back of the wagon itself the soldiers piled rich carpets wrapped in coarse cloth for protection against the desert sands. And then there were small chests of silks and spices and carbuncles and emeralds.

The horses, too, had to be disguised as best as could be managed. Only the smallest of war horses were selected and their manes unbraided to give them a common look. It was ruse that would ill fool a true horse

master, but they meant to camp outside of Anvard and so Emeth hoped that it would do.

"Praise be to Tash," Emeth had breathed quietly when he learned that his own lithe mare Alizeh had been deemed fit to go. Of his father's stable, she had carried him into countless battles and had saved his life more than once.

Though he directed the tasks of the soldiers with great care and the general excitement and energy of the troop rose, Emeth's heart was still not in it. Despite Rishda Tarkaan's argument that deception in the service of a war was a lie that bore no dishonor, Emeth could not countenance this deception in that way—to have to play a part, the part of a guest in another land no less, to offer words of supplication and receive welcome only to betray it went against all customs of hospitality.

Emeth was roused from his dark reveries by a strong slap on his back. "So, my young Tarkaan. I see that thou made thy way out of the labyrinthine alley ways of the carpet district. Did thou emerge a merchant?" Rishda Tarkaan bellowed.

"I emerged a soldier still, my lord," Emeth replied, "but I will be obedient."

"When hast thou ever not been," Rishda replied.

Another hour passed in securing skins of water on the horses and arranging the caravan. Then Rishda Tarkaan his rode war charger to the head of the caravan and gave a proud and cruel speech.

"Now, warriors, go to prepare the way for the armies of the Tisroc! Young Tarkaan Emeth will go to Anvard to tell them that our merchants are in the land, to dull their wits. Then you will on to Narnia to meet our Narnian ally

to complete our schemes. And, then, by the glory of Tash, I will arrive with our main force and thou may uncloak. Then thou may kill. Then thou may take. Then through surprise and swift action we will take, in the Barbarians' own words, Narnia and the North!," he ended with his armed raised and a shout.

With no shields or scimitars to beat together in response as was their custom, the soldiers in merchant garb stomped their feet, raising clouds of dust, and mockingly jeered again and again, "Narnia and the North! Narnia and the North!"

## Chapter 4 - Beauty in the Night - Jawahar

Emeth awoke. There was a rustle of breeze in the palm trees above him as the wind rose from the desert. He stood and walked toward the pool near the spring of the Oasis. He greeted the sentry on its Western edge and talked a little of the long ride across the desert that day. Then he walked out a little way farther where there was a cluster of three palm trees a little apart from the heart of the oasis. He sat with his back to the largest and faced the West.

The waxing moon was nearly full and was descending down the clear sky. Its light lit the cold desert with a pale light. Each tussock and scrubby plant had a sharp black shadow. And far from the dust and smoke of Tashbaan, that did not even fully clear at night, the stars, too, burned brightly. For Emeth night in the desert under the stars had often been time for deep contemplation, but this clear night reminded him of a night of longings less ethereal, but equally intense. As he sat, whether in sleep or waking, he slipped into the memories which brought him equal measures of joy and pain.

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It was Jehanshah Night, celebrated everywhere in Calormen, but especially in Jawahar where the stars shone especially clearly over the rugged mountains. A large banquet had been celebrated with food from all over Calormen. There was stuffed peafowl from Azimbalda and whole roast wild boar hunted in the marshes of Zalindreh and a great fish caught from the swift River Cherapani that ran from the mountains and through Jawahar. And for desserts there were all manner of cold sweet

things—custards and fools and creamy pistachio ices—for Jawahar was one of the few places in Calormen that regularly received snow and ice. All winter long the Tarkaan's slaves packed deep tunnels and wells with pressed snow and ice carved from the river which they covered in straw for use throughout the Summer and into the the Autumn.

Emeth had attended the banquet with Rishda Tarkaan. After dinner they had joined the party as they went up the grand stairs to the rooftop for the final ceremonies of the night, the story-telling and poetry. They could go up to the rooftop for all roofs in Calormen are flat. And the roofs of palaces are bordered with low walls interrupted at regular intervals with ornate pillars.

This night the star named by the Calormenes as Jehanshah, the King of the World, was burning brightly. The seers and astrologers had said it had not burned this brightly for 2000 years and it portended great victories for Calormen.

Emeth had been disappointed that the traditional story for Jehanshah Night which told of his conquest of the universe with the twin swords of Justice and Love was not told that night. Instead, a series of storytellers told stories of famous battles of sundry Tisrocs' throughout the history of Calormen. And as the night wore on their voices grew ever heated. And each at the end of his tale, for they were all men, turned toward Rishda Tarkaan with both hands raised and shouted. "All glory to the Tisroc and his mighty armies! All glory to Tash the Inexorable!" And each time Rishda Tarkaan had tilted his head ever so slightly in thanks to the storyteller, a thin smile on his lips.

Emeth had known Rishda for many years. He had thought that he was not as proud and greedy as other Tarkaans. Emeth saw that he was judicious in his bloodletting and in his treatment of his captured foes. He distributed the spoils of war more generously than most, and his name was little heard

in palace gossip, the intrigues and schemes to gain power and influence with the Tisroc to amass more lands and power. He was not particularly pious, but neither was he hypocritical.

However over the last few months, Emeth had begun to notice small signs that seemed to show that there was perhaps more ambition in Rishda Tarkaan than he had believed. That night as the storytellers spoke on and on, he saw his eyes in the glow of the torches and saw in them an almost ravenous gleam which he had never seen before.

At long last the storytellers had made an end and a poet began. Rishda had turned to Emeth. His manner now was as it always was toward Emeth, a sort of genial gruffness that showed that he admired, perhaps even loved, the young Tarkaan. He also had the tendency to gently mock what he deemed to be an overly serious outlook in one so young.

“Emeth, I care little for these love songs for the moon and stars and Tash himself,” he said,. “but I know that they are dear to thine heart and so thou may stay on.”

Then smiling a much more pleasant smile than earlier, he added, “I will also tell thee, my young Lord, that by yonder parapet beside the mountains, there is a view that is not to be missed. But mind thee that I still expect to see thee at the roll call on the morrow.”

Others evidently had the same tastes as Rishda and a great exodus was taking place toward the broad opening of the staircase, with only a few groups of devotees moving in closer to the empty divans. This poet seated cross-legged on the cushions of the dais was especially gifted and instead of simple recitation he had committed the poem to song. And in between each stanza a man with a Calormene flute sitting slightly behind the poet played a plaintive refrain that was alternately piercing and lilting. Both the song and melody of the flute created a sense of wide empty spaces in the

minds of the hearers, spaces above a desert at night. They seemed to speak of wandering and restlessness and of solitude.

The singer was just getting to the stanza about the severe beauty of the moon, when Emeth remembered Rishda's words and looked to the Northwest, and there in the corner of the roof which faced the narrow valley at the intersection of the feet of two mountains, was a brazier of burning wood and four low couches set in a square around it. And above, in the empty space between the mountains, hung the moon itself, cold and pristine. Outside of its bright halo and above the jagged ridges of the mountains, bright stars burned against the blackness.

He moved toward the corner of the roof and as he walked the melody seemed to follow him and fill his heart with joy. It melded with a sweet smell of incense which was coming from the fire in the brazier. He was looking up as he walked, and so it was not until he was almost by the corner that he saw that one of the couches held a reclining figure which seemed to be covered with a shapeless cloth.

"Tarkheena Lazuli!" Emeth suddenly exclaimed in recognition, "My lady, a thousand pardons. I could not see that thou sat here. I will depart."

"Nay, do not depart, my Lord," Lazuli replied while continuing to recline. "This song, though lovely, is proving too melancholy for my heart. Stay awhile and speak some mirth."

"My lady, I will stay, as thee bid. But as for mirth my heart is sunk too deep in the marrow of the song to speak too soon in mirth. Do thee not feel it?"

"I do feel its pull," she answered softly, "But I do not know towards what, toward joy or sorrow. And I dare not plum its depths, like yonder cold swift stream below, or soar with it to the cold heavens above."

“Truly, my lady, thou hast the poet’s tongue,” he answered with surprise, “but to truly know the song thou must dive in; thou must leap up into it. There is no way else.”

“Will thou not sit and tell me what thou hast found in its heights and depths?” she asked him.

“My lady, as one of the Tisroc’s men at arms, it would not be seemly for me to sit and stay to speak with thee in this place.”

“But art thou not also a Tarkaan’s son, and as such my equal? May we not freely converse as friends, as might any two of our heritage?” she asked quickly. “And yonder sits my old nursemaid and the night watchmen plying their gurgling water pipe. There is no impropriety.”

“Yet, even so my lady. I would stand awhile.”

“Well, then stand, if thou wishest, until the Tarkaan steps out from the soldier. But please speak with me whilst standing. This song, why do thee love it so?”

Emeth stood silent for a long time gazing at the moon. Then without looking down he spoke softly, “The words of the song are about the moon and its cold severe beauty above the desert. That is a beauty that aches. Hast thou never felt the pain of such a beauty, Tarkheena?”

“Yes, I have,” she answered softly. “Though I have never seen the moon above the desert, I feel such an ache when I see it here above the mountains. I have felt it, too, when I have gone up on the shoulders of the great mountain and heard the wind rushing through the pines.”

“Doubtless the poet would have seen the same beauty here and written such into his song,” Emeth answered, “It is the same. But he was a Rhughazalian of the Western desert who it seems had never traveled from his own land to see beauties elsewhere.”

Then more softly he added, "It is the ache that is more important than the beauty that elicits it. It is an ache that beauty alone can never satisfy. Dost thou know what that ache is for?"

It was now she who remained silent for some time.

"I...I do not know," she hesitated. "When I was a young girl, I used to visit one of my father's watchmen, who was an old man even then. We would stand on the walls facing the mountains and he would talk of such things."

"He said," she continued, "That it was the Beauty of Tash."

She hesitated for a longer pause. Emeth remained silent.

"But it's...it's just that everything about Tash and his house and his ways seems so different from that ache," she continued.

"And Alzamath would also tell me of ways about treating others and keeping one's word and so many other things that were...," she paused. "Well, they differed so much from that which the Pinion of Tash would teach."

"And then there are the sacrifices...and so much blood." She faltered.

After a few moments, Emeth began, "Yes. I, too, have had such thoughts. I, too, have all my life sought to put those two halves together."

"My grandfather was of the same sect of Tash as the singer of the song, along with many others in my town of Tehishbaan," he continued. "They make long journeys into the desert. They say that it is there in the desert that they find the beauty and essence of Tash, but that in the city he must appear fierce and cruel to match the cruelty of the Tarkaans."

Lazuli looked at him intently as he spoke.

“Others say that the Tarkaans have created a Tash in their own likeness and of their own liking,” he went on. “And some Rhughazalians therefore reject the bloody sacrifices.”

He paused and then went on, “Though some of the wisest I have known, say that it is not so. That sacrifice is part of true belief. They see in them the symbol of something deeper, which they say has been marred.”

“And art thou nigh to placing the two halves together, Emeth, into one truth?” she asked, “If I may call thee by thy name?”

“Thou may, indeed,” he answered.

“And then so, too, must thee call thee by my name,” she replied quickly.

Feeling this a lapse in decorum this flustered Emeth, but he responded, “To answer thy question, Lazuli—as thou wilt have it,” he said, calling her by her name alone for the first time, “I have not. I have sat under the teaching of the Rhughazalians and learned many wise truths. I have made all of the prescribed journeys wherein I have seen the beauty of Tash, But also there is this. When I am closest to feeling that I am in his presence, that I will see the unmasked visage of Tash, suddenly my mind’s eye is filled with a confusion of golden light and then the vision fades and there is nothing more. And when I come into the city and into the temples, there is nothing to cling to but obedience to the teachings.”

“And, so, art thou, too, a, how is that though sayest it,” Lazuli asked, “a Ruhghazalian?”

“Alas, no,” he answered. “I have never completed the final rites. Soldiers are not permitted. And as doth thou, I too ask how could Tash, the all-seeing, allow the teachings of so many of his Pinions to be so debased? How could he let the Tarkaans behave with such abhorrence?”

And then, too, there is that confusion of golden light in which all my visions end which bewilders me.”

“A confusion of golden light,” Lazuli repeated a little dreamily.

“I can say it no more plainly,” he replied.”But at the very cusp of my deepest joy I do not see Tash. And so I seek him ever more fervently.”

“And what of the Pinions,” Lazuli asked, “Hast thou found any to help thee in thy bewilderment?”

“The Pinion of Tehishbaan when I was young,” he began, “was a far more upright man than most, perhaps because the Rhughazalians were so nearby. When he performed the sacrifices, he restrained the luxury and extreme bloodthirst of the people as best he could. And once he tried to explain to me the importance of the blood from the sacrifices. But I did not understand. And, now, the more I see of sacrifices, especially the chaos around the Temple of Tash, the more it makes me wonder.”

“Truly thou wert well named,” Lazuli answered, “‘Truth’ is what thy name means, is it not?”

“It does, indeed,” he answered, “It was the gift of my mother, in addition to the gift of my very life.”

He paused and then added softly, “She died soon after bestowing both.”

“I am very sorry, Emeth,” Lazuli answered. And then added, “It was a beautiful gift.”

They both stayed silent for a while and then Lazuli said in a tone with some insistence, perhaps even some command, “Please sit on yonder divan, Emeth. I promise that I will not stay much longer, perchance the half part of the hour. But I can have thou stand no longer. Stay and be the Tarkaan

for a mere trifle of time. And then thou mayst return to the soldier and escort me to the stairs.”

“I will submit,” Emeth answered and sat, but only on the edge of the couch with his legs bent to stand at a moment’s notice.

They sat in silence for some time both gazing upward, then Emeth lowered his eyes and saw that her deep blue eyes, unusual even in the Northern climes of Calormen, were lined in black in the Calormene fashion and stared unblinking back at him. They were framed by the hem of a dark blue woolen shawl shimmering with silver thread which she clasped with her hand just above her breast, with her namesake jewels in a necklace of silver at her throat. She was beautiful.

He held his gaze steady and began softly, “My lady, as thou have given me the freedom to be my own man for the moment, I will speak with thee while I may.”

“Yes,” she answered softly.

“Well know then, Lazuli, Tarkheena of Jawahar, that though I have known thee only for the better part of a fortnight, were I a man who might follow the choosings of my heart, after my duty done, I would follow them back to Jawahar to treat with thee more.” He said the last words very low with his voice breaking ever so slightly.

“And, I for my part, Emeth of Tehishbaan, would welcome thee at the end of that choosing,” she answered, her eyes glimmering, “But why may thee not call it merely a delayed choosing? Surely the Tisroc cannot keep thee on thy soldier’s duty forever.”

“Even if I were free,” he began, “My family’s shame...”

“Thou must surely know, Emeth, how I despise such despising,” she answered softly.

“No,” he interrupted in a troubled tone, “It is for the shame that I go, though I may not speak more. I go to avenge my family against my family. To remove the stain.”

His face appeared to harden before Lazuli, though it seemed to her more like the face of an aggrieved young boy who has been hurt than that of a man.

She paused and then asked firmly but gently, “But when the shame is avenged, if avenged it must be, will not the hurt too be healed?”

Now he only stared down into the depths of fire and could not answer. He did not know whether he would return at all. Suddenly he rose, the soldier once again replacing the Tarkaaan.

“Tarkheena Lazuli, I beg to be excused.”

Lazuli, too, rose casting back her shawl and made to move around the brazier toward him.

“Nay, my lady, please,” he said with insistence, “Please.” He could say no more.

They stood with a silence between them, with the dull roar of the river thrumming from the valley below. Then Emeth broke the gaze of their eyes, bent his body in a deep bow, and turned toward the stairs.

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Emeth did not know whether his eyes had been open or closed, but once again they took in the desert surrounding the Oasis. The moon had slipped beneath the horizon and all was dim and grey.