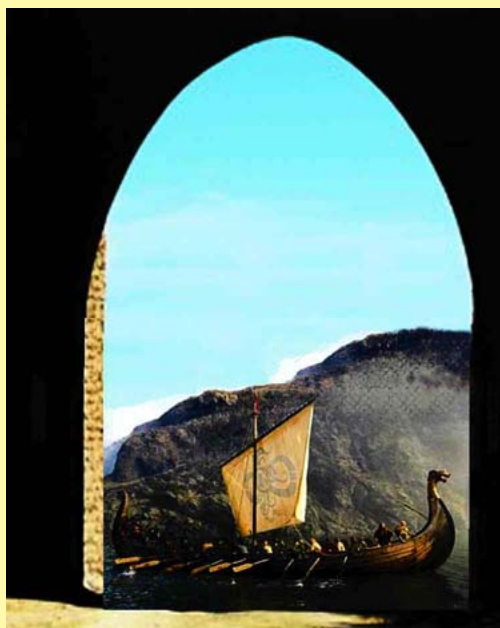


At the Eastern Gate



Daniel McCaffrey

AT THE EASTERN GATE

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Nomenclature

I found it difficult to decide which of the many names historical persons and states should be called in the modern world.

For instance the Byzantines called themselves the Romans. To a modern reader the name Byzantines would be more recognisable.

The realms of Charlemagne remained a Kingdom until a few months after the time covered by this book when it became the Holy Roman Empire.

Varangians was the name of the Swedish Vikings who traded and controlled Northern Russia and who traded with the Khazars. They used that name when they formed a bodyguard for the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. Modern readers would know them better as the Vikings.

Andalusians is the name they applied to themselves in the time covered by this story. It remains the name of the beautiful province of Spain They are more commonly known in modern times as the Moors.

I have used the term miles for distance being the Roman mile of 1000 paces. I am open to suggestions as to changes.

At The Beginning

Chapter 1

As Aalim squinted into the sun and looked back down the dusty road at the four men, horses and mules that were in his charge the words of Al-Hakam son of Hisham, grandson of Abd al Rahman, Emir of Andalusia rang in his ears.

“It will be a hard task Aalim, a hard task but interesting.”

The conversation with his lord and master had been life changing.

Then, he, Aalim Rahel was librarian of the library of Cordoba, the Emir’s pride, the finest library in the world. That was a few days ago.

Now he was charged by his Emir to go to the end of the earth to see if he could influence the trade of the northern world and the fate of a people no one he knew had ever spoken to.

As he had walked over the soft carpet to the Emir’s salon that morning he had expected to deliver his usual report.

A chat about new books that might interest the Emir, some intelligence on the state of the book trade and relaying the gossip about the world outside Andalusia that might be important to the Emirate.

There were only five libraries in the world in this year of 800 AD and it was his pride that none was as beautiful or held

more books than the 400,000 he had under his care.

He walked past the sentries standing outside.

“Good morning Aalim,” said the Emir, “All is well?”

“All is well my lord,” said Aalim bowing low.

“You have a good life Aalim,” said the Emir. ”The pleasure of reading the thoughts of men wiser than both of us and the time to think about what they are saying.”

“It is pleasant my lord,” he had said to the Emir.

“Aalim have I told you that I sleep more secure at night knowing we have the knowledge of the world at our fingertips. The intelligence in your books guards these walls as much as my soldiers.”

Aalim was flattered.

His books guarded the Kingdom. He hadn't looked on it in that light before. It was best to be cautious in conversation with the Emir. A little small talk and some idle chatter before the real nature of the business at hand was revealed.

Alarmingly on that occasion the Emir had come straight to the point.

The Emir was a dark thickset man and when he asked a question he had a habit of raising his left eyebrow in a pronounced manner. Unknown to the Emir the fashion of the raised eyebrow had caught on in the city of Cordoba. When some emphatic statement was made the eyebrow was raised.

It had spread to have another meaning, an expression of questioning disbelief. On that occasion both eyebrows were raised, slightly.

As the grandson of the legendary Al Rahman, and with the power of life and death over most of Spain, his quizzical eyebrows were keenly attended to in Cordoba.

“I have concerns Aalim that will change your pleasant life,” said the Emir. “They may even involve you in some risk and discomfort.”

“Indeed my lord,” said Aalim.

“Tarig will join us for a few moments,” said the Emir

He gestured to one of the servants who stood at strategic points around the walls of the large room.

The servant ushered in the resplendent white robed figure of Tarig el Rum, foreign advisor to the Emir.

Tarig was a frequent visitor to the library, always with searching and obscure questions that he thought a book might have the answer to. He was brusque, direct and busy, quick to the point and pleased with good answers.

Tarig bowed to the Emir, nodded to Aalim and took his seat. .

Aalim’s normally exclusive chat with the Emir had veered so far from its usual course that it was starting to worry him.

The Emir in a brisk mood was one thing. Combined with the busy all together no nonsense Tarig in attendance it was becoming disconcerting.

“Tarig please give Aalim your summary of events that you gave me yesterday,” said the Emir

“In my report to the Emir yesterday Aalim, I raised some opportunities that we might investigate which could possibly be greatly to our profit.”

They sat in the city of Cordova at the hill edges of the valley of the Guadalquivir.

To the west, south and east on the wide plain of the Guadalquivir were fields wheat, rye, and barley, and olive trees irrigated by waterwheels.

A few miles north of the city low mountains shielded them from the upland plains of a fertile and bounteous country.

The Emir’s domain comprised all of Spain north to the rivers Douro and Ebro.

The conquest eighty years ago had taken three years. After that a squabbling political entity had ruled Spain with no ruler lasting more than three years.

Fifty years ago the Emir’s grandfather Abd Al-Rahman had transformed the Emirate and Cordoba and created the nearest place to paradise on earth.

A prince of the Ummayyads he had fled Syria when the Abassids dynasty had taken over the reins of the Caliphate in Damascus.

Arriving alone in Spain he had fused Jews, Berbers, Catholics and Orthodox, Arabs and muwalladun into a nation that lived with each other in spite of their differences.

Everyone in El Rahman's Cordoba lived in their own separate worlds. Sephardic apothecaries, Visigoth blacksmiths, and Greek surgeons and plied their trade in the courtyards off the narrow streets.

He was fond of trade and brought the first date palms, lemons, limes, and grapefruit, as well as almonds, apricots, saffron, and henna to the Emirate. In the central market merchants sold Persian carpets, Damascus metalware, China silks, fine leather, jewellery and slaves.

He built the great Mosque at Cordoba, and not many steps away were the public baths.

The new city of Baghdad was reputed to be a place of beauty and wonder. Nevertheless it was accepted by the known world that Cordoba held the honour of being the world's most beautiful and civilised city.

Tarig continued.

“Before I discuss the potential prospects we might have I need outline the current situation so that when we come to the possibilities on offer they will make more sense to you.”

“I make no apologies for what will be a lengthy presentation.”

He snapped his fingers to a servant by the door and a large map was produced and placed on the small table between them.

“Our principal enemy is Charlemagne. It is twenty years since we defeated him at Saragossa and Roncevalles and chased him out of Spain.”

“Since then he has united the lands in the north east, Gerona, Cardona, Ausona, and Urgel into what he calls the ‘Spanish March’ with Dukes in charge of each.”

Tarig pointed to the small Dukedoms north of Barcelona.

“Duke is a nice sounding title of respectability for a collection of freebooters, ennobled bandits and well born ruffians who he hopes will defend their lands without him having to spend money sending an army to hold them fast.”

“Across this part of our frontier,” said Tarig, moving his finger to the westward side of northern Spain.

“The Basques, well what can you say about the Basques. They still boast about sacking Charlemagne’s baggage train at Roncesvalles twenty years ago.”

“The Galician’s are still the Galician’s in their watery mountains. Their Celtic enthusiasm for battle and their geography make them impossible to conquer. The Asturians remain as awkward as ever. They still boast about the battle of Covadonga.”

“None of these small boastful kingdoms have disturbed us of late and they are unlikely to do so without backing from the Franks.”

“As an aside instead of sending armies the Franks are sending priests to a conference in Toledo. To debate one of their indeterminable religious disputes over their triangular God.”

“There is always going to be disputes when you triangulate God don’t you think.”

“We have allowed them safe passage through the Emirate. Arguing priests are not as much risk as an army.”

“In summary we have a stable frontier along the rivers Ebro and the Douro and there is no sign of Charlemagne gathering armies on the other side of the Pyrenees.”

“Last year Charlemagne captured Corsica, Sardinia and the Balearics. It is a disturbing development but I share my lord’s view that it poses no threat to us. We are losing little, and they are gaining less.”

“Over here on the other side of his Kingdom Charlemagne is in continual battle with the Saxons. He might claim to have conquered and converted them but they are still fighting. He continues his war with the Wends. He has an army in Croatia and is still fighting in southern Italy.”

Tarig traced his finger along the eastern boundaries of the Frankish lands.

“His busyness is our best defence. He is digesting his conquest of the Avars on the Danube and digesting the vast quantities of gold he took from them.”

“Charlemagne has been waging war continually for 20 years. He has to fight constant wars. He needs the gold he gets from conquest to keep those fighting lords of his under his obligation and control. The horses of his armies have shoes of iron and the stirrups are made of the same material. They are formidable.”

“The most startling news is that the Pope, Leo III has fled Rome. It is said the Roman nobility tried to cut off his tongue

and gouge out his eyes. Appears they didn't like a commoner as Pope, charming people."

"Have you heard anything of this Aalim," asked Tarig?

"I cannot say I have," replied Aalim

"It is quite astonishing," said Tarig.

"He was been taken north by one of Charlemagne's lords, Magnus Forteman the Frisian, so he has kept his eyes and tongue and is safe in Charlemagne's hands."

"That said I suspect the Pope will return to Rome wrapped in the arms of Charlemagne."

"One thing is certain, Charlemagne will not have anyone threaten his Italian conquests from the Lombard's and will probably use the Pope to legitimise his possessions in Northern Italy. What he can or will do to the Byzantines in southern Italy remains to be seen."

"He has been a busy man Charlemagne. In general his present battles are on his eastern and southern fronts and we have been put to one side. Long may it last."

"Any question or concerns Aalim," asked Tarig.

"None I can think of just now," said Aalim.

It had all been a bit sudden. He had come to his usual consultation with the Emir not a discussion on world affairs.

He found himself enjoying Tarig's succinct canter around the geopolitics of the realms beyond Andalusia.

His recital of affairs gathered in the world and wrapped it into an understandable bundle of sense and understanding. Collation and analysis by an expert was refreshing.

Tarig continued.

“In the Byzantine Empire events remain puzzling. The Basileus Constantine the fourth of his name has been killed by his mother sent packing and the world has to deal with his mother, Irene.”

“She seems to be making a good fist of the being an Empress and continues to hold the eastern frontier against the Caliphate. Where armies don’t succeed she pays gold.”

Speaking of the Caliphate his blessed eminence Harun Al-Rashid our lord Caliph in Baghdad is happy to ignore our existence. He has not forgiven us for being Ummayyads and we have to live with the fact that an Abbassid usurper has taken our rightful inheritance.”

“However trade continues freely. Travellers to the Hajj tell us that he is making no progress against the Byzantines, The Caliph’s concerns are on his northern frontiers.”

“You will recall that his blessed eminence defeated the Chinese empire in the northeast fifty years ago at the battle of Talus River, north of Tashkent.”

“Incidentally Aalim it seems that one of the prisoners from that battle gave Harun el Rashid the recipe for making a cheap form of papyrus out of rags, called paper.”

“Shops in Baghdad are selling this ‘paper’. It is better and

cheaper than parchment or papyrus. You should get supplies of this 'paper', Aalim, it may change the world of books."

"I will certainly look into it," said Aalim.

He could sense Tarig burnishing his reputation with the Emir at his expense. It must be handy to have spies everywhere. Knowledge arrived in books so much slower than through the spoken word.

The Emir listened patiently to what he had heard the day before. He raised his hand to one of the servants standing by the wall and cold orange drinks were produced. Tarig sipped a quick drink and continued.

"The situations I have described so far look as though they will stay static for sometime, at least as far as the Emirate is concerned."

"They pose no threat to us and offer no opportunities."

"There is however one place that might offer us a chance to increase trade and change circumstances to our advantage."

"You see it has not been all victories for the Caliph. The armies of Harun el Rashid have been stopped here at the Caucasus. The people who defeated the Caliphate and blocked their advance are the Khazars."

"Their lands are here," said Tarig, pointing to the map.

"They hold the northern shores of the Black Sea, the Crimea, the Don Basin and the vast impenetrable forests that extend north up the Volga to the rim of the world."

“You might say what could it possibly matter to Andalusia what happens in the obscure far distant Empire of the Khazars.”

“Their importance lies here,” he said jabbing at two lines on the map.”

“These are the northern and southern Silk Roads. It was from your books in the library Aalim that I learned the struggle over these roads going back to Roman times.”

“The Caliph controls the southern branch of the Silk Road. He takes the trade that arrives at Baghdad from Persia, China and India and doles what pleases him to the traders of the Mediterranean. We in Andalusia get the runt’s portion.”

“However, take a look at the Northern Silk Road. It comes over the top of the Caliph’s lands above the Caspian Sea and ends at the capital of the Khazars, Atil, on the great river, the Volga. The Khazars control the Northern Silk Road.”

“All trade from the Northern Silk Road enters the city of Atil by the Eastern Gate.”

“The Khazars trade freely with all comers, Byzantines, Muslims of the Caliphate, peoples of the Danube, traders from the east, for a fee of ten per cent.”

“Now to the opportunity that might be on offer.”

“You see there is a new factor in the equation, a people called the Varangians.”

“We know nothing about these Varangians. They come from the North, from the dense woodlands and frozen wastes of the world’s rim, out of nowhere.”

“What we know is that the Varangians trade down this great river, the Volga, from the Baltic to the Eastern Gate at Atil.”

Tarig ran his finger down the map along the Volga.

“The appearance of the Varangians changes matters radically. What if the trade that the Varangians have established at the Eastern Gate was available to us?”

“Is it possible for us to trade with these Varangians in the Northern Sea?”

“I have suggested to the Emir that we need to meet the Varangians. Like us they are traders. We need to see if they would trade with us. If they will then we in Andalusia could get around the high and mighty control of the Silk Road held by our esteemed Caliph.”

“The Varangians might provide us with a link between these two places, from here in the Baltic to the end of the Silk Road at the mouth of the Volga.”

“I can see you thinking Aalim that these places are so far away that there is little we could do to influence matters.”

Aalim felt he was being used as a rhetorical foil by Tarig but no matter. The presentation must be coming to a point soon.

“So the Varangians are the first new factor which might give us a whole new bounty of trade possibilities.”

“The second new factor, Aalim,” said Tarig. “Is that the King of Khazar is going to change his religion and that of his people.”

There was a long pause. Aalim began to digest the idea that a King could change the religion of an empire.

“What religion do these people have at present,” he asked, stalling for time while he examined the implications.

“They believe in a multiplicity of Gods bequeathed by their ancestors from the mists of time,” said Tarig. “Their present religion is of no concern to anyone save themselves.”

“The important thing is that this King’s choice of religion has the potential to change the world drastically.”

“If the King of Khazar becomes a Muslim then the Caliphate will have control of both branches the Silk Road. With this religious alliance the conquering armies of El Rashid might be at the Iron Gates of the Danube in very few years.”

“If on the other hand the King of the Khazars becomes a Christian then the Northern Silk Road will be closed to us.”

“We in Andalusia will have lost an opportunity to trade with the east through the Varangians and the great river.”

“My request to the Emir is for us to contact the Varangians and do what we can to open trade with them, and, and, if possible go to the Khazars and do what we can to make sure the doors of the Eastern Gate remain open to us.”

“I am recommending to the Emir that we send an emissary

to the Varangians and if possible to the King of Khazar, to at least explore the possibilities. The first thing is to talk to the Varangians, they are the key to everything, my lord,” said Tarig addressing the Emir.

Tarig fell silent.

The Emir placed his hands together and paused.

“Thank you Tarig, most illuminating,” he said. “I agree with your advice that an investigation is worth an effort.”

“The prize is access to the Silk Road. If we are successful we could steal a march on Charlemagne by trading over the north of the world to the Eastern Gate and the silk road.”

“I have reflected on Tarig’s proposal yesterday and have decided on a quiet investigation. I have no intentions of sending a large naval excursion past Charlemagne’s domains and raising any anxiety in that quarter.”

Aalim tried not to let his trepidation show. He had been slowly coming to the conclusion that this crash course in the geo-strategic circumstances of the Emirate had been leading to something to do with him.

“When I thought of a quiet investigation I thought of a quiet man and Aalim naturally came to mind.”

“Aalim,” the Emir said, leaning forward towards Tarig and raising his eyebrow again.

“Aalim has been trading with the Irish,” said the Emir as though revealing a conspiracy.

Aalim was caught off guard. In all the whirl of commerce and the military dispositions of large empires the trade he had fostered with the Irish seemed of small importance.

He had maintained the long-standing trade with the Irish because they had an insatiable appetite for books. They had been trading with the Visigoths before the Emirate.

Most of these books came from the renegade Nestorian Christians, banished by the Byzantines to the realms of the Caliphate, into Persia, India and China.

They had thrived there for centuries establishing Bishoprics in Persia, Central Asia, Tibet, China and India.

The beneficent Caliph Harun el Rashid had followed the Moslem practice of tolerating the Nestorians after his predecessors had conquered Persia.

He had helped the book trade by establishing a transcribing centre in Baghdad, the Hall of Wisdom. Copies of the books of ancient Rome, Greece and the Christian religious texts came to Cordova across the Muslim lands of Northern Africa.

Aalim had nurtured this lucrative trade in the Nestorian trove with the Irish. It financed a small amount of the expenses of the library and gave Andalusia knowledge of the Greeks and Romans. The Christian books were of passing interest to Andalusia but keenly sought by the Irish. Besides he loved books

Aalim was pleased that the discussion had moved to an area where he had special knowledge.

“Yes this Irish trade might be most useful,” said Tarig.

“As we know for hundreds of years now the Irish have been sending preachers into the Frankish lands establishing monasteries among the barbarians,” Tarig continued

“Quite,” said the Emir, raising an eyebrow to Aalim.

“Well my lord,” said Aalim, “It is true, as you know I have been selling books and inks to the Irish. It’s a good trade.”

“They are a learned people although I am told they do not enjoy our comforts of civilisation. Great numbers of them read, write, and converse in Greek, Hebrew and Latin.”

“In all of the western world only two peoples are literate, we in Andalusia and the Irish.”

He paused. He could tell the Emir a lot more about the Irish trade but the more pressing point was what exactly the Emir wanted of him. It might be time to see if the Emir would come to the point.

“The yearly visit of my servants is due to go to Ireland soon, in early spring,” he said. “What is your lordship’s desire in the matter?”

The realisation that he might be the person who was going to do all this contacting of the Varangians and persuasion of the Khazars was coming into contemplation. Time seemed to stand still.

He sat with the Emir and Tarig in exquisite surroundings.

Flowers and herbs hung suspended around the room and from a channel in the eaves a thin film of water poured down the

gleaming sandstone walls cooling the air and wafting the scent of the herbs and flowers through the room.

The rich red carpet contrasted with the ornate calligraphy of the ceiling and blended with the scarlet cushion of the chairs. Well-dressed servants stood in attendance at the doorways and along the room's edge.

The Emir came sharply to the point.

“Aalim I desire you to leave the comforts of your library and go in person to see the Irish.”

Tarig was studiously looking at the walls.

There it was. The monthly report to the Emir had dramatically come to a changing of his world.

“If there is a chance of a trade route opening up in the northern lands above the Franks, I need someone of your abilities to quietly investigate the possibilities. Someone who has a good excuse to travel there and who will raise no suspicions among the Franks.”

“The Irish must have heard of these Varangians who live with them up there at the northern rim of the world.”

“So, Aalim, instead of sending your servants to Ireland I want you to go in person. To sell your books you understand. To sell books yes but with your eyes and ears open.”

“I would also like to see if we could somehow deal with the Khazars. As Tarig says they hold the keys to the trade doors at the Eastern Gate.”

“I need to know if these Khazars are going to align with the Byzantines or the Caliphate. If it is possible to persuade them to keep trade open with the Varangians whatever religion they decide on.”

“The establishment of trade will take time. Your travels might be the first steps in a matter, which will take years to unfold.”

“If you do meet the Varangians it might be possible for you to take this new trade route to the Eastern Gate. You might get a chance to talk to the Khazars and put the case for stability. For not upsetting the trade workings of the Eastern Gate.”

“Going to Ireland, it is an interesting idea,” mused Aalim aloud as if he had a choice in the matter.

“It will be good for you Aalim, get you out in the real world away from your books,” said Tarig.

“A summer journey among these Irish, a voyage of pleasure perhaps down to the mighty city of Atil and the Eastern Gate,” continued Tarig.

Aalim got the feeling he was rubbing it in.

“What do you know of these Irish, Aalim,” asked the Emir.

“The country is full of petty Kings living of their cattle.”

“There are numerous monasteries of Christian monks who understand Plato and Pythagoras as easily as their bibles. They have a love of knowledge not found among barbarians.”

“The Irish Monks hold high positions in Charlemagne’s

court. They transact his business write his letters. They are his learned men,” said Aalim

“On your voyage,” said the Emir, raising his eyebrow.

How swiftly a notional proposal had grown flesh and become an established fact thought Aalim.

“On your voyage I want you to bear two things in mind,” said the Emir.

His eyebrow was raised again. “Two things,” he said raising the eyebrow even higher.

“The first thing is not to give comfort to the Franks.”

“The Irish move amongst the Franks like fish in a quiet sea, educating them, advising them, turning them into Christians.”

“Do not let the knowledge of our fortifications become known to Charlemagne. He has made great conquests, this Charles the great. Now he even has the Pope in his paws.”

“The second thing is to make your enquiries discreetly. It is a delicate mission Librarian. It will bring you among men with whose habits you are not accustomed. It is not sensible to look like a spy, but we both know a wise merchant keeps his ears open.”

“I shall do my best,” said Aalim

It occurred to Aalim that no one present had any idea just how far it might be from Ireland to the Black Sea by this great river.

“It is my practice,” said Aalim, “to go to Salamanca with my servants and meet with the Rabbi Joseph.”

“With your permission I will take him into my confidence. He is an old friend, your Nagir in the city in fact, and can be trusted. His son is a Jewish trader and travels in both Christian and Muslim lands and I have found him a good source of knowledge in the past.”

“What do you need,” asked the Emir, with that small wave of his hand and shrug of the shoulders whereby a ruler tells an observant man that the interview is over and the details are to be sorted out by underlings.

“My lord I will need a small escort. A large number would be a challenge to fools and brigands who might think we have gold or such worth stealing. And of course if your Lordship is favourable, documents of passage in Arabic and Latin.”

“Very well,” said the Emir, “I will have the scribes draw you up documents of Ambassadorial rank. I will have the army commander send you some sensible men able to travel and I shall provide enough gold to pay your way on your mission.”

“I am giving you a hard task, Aalim, but a satisfying one”.

“I hope to see you safe and well back among your books as soon as you can. May Allah protect you and may your trade be fortunate.”

Aalim rose from his chair, bowed to the Emir, nodded to Tarig, and passed the courtiers waiting patiently at the door.

The Road to Salamanca

Chapter 2

On the strength of those words Aalim was now on the road four days out from Cordoba.

“I am sending you on a hard task, Aalim, but satisfying.”

They had come up the mountain road to Zafra and laboured across the plains to Emerita Augusta. Now Emerita Augusta was a memory of the morning.

He looked back at his small troop. It consisted of four mules, four horsemen and him. He had never commanded men before. Telling the library scribes and porters of what to do was a matter of soft voiced requests. Soldiers needed certainty and a strong tongue. He was not sure he had either.

The men the Emir had provided were better than the average soldiers he had met in the city. On their tunics they bore the emblem of the Emirate, a spear tied with a green cloth.

When the Ummayyads had conquered Andalusia it had all been a surprise to all concerned. A spontaneous raid launched from Africa made such rapid progress that there was no time to make flags. They had tied green ribbons to their spears.

In a three years they had found themselves masters of Spain. With tenacity and strong city walls they had held it for over 80 years.

Aalim's escort were clean and well presented. Aalim already thought of them as his little squad, his small army.

The leader Khubayb had the presence of command. He was tall, short-tempered and too hairy to be considered refined and gentlemanly.

But importantly for the venture he was businesslike. He did not spend too long talking about what was to be done. He took your arm and immediately started going it.

Aalim was not so confident of the abilities of the second in command, Naim. In contrast to Khubayb his hands and features seemed too soft for a fighting man. Would he hold his ground if there was some roughhousing ahead, he wondered?

Time would tell. For all he knew his presumption that only large rough handed men could be good soldiers might not be right. Perhaps smooth faced soldiers were the fiercest.

The other two, Aymaan and Tawfiq, were young, not yet twenty. They seemed sensible enough for their age. Aymaan was so good looking it was dangerous. Far too many foreign women could take an interest in him not to mention what attentions he might get from men.

And Tawfiq seemed to harbour a few secrets. His face was a halo of mystery. Still, in the short few days they had been together they had developed a respectful sense of comradeship. It augured well.

They had left Merida in the early morning when the sunlight was changing from the feeble shafts of a winter morning to the sharp clear spears of spring..

Merida had been founded in 16 BC as a settlement of the soldiers of Augustus in Iberia and called Emerita Augusta. He had made it the capital of the province of southern Iberia, Lusitania.

They had stayed a few days there. Aalim had shamelessly spent his time on a sightseeing tour of the Roman buildings much of them still in the same condition as when the Romans had lost Spain to the Barbarians.

He had tried to convey to his small troop the origins of the amphitheatre, the circus and the Arch of Trajan that gowned the town. He told them of the conquerors, Carthaginians from North Africa, the Romans, the Alans and Visigoths who had swaggered through these streets over the ages.

He was conscious of the gap between his polished learning in the academies of Alexandria and the practical knowledge of his men. They would be unimpressed with the vellum rolls and dry books carried on the mules. But here among the reality of roads and bridges and buildings he felt less guilty about lecturing them with the knowledge he had gathered from his books.

The roads, the bridge over the river, the aqueduct, the store house for snow from the northern mountains, all were Roman.

All different arrangements of stones spanning over times and cultures leaving behind these relics in the streets of the town spread below them. With each conqueror came war and enslavement.

Some of the conquerors brought prosperity and order, others had not.

They were lucky he told them that by the blessedness of Allah and the arms of the Emirate they were ruled in peace by the Emir and praise Allah would be protected from the onslaught of the Franks for eternity.

Without his tour guide speech they would pass through this country with no idea of those who had been here before.

The packs burdening the mule carried his precious trove of books carefully packed in straw and rolled in soft leathers wrappings. One of them was Tacitus's life of Sertorius.

Did Tacitus imagine that his work etched out on a parchment would last as long in time as the hard rock of the amphitheatre they had passed?

Sertorius, had no doubt taken this road over eight hundred years ago. It was in these valleys and ravines that the exploits of his hero and the villains took place. How admirable was the tenacity of Quintus Sertorius, his nobility and decency toward the Hispania he ruled and how sad his treacherous poisoning by an ally.

As they wound over the plain's road he told them of the noble Roman Sertorius.

He told them of the riddle Sertorius had told his men to persuade them their small armies could defeat the large forces of Pompey and Sulla. It was Sertorius's gift that he could persuade men of complex and impossible things by small feats of practical reasoning.

Sertorius convinced them they could face and defeat larger armies by showing that you could tear off the tail of a horse

if you went about it the right way. If you grabbed the tail and yanked it trying to tear it off, no matter how hard you pulled it you could not rip it off. But as Sertorius pointed out if you plucked just one hair at a time then slowly and painstakingly it could be done.

Sertorius attacked the small armies Sulla sent across the Pyrenees and before they could hire Spanish mercenaries or gather local allies. He defeated them one by one.

Aalim thought to himself that this tale of Sertorius was the lesson of the symbol of the Romans in reverse. The fasces, the symbol carried before a Roman Consul, the twelve rods of wood tied in a bundle spelt out that in Rome unity was strength. Together the twelve tribes of the Roman republic could not be conquered. Singly they could each be easily broken.

Khubayb was not so sure that this tale from a book could supersede real life and what it taught you.

He contrasted the tale of breakable rods and removable horses tails by telling a story with the opposite lesson. Where you should destroy all your enemies in one assault.

It was he said about the wisdom of foxes and the stupidity of dogs. Dogs he said could be seen sitting in the sun all day attacking fleas one by one. One flea would bite them more savagely than the others and the result would be a frenetic biting and chewing until the culprit was dealt with.

Foxes according to a story told to him by his father had a solution to fleas that was not one by one but all in one.

It was the custom of foxes according to Khubayb to take a

small stick in their mouths and swim slowly out into the river. They immersed more of their bodies as they swam out into the centre of the stream and the fleas not wishing to drown moved slowly up the body of the fox.

Finally the fox had sunk so low in the water that all the fleas walked out over the foxes nose onto the stick. The fox then let the stick go and the fleas sitting on the floating raft drifted down the river to their fate.

It was asserted Khubayb true as it was sworn to by his father and would such a good father as his lie to his son.

Aalim was sceptical but the mechanics of the tale stood up to immediate scrutiny. He agreed with Khubayb about the practical wisdom of the strategy without conceding that his exposition of unity being strength taken from books was discredited. He put the foxes tale on his lengthening list of things to believe in until proved otherwise.

He had an inkling that it was a tale by Aesop but it seemed heartless to tell Khubayb that it was not an observation from actuality as seen by his father.

The ruins and the stones scattered around them at Emerita could not tell these tales. They just invited questions as to the kind of men who built these wonders.

Books told more than mute stones, thought Aalim. Books could tell the tales of the lives, of the secrets of the men whose lives were lived among these stones. What was in their minds? What ambitions they harboured.

He was glad to be a librarian and not a rug merchant.

He sympathised with the traders who traipsed up and down Andalusia hawking the latest fashions in floor ware.

The knots per inch of carpets and the designs of the distant east were interesting, fascinating to some but paled he thought before the pleasures of words from ancient minds spread across a scroll.

Buying books was different from rugs, jars of oil and amphora of millet. It brought the pleasure of dealing with learned men.

Sometime in the late afternoon all being well they would arrive in Bejar, a town famous for its honey. Now it was coming noon and the mules looked eager for a respite from the weight of their burdens and the heat of the sun.

The dust of the road flecked the hooves of the horses and the incessant flies fled from the flourishes of his feathered cane.

The village came upon them suddenly, a surprise after long traverse across the plains. One of those villages you sense was there and expected but still it came upon you unawares.

It was noonish and no sooner did they enter the town than a band of small children ran out to tease the mules. It seemed a cherished local sport.

“You are ugly mule. So so so ugly,” chanted one red curly haired boy.

“Deeply ugly, mule, your mother must have been so ashamed,” shouted a small girl.”

“Not as ugly as your handler,” piped up a tousled hair boy.

Aymaan took offence at this. Sensing a reaction the children escalated the game.

“So so ugly and possessed by devils,” they shouted in unison. “Absolutely ugly and hairy. You are hairy, your mule is hairy, and your nostrils are hairy.”

It was the joy of small children to taunt soldiers. Were they older offence might be taken and lessons taught. But they were innocent and therefore licensed to taunt arrivals so long as they were from out of town and not staying long.

Aalim’s small army put up with the banter until they reached the inn.

The owner rushed out beaming at his good fortune in attracting a bit of business, customers, horses to feed, mules, food and maybe beds for sale for the night.

“Good sirs you are welcome. Business is profitable. You are bringing food to my children.”

The innkeeper’s effusive welcome bordered on an over oily concern. They were still some distance from Bejar and the mountain pass that would bring them to Salamanca. If travellers set out late they would arrive late in the town and maybe stay the night.

In the winter they were certain customers in the short day. But it was early spring and the day maybe long enough for travellers to reach Bejar.

The inn keeper continued fussing like a mother hen with chickens until the horses had been unsaddled and the mules unloaded and until they sat at the table outside in the sun.

“My name is Tamsa sirs and your wish is my command. Some goat’s cheese,” he announced, placing platters of white granulated cheese on the table, with pickled olives and anchovies following.

Two young men laboured under a platter of breads and roasted meats.

“Sir we have a prayer room that awaits you.”

Aalim had noticed a sign of the fish discreetly positioned inside the door and surmised their landlord was Christian. Clever he thought to provide Muslim guests with a prayer room. He wondered if it was used by more than one faith. Still there was no reason to get fussy.

The Emirate was tolerant of Jews and Christians as long as they paid the special tax assigned to them and did not flaunt their creeds with excessive displays of piety and proselytising. Goodwill on all sides had made this system work for sometime now and the benefits were mutual.

The tax raised a reasonable amount of revenue and reminded the Jews and Christians just who had conquered who.

“This is good,” said Khubayb crunching into a shank of lamb, “We should eat as much good Iberian fare as we can. Who knows what we will get when we move among the barbarians.”

Tawfiq had not given much consideration to idea that food might be different among barbarians.

“Surely the infidels eat much the same as we do,” he said, “are we not all men?”

“You have not travelled much,” said Khubayb. “When we

fought the Franks, at the gates of Saragossa now that was a blessed victory.”

His heavy jaws graunched into another shank of lamb.

“We managed to raid their camp and chase them away from their dinner. Well after we had taken all the plunder we could, we sampled their cooking pots. They were full of roots and rubbish. Not fit for fighting men. Still, what can you expect from eaters of pigs and spillers of wine?”

“No wonder they were thin people, scrawny.”

Naim looked up from the plate of gravy he was stabbing with a crust of bread, “I have fought the Franks. At sometimes of the year they eat roasted lamb. They were not all scrawny. You were lucky to meet such feeble opposition.”

Sensing a chance to needle the older man and his leader Tawfiq muttered, “Is it easier to fight the tired and hungry?”

“Hah,” said Khubayb, sensing he was getting challenged on a lifetime of acquired wisdom. “I have fought in a few sieges including a few where we lost.”

He frowned at the memory. “They outlasted us in food. They were on their own ground. We were the invaders.”

“People are harder to fight on their own land,” he said between mouthfuls. “The cost of losing is higher.”

He dipped a fistful of bread in gravy.

“If you are the besieger you can just go away with no great loss of men and treasure. When the defenders lose the battle

for their city they will be slaughtered. They know before they die that their wives and mothers will be raped and their beloved children sold into slavery.”

“It adds a lot to bravery when a soldier knows that is the price of losing. When you are trying to conquer a city as I said it’s the other way around. If you win you will enjoy the enemy’s mothers and daughters and be rich with the money from enslaving their men and boys.”

“But it’s not easy lasting week after week with supplies running low. There’s a chance you might weaken and the enemy rush out and slaughter you. You start to think of home. The defenders cannot call it quits, the besiegers can”.

“Just remember food has to be brought to a siege. That’s why we seen Charlemagne off from the gates of Saragossa, the great Charlemagne in person. It’s a race to see who runs out of food no matter how well the castle is defended. It is the way of men at war.”

Aalim noticed that Aymaan and Tawfiq were soaking up the lessons in fighting. They were new to soldiering and had no tales of hardship or battle from their own experience.

They sat in the sun each lost in their own thoughts, of battles won, lost and friends killed. The table darkened a little as shadows flitted over the street.

“It is the storks,” said the Tavern owner waving his hand at the sky. “So many, it is good omen it will be fruitful spring.”

The birds covered the sky and the noise of their squawking and beating wings hushed the travellers.

“Master are we staying the night,” asked Khubayb

“No,” said Aalim, “Let us say prayers and depart.”

“If we ride carefully we will make Bejar by nightfall. It is tempting to take the beginning of our journey slowly. Who knows how early the summer may close and we would regret any delay now in the cold days as winter approached.”

After prayers were said Aymaan and Tawfiq busied themselves with the harnesses and the packs on the mules. The mules were in better spirits and they seemed grateful for having the packs of for the hour of lunch and the bellyful of chaff and grain that was their fare.

The Innkeeper was remorseful about the party leaving,

“A good dinner sirs, warm beds,” he said beseechingly.

It was early spring, business was reasonable but who knew what the summer might bring, war or fever and the roads would quieten and the visitors slow to a trickle.

The road to Bejar was pleasant enough. There were flurries of dogs snarling out of a few small villages and they lost time with Tawfiq’s notions that he could shoot a pheasant out of the air with an arrow.

The red crests of the birds rose with a batter of wings, noisy and sudden, from behind hedges or from the small fields of grain crops tucked between the road and the hills. Tawfiq seemed to have an endless supply of arrows to let fly at the potential dinners.

The discussion was long and teasing between Aymaan, Naim

and Tawfiq as to whether the birds were so much faster than the slow game around Cordoba or simply that Tawfiq was too poor a bowman to actually hit one.

Pheasant for dinner they said was a small chance.

Aymaan took the trouble to ride to the front to ask Aalim loudly if they could buy some pheasants from the old women in the markets.

“Master, Tawfiq will never get us dinner. He is filling the fields with arrows. They will grow into trees before he hits a pheasant master and we will go hungry.”

Aalim raised a reproachful eyebrow at him and wondered loudly if a fit young man like him could not leap off his horse and catch them with his bare hands.

“No master I am fast but not that fast.” He tarried a while at the front of the small caravan.

“If we were here in the morning master we could catch them with a hair from the tails of our horses.”

He paused for effect letting Aalim’s curiosity grow as to just how you could catch swift birds with a single horsehair. Had he got carried away with the tale of Sertorius? Finally intrigued Aalim asked him what cleverness this involved.

“Well” said Naim, glad he had the master’s full attention, “you get a bowl of juicy peas or juniper berries and you let them dry a bit, perhaps a day master. The birds they love them master, love them dearly.”

“So,” said Aalim mystified as to where the horse’s hair fitted

in to this plan.

“Well master you take every seventh pea or berry and thread a horsehair through it. Then you scatter them on the paths the birds use to scurry through the grass. Before dawn master, just before the light comes. They swallow the peas with relish master, gobble them down but,” and he paused again for effect, “they eventually pluck up one with the hair in it.”

“In the early morning light the birds can’t see the hair. The pea goes down the bird’s gullet master. And the hair does not let the pea pass their gizzard master.”

It chokes them master, stone dead master”.

“Chuff Chuff,” he gargled grabbing his neck. “And then master you go along with a small sack and take a bag of plump warm pheasants from the ground.”

He beamed at the stealth and simplicity of it. It seemed to please Aymaan that he knew practical things a learned man such as Aalim was ignorant of.

Aalim gave him a look of surprise. Either Aymaan was clever or he learned some useful means of getting a full dinner without too much effort.

“More reliable you think than shooting arrows in the air,” he said to Aymaan, nodding his head back down to the fruitless efforts of Tawfiq as another pheasant flew unharmed into the afternoon breeze

“One morning Aymaan when we are up early and the weather is good and the horses are willing to lose a few hairs from

their tails we will see if we can gather a feast of pheasant for breakfast on the basis of this tale.”

Aymaan beamed once more. They entered Bejar in the early twilight. They were close to the mountain pass now. The town hung on two sides of a canyon, the houses seemed poised to fall into the river which cut the town in two.

The ruins of a small roman amphitheatre loomed over the town casting long shadows over the narrow streets.

He and Khubayb shepherded the small band into the yard of an inn. A slew of oil lamps gleamed light over the yard attracting a fog of moths. The mules stood patient and pleased as their burdens were loosed and they were led to barley and hay in the mangers.

The weary company traipsed after the Innkeeper into a dining hall.

“Sit honoured guests,” a small bobbing man declared.

He was like a creature of the woods with a small narrow head without a hair on it and darting beady eyes. He seemed to be aware of his appearance and his lack of authority and had somehow had made his parlour make up for it. It had a high pitched impressive roof terracotta coloured walls and a large fireplace dominating the room. The tables were large, hefty, rough hewn and solid.

The servants came smart and quick with brown bread and roasted goose piled up on platters. Serve the gentlemen well he seemed to beam and they will bring more trade. The master of this group looked like a refined man, a man with money

and business on his hands.

After they had consumed a gargantuan feast the landlord produced warm jugs of syrupy al-burtuqal, sweetened with honey. He came around again with small cakes covered in crushed almonds and dripping again with honey.

“Honey,” he said, “the pride of Bejar. You came in the dark so you would not have seen the hill of flowers and roses, which surround our town.”

“No tell me about it,” said Aalim, thinking was it possible to get through a town with out the sales ‘pitch’.

“Our bees are famous all over the world for their hard work and delicious honey. Our pastries are famous throughout all of Iberia.”

The inn slowly filled up over the next hour with a number of the local citizens. They were in the main well dressed and of pleasant demeanour. Except for one small group in the corner who as the evening went on became progressively drunker and noisier.

Aalim found this fascination with wine hard to understand It did release one’s inhibitions but sometimes more than common sense allowed.

A beefy red-faced giant lurched across the room on his way to relieve himself in the courtyard. He caught the slight look of contempt in Khubayb’s eye.

“What are you looking at,” he asked in a snarl.

Whatever he was drinking it gave him a courage that blinded his limited intelligence. It was rare for ruffians of any stripe to raise their voices against Muslims.

“I don’t like the look of you,” the large man said lurching toward Khubayb his arm moving upwards in a swinging threat.

As he rose from his seat Khubayb reached below his bench for the slops bucket and putting his foot forward he swung the bucket over his shoulder and plopped it hard down over the big man’s head.

The spittle oozed down the lout’s shoulders. As he reached up to remove the bucket jammed on his head. Khubayb grabbed one of his elbows, spun him round, planted his foot in the small of his back and propelled him towards the door.

The thug reeled forward hands clenched around the buckets edge.

Khubayb stepping gracefully behind him assisting him through the door with another shove of his foot and cannoned him out into the courtyard.

As this drama unfolded the man’s two companions had risen to assist him. Aymaan and Naim swiftly crossed the distance between them pulling out curved swords and wielding them a few inches from their faces.

Aalim stepped over to the two men now frozen in a tableau. He waited a few moments looking for any sign that they wished to continue the fight. They were still.

“Leave them, said Aalim, impressing himself with his strong steady voice.

“We are sorry sirs, they muttered,” as Aymaan and Naim lowered their swords.

The two swordsmen stepped aside as the ruffians slunk towards the door. They passed by Khubayb out into the night. Khubayb looked out through the door but it would seem the big man had no will in him for a fight for he and his companions shrank off into the gloom at the edge of the courtyard.

The innkeeper ran up to Aalim,

“My Lord, I apologise for these ruffians. They will not come here again.”

Yes they will Aalim thought to himself, they are the local trade for such a place. All that might happen is that the landlord might caution them against annoying soldiers of the Emir.

“Apology accepted,” he said.

The party sat down and settled into the table.

“What brought that on,” asked Aalim, “Why did such people think we were easy meat”?

“We are wearing our cloaks, they cover our uniforms and swords. The fools thought we were weak livered scholars,” said Khubayb rejoining the table.

There was a slight chuckle in his voice. He was relishing the chance to parade his fighting skills, indispensable in the

wider world of Inns and travels unlike the rarefied air that the Master inhabited.

“Such men do not usually bother soldiers. We looked like easy folk to taunt master, soft handed people easily intimidated.”

Aalim pondered the matter. He did not know whether to reign in Khubayb’s obvious reference to the low abilities of librarians in tavern brawls. It was going to be a continuing theme of jibes he thought.

He asked Khubayb

“Why did the big man give up so easily, you humiliated him in front of his friends and these locals,” he said, nodding his head to the small throng that remained in the room.

“Well it’s not easy to fight with slops on your head and coming back through that door not knowing where I was would take more courage than he had,” replied Khubayb.

“Well,” said Aalim, “he certainly looked like a man unable to control his impulses. You were certainly quick.”

“Indeed master.”

Khubayb paused and waited until he had the attention of Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq

“That is the craft of soldiers, which is different from these brawlers in taverns.”

“Such people spend their lives with pickaxes and sickles. They have never handled anything more threatening than a

spade or an axe.”

“They are not focused on what harm can come from an armed man who knows what he is doing.”

“You must keep your eye on your opponent’s body, be ready for his moves and at the same time be aware of where you are, what position your body is in, the stance of your feet and just how far you have to move to bring power to him.”

“Always observe every detail of your circumstances. I knew the bucket was there. Speed is your best weapon. Speed of decision my lord they cannot handle, Strike hard fast and resolute.”

Nods from the others at the table confirmed that this was wise advice.

“To be borne in mind,” said Aalim. “We have a long way to go and let’s start by going to bed. We have to make it to Salamanca tomorrow. I have to do some business with Joseph and then we will join a military convoy, which will take us to the ferry at the Douro. On the full moon of this month a ship will take us from Porto to Ireland.”

The early light brought a day crisp and bright. The horses stood sleeping in their stalls, the mules leaning against a wall. They stamped their feet and backed away from the pack saddles as Naim lowered them onto their backs

There never seemed a morning when they were eager to feel the cinch tighten around their middles and the long trek of the day began. The men bustled around the courtyard, lifting the bundles of goods and provisions up onto the mules, checking

the bridles of the horses and seeing the halters of the mules were not frayed and loose.

“I will pay the Inn keeper,” said Aalim tying his horse to the gate of the tavern.

They set out in the early slanting light, the harnesses jingling and their bodies now accustomed to the jogging gait of days spent on horseback. It was still morning as they rounded a corner in the road that the surprise came.

Stretched across the road were six men on horses. In the centre was their braggart adversary of the night before.

“Rally,” shouted Khubayb galvanizing his Arab mare directly towards the big man in the centre. His sword came flashing into his right hand while a large dagger appeared in his left. His horse lunged forward with only his knees guiding it to the right hand side of the big man’s horse.

Both hands free, his knife was held low while he lowered his head alongside the head of his mount.

The knife sliced the throat of the big man’s horse causing the animal to lunge to the left putting the sweep of the big man’s sword off to one side, while Khubayb’s sword sliced his forearm. The big man lurched off his horse and fell on the ground.

Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq perhaps remembering the advice of the previous evening raced their horses from the side of the mules and threw themselves into the startled line of stationary horsemen. Naim’s horse at the last moment turned side on and shoved itself in the face of the standing horse of one of the brigands.

The horse lunged back unseating a rider while Naim backed his horse into the next of the ambushers. Tawfiq raised a yell that would chill the blood of a Frankish soldier and ran full front into the horseman on the right his right arm fully extended his sword point well over the head of his horse and cut the sword arm of his opponent.

The man fell back unseated from his horse hitting the ground

Khubayb nudged his horse's neck with his foot and the horse swerved a full 180 degrees and turned back into the melee letting him sweep down on the last horseman from behind.

Tawfiq started a sword fight with an opponent ending the skirmish when he kicked his opponent's horse in the rump causing the animal to rear up dismounting the rider. The battle, if an affair that took so little time could be called a battle, was over in minutes. A gesture from Khubayb with his sword and the last of the mounted attackers dismounted.

Aalim who had been holding the mules among the shouting and disturbance dismounted and tied their harnesses to a small tree. He tried not to let his amazement at the tactics and ferocity of his men show.

“Are you all unharmed” he said.

They were unharmed. He walked forward and looked at the ruffians. There were a few flesh wounds among the attackers.

He asked the big man, “Are you Asturian raiders?” “Where are you from,” he asked louder

“We are from the farm of Ajianus,” said the big man, gesturing

over the hill. “Why are you not working?”

The Big man shrugged his shoulders, their wounds were bleeding but no limbs seemed severed.

“The planting is not ready and we were hunting for game.”

“And got the wrong game,” said Aalim

“What shall we do with them” asked Khubayb.

“Well we could delay our journey and take them to the farm and ask the owner to punish them.”

“That would take time and we would pass the decision about their punishment to other hands. We could take them to the garrison at Salamanca and have them hung from the city gates. But that would be tiresome dragging them along the road and the farm owner would be annoyed at losing even such poor labour as this.”

“But assaulting innocent merchants and drawing a sword against the soldiers of the Emir cannot go unpunished. What we shall do is this.”

“I will report to the garrison commander at Salamanca. I am sure he will have a word with the farmer Ajjanus and bid him keep his workers under better control.”

“As for their punishment who can do that better than us. Tie them to those trees and give them a good whipping.”

It took a few minutes for the travellers to wrestle the attackers to the nearest trees and tie them to the trunks.

“Right,” said Aalim throwing Naim and Aymaan two of the mule whips. “Don’t waste your time striping their backs. Give them a good lashing across their backsides so that they will have to walk their horses home and explain to their master why they have to stand up for the next few days.”

The only stoic among the attackers was the big man. The rest of them yelped like dogs. As the would-be brigands led their horses away it was hard to tell whether they felt any remorse. They were certainly in pain.

After Aalim and the travellers gathered up their arms and settled down the mules and horses they set out again, adrenalin racing. Aalim moved his horse along side Khubayb

“You were quick to respond Khubayb,” he said

“Indeed master, it is as I said in the Inn. Had we hesitated or retreated we would have got tangled with the mules and our backs would have been open to those scoundrels.”

“Moving fast is the advantage of fighters. They were not fighters.”

“They were so amateurish,” he said disdainfully spitting on the ground. “I was pleased that Aymaan and Tawfiq moved so swiftly. They showed courage master.”

“Naim and I have fought such encounters in battles before my lord. These boys have spent their time looking after the palace of the Emir. But they are good boys and I must spend sometime teaching them a few lessons in the arts of attack and defence.”

“A good Idea,” said Aalim.

He let his horse slow down until he drew level with the rest of the party.

“You did well gentlemen very well indeed, courage and bravery won the day.”

“All by the will of Allah, master. I think the fact that we have well trained horses helped,” said Naim. “It is a great advantage to have a horse that knows what to do and is fast and agile master. It is why we defeated the barbarians and have this great land master.”

“An astute observation,” Aalim remarked. “We have that advantage over the barbarians. It may not last. A stolen herd of horses and in a few years the barbarians could have steeds as good as ours.”

“Maybe though they would not be so good at training them,” said Naim.

“Yes,” said Aalim, “That’s a useful manoeuvre you did with your horse, reversing into him.”

“Well master it’s a simple equation; it is further from the back of a horse for the other man to strike with a sword. A good horse can unseat or unnerve the other rider with an unexpected faint and when the rider is unsettled it is easier to get a good thrust at him and settle the matter quickly.”

“When you are outnumbered as we were its important to deal to the first few of them as quickly as possible so that the numerical superiority of the enemy is reduced.”

It took a few hours for the adrenalin to settle down.

The City of Salamanca

Chapter 3

They reached Salamanca as a hazy darkness fell. There was a pattern to these citadels of the Emirate thought Aalim.

The walls of the city rimmed around a high promontory on the far side of a river. A river wide enough to give an army pause and allow the defenders of the city time to man the ramparts. On the southern end of the bridge that spanned the river inevitably a strong walled fort guarding the entrance to the bridge.

And while all the cities they had come to followed the pattern, a Roman road leading to a roman bridge and the walled city secure at the northern reaches, none were as beautiful as Salamanca in the evening sun.

Aalim took them across the Roman bridge over the river Tormes and up the main road to the centre square of the town. A few streets away was the house of Joseph.

A youngster sighted them and guessing they were bound for his master's house ran down the street. They caught up with him as he ran into courtyard shouting "visitors, visitors".

Aalim led the party into the large courtyard. A tall well-dressed man came out adjusting his cloak and smiling at the group.

He called to the youth, "Micah, come, come get the horses and mules water and fodder."

He walked to the dismounted Aalim,

“Aalim, old friend how are you, how was your journey?”

Aalim shook his arm and smiled a welcoming grin.

“We travelled well, Joseph, no trouble we could not deal with.”

The bustle and tussle of getting the mules unloaded and settling the horses into their stalls continued as they spoke.

“My, my,” said Joseph, “look at these armed men you must be important these days. There was a time once when you came with a servant and a donkey. Now you have an escort, an army escort, no less. I must be paying you too much for your books.”

“Never enough Joseph never enough, every word is a polished jewel. They are worth every dirham,” said Aalim.

They spent a few moments in small chatter making reacquaintance in the togetherness of old and trusted friends.

“Come, come into the house, Micah help the men with the horses. Nathan, join us if you will,” he said to a tall man who had just entered the courtyard to see what all the noise was about.

“Nathan how good to see you,” said Aalim, “you look like you have seen a lot of sunshine and good living.”

“You are a welcome sight Aalim, it is such a pleasure to have you under our roof,” said Nathan shaking his hand.

“Yes I have enjoyed the sun this year past. God has blessed my trade. Prosperity and good fortune have attended me.”

Nathan was tall with a dark beard and a charming smile. He wore the wide belt of the Jews together with a turbaned hat with a slight cone protruding from the top. He was impeccably dressed with his clothes tailored to perfection. The best tailors were Jews thought Aalim.

“Come Aalim, water and some warm drink,” said Joseph

Aalim the traveller, Joseph the head of the house and Nathan went in and sat down to the large familiar table. Khubayb, Naim, Tawfiq and Aymaan came diffidently into the room and joined them. Soon the table was covered with small breads and a warm ginger, honey and lemon drink steaming in large jars.

“You are looking so well Aalim,” said Joseph, again.

Aalim surveyed the room with its warm polished wood and air of comfort. Then he got straight to the point.

“I have a different journey this time Joseph, I will not be returning to the comforts of Cordoba at the end of our business. I am going to Ireland myself to conduct my book selling in person.”

“I am surprised,” said Joseph. “I had you marked for a scholar of the desk and the contemplative life and here you are revealed as a man of action.”

There was an inflection in his voice, a playful combative lilt, a inquisitive touching of minds entwined with a twinge of sardonic teasing.

“I am surprised myself,” said Aalim picking up the playful tone in Joseph’s voice.

Was everyone they met going to demote him to a scholar among soldiers, even old friends. It was starting to intrigue him. In the space of a few days he had begun to adjust his own portrayal of himself. He had started to alter his concept of himself to accommodate his mission as the travelling emissary of the Emir.

It was a profound transformation from being a scholar to a traveller and he was shifting his mental furniture every day. But to those he knew the previous apparition of his life still held sway.

“Who am I to be away from my library, the morning sunlight of my studio and the comforts of my goods and servants, not to mention the warm company of my beloved,” he said.

“I hope she is missing you,” said Joseph.

“Grievously my good friend grievously, I hope,” said Aalim with a whimsical smile.

“But there is no suffering, on the contrary I am finding the outdoor life refreshing, enlivening. I am in the open air.”

“It is spring. The flowers are blooming, the hares are dancing their madness in the fields, and life is creating itself anew everywhere. It’s a pleasure not a burden.”

Joseph’s wife Miriam brought small cakes to the table and refreshed the ginger and honey.

“Aalim, how wonderful to see you, you look so well,” she said. “He looks so much better doesn’t he Joseph, and so handsome, I am surprised one of your Moorish Princesses has not caught your fancy by now,” said Miriam

“It has been a close thing on occasions, Miriam, close but I always escape,” said Aalim. How much had a few days in the sun and wind changed his features he wondered.

“Ah you should take the responsibilities of a family man. Get your own flesh and blood scholars under your roof,” said Miriam.

“I have scholars aplenty,” said Aalim. “I lecture to the schools and at the mosque. Where is the time for family life? For the moment I am to be a travelling salesman of the roads.”

“It will happen,” said Miriam, “in God’s own time.”

She left for matters in the kitchen and the three men got down to the business at hand. At first they talked of inconsequential events and eventually drifted on to more substantive matters. How the widespread family of Joseph was getting on, the possibility of good crops and prosperity for the summer.

Aalim recounted the state of affairs in Cordoba. They had many mutual friends in the Judeira, the Jewish district of Cordoba. It lay inside the city walls immediately beside the Mosque and the Emir’s palace. It was one of the most attractive places in the whole of Cordoba.

The close-knit streets with their high white walls gave little indication of the exquisite world of courtyards and flowery -fountained patios concealed inside.

The breezes that blew through the district had a distinct combination of garlic, oranges and rosemary. Aalim had enjoyed many fruitful conversations and pleasant meals with the sharp minded members of the Jewish community.

Miriam bustled in, a sign that maybe beds were on the agenda.

“Can we attend to your companions, their washing, somewhere to say their prayers?”

They moved noisily through the house and courtyard, getting the horses settled for the night.

The next day was as pleasant as he could remember in a number of years. Aalim went for a walk through the early morning streets of the city of Salamanca. The stroll down past the green squares through the palm trees to the bank of the river was a pleasant peek of solitude away from his escort and the throng of a busy house.

He was early enough to see the crows fly out on their morning flight from the river to the fields out in the hinterland of the city and see the sparrows commence their morning examination of the city streets for any morsels dropped in the previous night.

He returned to the house to find Joseph’s son Micah keeping a steady train of food mustered towards the visitors.

Between courses Micah pestered Khubayb Aymaan Tawfiq and Naim with questions.

What was Cordova like, the names of the horses, what they had eaten on the journey?

With that air that comes upon men of the world answering

the questions of boys they took pleasure in the queries of an intelligent young man eager to learn of the world beyond the gates of the city of Salamanca.

Micah's enquires flew back and forth as fast as the food left the table. In a few short hours Micah added to his accumulated store of knowledge of the ways of men and their attitudes and professions.

It also gave the soldiers a chance to see what was known about them in the general community they seldom mixed with. Aalim, Joseph and Nathan sat in the warm courtyard and after a short time got down to business.

Aalim spread his wares out on Joseph's table and picked up a fawn coloured book

"This is Priscian's Grammar, the good Priscian has written a dry teachy book to teach even the slow witted to speak and orate good Latin."

"It is long and elaborate but reading it will make anyone a Latin scholar of the first order. It has so many 'jewels' of knowledge hiding inside the cover."

"Salted away in here," said Aalim, tapping the book, "you will find slices of Virgil, scraps of Cicero, pieces of Ovid. It is like a banquet of well-written morsels laid out on a bare table."

Joseph smiled at Aalim's sales patter and opened the codex and read it slowly for a few pages.

"It is a nice copy, very fine finish.

How wonderful to have the finest Latin of the ages to put to young minds starting on the journey into the minds of the Romans.”

“I will have some copies made and see if my colleague the Bishop will buy it from me. We meet occasionally, the teachers of Salamanca, myself, the Imam and the Bishop.”

“Despite our differences in belief we are agreed that Salamanca should be a place of knowledge. No matter who should conquer this place we are resolved that we will try and keep the light of learning aflame.”

Then realizing that his words implied that one day the emirate would cease to rule the ground they sat upon he said quickly

“But of course please God that will never happen.”

“ I have a zealous group of students. They are mastering the Torah well. They will I hope have the love for the Torah of the good Rabbi Rav, pious but keeping a sense of humour.”

“By the way Aalim I have a theory. Why you Muslims have your houses covered with carpet and rugs?”

“Why do you think that is,” asked Aalim?

“It’s because you pray on your knees. Your devotion in such fashion leads you to cover the floor. Jews pray standing up.”

“Hmmm” said Aalim, “You may be right. You may be right.”

They were friends but they stepped gingerly around the topics of belief and custom lest they inadvertently cause offence.

“Now this book will interest you,” said Aalim taking another volume from his trove.

“It’s called ‘Propositiones ad Acuendos Juvenes’, Problems to Sharpen the Young. It is written by Alcuin of York, an interesting man, an advisor of Charlemagne’s. It’s a collection of numerical riddles.”

“There are fifty three wonderful mathematical problems that will have your students grappling with the wonders of numbers in a way they had never thought they could.”

They began to discuss Joseph’s library and its dazzling collection of ancient books. It was a treasure trove of knowledge safely away in a minor town of the Emirate. Inevitably the discussion fell to trade.

“What news is there,” asked Nathan.

It seemed a simple question. It wasn’t. Traders in business need the knowledge that conversations bring. To outsiders it might seem that the gossip of traders was an indulgence, an excuse for idleness and idle chatter. But traders knew conversation was the essence of sound bargains.

What did people want. How badly did they want it. That was where a profit lay. Merchants needed knowledge of the wider world. The things that happened, where ever they happened sprang from the ambitions of men. They composed the small and large events that could threaten or improve trade.

And knowledge itself was not enough. A trader had to be endowed with the mental nimbleness to use it to step over or around the changing fashions in the world.

Jewish merchants had the unique advantage of travelling in both the Christian and Muslim lands and they wisely kept a lot of what they knew to themselves.

“It is Emir’s thinking the Franks will not lead armies across the Pyrenees for sometime, hopefully never. They have more pressing battles on their hands than attacking Andalusia.”

“The Dukes of this Spanish march he has set up cannot attack us without the backing of the Franks. Charlemagne is happy to keep them as a cheap buffer between our forces and his. For the Emir’s part he is content to leave the northern lands in the hands of the Christians.”

“It looks as though the frontier will remain along the rivers Ebro and the Douro. Our possession of our lands will continue to depend on strong soldiers and good roads.”

“That is pleasing,” said Joseph. “I have not met a Frank in my life but from what I have heard I wonder if the Franks can be considered civilised people.”

“The ancestors of the Franks were destroyers of civilisation,” said Joseph.

“We know from our books that their barbarian ancestors smashed the civilisation of Rome. They burnt the libraries, wrecked the water supplies, the baths, and the amphitheatres. They struggle to keep the roads in repair.”

“It is an interesting point,” said Aalim, “speaking generally what makes a people civilised?”

“That they build instead of destroy,” suggested Nathan, “even that they wash,” he added. “At least once a week, the Franks never wash. Their garments fall from them covered in lice and filth.”

“I hear that Aachen is a very poor cousin to Cordoba, a few wooden buildings and a modest church and palace. They do not build aqueducts, there are no public baths, and the houses are crude. There are no fountains, no floor coverings; the floors of their houses are covered in straw and filth.”

“Their towns are made of wood and the only buildings of value are leftovers from the Romans. The Irish build their water wheels and drain and irrigate the land from their monasteries.”

“Who talks of Frankish craftsmen, their jewellery? Where are their metal works,” continued Nathan.

“My measure of civilisation is whether their leaders read books,” said Aalim.

“Civilisation must hinge on the difference between those peoples who can read and those who do not. I understand Charlemagne cannot read or write. The Byzantines, the Caliphate and we in Andalusia can.”

“Every Muslim boy must be able to read to recite the Koran. Every Jewish boy must learn to read and write to take his Bar Mitzvah,” said Nathan.

“Do the Franks educate their children,” asked Joseph.

“They are starting to,” said Aalim.

“Charlemagne has taken Alcuin’s advice. They are setting up schools in the churches.”

“Who is this Alcuin, writer of the riddle book” asked Joseph?

“He is Charlemagne’s chief advisor. He is from the Irish church in Northumbria, he understands that the Franks need to become literate,” said Aalim.

“One difference between the Franks and us is that among them it is only the clergy who read and write and then only to enforce the authority of the church.”

“In Andalusia and in the Caliphate we take an interest in the books of the Greeks and Romans. The wisdom of the past is not closed to us. We can acquaint ourselves with the tenets of reason from Aristotle, of Plato, Pythagoras, Livy and Philo.”

“We can explore science and philosophy without any authority thinking we are heretics or unfaithful to our religion.”

“The wisdom of the past is ours for the taking. We see the reasoning of intelligent men. The Franks are prohibited from such exploration by their church.”

“There are intelligent men among the Franks,” continued Aalim, “Doubtless they reason like all humans.”

“It is the prohibition of the Church that stops them exploring the real world on their doorstep.”

“The Franks are making books,” said Joseph, “and in a new script. They are learning.”

Maybe in a few years they will become civilised. Barbarians burn books and learn all they know from men who live today. They have their memories of the past, their own past and no one else's."

"That is true," said Nathan "as the Franks become more educated they will need more books from the Irish. Until they can make their own books we have the opportunity for trade."

Nathan was a trader. Opportunity was a creature he sought and nurtured wherever he could find it.

Aalim reflected on the curious Jewish custom that Rabbi's should have a trade.

The two men in front of him were tradesmen. As Joseph was a maker of books so was Nathan a trader. He had asked Joseph once why Rabbis were required to have a trade. Would it not be more sensible for the clergy of the Jewish faith to spend all their time attending to the care of their synagogue and its attendants. Like every other religion he was familiar with.

It stemmed Joseph had said from the precept that knowledge was free and had to be freely taught. A Rabbi was a teacher and could not charge for teaching.

Aalim thought the independence of Rabbi's for their income would protect them from any hierarchy that tried to rule their thinking.

Joseph explained that not all the trades the Rabbis embraced called for soft hands and easy labour.

The revered Rabbi Joshua was a black smith and forged horseshoes at his blazing fire. Rabbi Yochannan it appeared was a cobbler and the heads of his pupils were full of wisdom from his teaching and the shoes on their feet came from his own hands.

Aalim's eyes roved to the sound features of Nathan's face. As a Mediterranean trader Nathan travelled the edges of the sea where civilisation was born and still prospered. Aalim assumed that Nathan was a member of the Radhanites. A collection of Jewish traders ran their own trading communities from Cordoba to Vienna and from Morocco to China.

He knew their main trade routes by heart. One went northward through Europe via Prague, Bulgaria, and the land of the Khazars.

The second proceeded along the Mediterranean littoral and ended in Iraq and Iran The third crossed North Africa through Egypt to Damascus. The fourth went by sea and land all the way to China.

Radhanites went only part of a route, making trade with colleagues who passed the merchandise on to the next leg.

Muslims were excluded from Christian markets, and Christians were virtually barred from Islamic waters.

As a Jewish merchant Nathan had the advantage of being neither.

He could travel the 'mare nostrum' from feuding kingdom to feuding kingdom with impunity.

A merchant was a reputable trade among Muslims and Jews. The prophet Mohammed was a merchant. Ishmael was a merchant. A standard Muslim form of farewell was “may your merchandise not remain unsold. Christians regarded traders and merchants as people of low rank.

Aalim was conscious that his meditation on the occupations of his fellows at the table had left him silent for a while. He reached into his bag sitting at the side of the table and withdrew a book.

“Gentlemen” he said, “a feast for your eyes and a treasure for your minds.”

He placed his copy of Dicuilt’s “De mensura Orbis Terrae” on the table.

“It contains the geography of the known world, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Eastern Gate, from the far sands of the Sahara to the icy fires of Ultima Thule.”

Joseph ran his palms along the spine and felt the smooth leather finish. He opened the book with visible pleasure.

The definition and clarity of the words on the page was better than any book he had ever seen.

“What script is this,” he asked

“It is the new script from the court of Charlemagne. Dicuilt is an Irish monk in Charlemagne’s court at Aachen,” said Aalim.

“ I think Dicuilt’s material is not from his own travels,” said Aalim.

“Some of the contents have come from a survey made by the emperor Theodosius of the known world four hundred years ago, ‘Mensuratio Orbis,’ ‘The Measurement of the World.’ Other material looks to have come from reports of the travelling Irish monks to their monasteries in Europe.”

They took turns at reading the 128 pages of the book. The sighs of pleasure were audible. In this one small volume the Irish cleric had framed and wrapped the mysterious world into a known place. At length Nathan set it down.

“Magnificent,” he said, “to see the world and its edges, its measures framed in these pages is astounding.”

He started with a question. “Where have all these people Dicult mentions come from?”

“The Alans, the Germans, Huns Goths, Franks, Magyars and the Bulgars. Each one pushing into the edge of the western world, shoving the other like tiles on a backgammon table.”

Aalim said, “It must be that out there beyond the eastern gate there are fertile lands, grazing lands.”

“You can’t have a great number of people without something to feed them and their animals,” Joseph added

“All the tribes that have come had the resources to come. They had many children, cattle, and horses. To have horses and cattle you need the rains to fall reliably, the soil to be good.”

“Maybe that is what happens,” said Nathan.

“The rains fail and tribe starts to fight with tribe and some get pushed out, or they start out on their own to see if they can find grazing lands to the west.”

“Maybe that is why the Empire fell,” said Aalim. “But why would you leave a fertile place and risk your lives fighting the Romans if life is so good out there.”

“I have met a few traders,” said Nathan, “in Barcelona, who have travelled from Antioch across the caucuses and they tell tales of the lands beyond the Eastern Gate.”

“I have a feeling we know only half the world and the rest of it is yet to be revealed.”

“The Emir has news of more conquests by Charlemagne over to the east of his dominions, out where all these peoples come from,” said Aalim.

“Well there’s a lot of scope for his conquests there,” said Joseph laughing at the enormity of it.

“There are tribes upon tribe who will fight him every valley of the way. The east teems with peoples. Word has it that they are fiercer and more savage the further east you go.”

Aalim pondered for a moment and thought this made some sense. History seemed to be a pouring of people from these places into the settled world.

The time had come to broach the nature of his mission with Joseph and Nathan.

“Speaking of strange people that is the reason I am going to Ireland”.

“An unknown people have started to trade from the north of the world to Khazar. They are called the Varangians.”

“My mission is to contact these Varangians.”

“My Emir has an idea we can trade with these Varangians and thereby get access to the Silk road at the Eastern Gate, at the mouth of the Volga.”

He drew a large parchment from his bag on which the geography of the world was laid out in coloured areas enclosed with black lines. He unravelled it on the table and placed his finger emphatically on the central point.

“From here in the Baltic to the Eastern Gate. Have you heard of this trade route Nathan?”

“Yes I have,” said Nathan. “Last year in Marseilles I met a trader who come down the Rhine and then the Rhone from northern Francia, who have dealt with the Varangians on the Baltic.”

“He said that the Varangians are taking their goods from the north, amber, furs, ivory from a fierce animal that lives in the frozen sea and most profitable of all slaves, down the great river to the Kingdom of Khazar.”

“On the return journey from Khazar they take back jade, silks carpets, gold that have come across the steppes along the northern Silk Road, They also take goods from Byzantium and the Caliphate back to their kingdom in the Baltic.”

“What kind of people are these people, the Varangians,” asked Joseph

“The trader told me they are barbarians. Savages but good traders and skilled boatmen,” said Nathan

“You don’t think they are selling books,” Joseph asked his son jestingly.

“Do the Varangians trade with the west of the Baltic, the Franks, the Kingdoms of Anglia,” asked Aalim.

“He said the main port of the Franks is at Dorestad near the mouth of the Rhine, where it meets a river called the Lek. This is the port for all the Frankish trade with Freesia, Jutland, England and Ireland.”

“The other port is at a place called Hegeby on the Northern edge of Saxony at the base of the Jutland peninsula.”

“He said Hegeby was just outside Frankish territory and that it was a Varangian port.”

“The trader said that from Hegeby the Varangians trade with their Kingdoms in the north of the Baltic and across the Baltic to their trading post at Starya Ladoga over here at the eastern end of the Baltic,” said Nathan pointing at the map.

“It must be from Starya Ladoga that the Varangians ride the waters of the Volga, from the rim of the world to the Khazars at the Eastern Gate,” said Nathan.

“So,” said Aalim. “That puts flesh on the tale.”

“The Emir thinks the Irish must have contacts with the Varangians. It stands to sense. The Irish network of communication among their Irish monasteries gives them a great knowledge of Frankish and northern affairs.”

“That is why I am sent to Ireland, to ask them what they know of these Varangians.”

“The other piece of information the Emir has is that the King of Khazars is changing his religion, for his whole Kingdom.”

“The decision is to be made on the first moon after the autumnal equinox this year. The King has invited preachers, advocates of religions to come and convince him which one he should choose.”

“As you can see from the map this King’s choice will change the world”.

“The Khazars hold the key to the Eastern Gate and the ambitions of three empires. Depending on the King’s decisions one those empires will have a hold over the northern Silk Road.”

“Well that would upset a number of well-balanced apple carts,” said Nathan.

“All efforts to open the Black Sea straits and dislodge the Byzantines from Constantinople by the ships of the Caliphate have been failures.”

“They repulse them with Greek fire. The Greeks have had that recipe for a few hundred years and still no one knows what it is made of.”

“My mission from the Emir is to go to Ireland to see if I can meet the Varangians and see if we can establish a trade arrangement with them.”

“Further to see if I can meet the Khazars and persuade this King to keep his religion and make sure neither the caliphate the Byzantines or Charlemagne take control of the only independent access to the silk road.”

Nathan was wide eyed.

“What a wonderful voyage that would be,” he said.

“Well,” said Aalim, “it was easy for my Emir to send and fund me but the slight detail of just how far away it is and would the Varangians take us down what is their trading route is a question, which is without answer at the moment.”

“You see it is easy to sketch these things out on a piece of parchment. Look at this,” he said, “it’s all there, the world we know is all laid out on a skin I can hold in my hand. But how far is it between say this line and that. We don’t know.”

Nathan was looking keenly at the map.

“Is there room,” he said, “for another voyager on your mission?”

“If I had links to these Varangians and could correspond with Jewish merchants in the Kingdom of Khazar I could be part of Andalusia’s trade with the Eastern Gate.”

“Ireland and the northern lands are only a few days sea voyage from Porto.”

“I would love to expand my trading and make the connexions with people who have goods in demand here in Spain and in North Africa. We would be able to buy amber, furs, silks, spices from the Varangians and the Eastern Gate.”

“And imagine if we went further, imagine going to the Eastern Gate, the Eastern Gate,” he repeated, “to see what merchandise they sell in those places.”

“This King of Khazar must be offering a safe sanctuary for this contest of religions. For a while it will be a gathering place for every merchant in the black sea, China, India and the Caliphate and Byzantine.”

They talked well into the evening.

The mad impracticality of Aalim’s mission slipped away as the talk progressed. Words and the sketch map glossed over the hardships it presented.

Dicult’s book had brought a certainty to places, which had been previously figments of the imagination. What was a far-fetched notion at the beginning of the discussion after the shuffling of maps and drawings began to assume a concrete form.

It became shaped in solidness, a notion with definite structure, fixed in time.

Aalim was not sure when he signed on to the proposition that Nathan should come on the enterprise.

A companion with his experience and common sense would be a boon.

It added comfort to the fact that his journey to the Eastern gate might be real and possible.

The Emir would be pleased if he was able to convert a trade mission into a solid connection between Nathan and traders at Dorestad, Hegeby and the Eastern Gate.

Secretly he had admitted to himself that the best he had expected was an opportunity to talk to the Irish and see if they had connections with the Varangians and then return safely to the comforts of Cordova. The thought of influencing a King in far off Khazaria was daunting and to be truthful he thought a bit far-fetched.

But his thinking seemed to expand with Nathan's enthusiasm. Nathan was a merchant, he was focussed on the opportunities for trade for increased wealth for him and his customers and his sellers.

He, Aalim he was a librarian who loved books. It was others who brought books for sale or offered to buy them. He had got lucky with the Irish book trade.

Most of the new ideas, old ideas were coming from Persia.

Books had accumulated there after the Byzantines had expelled the Christian heretics, the Nestorians some three hundred years ago.

Now in far off Persia and beyond was a large church of Nestorian 'heretics' translating and valuing ancient 'heresies'. At the Eastern Gate he might be able to make direct contact with them.

At the moment any Nestorian books filtered through to the hands of the Caliphate and graced his eminence the Caliph's library in Bagdad.

Miriam joined them as the light fell,

Joseph set out the prospect of Nathan travelling to the Eastern Gate and back.

“Nathan,” she implored him, “this is a dangerous business. You are prospering well. Is there not enough trade in Spain and the Roman Sea to keep you prosperous all your life?”

“That is true mother, true and in doing what I do I am like any other trader in a crowded sea,” said Nathan.

“And the journey down these rivers, how will you get back,” she said. “Rivers run one way you know.”

“It must be possible mother after all the Varangians do it.”

“They must have powerful oarsmen.”

“I have always assumed,” said Aalim, “that a journey back up the great river would be unlikely and that we would we would come back to our dear Andalusia by way of the Caliphate and Baghdad. We will be safe in the care of Harun el Rashid. I have ambassadorial rank conferred on me by the Emir.”

“The animosity between we the Ummayad of Andalusia and the Abassids of Baghdad has faded.”

“It will be no problem to make passage from Antioch to Barcelona,” said Nathan, “it is a well travelled route of trade.”

The drama of discussing such large and adventurous ambitions was getting to Aalim. Although he was a senior advisor to the Emir it was mainly on the parochial matters of Iberia that his advice had been sought.

It was an intoxicating feeling to be going to a place at the confluences of the world when large affairs of empires would be decided. He reflected that it was mostly battles that decided the fate of nations.

But occasionally one a man has a choice and he felt it would be less than manly of him if he did not take up the challenge.

When Caesar rolled the dice to make his decision to cross the Rubicon, to leave his province of Gaul and cross a small stream he and he alone decided the fate of the Roman Republic.

This King of Khazars has taken into his hands the fate of his people and peoples far and wide for a time and times to come. He would regret all his life if he did not try to influence a choice on the hinge of fate.

By the close of the day the matter was settled.

They would travel to Ireland and see what trade in books were offered. They would make enquiries of the Irish on how to contact and deal with the Varangians

If that worked out to their satisfaction from Ireland they would seek passage to Dorestad, the great trading port of Charlemagne on the northern shores of the Frankish Kingdom. From there to Hegeby seemed a small step and hope they could persuade the Varangians to take them down the Volga, to the Eastern Gate.

Who knew what bounty was offered.

“Good night” Aalim said at last when every possibility had been explored, reiterated and said again and understood but not quite not understood.

They had enough knowledge to talk but not enough to resolve the unknowns in any detail.

The morning rose clear and bright over the beautiful city of Salamanca. The city walls shone in the sunlight. It was a most pleasant place thought Aalim.

He started by telling Joseph their plans for the next few days.

“I will see the Commander of the Border tomorrow. We will join him on his patrol as far as the Douro. Thence we will go down the river to Porto. Our ship to Ireland leaves at the full moon.”

“Is the river safe,” asked Joseph.

In Salamanca it was the question of the district, of the province. Was the northern frontier with the Galician’s safe? Could one take produce down the road along the Tormes river and then the Douro to Porto? Were marauders pillaging the travellers and was the safety of the subjects of the Emir under threat.

“It has been good for sometime,” said Nathan. “I hear occasionally from our people who live in Asturias. They travel south for weddings. All is peaceful and has been for some time.”

The morning advanced and warmed as they gathered in the courtyard and went through what had become a practised art.

The loading of the mules, checking the hooves of the horse, eating a breakfast in the gathering light of day took longer than usual. But it was plain that Naim Tawfiq and Aymaan were the worse for wear.

“What were those two up to last night,” asked Aalim of Khubayb

“Women I think,” said Khubayb, “loose women.”

“How loose,” asked Aalim. “Very loose,” replied Khubayb.

“I am told,” said Aalim. “That such women are banned from Salamanca during the Christian lent. The feast of the return of the harlots to Salamanca is a bacchanalian delight so I am hear. Imagine all the loose women returning to the town all at once after forty days of absence.”

“I take it the slatterns are happy to sacrifice their income for this period master,” asked Khubayb.

“It’s possible they take their sluttery to another town, indeed who knows perhaps they ply their trade among less rigid Christians, Jews or Muslims,” said Aalim.

“God was merciful was he not asking us the true believers to abstain from food during the daylight hours of Ramadan, not women.”

“Indeed yes,” said Khubayb.

“Work those three hard today, and see if they learn to moderate their behaviour, and give them a good telling off,” said Aalim.

“I shall master I shall do that,” said Khubayb.

“With no pleasure Khubayb, do it with no pleasure,” said Aalim.

Khubayb cast a glance at him and nodded with a dry smile.

“As you wish master, as you wish”

They said good-bye to Joseph and his household. It was hard for Miriam to say farewell to Nathan, harder than they had thought the night before.

Joseph was kind enough to offer them a Muslim prayer.

“May your hajj be acceptable, your sin be forgiven, and your merchandise not remain unsold.”

There was only one God.

He was the God of Abraham

Oporto to the Shannon

Chapter 4

The Captain of the escort stood ready as Aalim and his small troop came to the barrack square. He came forward to Aalim and gave a quick salute.

“My name is Akbar. I welcome you to our patrol of the northern front. We will see you safely to the Douro. I will introduce you to my lieutenants as the journey proceeds. It is understood that your men will take orders from my officers and myself without question”

Aalim nodded his assent.

On horseback ranged around the square were fifty well turned out warriors of the faith. They were groomed to perfection. The reins of their horses and the saddle work glistened against their white robes and on their chests were the green tasselled symbol of the Emirate.

“Is the road safe Captain,” asked Aalim.

“It is. We are a good distance from the border. We also seem to have a kind of truce with the Christians. Merchants and clerics are travelling freely from each side and the river is safe to Porto. It is not peace and light by any means your eminence. We have not become blood brothers with the Christians but a sullen peace is to be preferred to funerals and fighting.”

The road would take them along the Tormes, the placid river that ran below the promontory of Salamanca. The troop jingled out of the barracks into the town and joined the river road down by the Roman Bridge.

Aalim, Khubayb Naim Tawfiq Aymaan fell easily into the life they have left a few days before. Nathan found it a very different experience from his usual departure from Salamanca. To be surrounded by the security of an escort of briskly trotting soldiers was altogether different from the usual gaggle of a merchant convoy.

The first task was to reach the river Douro. The Captain and his men would leave them there. Aalim and his party would take the boat westward down the river through the high canyons south of Braganza to the port at Porto. The Captain would follow the Douro upstream for a few days, returning to Salamanca by way of the northern border.

Khubayb and the Captain had met before. Naim, Tawfiq and Aymaan did not know anyone in the escort. They seemed pleased to ride as professional soldiers again in the army of the Emirate and not as the straggled escort of a scholar.

The road forked north. Nathan pulled his horse next to Aalim.

“It is a safe feeling having soldiers take one along the road. I usually travel with my men without the luxury of security.”

“Don’t worry,” said Aalim, “tomorrow when our escort leaves us you will have your old feelings of insecurity back.”

“Interestedly some of our escort are Jews,” said Nathan.

“Indeed” said Aalim, “they must be men of calibre.”

“I suspect they are,” said Nathan.

It was when he stopped for lunch that they discovered the first drawback of the armed escort. Instead of sojourn at a pleasant inn the soldiers quickly dismounted and sat under the shade of trees on the riverbank while stringy beef and soft bread was distributed along the groups of hungry men. It was followed by cups of fresh water mixed with lemon juice and honey.

“Not quite the fare you are used to,” said the captain.

“Not quite,” said Aalim.

He could not suppress the thought that the Captain was relishing the opportunity to show the Emir’s ambassador that the Army was spending the funds of the Emirate sparingly. It could however be that this was the usual fare of the army.

Late in the afternoon heat it seemed it was the army’s custom to have a short siesta. The soldiers hung hammocks where they could or placed pallets on the ground and slept in rotation always with a guard posted on the outer perimeter of the small encampment.

They reached the banks of the Douro a day later at nightfall. Their boat awaited them but there was little time to meet the captain or discuss their boarding as the darkness gathered.

Again the soldiers ran through their practised routine. Pots were quickly slung over small fires, hammocks slung in the bushes, and guards posted to the perimeter.

Aalim spent the evening dreaming of his feather bed in Cordoba and anxious moments worrying about his precious cargo. There was one benefit of his discomfort. He got to know Naim, Tawfiq and Aymaan better. The fact that he, a gentleman was forced to rough it with them, relaxed their guard and in the warm evening by the campfire the tales came tumbling out.

They were sons of tradesmen who having a number of sons were grateful to enrol the surplus in the army. In times of war soldiering was undoubtedly a risky trade but the Emirate had basked in peace for a number of years. In times of peace it was a fine occupation. Fancy clothes, travel and the prospect of the excitement of combat one day made it ideal for young men.

It had taken most of the day to acquaint Nathan with the actuality of the prayer stops. Living in the city he had heard the Muezzins' call to prayer five times a day for most of his life. However, he had never actually been among those praying. The call had always been for someone else.

As an observant Jew he prayed three times a day. Shar, the morning light, the afternoon prayer which evoked the prayer in the temple around the offering of flour and the Arvit prayer for evening. He could pray standing and occasionally prayed from his saddle, it didn't need to involve the hand washing, and cleansing required of his fellow travellers

Aalim his troop and the soldiers slept in a covered platform which looked like one day with a bit of effort it might become a place for travellers to sojourn in more comfort.

The morning came with a sunny light beaming fitfully through a mist rising from the river. The smoke from the fires drifted in under the fog and left a smoky smell that lingered under the olives trees and spread through the encampment.

The boats crew had a small hut for their repose a little away from the banks.

The captain of the escort came forward to Aalim

“I will take your horses and mules back to Salamanca. From there the Emir’s hostellers will see they are returned to Cordoba with the first convoy going south. You need not worry about their safe return.”

Aalim was saddened to say goodbye to his horse. It was feeling shared by the others. Aymaan made such a fuss it was hard to tell if he really had that much affection for his horse or was as usual taking the opportunity to dramatise the business and draw attention to himself.

The Escort Captain said goodbye and wished them a safe journey saying if they were ever in Salamanca again to come by the garrison and pay their respects.

The boat captain came ashore and welcomed them to the Douro, a fine river he boasted as though his mastery of it gave him an ownership denied to others.

The boat had a small sail and a jaunty look. Aalim was busy trying to make sure everyone of his precious bundles was lashed tight and safe from water.

At length all were on board and the Captain and his crew went about casting off in a businesslike manner.

The river was wide at first, and the mist of the morning had lifted leaving a pleasant warmth hovering over the water. It was a delightful experience Aalim thought. The sail side on to the small head wind and the current bore them steadily forward seemingly without effort. In a few hours they reached the canyons, rising high seemingly to the top of the blue sky.

Naim was impressed.

“You find this pleasant,” said Aalim to him.

“Indeed master, sailors have a good life, no saddle sores, time to watch the passing scenery and ambushes can be seen early before they get close at hand.”

“True,” said Aalim, “but you can’t spur this horse and ride swiftly from danger, the river is in charge.”

Evening fell and as they drifted in the rivers currents they could see along the banks small hamlets where a glow of candles in the houses gave proof the world still had people in it. The night was a canopy covered in stars framed in the sharp canyon walls.

The full moon seemed to lead them down the river glistening in the water’s flow and freckled in the glimmering eddies always edged by the black walls of the gorge.

Aalim felt overawed at the majesty of the heavens. He lived as far as he could tell in the most civilised part of the world.

A land where the comforts of civilisation were taken for granted and the graces of justice and tolerance for all citizens were assured. Yet in a few days he would be leaving this sanctuary and be among people who did not believe in the laws and faith of Allah.

Who knew countries they might pass through where the lives of men were governed by the personal whims of capricious and intemperate rules.

He sat by the boat rail and watched the oarsman steer the craft deftly between the wide banks of the river shrouded in darkness, eyes sweeping the banks for any possible disturbance to their progress.

The morning sun rose as they moved further down the river. Breakfast was bread buttered with the richest of butter and fillets of small fish smoked to perfection.

Lunch was salted beef with pickled onions and more coarse bread with slabs of rich butter. The sailors of the river ate well.

Finally at the end of the second day they came to the mouth of the Douro and the harbour of Oporto.

Naim and Tawfiq were astonished by the harbour. The aroma of fish, fresh and rotten, was overwhelming. The tang of salty ropes and pitch tar nestled among the clutter of barrels scented the breeze. As you walked further the nose singled out odours pine resin, sawn timber and tarred rope.

Aalim bade them stay on the riverboat and guard the cargo.

The riverboat captain agreed to hold their equipment until their outbound ship was found.

It was hard to guess which ship might be the one that would take them to Ireland. He asked a sailor standing on the deck of the ship next to the riverboat.

“I am looking for a ship and her captain is Aidan, she is going to Ireland.”

The crewman looked puzzled but motioned him to hold his ground while he fetched someone that could help him. Finally a tall blonde man came to the ships side and addressed him in poor Arabic,

“What ship is it your looking for,” he asked.

Aalim replied. “The captain’s name is Aidan. It is going to Ireland, adding, you have Latin.”

The sailor replied in Latin.

“Apologies for my poor Arabic, my Latin is a bit better.”

“Let me see the situation,” he said as he walked to the bow, “Aiden has his ship,” and standing on the bow he counted the ships tied up to the harbour wall, and shouted back, “number five, it’s the fifth ship that way counting this one.”

“My thanks,” said Aalim, “and a good voyage to you.”

He wondered if that was what you wished sailors. He had sailed once from Morocco. But that was a crowded sea hemmed in by land much of it friendly shores.

As he walked to the fifth ship he was struck by the number of barrels everywhere, barrels.

Could learning from books ever teach bookish men the things of the real world, the small ever present facts of existence.

Pliny noticed the small things, the little things that make the world work. Barrels were a Celtic invention, Pliny had decided. Maybe they came about because the Gauls had so many more trees in their wet domains than in the dry lands of the Mediterranean, thought Aalim. The Celts had turned the commercial world upside down with barrels. Barrels made it cheaper to ship the sweet wines of Gaul and Spain to Rome. They were easier to handle and held greater capacity than the amphora used in the eastern trade.

The Emperor Domitian became so incensed by Gauls and their gushers of wine in barrels competing with his patrician supporter's estates that he ordered all the vineyards in Gaul ripped up. Yet there was still wine in Gaul hundreds of years later despite the ravishes of the barbarians. It seemed likely to Aalim that Domitian's order was executed slowly and by the time it was having some effect the Emperor had been assassinated. They were a Gaulish gift to the world thought Aalim sturdy wooden barrels.

The interesting thing about them was they bulged. Building them with bulges must be harder than using straight staves. It But staves straight for the full length of a barrel would touch the ground with their full weight. It would be harder to turn and manoeuvre them, mused Aalim. But with the bulge only a small part touched the deck and they could be turned on a coin. Interesting he thought feeling more a like a mariner with this morsel of knowledge he had figured out about barrels.

The thought lasted him on his walk along the wharf until he got to ship number five. He called out in Latin to a red haired sailor standing by the rails.

“Is your captain named Aidan?”

“Indeed that he is sir. You have business with him”

“Yes I have,” replied Aiden

“I shall fetch him”

In a moment a middle sized gnarly man appeared on deck. Looking Aalim up and down, he said, “So you are one of my passengers to Ireland?”

“That is true,” said Aalim in Latin, “I am Aalim.”

“I am Aidan. I am the master of this ship.” His Latin was rough but precise.

“I have received your request from the Porto Garrison commander when my ship arrived last week. I have room for you and your men and some cargo.”

“Bring your men and goods to the ships side in one hour and my crew will take you aboard, show you to your quarters and stow your cargo”

Aalim listened carefully. He recalled some of the nautical terms he knew. But while they were easy to him in Arabic they had not the same clear reality in Latin. What exactly did stow mean.

“My thanks,” he replied, “We shall be present in the hour.”

He walked back to the riverboat. The captain of the riverboat agreed to take it alongside the ship number five. This he did by a slow crab-walking manoeuvre pulling the boat along by grappling the moored ships and pulling the small boat long.

It was accompanied by shouts and scorn from the crews of the moored ships. Derisory remarks were directed at the size of his ship and the cheek of using them as an anchor point to move his boat.

Aalim watched the manoeuvre from shore and listening to his men and becoming bemused by the banter of the sailors.

He felt relieved.

It was the night of the full moon. The request he had made to the garrison commander weeks ago had reached the captain of the Irish ship. The captain had reached the port on time. It was good when plans made months earlier fell into place. The pleasure of it brightened up his view of the day

“Come my men,” he said, “let us set off to sea and see what we shall see.”

It sounded more poetical in Latin. He had better teach his men rudimentary Latin and some basic words in Irish would do no harm. He himself spoke fluent Latin, Hebrew and Greek along with his own Arabic.

Nathan spoke Hebrew, good Latin, Greek and Arabic. They had the words to get by he thought but the men did not.

The Captain met them as they came aboard and invited them to gather round him. He surveyed them silently for about half a minute, noting the military demeanour of the escort and the bearing and courtly dress of Aalim. The other well-robed man he took to be a scholar or a merchant.

“I am not from this country and I do not share your religion. Whilst we are on land we serve different rulers and bow to different Gods. However, on this voyage, on this deck I am the supreme commander.”

“I am the law. I am the judge of all disputes and quarrels. Your lives rest in my hands. I am to all intents and purposes God. You will of course find this blasphemous.”

Nathan and Aalim were already bristling at blasphemy. His Irish accented Latin did not help either. Luckily the men did not follow his Latin.

Aalim translated the statement into Arabic leaving out the bit about the captain’s pretensions to being God. It seemed the captain needed to emphasise his authority.

Reality spoke louder than any misgivings they might have about the religious correctness of the captain’s words. Their lives would be in his hands and the hands of the crew and they had better trust him or find another ship.

“That is understood Captain,” said Aalim.

The rest of the day was full of bustle. A man who had obviously been in the wars took them to their quarters, his faced was scarred and there was a misshapen look about him.

The sailors were hairy angular men who walked with the wavery gait of those more used to a moving deck than the firmity of dry land.

The travellers stood near the steering pole watching the captain give the orders to get the ship ready for sea. The loading of cargo the checking of sails, positioning of ropes, oiling the capstan continued at a fast pace After a while noticing the travellers the captain turned and answered the unspoken question that hung on the air.

“We leave,” said Aidan, “at the midnight bell.”

“Why midnight why not leave in the daylight,” asked Naim speaking out of turn and in very poor Latin. “When you can see where the ship is going.”

The Captain looked at him with a look of despairing hopeless incredulity at the profound ignorance Naim’s remark implied..

“It’s the tide lad. We need the tide to get a good start, a racing outward tide with a good wind will get us out there far enough from land to take a westerly wind to Ireland.”

“There will be a small easterly wind with this tide. We have to reach as far west as we can and then we can turn and run up on the westerly morning wind. The evening breeze is from the land. The morning is off the sea. The tide with the morning breeze and a bit of hard rowing will clear us out past Finisterre by morning.”

Given the Captain’s withering disdain Naim thought asking what a tide was might be a step too far.

“And what,” asked Aymaan, “is Finisterre, some water spirit”?

The captain with a helpless shrug reserved for the land bound said, “It’s a piece of land,” he said, “not just any land but the last land in the world.”

“Finisterre is where the ground ends. It is the place where there is no more of it, where you run out of rocks and soil. Out past Finisterre there is only sea to the rim of the ocean at the edge of the world. We are to push out to sea as far as we can and then let the morning westerly wind drive us up to Ireland. We have to stay far from land out of the range of Frankish pirates and slave traders.”

“But not so far,” said Naim, “as to fall off the edge of the world into the abyss of water.”

Aiden assumed he was having a lend of him and smiled, “yes lad we wouldn’t want to fall off the edge it would be the devils own job getting back up.”

Naim took all of this knowledge of the world of water in with good grace still wondering what a tide was but no doubt he would find that out in the course of time.

Aymaan had the wit to say nothing. Ignorance was no shame. Pretend knowledge would not get you by in this strange world.

They waited in the evening light for the departure. Khubayb had sailed from Cadiz to Alexandra and was able to nonchalantly say he would retire for good nights sleep feigning interest.

There was a tradition among those at sea that to have been through the gates of Hercules was a stripe of manhood.

They cast off. No matter how often a ship sailed, of whatever size there is always that feeling of cleavage when the ropes were cast ashore and the connection with the land was cut, severed and the finality of the voyage was manifest.

With the dropping of the rope in the outgoing tide and the slow drift away from the wharf the ship became a small world of its own. A planet to itself, single and entire with those on board a country to themselves with only themselves to reckon with. They and all the property they held had no domain but the ship itself.

While it was understood in the land they had just left that Arabic was the language that God had spoken to men and that the Arab speaking elite were the rulers of all they surveyed. Here on this small ship all that faded slowly away.

The moon was bright and to the north and the banks of the Douro slide slowly alongside. At first it seemed as though they stood still and the land moved alongside them. As they moved away from the shore the small wavelets became less the creatures of the river and more inhabitants of the broad and unlimited ocean that seemed to pan out to the darkening horizon on and on forever.

Naim and Tawfiq choose a spot at the bow and sat there, in plain wonderment.

“Is it as you thought Tawfiq,” asked Naim.

“I couldn’t think what it might be, Naim.

“I have never seen the ocean, never seen the sea. It is strange beyond any strangeness I could imagine.”

The night set in to a more complete darkness. Oil lamps were hung about the ship. The large white sail swung at an angle to the mast and the waves curled alongside the blade of the bow as it cut the water. They watched for an hour as the dark of the land faded from sight.

In the small cabin their companions were asleep in their hammocks as they settled in to a world that rocked and dipped and bowed under their feet and whose motion they could not escape.

The morning rose over a blue sea stretching out to the rim of the earth. The captain approached and pointed out the headland they could see in the slight mist over a sunlight sea.

“That is Aquino, the next headland is Mouros then Finisterre and then we will be in the northern sea.”

Khubayb Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq were on the foredeck when Aalim rose and went to relieve himself.

It was pleasant to face the day without sitting in a saddle. They were discussing spirits and Djinns when he approached them.

“It is a bad feeling,” said Tawfiq. “My intestines are possessed by demons.”

The same infestations by bad spirits had also affected Naim and Aymaan.

“Indeed,” confirmed Khubayb, “there are djinns in the sea. They affect those who are weak and unworthy to venture out on the waters of the ocean”

“But how do they get inside you,” asked Aymaan.

“They are Djinn. You do not ask a Djinn how it goes about its business,” said Khubayb authoritatively

“Well how do they know who is unworthy” asked Tawfiq. “Is there a sign? Could you fool a Djinn of the sea”?

Khubayb glanced at Aalim seeking his acquiescence in the subterfuge. Aalim raised his eyebrows heavenward. The sooner young men stopped falling for nonsense he thought, the sooner they became men whose judgment you could trust.

Nevertheless, it seems they always needed a taste of the world of charlatans to understand the nature of them. It took experience and time to develop a healthy scepticism for every tale and explanation that was offered to them no matter how gravely it was expressed and with what false sense of candour.

He looked at Nathan. He was no believer in the mystic tales of Arabic lads.

Anyway he was far too sick to take any interest. The Djinn had taken a serious interest in him, too. Nathan discretely removed himself from the company, like a seasoned sailor walked to the back of the ship and threw up over the side.

The ship ploughed on through the waves as the day wore on. Aymaan and Tawfiq fell asleep on a pile of ropes.

The crew were a bundle of singing hard work and energy carrying buckets of pitch hot and steaming from a brazier in the middle deck.

Small brooms were used to stick the black goo into the cracks of the decking and round the timbers of the upper hull. In the afternoon the passengers spent time watching diving gannets spearing down into the ocean and rising with small sardines in their mouth.

The weather was pleasant the sun warming the sea and sails and wooden deck

Aalim approached the captain.

“Captain could I ask a favour of you. Could your men spend some time helping my men learn a bit of your language? Enough to get them fed and looked after in Ireland.”

The captain looked at him with interest.

“A wise move sir, a wise move,” he said.

“To be adrift in our green land without a word of the Irish tongue would be to be at peril sir. I can lend you Diarmid but I will need some help from your men in return. There is always some work need to be done to the ship to keep her sound and turning the vessel into a class room would hinder our success.”

“You will not make soldiers into sailors in the short days we have but it will keep them occupied,” said Aalim.

“You will not make a sailor a scholar either,” said the captain.

“But if Diarmid could learn more Arabic it would make him a bit handier in Porto and Cadiz in the future.”

They started the language lessons the next morning with the subject of food. The young blond haired sailor, Diarmid came from the cookhouse with a few items.

“Bread, arain” he said, in Irish. The pupils said the word in Arabic

“Spoon” said Diarmid in Irish and they chorused the word in Arabic. After a while they reversed it. Bread they said in Irish, and Diarmid said it manfully in Arabic.

Nathan was the better pupil. He had good Latin, and better Arabic than the boys and his Irish came along all the better. It was slow and painful.

Aalim led the lessons in the evening as they lay in hammocks swinging lightly in the cabin as they went through the words again. In Irish, in Arabic, in Irish again and again in Arabic.

They were quick learners. Diarmid was no scholar. Nathan’s more philosophical questions met with a good-natured rebuff.

“I am too long away from my parish for that sort of talk,” he said.

The seagulls were a source of mystery to Aymaan and Tawfiq.

“What do they eat?” Asked Aymaan.

“Just wait until after lunch and the swill bucket goes out and you will see what is on the menu for the birds,” said Diarmid

By the third day the voyage had settled into a rhyme of waves and words and progress.

Knowledge of rudimentary Irish was slowly getting into the heads of his men. Aalim had a natural acuity for language and its metier. The task his men did to repay the sailors caused some amusement.

Aymaan milked the goat.

Somehow Tawfiq and Naim always seemed to be about at milking time teasing the animal. What is it like dark beauty to have your tits pulled by Aymaan the conqueror of women they said? The goat seemed to join the merriment. When you talked to it, it made a noise and nodded its head. It has mixed views on the tenderness of Aymaan's hands.

Naim had a job braiding rope under the careful guidance of an old grizzled sailor who seldom spoke but pointed a lot. Khubayb spent more time in the cookhouse than he wanted.

Aalim met Aidan the captain on the evening of the third day

“How do you know where you are going,” Aalim asked waving his arm at the wide sea, which stretched uniformly from all points on the horizon.

“Well we have the astrolabe, we have the stars,” replied Aiden. “All I have to do is try and see the sun at midday, reckon where the horizon is and I know I am heading due north.”

“At night I have the pole star. We are lucky this voyage. At times the clouds make it hard guessing. When I have passed four days of good sailing I turn to the right, and let the ship drift toward where Ireland is.

It's always there sir, Ireland never moves.”

“The trick is to keep well away from land until we see Brandon or Skellig Michael if there is a gale that blows us about maybe Kinsale. The main thing to keep your eye on is the birds especially when the sky is cloudy. They fly below the cloud cover and they are always busy about their business.”

“The presence of birds is a great comfort to the sailor. Birds are always coming and going from land to the sea.”

“If you watch the birds carefully you will know where the land is. There are some as use Ravens sir. They are in my view the smartest bird. If you are hoping to make landfall after a few days at sea without the sight of land and have brought along a few ravens all you need to do is let them sit on the ropes or wander round the deck.”

“As soon as you are near to land they know where it is long before we sailors can see it. They fly towards it if it is there. The main rule about the seas to Spain and Ireland is to avoid Ushant and the Scillies. That’s the main thing, avoid Ushant and the Scillies.”

“Most of the people I know think the world ends out there where the sun sets but in Ireland we hold a different view. The sun according to the people in the rest of the world current thinking sinks into the sea, goes beneath the earth, and rises again on the other side of the rim of the earth in the east the next morning.”

“That well may be but it was the belief of the old Irish that out there beyond the furthestmost wave lies Tir an Oige.”

“The land of youth, where the good people go when they die.”

“It made sense to our ancestors that in paradise you would have the fitness and liveness of youth. What would be the point of staggering into paradise on a stick. We are all good Christians now but there’s many have the notion it’s there they will pass to after death.”

Aiden was in a talkative mood.

“The main reason we think the world does not end out there and that there are other lands is the voyage of the blessed Saint Brendan. If the weather is good by tomorrow we should see we will see the Bay where Brendan left Ireland. Brendan sailed from there out over the broad ocean. You must have read his book sir, it is in every monastery in Ireland and even I have heard in the Frankish lands.”

“Indeed I have,” said Aalim, “I thought it a fable.”

“Sailors I have met who have been to the islands north of Ireland, the Faeroes and to Ultima Thule are convinced that Brendan sailed well beyond the known seas and that there is more land out there than we know. Time will tell I suppose,” said Aiden.

“If we are lucky as we come close to Ireland we will see the monastery of Skellig Michael. It is a bare rock thrusting out of the seas. That monastery has been there over three hundred years. It is a place of great sanctity. It is the custom for the good monks to pray to heaven for the safe passage of ship that pass in sight.”

“We take the third headland, past Skellig Michael and enter the bay of the Shannon. It leads to the long wide river, deep and safe and with no trouble we will be at Clonmacnois.”

Aidan was puzzled at the nature of their business in Ireland.

“Well it is a wonder to me sir that there be money in books and dyes. I am more used to barrels of pork legs leathers, swords and slaves.”

On the fourth day as a drizzled rain came in from a cloudy western sky land appeared suddenly of the starboard.

“Sails back,” shouted the captain, “haul to port. Haul back the sail”

The ship pulled left out from the shore far enough to see it but not close enough to be pulled into it by the surging waves. Two men on the starboard and Aidan ran through a practised routine with sharpness and power.

“Keep the eyes in your head on that shore,” shouted Aiden. “Helmsman stay out as far as you need so we can see it but not run into it.”

It was a strange thing the sea at the edge of the land, foaming and scouring the land. The land ran out hidden underneath the sea and could rip the bottom of a ship. For the next two days there was always two men of the landward side of the ship. There was some sort of game going on. As they passed a headland they called out a name in Irish. Then there was a debate.

“No that peninsula has a slope to the left”

“No that’s Valentia Island.” .

“It’s a useful game,” he said to Aalim. “They are teaching the younger ones to remember the landmarks, to understand the surging swells.”

“At least on land there is a road, a verge and for better or worse you are forced into a course,” said Nathan. “

“In this helpless drift across a slippery sea you could go anywhere you liked until the graunching of the rocks on the ship’s keel told you that you had strayed.”

Finally it seemed the game was ended. Aiden was satisfied he had the landmarks under control.

“To the right and the Shannon,” he cried and the ship turned for the first time in the voyage due east and ran fast and hard up a surging tide with the land on the right of the ship.

As the late afternoon wore on they reached the mouth of a wide river with easy hills girding its sides and cattle and men visible on the green hills. It was so luminously green that Aalim and the travellers were taken aback. The green had variations of shades, and the light seemed diffused by a soft unseen mist. Images were slightly blurred in the haze. The ship pulled hard on the westerly wind and furrowed fast up between the banks now less than a two ships lengths from the shore. The helmsmen took orders shouted from two sailors stationed at the bow.

“Left a bit,” said one

“Right a bit,” said the other, each looking at the reeds at the side of the river. Each leaned over the rail looking forward into the gloom. At intervals they flung a lead weight on a cord over the side.

It was shaped like a cup with tallow in the base. When the line was hauled in the nature of the bottom could be understood by looking at what had stuck to the tallow.

“We will anchor here tonight,” said Aiden. “We are safe, there’s few will disturb us and these lands are fairly welcoming to ships. They like a bit of trade.”

They slept well with just the lapping of the river water slapping against the side of the ship.

They were in Ireland even if their feet had not yet touched the land.

At Clonmacnois

Chapter 5

They sailed up between the green banks of a low lying land past forests of oak and elms interleaved with meadows of grass and buttercups. Here and there it was not apparent where the riverbank was as the river had flooded over fields leaving the grass and flowers showing clearly below the water at the rivers 'edge'.

Occasionally they would pull in to a settlement and Aiden would buy fish, meat, vegetables and fresh milk. The people seemed well dressed and clean but there were no villages or cities.

The voyage up the river seemed to go on for days. At one stage they crossed a wide lake its edges crowded in reeds and the forested shores dotted with the fires of small settlements. Then one morning when for once the sky cleared and the sun shone a watery glimmer over the mid morning they arrived at Clonmacnois.

Word had travelled up the river and waiting for them was a cluster of men in grey stone coloured cloaks gathered at the wharfs edge.

Behind them up a grassy shoulder were brown buildings, thatched with rushes and a few larger structures made of stone. Surrounding this was a vivid green landscape cut with stony paths. In the further fields were sheep and cattle and some horses.

There was no town evident at any distance, no streets with houses crouched along them, no plaza for a gathering of people.

Ropes were flung ashore and waiting hands grabbed them. The boat was pulled to the wharf and tied to poles at its ends.

Five men stood facing the boat as it touched the wharf side, two of some importance stood to the front. They wore woollen cloaks of a hard coarse wool that had not been bleached and the lanolin shone from the wool of mountain sheep. They had linen underclothes and a woollen cape with a hood perched behind their heads. All wore sandals and each held a wooden stick.

It was the uncovered heads that were startling. From a line running from ear to ear the front of their heads were bare, their remaining hair stood up in the middle of their heads and flowed back down their necks.

One of them shouted to the Captain in Irish. “You had a good voyage Aiden, the winds were kind to you.”

“Indeed the winds were kind Fergal thanks be to God indeed they were. It was as good a voyage as ever I had, clear skies and fair winds on every day.”

A large plank was placed onto the ship and Aiden indicated to Aalim that he was welcome to step ashore. Aalim gestured to Nathan and to his men to follow and they descended down the plank to step onto land.

The world stopped rising up and down but the feeling they had to compensate for the movement of the ship remained.

A tall blonde haired man stepped forward, his bare forehead shining.

“You are well met,” he said in Latin.

The contrast between the turbaned Andalusian with his white flowing robes, green rimmed turban and the grey woollen clad monk with the blond hair was stark.

“I am Fergal. Fergal of the Monastery of Clonmacnois.”

“I am Aalim Rahel, Librarian to his eminence the Emir of Andalusia. I am pleased to meet you,” said Aalim.

“I have dealt with your traders in years past,” said Fergal. “They spoke well of you,” he said in a soft accented but perfect Latin. “It is a pleasure to meet you in person.”

Aalim was struck by his ignorance of the customs by which one might greet so foreign a people in so foreign a place. It was not just that they were strangers. He had met strangers all his life. But they were part of a totality of strange landscape and unknown culture. Everywhere his senses felt the exotic.

Any meeting of men was personal but they here they met as men of responsibility, giving not just their own personal welcome to each other but exchanging the greetings of the worlds and institutions they represented.

He thought he would proceed as best he could and assume that any inadvertent slight that he might cause would be forgiven in the goodwill of the occasion.

“And this,” said Aalim, “is my colleague Nathan, a Jewish scholar and trader of Salamanca.”

Fergal extended his hand and in a salute acknowledged Nathan

“Welcome to the monastery of Kieran may your sojourn here be a fruitful one,” he said in flawless Hebrew.

Nathan smiled at the courtesy bowed and said in Irish, “It is most welcome to be here.”

Fergal smiled and nodded. These were he thought men of learning and courtesy.

Aalim stepped forward and said in Latin. “May I present my escort, men of the Emirs army.”

This is their leader Khubayb. Khubayb, bowed, “My compliments” he said to Fergal in Irish.

And the second in command Naim, Another bow, Aymaan, steeped forward and gave a rudimentary bow. And Tawfiq, only to have Tawfiq do an elaborate bow more suited to a tavern girl.

“Gentlemen, and others” said Fergal with a bemused smile, “You have arrived at the Monastery of Clonmacnois.”

“This is the abbot and leader of our community Tuathga.”

A man with a freckled face and an alarming shock of red hair made all the more glaring by the front of his head being shaven stepped forward.

“Welcome to Clonmacnois. I will not keep you here long in the wind. Fergal looks after travellers. He will take you to the house for guests and see you are settled in for your stay. I will take my leave now and look forward to talking with you later.”

Aalim was impressed. They might look like robed savages from beyond the wilds of Germania but these men were well spoken and their welcome was warm and genuine.

Fergal called a young man out from the bystanders and introduced him.

“This is Kieran. He will be your shadow and guide.”

The young man had blonde hair, and a sunny smile.

“Pleased to meet you my lords” he said.

“Oh we are not lords,” said Nathan, in Latin “mere travellers.”

“Come,” said Fergal, “come and get some food into you and settle in to your lodgings.”

“These men,” he said gesturing at the three monks standing further back “will see your goods are taken up to the house for guests.”

The three other cloaked figures moved forward and removed their hoods and went on board the ship.

Aalim had another look around him. A low hill sloped up to the right and scattered out to the right hand side of the river amid the greenscape were a number of small buildings.

Small fields intersected the edges of the settlement. Between the stonewalls and the green fields were small domed shaped buildings like oversized beehives. In the middle stood a number of large church like buildings.

Sprinkled among this throng of habitations were larger buildings roofed in straw thatch with walls of timber coated in a mortar of clay. It was unlike any place that he had ever seen.

The river curved in a flat calm turn to the left and vanished northward into a green solemnity.

They made their way to a stone building in the centre of the low hill surrounded with a high wall.

Fergal pointed to the domed beehive stone buildings sprinkled over the landscape behind and to the left of the hill and said again in a musically soft Latin, that these were the dwellings of individual monks.

Aalim, Nathan Khubayb Naim Aymaan and Tawfiq were escorted in to a tall wooden building with tables and chairs set in rows down the middle. There was a fire going in the left hand side of the room stacked high with a strange set of square stones. The door was shut and they all sat down.

“Some food for the guests,” said Fergal to a tall monk nearby.

“I have no idea of your tastes or customs in the matter of food,” said Fergal. “Pork I know you do not eat. But until we get the matter sorted we will side on the safety of fish.”

“Bread Paudeen bread,” said Fergal to a grey haired monk who came forward to meet them.

A large tureen of fish soup was placed on the table with pewter bowls and spoons following.

Next came a pile of warm steaming bread and platters of butter set down at both ends of the table. Goblets of cool crisp buttermilk appeared and platters of salmon trout and sea bass doused in butter with a sprinkling of watercress on the top landed in front of them.

They ate with gusto.

When it was plain that all had eaten what satisfied them Fergal rose and rapped a spoon against the table and said “come Andalusians and we shall see to your quarters.”

They walked to another wooden building with a stout door and large poles with planked walls. Aalim’s books and trading stock and their baggage were already set against the wall.

The furniture was made entirely of stout wood planks. The beds had mattresses encased in covers of linen filled with the feathers of birds. Thick fur covered eiderdowns also filled with the down of waterfowl covered every bed.

A blazing fire of turf and wood sat in the centre of the flag stone floor. The house had six beds in two rows of three fornenst the wall. There was a small glass window at each end and two oil lamps hung over both tables. Beeswax candles were niched in recesses around the walls.

It was warm. Aalim surmised that the floor stones were heated by the fire and kept the air heated. A streak of smokey soot ran up the roof to the small hole out of which the smoke escaped. It could be a warm respite from the cold of winter he thought.

They sat in chairs around the brazier and took account of their surroundings

Tawfiq was full of questions. “Master are we closer to the edge of the world here?”

“No,” said Aalim, “that is at Ultima Thule. It is according to Aiden six days sailing north from here, a land of ice and fire.”

“How can you have ice and fire in the same place,” asked Naim.

“I do not know,” said Aalim, “Allah is mighty and he seems to have solved that problem somehow.”

It was noticeable that as they had become more familiar with him his men had started to treat him as a font of knowledge. They had begun asking him questions about the strangeness they were encountering, confident he could answer from his bookish learning. They assumed he knew everything. After all the vast library of Cordoba contained all the knowledge in the known world did it not, and he presumably had read it all. So far he had managed to answer most of them.

“I have read a few books that mention Ultima Thule,” continued Aalim, “and they are all certain there is ice and fire, together in the same place. Brendan the Irishman, the man mentioned by Aiden as we went past that headland a few days ago described a land of ice and fire. Beyond Ultima Thule the world ends with the oceans pouring over the rim of the earth.”

“How can hot and cold be in the same place at the same time,” persisted Aymaan.

“The fire comes from the earth, like the great mountains of Naples. And perhaps because it is so cold at the rim of the earth the ice remains there in one place.”

Aalim was pleased with the answer. It made sense.

“When will summer come,” asked Naim?

“It’s here now,” said Khubayb, “and here we are sitting beside a fire.”

“The beds are such, as you would find in the snows of the Atlas Mountains in the middle of winter. By our standards Ireland is not warm.”

“I have been told that the further you get to the North Star the colder it gets.”

“Is that why these people are so pale and unhealthy looking,” asked Tawfiq.

“No it’s not just the cold,” said Aalim, “I think they get little sunshine.”

“We are blessed by God in Andalusia with a sun that shines warm and often.”

“Did you see the tunics they wear, how thick they are. The wool has not been scoured; its raw and the lanolin had been left in the wool.”

“It is a fashion they follow in Galicia,” said Naim. “The oil in the wool keeps you warm and stops water getting to you.”

The discussion continued until eventually only Nathan and Aalim remained seated in the chairs around the brazier. After a rambling conversation about where the Saxons lived they too took to the warmth of the fur lined linen covers.

Their slumbers were disturbed at an early hour of the morning well before the dawn by the sound of singing coming through the walls of the building. It had a droning sound with low male voices chanting in unison.

Aalim Nathan and Khubayb gathered their robes and took themselves outside the house.

There was a low mist covering the green meadows at the monasteries' edge and a half moon glinted low across the river

The singing came from a candle lit church, the lights hazy in the mist. They listened for a while.

“They are singing from one of the Book of Praises,” said Nathan, “I have never heard them in Latin before. Their Latin is accented but I can follow the words.”

*Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and
hear my prayer.*

*How long will you people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false Gods
Know that the Lord has set apart
his faithful servant for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.*

*Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.
Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.*

*Many, Lord, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?"
Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.*

*In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety*

"It is the fourth psalm," said Aalim, "it is the one songs of David

"How do you know a song of the unbelievers," asked Khubayb?

"These songs of a Jewish King were sung long before the Mohammed blessed be his name brought the true faith. They are called the Zabour in the Quran. Our tradition is that they were revealed to David in the same way as the holy Quran was revealed to Mohammed blessed be his name and peace be upon him."

"Our God is the God of Abraham. David's God is the God of Abraham. These songs are ours as well as the Hebrews," said Aalim to Khubayb. "We are the people of the book."

"And now the Christians have them too," said Nathan.

The singing was replaced by a low chant. It rose in tone and harmony, interleaved with a melody of voices singing every other line until it ended with a lone voice that drifted over the river and lowland like drifting rain.

They became chilled after a while and retired again to bed.

The singing woke them again and understanding it was early morning Aalim, Tawfiq, Naim and Aymaan and Khubayb washed their hands face and feet and made the first prayer of the day. They were nearly finished when Kieran approached them and stood by as they finished the prayers.

“Gentlemen, come, we will break our fast.”

The food they ate was plain but nourishing. There was a constant supply of oats boiled and served with milk and honey, a soup of dried fish and bread and seared salmon doused in butter. The kitchens were a cacophony of banging pots and clashing pewter’s.

Sneaking a look at the monks seated at other tables they could see that some ate only vegetable and some seemed to eat hardly anything. A few monks joined their table nodding a greeting to the Andalusians.

In Latin Nathan asked the nearest monk, “Could I be so bold as to ask what food you eat in Ireland”?

The short monk with a ravenous appetite was most informative.

“Well to begin with in Ireland there is a plenitude of soup, rivers of it flow from the kitchens of Ireland. Soups of onions, celery, peas, parsnips, beans, carrots, cabbage and leeks. Soups with meat bones, sheep bones, pork bones and the bones of fowl and fish, it rains upon us in profusion.”

“As for meat well there’s a cascade of geese, hens, duck, pheasants, swans with piles of pigs, sheep, the deer of the mountains and the cattle of the meadows.”

“In our Island basket upon basket of fishes gush from the traps on the river, trout, salmon, eel and pike, bass and bream are the fish of the waters of Ireland.”

“From the wild seas of the coast flows a profusion of cod, , crabs, lobsters, herring and haddock and plaice. The shores of the western ocean are festooned with oysters, muscles, winkles and mosses. We are beset with crans of abundance.”

“Bread,” he said “bread was in continual and constant slathers, buttered and honeyed and in mountainous quantities available at every hour of the day.”

“And as if this horn of plenty is not enough there’s churns of buttermilk in torrents, mead in multiples not to mention piles of apples, pears, plums, strawberries and the platters of blackberries, red currants and gooseberries.”

The monks at their table and that next to it were becoming amused at the visions of plenty the monk was describing to the visitors.”

It was the first inkling the visitors had of the Irish talent for exuberance of description.

Finally after the talk of cornucopia had run its course one of the monks spoke.

“What the good brother has told you is true we have all those foods but maybe not always in the amount he talks about. There are good harvests most years.”

“But there are years of hunger when the rains slow the harvest or the frost kills the buds. They are hard those years.”

“Many’s the time a long winter and a shortfall in the harvest before has left famine and hunger in its wake.”

“Disease in horses or men and foul weather have brought the people of Ireland to the brink of starvation on a few occasions. Other years have been years of abundance. We have long periods of fasting in the course of our year.”

Nathan thought fasting would be good preparation for the lean years. Dedicating a voluntary hunger to God would teach them discipline in the hard times of rationing. Hunger for salvation helped the hunger of necessity.

Taking boldness upon him he asked the monk, “Do the people outside the monastery fast as well”?

“As a rule no,” said the monk, “they fast for lent and for special causes. There is a custom that if a man is denied justice he can go to the house of the man that caused the injustice and starve at his gate. It is a hard way to get fairness but it can shame the wrongdoer.”

“We fast,” said Aalim, “for a month of the year, but only from dawn to dusk. It is a duty we owe to Allah.”

“There is a special taste to food after a long abstinence and hunger brings visions of angels and the voice of God,” replied the monk.

Fergal appeared and sat down beside Aalim. He spoke to all but with the unspoken understanding that Aalim was in charge of any arrangements that would follow.

“Normally our visitors are Saxons, Franks and Picts. They had no religious requirements with their food and generally follow our customs since they are Christians.”

“They are barbarians and will eat anything,” piped up Aymaan.

“Dreadful food,” agreed said Khubayb, “turnips and vegetables.”

“Well your are not far wrong” said Fergal, “but it would be less than polite to say so. Anyway that was in their country, we are better eaters here.”

Nodding to Nathan he said “the bible is full of your Jewish dietary requirements. We know them well. Some of us have laboriously copied them out in books over years. I have no idea what the practices of Muslims are.”

“So what I suggest is this. I will arrange for a lamb to be put at your disposal. Kieran will get a butcher to slaughter it according to your custom. If you have any other needs regarding how your food is prepared you are free to talk to the cooks.”

“Your gracious attention to the requirements of our religion is most civilised,” said Aalim

“Now what are your needs for prayer,” asked Fergal.

“We pray five times a day,” said Aalim. “We need a basin of water to wash before addressing Allah, blessed be his name.”

“You wash five times a day,” exclaimed Fergal with a slight mock horror.

“Would it be so disrespectful to ask you why you do such a fierce amount of washing? Are the deserts of your country full of dust and dirt and water”?

Aalim was taken askance.

“On the contrary. It is so much dryer than this land of watery torrents. It sometimes does not rain for months.”

Fergal furrowed his brows.

“For months” Aalim said, in a slightly higher pitch than normal.

“True, months so we do not live in mud and wet. We wash because we pray. It is a sign of respect for God that we pray with clean hands.”

“Well now that’s a fashion that will never catch on with the Irish, not that we are short of water,” said Fergal, “and we do wash once a day unlike the Saxons and the Franks. Some of them boys only get washed when they cross a river and fall in. God takes our prayers clean or not so clean.”

“Five times a day” repeated Fergal, “is that all.”

“The Quran is plain on this five times a day facing Mecca,” replied Aalim. “We certainly do not pray at the ungodly hours of the morning that your faith requires you to. We heard your songs this morning; they were the psalms were they not”?

“Indeed they were,” said Fergal. “Mind you when I think of it your are not real solid prayers at all. We pray every three hours, that’s eight times a day.”

“It’s so much part of the day I had not realised it was so often.”

“Still we are professional prayers, monks. The ordinary population prays once a day and oftener on Sundays. Just so you will not be surprised at the comings and goings to prayer I better tell you the order of prayers.”

“As I said we pray every three hours. And each time we sing three psalms. We start at the first hour of the day at Prime Next comes Teirt in Irish at 9 am to commemorate the hour our lord Jesus Christ was sent to Pilate.

“Medon lai in Irish or in Latin sext 12 noon the hour of Adam’s sin and the hour of the crucifixion. Then Noin at 3 pm when Christ died and the angel visited the centurion Cornelius we say again three psalms.”

“Espartu Vespers 6 pm when the sacrifice was made under Jewish tradition three more psalms. Midnocht Nocturnes midnight when God created the elements three more psalms.”

“In addition, at Iamerge Matins 3 am when Peter denied Christ for the third time we have the singing of six psalms.”

“And you think we pray too much” said Aalim with amusement.

“Well Jews pray three times a day,” said Nathan.

Aalim felt like mentioning that on the scale of praying the Irish seemed obsessive and the Jews negligent but perhaps it was not a polite observation to make.

The Irish were professionals after all.

Fergal motioned to a monk standing at the dining room door,

“Come Seamus meet these men from Andalusia.”

“He is the most important man in the monastery,” said Fergal

He was a dishevelled wreck of a man with robes covered in dirt. Burrs snagged on his raw wool cloak from the trees in the woods. All parts of him seem to extrude hair in black tufts.

“And how could such a distinguished man be so important,” asked Nathan with a slight hint of wonder in his voice.

He was getting used to the humour that hung in every pore of the monastery. The speech of these people was full of gentle barbs and teasing aimed at seeing if the person spoken to was alert and mentally agile.

There was lightness and a lilt to their thinking which took the world on probation willing to suspend judgement knowing that all things held mystery and were ephemeral. They drank a fair amount of beer which might have contributed to their jolliness but nevertheless a chiding tomfoolery seemed part of the nature of the place.

Nathan waited until the importance of the tattered man in front of them was revealed.

“Well,” said Fergal, “he is the bee man. He finds all the bee’s nests for miles around and brings them to his bit of ground next to the north wall. He has hives all over the countryside that he watches and tends and where he gathers the honey to make our lives sweeter.”

“One of our joys is soft white bread covered with a glaze of butter, dripped with this man’s fine honey.”

The bee man spoke.

“It is the wonder that such small humming creatures give us the sweetness of food, the covering for wounds and the joy of a warm drink on a cold winters night. Not to mention that we are a bit partial to mead here.”

Naim was starting to take an interest in the discussion remembering the taste of honey and pastry they had enjoyed at Bejar.

The hairy man spoke again, “well sirs you know that bees are under the blessing of God to produce our sweetness in life. They are my life and joy. The chasing of them and the winning of their kindness fills my days. The sound of their humming is a song for me.”

“Tell me sirs are there such a thing as bees in your country.”

“Very many of the small creatures,” said Naim, in fractured Latin.

“On our journey here we stayed briefly in a town and a man there boasted he had the finest honey in the world. The whole town was devoted to the making of honey. It was the foundation of their wealth. Andalusia resounds with the humming of bees.”

“Well,” said the bee man, “I have not heard of a town living off the bees. Mind you I have no idea what a town is but no matter.”

“But it is pleasing that there are men who appreciate the bee and all God meant it to give us.”

The talk fell to general discussion and chatter with the other monks in the room casting glances at the strangers.

Aymaan mustered the courage to address a question to Fergal

“Sir as we passed up the great river I did not notice any towns, are there any towns nearby so that we could go and see the people there and perhaps get to know them.”

Khubayb cleared his throat, and said, “which ones would you wish to know and how well would you wish to ‘know’ them Aymaan.”

Addressing Fergal he said, “our young companions have a great interest in getting to know the local citizens of these towns, particularly the young female ones,” he said arching his eyebrow to previously unachieved heights.

“Well there you will be disappointed,” said Fergal, “on one score anyway.”

“The fact is there are no towns in Ireland. There are Rathes, defended hills which have a few houses clustered about the main house of the chief or the King. By and large we are a people who live separate lives, each large wide clan family with its cattle and the king’s house as the place where people gather to sing and dance and make as much merriment as they can.”

The look on Tawfiq’s crestfallen face had not escaped him.

“There you are no towns no loose women,” said Khubayb.
“No it’s not that the women of this country are virtuous, although there are monasteries composed entirely of women. It is just that you will find them all, loose and otherwise, under the protection of their kin,” said Fergal.

A look of gloom seemed to engulf Aymaan and Tawfiq further.

“Merchants, poets women and bards and entertaining moors such as yourselves come and go but each clan holds its lands, kin and cattle dear. Women are the equals of men in most regards.”

After they had finished eating Fergal rose and said “so you understand where and what things are and so you are not a stranger to the community come with me and I will give you the grand tour.”

“Our rules for guests are simple. You can enter any place at any time except the church when prayers are said. And if you want to come to prayers and pray with us you are most welcome let us know and we will put an a few extra seats.”

“We have had over the years a large number of people from abroad. Some were prayers some were not.”

He took them to the highest point in the monastery.

“What were the origins of the monastery,” asked Aalim

“Saint Ciaran founded it,” replied Fergal.

“He came to this part of the Shannon from the island of Inis-Oenghin, in Lough Ree, the wide lake you crossed on your

way here. Ciaran loved the islands of Lough Ree.”

“He said they were ‘a necklace of pearls, that God has set upon the bosom of the waters, and in which those who would shun the pleasures of the world may find a refuge wherein to practise austerity, and save themselves from the snares of life.”

“In the year 544 he came here to found Clonmacnois, the ‘meadow of the sons of Nois’. Up the river a few miles on the other side is the Monastery of Clonfert. It is said there are 2000 monks there. And down there is Banagher,” he said waving his arm down the river.

“The monastery there was founded by St. Rynagh, who came from Wexford. He died about 610 AD.”

“How many Monasteries are there in Ireland,” asked Nathan.

“Hundreds,” said Fergal, “hundreds; they are almost every ten miles of the road.”

“We live by the rule of our founder who followed the rule of Martin of Tours and Anthony. We also believe like Augustine that Kings can be told of their sins and mortality. For that reason we are seldom told what to do by a King. Educating children is our prime concern.”

“We have the holy duty of growing crops. All other lands are used for the grazing of cattle.”

“The settlements around a Kings house will grow a few vegetables but the large fields of wheat and crops will be those of a monastery.”

“We monks are the makers of things in Ireland. We make water mills, Corn kilns. We take the river marches and boggy meadows and make them lands of plenty.”

They walked the hundred yards to a wooden high roofed house with thick thatch on the roof.

“I will start with the place that might interest you most, the scriptorium where our books are made. Silence and a gentleness of manners are the rule here.”

They walked around the scriptorium. The walls were made of timber shutters that could be lifted up by ropes allowing the light to stream onto the sloped tables. Young men were perched on high three legged stools at long tables sloping from the walls of the room. Beside them on smaller tables were inks and quills. In the centre was a larger table with more monks seated in the same high chaired stools.

“All our books are copied and made here,” said Fergal.

Aalim wandered around the room looking over each monks shoulder in turn. Nathan stood by one table in the corner reading closely the script on one monk’s portion of the table.

“It’s a pocket book of the Psalter,” said the monk in Latin.

“We craft a lot of these. There’s is a great demand for them, every monk needs a Psalter. Morning noon and night the psalms are recited every day, day in day out.”

“From Iona to Bobbio from Inishmurray to Ratisbon, in every monastery in Ireland and in Francia monks need Psalters. The Psalter is in five books so there’s an awful lot of them produced in Ireland.”

“We are using some of the papyrus your agents brought on their last visit. It makes a good stiffener on the inside of the Psalters,” said Fergal

“We have heard of a new material made from rags that has appeared in the Caliphate,” said Aalim. “The Caliph captured the recipe after a victory over the Chinese in the far eastern part of the Caliphate. It has not yet reached Andalusia.”

“It would be good to have something easier to work with than animal skins. We eat a lot of calves and sheep but it takes a lot of skins to make a book. The material for a book costs 15 pigs or four sheep,” said Fergal.

“The time and labour can be counted in years and years, sometimes the life of a man”

“If this paper is as economical and lasting as they say it will change the making of books,” said Aalim

“The Jewish world still has a preference for the scroll,” said Nathan. “But codices are gathering a following. A scroll is handy because you can scribble notes on the back. You can’t do that with a codex.”

There was a murmured chatter between the bare foreheaded figures. The monks sat straight backed with the quills snubbed in their hands slow disciplined and steadfast, where the work was a devotion not a task.

Aalim bent over a monk who was doing a preface page with the figure of an apostle seated on a chair with large facing illustrations to the gospels.

“This style reminds me of a book I have in our library. It is very old at least 600 years old from the 2nd century of your Christian eras. It’s called the Distassaron”

“This book follows the same pattern; the position of the images is the same. It has the same poses of the symbols the angles on which they were drawn and nearly identical drawings with this double armed cross and also embedded in an intricate weave of interlaces.”

“The person who sold it to me said it had been composed by a man named Tatian. This has likely found its way from the Nestorians. I understand some authorities consider it heretical.”

“That is interesting,” said Fergal, “I have no doubt that a copy of the original made its way to Ireland long ago.”

Aalim was captivated by the whorls and whirls and elaborate calligraphy of the books. It reminded him of the decorations on ceilings and walls of the mosques of Cordova. The patterns were different and the pictures of animals and small creatures in the margins were not something Islamic craftsmen were permitted but the elaborate devotion to intricacy and complexity and the preservation of patterns in the crowded imagery was of the same nature.

“You have always used imagery,” he asked Fergal.

“From the time of Patrick it has been the custom.”

“The Byzantines have been running hot and cold on imagery,” said Aalim.

“They have recently relaxed their prohibition of icons but they spent some time burning and destroying them before that.”

The argument is the same as that in Islam is it not,” said Nathan to Aalim.

“Yes the Byzantines banned icons because they feared that the image would distract people from the worship of God and that they would in the end be worshipping the images and idols. Now they have permitted them again.”

“Jews have no debate on the matter. It’s in the Book of Exodus and the laws of Moses,” said Nathan.

“Likewise the Quran says there will be no images and thus there will not be images. We have a calligraphy but no images,” said Aalim

“Well we have no contact with Rome or the Byzantines but it has never occurred in our Irish thinking that images are any distraction to the worship of God.”

Aalim moved further down the room feeling the parchment between his fingers.

“With all the green grass you have the hides you use must be softer. Our hides come from places where the sun is hot and the air dry.”

“We use calves as much as sheep,” said Fergal.

“Calves are more common in the boggy country around here. Wet land like this does not suit sheep, their feet rot.”

“But if calfskin is available from elsewhere we use it. You will see few hides or clothing using sheepskin. We need the vellum. One copy of a bible can send a lot of God’s creatures to their maker.”

Nathan passed further down the scriptorium past basket of eggs and small wooden bowls with green and scarlet and black inks

“What do you use for the green ink,” asked Nathan. It seemed a more lustrous colour than he had seen before.

“There’s a shell on the beach,” said Fergal, “we get a nice green shade from its juices.”

“The black is lampblack and for a deeper black we use a blister on oak trees that has waxy ink we can use. The work is sealed with the whites of eggs when it is finished.”

They left the soft light of the Scriptorium and walked outside and sat on a set of benches in the warm sun.

Nathan posed a question he had been wondering about since they landed in Ireland.

“It surprised me he said that we were met with no authority, no soldiers when we landed. Since then I have seen no sign of civil authority. Are there only monks here, is there no King or Emir of Ireland.”

“Not at all,” said Fergal, “the land is full of women and men with arms. We are a tribal people. We here are of the clan O Kelly. This small kingdom is the land of Hymane,” said Fergal.

“The King is Cathal, son of Murchadh. There are sub clans of Madden’s, Naughton’s, Dunnellon’s, Mullally’s and Fallon’s but we are all the Ui Maine, the Hymane. The Island of Ireland has five provinces. Hymane is part of the most westerly province, which is Connaught. Our King is subject to the King of Connaught. If the King of Connaught takes a notion to go to a war then our King is the marshal of his army.”

The Kings lands are mainly to the west of the river. Cathal has been on the throne some six summers now. He is a good King, may his life be long.”

“Indeed,” said Nathan, “and how does the King command this place. Do his soldiers come here? Can he command the monks to fight in his wars?”

“There is talk,” said Fergal, “the Kings of Ireland would like the manpower of the monks in their battles but I hope it never comes to that.”

“We are part of Gods spiritual dominions. The Kingdom of Hy Maine was under a patron saint.”

“Grellan a priest who performed a miracle for the tribe in the battle when the land was conquered from the Fir Bolgs about three hundred years ago.”

“Grellan left a few instructions to the Kings of Hymane as to how we monks should be treated as part of the bargain for performing the miracle that won the battle.”

“So while we are the Kings kinsmen and the people here are our clan we are not under the Kings dominion or his rule.”

“ We are under God’s rule. We are monks, lay people not priests so we are not under the rule of bishops.”

“Technically,” said Fergal, “we are in the Diocese of Clonfert, Cluain-fearta Brenainn, the dioceses of Brendan but while we are mindful of the Bishop we pay him little account. As I said we are monks are not priests or clergy. Our vow is to the precepts of the monastery’s founder and the direction of our abbot.”

“So you are not subject to any earthly power, not even the Pope,” asked Aalim his voice showing a hint of astonishment.

“Kings are in caution about the fate of their immortal soul and commanding the men of God to war would be an unheard of thing. So while we are free from the rulers of the land we are still their kith and kin.”

“That said the rules of the monkish life are stern. Each monk must be obedient to his directors and the directors must obey the Abbot. A monk of this monastery simply can’t do what he wants to do, nor eat what he wants to eat. He must eat what is put in front of him. He must possess nothing but what he receives and he must do every task that is given to him.”

“He must be tired out before he goes to bed. He must be out of bed before his need for sleep is satisfied. When he is insulted he must listen without a word.”

“He must fear his superior as a lord but love him as a father. He must believe whatever he orders is for his own good, He cannot say a critical word on the judgement of anyone placed over him. It is his duty to obey and do what he is told.”

“If I tell you that the Abbot is called *abba* in Irish from the Aramaic *abba* father you will understand the thinking behind it. The Abbot is a Coarb in Irish, a descendent in title from the founder.

“A monk may have a confessor, an *Anam chara* a soul friend, a wiser member of the community assigned to keep an eye on him, a father in God.”

“As you can see we do not live in a common house like the Benedictines. We do pray in common at the appointed hours but we are individuals who make up a communion of individuals not a communion that suborns the individual spirit as is I understand the custom among other peoples.”

“Each monk lives in his small cell and prays as himself to God. In our wee cells we are sole, a single creature talking to the God that made us.”

“That is a stern code of conduct,” said Nathan. “There are armies where discipline is less. You make it sound as if there is no law. No king no law.”

“But are you not subject to the laws of the King since you are in his lands.”

“Well no it’s simple,” said Fergal. “The law is not the King’s law but the ancient law of Ireland. The druids and judges of Ireland from time out of mind decided the Brehon law. The King is as much subject to it as I am, or the Abbot is. The king supports the law but it is in everyman’s hands.

“Surely all this law changed when you became Christians and were subject to the Pope,” said Aalim.

“The Annals, the books that record the history of Ireland say that when Patrick came he asked for all the law books of Ireland to be gathered at Tara,” responded Fergal

“A council was assembled of all the learned men of Ireland the men wise in all sciences and every chief in Ireland was there. Each of the learned men and the poets put their arts to Patrick and the Chiefs.”

“Dubhthach was advised to exhibit the judgments, and all the poetry of Erin, and every law that prevailed amongst the men of Erin, through the law of nature the judgments of true nature, which the Holy Ghost had spoken through the mouths of the Brehons.”

“Three men High King of Ireland Leaghaire, Dubhthach, the chief bard and historian, and Patrick himself settled what the laws of Ireland would be with the coming of the word of Christ and the gospels.”

“What the three men did was to confirm as the law of Ireland and what did not clash with the Word of God in the law, and in the New Testament, and in the consciences of the believers stood as from ancient times.”

“So the laws of Ireland remain what they always were and only those laws were removed that were not in the faith of the people and the harmony of the Church and the words of God and Christ our saviour.”

“It is called Cain Patrick, the law of Patrick.”

“The truth is we do not pay strong allegiance to Rome.”

“Our loyalty in the end is not to Rome but to our Clan and as Christians to the rules of our founder and our Abbot.”

“That is interesting,” said Nathan, “I would have thought that the Pope after punishing all the recent heresies in the Frankish lands would be as interested in seeing that the Irish followed the authority of the Pope in all regards.”

“Maybe it’s because we are small and far away” said Fergal. “As long as the Irish behave themselves in Frankish lands I think the Pope will leave us well alone. We are an island of peace and holiness devoted to the worship of our lord God and Jesus Christ. Which is not to say there has not been a murderous slaughter of men cattle raiding, wars constant and continuous between the clans over lands and hostages.”

“Incidentally there have been a few Jewish scholars here in times past. The brothers tell tales of men with very different hair coverings to us. Men of piety and great learning in the Bible. It is remarked that they has a very strange sense of humour.”

Nathan thought it a bit presumptuous of the Irish to be remarking on the strange customs of humour in others.

“Anyway,” said Fergal let’s go and see some scholars. They rose from their warm seats and walked over to a group of wooden buildings. A full room of boys aged from eight to likely 14 were seated in chairs facing a monk. They had wax tablets and short styluses clasped in their hands.

“So what is taught in your schools,” asked Aalim?

“The first thing they have do is learn the psalms off by heart.

“All 150 have to be etched into their tiny minds. They have to learn Irish, Latin. Later some will learn Greek if they have any talent for it and for the higher scholars Hebrew.”

Then they learn Mathematics History Law Medicine Poetry Music Dialectics Astronomy Navigation Chess Theology and the Classical authors.

Aalim was stunned. There were many educated people in the Emir’s government but not at this scale. Just to test the matter he asked, “What classical authors are learned”?

“Persius Virgil Horace Sallust Ovid Juvenal Christian poets Juvenecus, Prudentius and Asonius. Also Athanasius Cassian Jerome Origen Augustine Cyprrian Gregory Theophilus Cyrillius Morinus” said Fergal

“It’s an impressive list,” said Aalim

“Well we are good customers for your books on that account,” said Fergal

They left the school and made their way back to the main hall for the evening meal.

A Mission

Chapter 6

On the second morning in Clonmacnois Fergal and Kieran appeared at the guest house just after the travellers had finished their prayers.

“Good morning gentlemen,” said Fergal, “you slept well, the foxes and badgers did not disturb you.”

“No,” said Aalim, “all was peace. We were lulled to sleep by the sound of your psalms.”

“We were lulled to sleep often,” said Nathan.

“Well it is a pleasure to give a young Jewish man a good rendition of the songs of David. What did you think of the Latin translations, were they satisfactory,” asked Fergal.

“The translations were good. Your accents were a bit hard to follow,” said Nathan.

“I suppose the Spanish Latin is said differently,” said Fergal.

“Somewhat,” said Aalim. Aalim found the Irish style of Latin had a singsong cadence to it. Not unpleasant but full of unusual accentuations that sprung a surprise on one in the middle of a sentence.

“Today,” said Fergal, “I thought we might get started on the matter of buying and selling books. We are interested in what you have on offer.”

“However before we do business let us attend to your men,” said Fergal.

“I think your fine lads might find a day of dry discourse and talk of books a bit dreary.”

As he said this he looked away from them, out over the meadowlands where low shafts of sunlight sparkled on the water and the green banks of the river’s edge.

“I have asked Kieran if he could organise a ride around the hills for your strapping men, a chance to stretch their legs and an opportunity for a bit of sport.”

Turning to Aalim he said, “Kieran will get them a few horses and they can go coursing for a few hares and if they are able for it chase a few Irish boars out of their beds on Croghan hill.”

“That,” said Aalim with a smile, “might just be what they need. So far on this journey they have only had one slight skirmish with a few ruffians far from their equal. A chase after a few of your local tuskers might hone their reflexes. They are men of action. Lack of it makes them fidgety and churlish.”

He turned to Khubayb, “I take a day of hunting would take your fancy more than idleness or talk about books.”

Khubayb smiled. “It would be good to have a horse between ones legs again.”

“Be careful,” said Nathan. “I have a feeling the local customs are radically different from Spain.”

“They doubtless are,” said Fergal, “it is all in the matter of cows. If you kill one accidentally you will owe another cow maybe two. Whatever damage you cause of any kind will have to be paid for in cattle. If you kill somebody then it will be a lot more cows than one.”

Naim looked a bit disconcerted.

“Master, I promise we will leave the cows alone.”

“Definitely,” said Aymaan, “a good policy and I’m sure you know the difference between a cow and a pig.”

“If we cause harm by accident will the King send his soldiers to take us away,” asked Naim.

“No,” said Fergal, “the king is not in charge of the law around here. We are, everybody is. All that is needed is to go before a legal scholar I suppose you would call him. The price of all transgressions is set out in the law and as I said it’s usually paid in cattle.”

“But we have no cattle how could we pay a fine,” asked Aymaan.

Fergal frowned and tugged his ear with his hand.

“You will have to buy a few calves and live on the wild side of the Galtymore mountains for five years while they grow up, living in the heather on wild honey and badger meat.”

Aalim smiled.

“Now don’t be caught up in worry about the legalism and damage you might do,” said Fergal, “the lord will provide a boar or a cow when required. Put your mind on the fact that Irish boars might be bigger and stronger and faster and have bigger tusks than Spanish boars.”

“You do have boars in Andalusia don’t you”?

“Yes we do,” said Khubayb who fancied himself as a bit of a hunter. “If we can chase a few of these Irish pigs out for a chase we will settle that question.”

A thought occurred to Kieran. He understood from the Bible that the Jews were forbidden to eat pork. It was possible that the same rules applied to these Muslims. They looked the same. There might just be the opportunity of a windfall. Life was good in Clonmacnois but a windfall only fell into your lap as often as a warm kind wind blew through an orchard.

In Ireland the hunters had first choice of the game they slaughtered. The idea of hunters heading out to kill an animal they were forbidden to eat was a notion no one had ever contemplated.

“If we get a few boars I take these lads will not be eating them,” he said looking at Fergal.

“That could be right. It might be one of your luckier hunts Kieran. But for fortune to fall into your hands you will actually have to kill something.”

The hunters walked off to get some horses and start a day of exercise and entertainment. Nathan, Fergal and Aalim went to the main House.

“Thank you,” said Aalim to Fergal, “for providing something for my men to do today. It is most considerate of you.”

“No bother at all,” said Fergal, “sure it will give us something to talk about tonight.”

They were an interesting people the Irish mused Aalim. They loved talking so much that they were prepared to set aside time and resources to do anything so that they would have something to talk about later. As a consequence if nothing was happening they seemed willing to start an argument or set in play some activity that would provide a subject for conversation then or sometime later.

Fergal asked Paudeen to go with Aalim and help him fetch the books and merchandise They carried the bundles from the guest house and placed them on the table in the large hall.

Seated at the table were a number of monks that Aalim and Nathan had not met previously.

“Let us commence,” said Fergal with the air of authority of a man who naturally expects to be in charge.

“This,” he said placing his hand on the shoulder of a monk is Dymphna. “She is in charge of our library.”

Dymphna smiled and nodded. She was a middle-aged woman with bright blue eyes and an expression of interest and concern. She stood out among the Irish seated at the table not just for her femininity but the fact she had a full head of long flowing reddish hair.

Nathan and Aalim had still not adjusted to sight of the bare foreheads of the monks and their shock of hair rising halfway down their skulls.

It was a far and strange place, Ireland and now unexpected and more surprising was to sit a table where a women had say and authority.

“And this,” said Fergal placing his hand on another monk’s shoulder, “is Niall.”

He was a large man with a pockmarked face and a dark countenance. The bare forehead with black hair bristling straight up belied a wide beaming smile.

“He is a man keen for a bargain,” said Fergal, “with a notion that he knows a bit about books.”

Niall nodded his head.

“And this is Liam.”

Liam was a young man with a downy beard and the look of someone who was interested in learning all about everything.

Fergal addressed Dymphna, Niall and Liam.

“These two gentlemen have come from the sunny lands of Spain from the Emirate of Andalusia.”

“This is Aalim, the Chief librarian of the Emir’s library in the city of Cordoba. We have in previous years been visited by his representatives and now we are graced with the presence of the man himself.”

“This is Nathan, a trader of the city of Salamanca”

Aalim and Nathan nodded across the table.

“We are pleased to see you and it will be a pleasure to learn of your books from such well versed persons such as yourselves,” said Dymphna.

“Let us have a look at your trove,” said Fergal.

Aalim opened the first bundle.

“These are a few dyes.”

“This blue,” said Aalim unwrapping a wooden box, “is from eastern Persia. It is the finest lapis lazuli, bluer than the eyes of the Saxons, than the clearest sky or the deepest lake.”

He took a small spoon from the packet and scooping out a measure of powder he emptied it into a small wooden plate. It was a blue of the most blazing intensity.

Liam passed the small bowl to Dymphna who looked at it keenly.

“It looks better than we have had in the past,” she said, trying not to let the merchants know how keen she was to buy it.

“Do you mind me asking where you got it?”

Aalim was getting used to the softer voice and femininity of his counter party in the trade.

“It has come a long way,” said Aalim.

“It came to Cordoba from a trader in Barcelona who brought it from Antioch. He purchased it from a caravan that had come from the far end of the Caliphate borders in Afghanistan.”

Aalim looked at Dymphna who simply nodded that she would take it. It was placed in a pile of goods, which were going to change hands in the next hour or so.

Taking out another small container Aalim said, “this is also from the Caliphate. The finest Aleppo galls, powdered and mixed with iron sulphate and black soot. They have a delicate acidic action that makes sure the ink etches into the parchment, and cuts through any traces of oiliness. It is clean running and will not clog a reed or a quill.”

Dymphna nodded again and Aalim placed it in the taken pile along with the Lapis Lazuli.

“This,” said Aalim producing the next item in his kit bag, “is the Arabic gum you have purchased before. The quality is excellent and it will last to eternity.”

He waited for Dymphna’s nod. He expected it but did not take it for granted. Who knew how many merchants would risk the seas and dangers to bring exotic inks to this far-flung place.

He found himself at a disadvantage. He did not know the details of the previous trading with the monks at Clonmacnois.

His agents had rendered him a report of books and inks sold and monies paid and received. The cut and thrust of the trading was lost in the telling.

There was much he did not know about trading and sitting now at this table was perhaps not the time to be discovering his ignorance.

What if these people dealt with other traders? You could never tell. There was always the chance of competition. Maybe they were getting supplies from the Franks.

Aalim continued the parade of produce.

“Lacquer from the merchants of Toledo. Spanish pine resin and this, I think you have bought this before. It is burnt tar from Basra. It gives a nice oily reflecting effect to script but the ink does not spread beyond the line.”

He might not be a natural or a seasoned salesman but at least he knew the product supervising as he did the production of books in one of the world’s best libraries.

Dymphna nodded again. The little collection of potions and powders was moved into the sold pile.

Price would be discussed in due course and the question of what value they would put on these rarely obtainable items would be settled later. At the moment the only decision was did they want them or did they not.

“This is alchiber,” said Aalim. “It is the ink favoured in the libraries of the Emir and in the Caliphate.”

“Yes,” said Dymphna, “we have bought it before. We found it good quality.”

Dymphna had little compunction admitting that a trade was going to be made and no wish to conceal from the Librarian that they found the merchandise worthwhile and wholesome for their purposes.

Aalim was plainly new to the business of merchandising but the secret of trade in any man's eyes was to deal with people you could trust and who had integrity. Good merchants would fix any problems of quality or price. Bad ones never did.

"Tell me," asked Dymphna, "what is it made of?"

Aalim was hesitant in revealing the secrets of the alchiber. These people were unquestionably honest people. Would they be tempted to make 'dry' ink if they knew the recipe.

Recipes were more precious than gold or diamonds. A diamond would stay the same forever. If you had a recipe for ink or a dye you could make more of it. Adding water to alchiber made ink, the stock and trade of the makers of books.

Should he reveal the secret of alchiber? Would only an amateur trader do that?

He was going to turn to Nathan and see if his expression indicated any reservations on telling the secret of a substance that for all he knew was the pride and treasure of the merchants of Baghdad.

Then it occurred to him.

The recipe was worthless without the ingredients? It was unlikely for instance that they would have access to tar oil from the Persian Gulf.

“Alchiber, he said, “is made of burnt resins such as Basra tar or Persian oils mixed with honey and gum of Arabia bound into this tablet. It is carefully compressed and dried.”

“As you know adding a small amount of water produces an excellent ink.”

“I think the dry tablet form of ink was made originally for travel over long distances and many days in a hot dry climate. You do not need a bottle made of glass. Bottled ink evaporates and the price of good bottles now a days is simply extortionate.”

He moved on to set the rest of his wares before the monks.

“Red ink with a vermilion hue made of mercury, sulphur and potash or cinnabar. Indigo of blue made of the oxides of copper and cobalt from China.”

“This,” said Aalim, “is the papyrus my agents told me you are finding useful.”

“Yes,” said Niall, “it’s useful as a stiffener, we are putting it inside the pocket books we make.”

There was a bit of haggling over the inks and dyes and papyrus. Eventually a price was settled and Dhiraams were paid.

“Now,” said Aalim, “to the joy of our life’s work, let me present the books.” He unwrapped a bundle of four codex books.

“This,” he said, “is a copy of Caesar’s “Comments on the Civil Wars”

He passed it to Dymphna who felt the cover, looked through the pages, and passed it in turn to Niall and Liam. After they had examined it carefully they handed it to Fergal without remark. Aalim had expected a comment from Dymphna while she examined it. All of them had quietly read the first few pages. It must be their custom for everyone to examine a book before commenting on it.

“Well” said Dymphna eventually. “It is a book in good condition. We have a copy of Caesar’s book on the Gallic wars. This book we have heard of but not seen. It will please our scholars. What is it about?”

“It is,” said Aalim, “a recounting in Caesar’s dry laconic Latin of the wars among the citizens of Rome, mainly himself and Pompey and how he won those wars and became master of Rome. For myself, what I found interesting was a recounting of Caesar’s campaign in Spain, the battles he fought there against the forces of Pompey. Those battles were in places I know and in a landscape I am familiar with.

“The description of the Battle of Ilerda is the crux of the matter. Had Caesar lost that battle the world would have been a very different place.”

Fergal had by this time read the first page.

“It looks extremely interesting,” he said. “He is not one for long descriptions is he? The tone is of a man ordering a horse cart of timber.”

Nathan was struck by the fact that this book was being discussed in place that had never known Roman law or culture.

A place where no Roman roads had carried Roman armies or bridges crossed roman rivers. In Andalusia the influence of Rome shadowed every city wall and coloured every aspect of life long after its conquest by the barbarians and the Muslim armies of the Emirs forebears. In Ireland Romans were people you read about in books. There was no physical evidence of their existence anywhere.

“We would be glad to have this book,” said Dymphna.

Nathan had by now reached the conclusion that Dymphna held the power of decision at the table.

“This one,” said Aalim opening another book from its cloth packaging, “is a copy of Plato’s Republic.”

The book was passed from hand to hand and eventually to Fergal.

“We have this book and it is studied by our pupils, said Dymphna. “ This is a fine copy.”

“You are familiar with the contents,” said Liam to Aalim.

Aalim was unable to stop a small look of annoyance crossing his face. Such a remark seemed to infer he was a merchant of goods of which he knew little and not a learned Doctor of literature.

“Well yes,” he said. And then he paused. The monks of Clonmacnois had only dealt with his servants before now. The monks would have sat at this table with his agents who sold books like cattle putting them forward without any idea of their content.

Books were odd things. Physical items of small dimension capable of encompassing in their small carriage the entirety of a military campaign, the civilisation from which it sprung and the thoughts of the man who directed that campaign.

Or the entire philosophical schema of a philosopher or in the case of Isidore all the knowledge a man should know. In this instance the elucidation by a keen mind of the philosophical disposition of the right conduct of the affairs of life and the state.

But while every cow differed from another it was only in the quality of the milk that might matter to a buyer and its quantity. Each book was unique in the mind of the man that wrote it and conjured up an individual world in those that read it.

He smiled.

“Yes I have read it a number of times. Our students wrestle with his style of Greek.”

“My favourite passage and one which I always draw to the attention of our young students is where he considers that practitioners of philosophy should not be considered learned until after they have in their youth filled their minds with the teachings of a master and have reached the maximum they are capable of ingesting with all the philosophical training they can stand.”

“Plato is of the view that the study of philosophy should be tackled by mature men past their use for military service.”

“Only at that point he says should they be allowed to give their heads and energies to philosophy so that they can lead a happy life and their final destiny after death to match their life on earth.”

“Indeed,” said Niall smiling wryly, “you command it well.”

“That particular notion has been entertained by an old Irish philosopher and it is said in the old rhyme.

*Cucumhain in youth
Read half way through the truth
But set it aside
Gave women a try
In his old age he became a holy sage
Gave women the laugh
Read the other half.*

Dymphna, Liam and Fergal gave a warm chuckle of laughter.

“I am interested in having that book,” said Dymphna. “You can never have enough copies of a good book and far too often can never get rid of a bad one.”

“They were a strange people these Greeks,” said Nathan, “so versed in philosophy and mathematics yet having a petulant immoral pantheon of disputatious Gods.”

“The Gods behaved no better than their believers and certainly were no moral example to anyone. We may differ in religion yet we worship one God and a moralising one at that.”

“Indeed,” said Dymphna caught off guard by an observation on Greek behaviour that she had not contemplated before.

“A copy of Euclid’s theorems.”

“There is nothing that should please a young man,” said Niall, “more than coming to grips with Euclid’s theorem’s.”

“You have a favourite,” asked Aalim.

“A favourite,” said Niall. “It’s a while since I taught them to scholars. In fact my favourite theorem is not from Euclid at all. I would choose Apollonius’s theorem. ‘The sum of the squares of any two sides of any triangle equals twice the square on half the third side, together with twice the square on the median bisecting the third side’.

“When you set out the squares on the ground before young scholars they spell out the proof on their own in an unfolding elegance of grace. Plain and unsubtle but with completeness.”

There seemed general assent without words being said that the book was sold.

“And this” said Aalim, “speaking of practical men is Isidore’s book of knowledge, his considered view of all that is needed to be known in the world.”

The book was passed around again in silence as each of them sought to understand the outline of the words and the thinking of the man who wrote it. It was a while before any of them spoke.

“I have” said Dymphna, “seen this once while I was visiting Bangor, and I believe Armagh has a copy.”

““Our library is small no more than six hundred volumes.”

“We see our work as making copies so that the learning and wisdom may spread through Ireland and the monasteries in the English and Frankish lands.”

“This is an excellent copy,” said Dymphna

“I know that the Abbot of Devenish would sell half the lands of the King of Airgilla for a copy. We will make a few more copies if we find the vellum for the work. There will be calves slaughtered about here for the sake of these fine words.”

“Now this book,” said Aalim, “is one you will appreciate. It is from one of your monks who dwells with Charlemagne in Aachen.”

He placed a copy of Dicult’s “De mensura Orbis Terrae” on the table.

Nathan smiled. In Salamanca his esteemed colleague had presented his father with an exact copy as though it was the only one in the known world. Plainly it was not. There was obviously an advantage in being the librarian of a library with an unsurpassed ability to copy books.

Aalim launched into the same sales patter he had used at Salamanca.

“It contains the geography of the known world, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Eastern Gate, from the far sands of the Sahara to the icy fires of Ultima Thule.”

“I think Dicult’s material is not from his own travels,” said Aalim.

“Some of the contents have come from a survey made by the emperor Theodosius of the known world four hundred years ago, “Mensuratio Orbis,” the measurement of the world.”

This selling was easy, mused Aalim. All you had to do was improve your pitch each time you presented the goods. Dymphna, Niall, Liam and Fergal took turns examining Dicult’s book. There was a silence of worship and respect.

“He has done us proud,” said Liam.

Aalim did not wait for Dymphna’s nod of assent. He reached into his stock and produced another book.

“This is Priscian’s Grammar, an essential tool for your Latin scholars. Priscian has written a solid teaching book that will make a Latin master of even your dullest pupils. It has excerpts of men of wisdom you know well, Virgil, Cicero, Seneca and Ovid.”

Nathan smiled at Aalim’s presentation. He was going to make a trader yet.

Aalim took yet another copy of a book that had seemed in Salamanca the only version extant.

“Here,” he said, “Is another book written by a man of the Irish school. The scholars I seen in your classroom will find it invaluable.”

‘Propositiones ad Acuendos Juvenes’, ‘Problems to Sharpen the Young’ by Alcuin of York, It’s a collection of numerical riddles.”

“Inside,” said Aalim tapping the book, “are fifty three mathematical problems that will have your students grappling with the wonders of numbers in a way they never thought they could.”

He really is getting good at this selling thought Nathan.

“That is all I have for you,” said Aalim. “Nathan has some items that might interest you.”

“A few more books for your consideration,” said Nathan

“These are,” said Nathan, “a few of Plutarch’s lives, Solon, Telemachus, Cicero.

“A writer fond of his Greek origins,” commented Niall.

“Quite so,” said Nathan. “This is a copy of Xenophon’s ‘The Persian Expedition’.

“I remember reading it years ago at Clonfert,” said Liam. “His Greek is clear and sharp. I thought Cyrus was an admirable man, a leader of integrity and honour. I was saddened on reading into the book I found he was cut down by treachery. Xenophon’s story shows how quickly fortune can change destiny in the passing of one night.”

“I have a copy of the book of Exodus,” continued Nathan, “a copy of the book of Daniel, a book by Josephus, which includes a description the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by Titus.”

The books were passed around. There was a sigh from Niall as he commenced to read the beginnings of Josephus.

The books were in the common Jewish manner, scrolls tightly wound around a spindle.

“It will be a sound move,” said Liam, “to make these into codices, well bound.”

“And these I am sure you will find interesting,” continued Nathan.

“A copy of a letter from the Paul of Tarsus. I am sure you possess copies but there might be variations.”

The assembled scrutinisers of the merchandise were excited to discover they had in their hands a letter of Paul, which they had not seen before. Excited was not a strong enough word. They were almost delirious with joy. Years would be spent discussing this letter from a man who may have seen Christ.

The morning’s business was nearly concluded. Some of the gold and dirhams held by Clonmacnois were in the hands of the travellers and the Monks were happy and delighted in the books they had acquired.

There was a break for prayers. Aalim went outside and commenced his absolutions and bowed in the general direction of Mecca. The Monks hurried off to the church for the three o’ clock psalms,

Nathan finished his noon prayer and wandered round seeing how the kitchens worked.

With business finally over Aalim sat down and cleared his mind. One of his tasks in coming to Ireland had been discharged.

There popped into his head a question so obvious it had been hidden in plain sight. Why were these Irish monks so engrossed in books.?

Why when these people, the brighter sons and daughters, the nobility of small petty kingdoms of cattle minders had come together in these monastic ‘cities’ they had started making books. Why had the high born among them and devoted their lives to the painstaking task of making books.

“Why,” he asked Fergal, “is so much of the energy of your monasteries devoted to books? I am sure all your industry is necessary, to feed people and educate them but why books.”

“Well,” said Fergal. “It is all tied up in who we are. We Irish have always had a love affair with words.”

“Since before time began our lives and culture has been warmly wrapped in the words of bards and poets and the great tales of our ancestors. Words held in trust who we are and what we have done for passing to the coming generations.”

“The form of writing we had before Patrick was markings on a stick and slashes on a rock.”

“Then a man came with a book. Moreover, in the book that Patrick brought were not just words, but the words of God himself, the one true God. A book full of the words of God, imagine, the God who created all things, the trees and the birds and the stars and the small creatures in the woods.”

“With the Roman alphabet applied to our language we found we could capture words, ideas, thoughts there on the pages. We could hold words as prisoners, forever captive.”

“So it is because of our Irishness that we are book makers and writers. In a book are the two loves of our lives. God in all his manifestations and words.”

“We are bookmakers because we drown in the joy of words.”

“We have kept the stories and poems of the days before Patrick. Let me tell you one which bewails the presence of us monks in Ireland.”

It is about an old warrior who returns to Ireland. He complains of the monks who have took over the land where once his warriors roamed.”

Fionn was an ancient leader of the Fianna. He was banished to the land of Youth, Tir an Oige, the heaven of the Irish.

Well Fionn came back after 300 years and found his lands now covered with monasteries.”

“And he was vexed with God for the substitution of the warriors of Ireland with us monks praying and singing in the chapel.”

It goes like this.

Patrick you chatter too loud
And lift your crozier too high,
Your stick would be kindling soon
If my son Osgar stood by.

If my son Osgar and God
Wrestled it out on the hill
And I saw Osgar go down
I'd say that your God fought well.

But how could the God you praise
And his mild priests singing a tune
Be better than Fionn the swordsman,
Generous, faultless Fionn?

Just by the strength of their hands
The Fenian's battles were fought,
With never a spoken lie,
Never a lie in thought.

There never sat a priest in church
A tuneful psalm to raise
Better spoken than these
Scarred in a thousand frays.

Whatever your monks have called
The law of the King of Grace,
That was the Fenian's' law;
His home is their dwelling-place.

If happier house than Heaven
There be, above or below,
'Tis there my master Fionn
And his fighting men will go.

Ah, priest, if you saw the Fenians
Filling the strand beneath
Or gathered in streamy Naas
You would praise them with every breath.

Patrick, ask of your God
Does he remember their might,
Or has he seen east or west
Better men in a fight?

Or known in his own land
Above the stars and the moon
For wisdom, courage and strength
A man the like of Fionn?

Aalim again noticed a difference of culture, a way in which the Irish manner of doing things was different from Andalusia. The Irish really did love words. They would stop on the roadside to hear a poem or sing a song.

“An interesting poem,” said Nathan, “there are few peoples who keep the honour of the old Gods after they have taken another.”

They returned to the table in the hall. The Abbot and some of the senior monks had joined the conclave. Now that business was finished it seemed the monks were interested in a general discussion.

After the opening jocularities Nathan decided to broach a question to these strange Christians a question that had interested him for years.

“I am puzzled,” he said, “by the violence among Christian concerning, how can I put it doctrinal purity. Is Ireland troubled by shall I say disputes on heresy that prevail among the Christians elsewhere”?

“That’s an interesting question,” said the Abbot, “very interesting indeed. By the grace of God we follow the teachings the blessed Anthony, Jerome and Martin of Tours.”

“We received the true faith that triumphed over all the side roads and false directions elsewhere.”

“If we had received our faith from the Christians of Spain we would have followed the Arianism of the Visigoths. If we had received it from the Saxons we would have followed the teachings of Pelagius.”

“Had we got our Christianity from the Byzantines we might have been a lot more dogmatic than we are.”

“The Christians who spent many years embroiled in the crushing of heresy were children of the Roman Empire. The dioceses which are administered by bishops follow the organisation of the empire made by Diocletian.”

“These Christians, Roman Christians were given many privileges, tax exemptions, freedom from military service. They became used to having their way in matters of faith and had the power of the emperor’s soldiers to enforce the matter.”

“Views of Christianity that caused any disruption to the civil order were remorselessly punished by the prevailing orthodoxy by the authority of the Emperor. When the Empire fell they found themselves the only literate authorities left.”

“You must understand that Patrick had been a slave in Ireland. He was not so taken with the aristocracy of the Empire. He lived most of his life out side the empire in a country, Ireland, completely untouched by it.”

“Our teachers, Patrick, Colm, Comgall and Columbanus were wise. They preserved all that was possible of our Irish laws and traditions.”

“So much so that you might say that Ireland was not made Christian but that Christianity was made Irish.”

“So in Ireland through the independent monasteries devoted to the precepts of our founders a faith flourished that had no need of civil authority to punish anybody who would have argument about doctrine.”

“Anyway I doubt that our civil authorities, our Kings would fight for any view of the ‘correctness’ of doctrine. They will fight for land and cattle but not catechism.”

“Our monasteries are comprised of people who follow the rule of people like myself. We are an individually minded people. In those small domed sanctuaries of solace our monks are alone with God.”

“Thus there has never been violence in Ireland on the question of heresy.”

“Columbanus abjured us to stay consonant with Roman teachings, and we do, but not in the dogmatic way that would have us harm our fellow Irish over the placing of a phrase in a book.”

On impulse Aalim decided to raise a subject on which he had pondered for years.

“We were talking of the Greek Gods earlier. Our two peoples have access to their thinking. Hardly anyone in Francia speaks or understands Greek.”

I have studied their thinking and I would like to hear your thoughts on a conclusion I have reached.”

“I consider the most impressive part of Greek thinking,” said Aalim, “was their ability to separate Logos from Muthos.”

“The Greeks understood that logic and reason could not be applied to their religious thinking and their myths. They thought that religious thinking had a rationale of its own and should not and could not be subjected to practical analysis.”

“In the same vein they considered that the practical exploration of the world in the empirical endeavours of mathematics and science could not and should not be hindered by the strictures of religious ideas.

“When I look around our modern world it is my impression that we Muslims are akin to the Greeks. The examination of the practical world through reason and experiment in astronomy, mathematics and the physical sciences flourishes in all parts of the Moslem world.”

“The Quran does not preclude us from discovering the real world by investigation and reason.”

“It is my impression that we Moslems are in the tradition of Aristotle while Christians are infused with Plato.”

“When I look at the Christian world there seems to be a prohibition on the gaining of practical knowledge. You have taken the strictures of orthodoxy and applied them to logos and the examination of reality.”

“Now there’s an interesting proposition,” said Abbot.

“We could spend the day going over the development of the present position of the Church. Let me put it this way. In the course of arriving at the true teachings of the church it became established doctrine that Christ was the logos, the means whereby knowledge arrived in the world.“

“The church became part of the empire so this doctrine became enforceable throughout the Empire.”

“By the time of Pope Gregory it was laid down that all that is to be known in the world is to be known from church authority.”

“We in Ireland could challenge that assertion but we are already derelict in so many ways that to challenge the authority of Rome in that way would be a heresy that would not be overlooked.”

“Columbanus, one of the wisest sages of Christian Ireland advised us to be obedient to the Pope and so we shall.”

“Courtesy of your books we may read of these matters even if we cannot act on them.”

Aalim was conscious that seated at the table were Christians of a kind, a Jew and himself a Muslim. Whilst they might agree on much there was much they could not. But it was pleasant to talk about such subjects in a civilised way.

The Abbot rapidly changed the subject.

“Speaking of the Pope we have heard disturbing news that he has left Rome. Is this true”?

“It is our understanding,” said Nathan, carefully trying not to pass judgment on what could only be viewed as a disgrace.

How could you tell Christians their spiritual leader, the leader of Christianity had been chased like a vagabond out of the city of Rome.

“It is our understanding,” he said carefully, “that after some dispute he has gone to seek the sanctuary of Charlemagne.”

“We had heard that his Holiness was under some pressure from the aristocracy in Rome but being forced out of Rome, how extraordinary,” said the Abbot.

“We heard that they wanted to cut his tongue out,” said Aalim.

“Astonishing. We have never viewed the current inhabitants of Rome as altogether civilised,” said Dymphna. .

Nathan reflected with ironic amusement on the remark.

Yesterday they had discussed the books of a civilised empire and republic, the world of Cicero and Tacitus. Now the monks of this island on the western edges of the world considered the present citizens of Rome barbarians.

“It is the opinion of my lord Emir that Charlemagne will give the Pope assistance,” said Aalim.

“So it is possible that the Pope will return to Rome secured by the arms of Charlemagne,” said Niall.

“That is the talk at the moment,” said Nathan.

There was a pause in the flow of discussion. Aalim seized the gap to raise the matter of why he was in Ireland.

“Let me tell you the reason Nathan and myself have come to Ireland. We are interested in opening up a new trade route here in the northern lands.”

Aalim produced his map from his bag and proceeded to outline the boundaries of the eastern lands and the Black Sea.

“We want to talk to a people called the Varangians a people with expertise at sailing long boats who live in the northern lands,” said Aalim, “let me show you why.”

“This is the Black Sea. This is the river Volga. These Varangians have started to trade from Starya Ladoga here down this great river to the city of Atil here on the Caspian Sea.”

“The city of Atil,” said Nathan pointing to the map, “Is the capital of this Kingdom, of the Khazars. There is a road called the Silk Road that comes from China and India to the Eastern Gate, a gate of the city of Atil.”

“To that Eastern Gate come silks, spices, and the wares of China and India.”

“It follows that if we can trade with the Varangians then we can trade with the Khazars and get direct access to the trade of the nations of the east. Being able to trade with these Varangians will change all the trading in these northern regions.”

“We know the Varangians trade from a port called Hegeby here in the western Baltic. If we could trade with them there we could have access to the goods of India and China away from the reach of the Franks and the Byzantines and the Caliphate.”

“Have you ever met the Varangians,” asked Aalim?

“No” said Fergal, “and as far as I know they have never been in Ireland.

“But let me tell you this though. In June five years ago an Irish monastery Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria, famous for its learning across the length and breadth of the civilised world was attacked by sea raiders.”

“Monks were killed in the abbey, thrown into the sea to drown or carried away as slaves along with the church treasures.”

“The raiders were described as dark haired and they came from the east. They were not Picts, Saxons, Angles or any people we know. There was another raid about five years ago on Rathlin Island off the north of Ireland.

“And,” added Niall. “There was a raid by the same sea raiders on the island of Inishmurray off the coast of Sligo four years ago. The raiders were fierce savage ruthless murderers of unarmed monks. They had long ships, swift and well manoeuvred. Again it is thought they came from the northeast, from the Danish sea out beyond Northumbria”

“They have not been heard of since. That makes two devastating raids three years apart.”

“Were the people who made those raids Varangians,” asked Aalim.

“We do not know,” said Niall

“The fact remains,” said Nathan, “That the Varangians are the people who trade down the river from the Baltic to the Black Sea to the Khazars.”

“Who are these Khazars,” asked Niall.

“They are Turkic people who came from beyond the Eastern Gate a few hundred years ago,” said Aalim.

“Now there is further interesting aspect to our quest,” said Aalim.

“The King of Khazar has announced that at the first moon after the autumn equinox he will change the religion of his Empire. He will set aside the beliefs of his people in favour of a new religion.”

“Now this is a fascinating notion,” said the Abbot, “an empire to be persuaded for God.”

“Well,” said Nathan, “God yes since those who will put their views to this barbarian king are all the sons of Abraham. It’s more a case of which prophet and from that prophet which beliefs.”

“Nathan and myself,” said Aalim, “are resolved if possible to go the Eastern Gate and prevail upon this King to trade with us across the northern seas.”

“We think if we come at the time of the King choosing his new faith all of the east will be there. Frankly if he would stick to his religion, trade would continue as it is.”

“But in particular we want to talk to the Varangians.”

“What we know about them is. They have a port at Hegeby here,” said Aalim pointing at the map.

“We also know there is a large port at Dorestad in Holland, Charlemagne’s port.”

“Yes,” said Fergal, “It is the main port through which our missionaries go to from Dublin. Most of the trade between Ireland and Francia goes there.”

“We wish to go to Dorestad and then Hegeby and talk with the Varangians and if possible go with them to the Eastern Gate,” said Aalim.

“That is a brave undertaking,” said the Abbot.

“I have letters of embassy from the Emir,” said Aalim.

“They might be more trouble than they are worth,” said the Abbot.

“If you produce them in Francia you will be politely invited to Aachen and you will be fed and feasted and asked a lot of polite but meaningful questions, and time will slip away.”

“As for showing them to the Varangians well they might be impressed and they might not. If they are the sea raiders who slaughtered the innocents at Rathlin Island, Inishmurray and Lindisfarne a few pieces of paper and four men will not be enough to save your neck.”

“That said though I see no reason why a small band of men would bother the Franks.”

“Would not the forces of Charlemagne consider us spies,” asked Nathan?

“Jews like me are able to trade in the Frankish lands but Aalim and four soldiers of the Emir might have some difficulty,” continued Nathan.

Difficulty was a diplomatic manner of expression. They might in fact have their throats cut.

“I think it would be most unlikely,” said Dymphna. “Were you to wander around the Marche lands or in southern France you would be questioned and perhaps held ransom. However, in the northern regions, you would be so strange as to be considered harmless.”

“Charlemagne has conquered so many people in the last thirty years there are folk of all kinds and persuasions in the northern Frankish lands. Just change your clothes. Why not the clothing of Irish monks?”

“They are used to bands of Irish missionaries in Francia. We have been going there for over two hundred years.”

“What we could do,” said Aalim, “is travel to this port Hegeby and talk to the Varangians and see what they buy and sell from us. That would be information we do not have at present.”

“If they were good enough to take some fellow traders and travellers down to the Eastern Gate that would be a bonus. If they don’t we can retrace our steps and tell the Emir whether or not the Varangians will trade with Andalusia.”

“Now then,” said the Abbot, “let’s establish what we know and what we are going to do about it. We are not a trading house. We are missionaries converting souls for Christ.”

“Books are there Christian books that come through this “Eastern Gate”?”

“Yes,” said Aalim, “The main source of Christian books is the Nestorians. They have great libraries of the ancient and Christian books. Actually most of the books sold from Andalusia to you have come across the Caliphate from the Nestorians.”

“So,” said the Abbot, “we have a situation where there might be access through the Eastern Gate to books. A great empire is about to choose a religion. It is important to the world that the choice be wise and well argued.”

“This Emperor of the Khazars you say has invited representatives of the all faiths.”

“That’s interesting. The first thing we know is that the Pope will not be sending anyone to persuade him.”

“And why is that,” asked Fergal

“From what Aalim tells us the Pope is a busy keeping his tongue in his head. And the Byzantines, I have no doubt they will send representatives.”

“Yes very much so,” said Aalim, “They have a great interest in what happens in the Black Sea. To have a Christian ruler on the northern shores would please them mightily”

“And the Moslems of the Caliphate, they will send representatives” asked the abbot.

“Indeed they most certainly shall,” said Aalim.

“We are the Irish. Our interests lie in seeing that our work in the Frankish lands does not come to nothing,” said the Abbot.

“It is our mission from God to travel across all the seas to convert the heathens. It comes to me we should send a missionary to talk to this great emperor of the Khazars.”

“I think we should tell him there is another manner of conversion to the faith of the redeemer than the sword of Charlemagne.”

“I think since the Pope is busy we Irish must send someone to talk to this heathen King. Otherwise the dry voices of the Byzantines will be all that he will hear.”

“I am saying that you Fergal should travel with Nathan and Aalim to the Eastern Gate and see what you can do. In addition you will have the opportunity to talk to the Nestorians about their books. Let us all see what transpires this autumn equinox.”

“May it be the wish of God that whatever religion this emperor chooses it brings peace to all of us.”

The meeting was ended.

The instruction the Abbot had given to Fergal had come with the voice of authority over the lives of a thousand people.

Nathan, Aalim and Fergal went outside to the closing evening light.

“So,” said Aalim, “you are commanded by your Abbot to come with us on our mission to the Varangians.”

“Now that was unexpected,” said Fergal.

“I am stunned. This morning I was a monk in this monastery imagining that my affairs would continue as they have for the foreseeable future.”

“Now I am to go with you to the far end of the world and talk to a people I have never heard of until this week.”

“Well if it consoles you much the same happened to me,” said Aalim. “I went to a meeting and next thing I knew I had a troupe of horsemen bound for a place I had never heard of.”

“So who do you think is more powerful,” asked Nathan, “an Abbot or an Emir.

“We might never know but either of them is powerful enough to send us far away,” said Fergal.

“You would be most most welcome to come with us,” said Aalim. ”Your knowledge of the Frankish lands and your connections to the Irish monasteries there would be invaluable.”

They sat there in the twilight settling the details as the light fell on the tiny domed stone homes of the monks of Clonmacnois.

Shouts and commotion from the main gate told them the hunters had returned. They were covered with blood and on the back of a two donkeys were three large very dead black pigs. Aalim went to look at the boars. They were big indeed and had the proportionate tusks to match.

“Good hunting I take gentlemen,” said Fergal.

“Oh indeed good hunting” said Khubayb.

“The very best of sport,” said Kieran.

Naim and the others were covered in dried sweat, burrs, blood and briar scratches. They were beaming with delight.

Tonight thought Aalim will be the entertainment of discussing blow by blow how these unfortunate animals fought like tigers and fell before the outstanding hunters of Andalusia.

“To dinner”, said Fergal, “the good and holy company will be thrilled to hear of the chase and finale of these fine pigs.”

“Tomorrow the road.”

The Road to Dublin

Chapter 7

They left Clonmacnois on a mist dripping morning. There was a sweet dampness in the air and the sun seemed not to come from the heavens but to have come down to the earth and shone level with the ground blazing out from behind trees and buildings.

The horses were smaller than they were used to and lacked the fire of the Arab steeds of Andalusia. The mules were not mules but donkeys. Khubayb and the soldiers felt demoted in the ranks of the brave.

The Monks lined their path as their horses passed down through the stone gate to a road running away from the hill behind the monastery.

They were all there, the Abbot, Seamus the beekeeper, Paudeen, the singers of the psalms, Dymphna, Liam and Niall. A line up of monks, male and female, small children, every person in the monastery shouting out good wishes for the journey, God speed on their mission and a safe return one day.

I might come back thought Aalim. Before the vicissitudes of age make days on horseback too much to contemplate.

The monks were gracious and hospitable.

It had been a pleasure to talk with people who held the craft of writing and words in such high esteem.

They rode into a morning of waning mists, sunny verges and unruly hedges. The chatter of small birds and the alarms of blackbirds tolled their passage as they disturbed the morning calm.

The road was wide enough for Nathan, Fergal and Aalim to ride abreast.

It was a journey of questions from the saddle, droll tales and explanations and slow walking horses.

“We are riding to the sea,” asked Nathan.

“Yes, that you are, riding to the seas on the east side of Ireland,” confirmed Fergal.

“Are there any great ports in Ireland,” asked Khubayb?

“Not many,” said Fergal, “as many as we need obviously but not many.”

“We send little abroad. There has always been trade in wolfhounds. They’re easy to rear, very affectionate animals and in great demand among the nobility abroad. It seems to me if you are in some position of power in Francia you need a bigger dog than everyone else. And we in Ireland have the biggest dogs. The Romans were fond of them.”

“Our prime export is that great Celtic staple smoked hams. While the cattle in Ireland are grazing in the meadows the pigs are in the woods eating acorns and piling on condition.”

“They are many in Ireland who owe their prosperity to the smoked legs of a pig.”

“What is brought into Ireland,” asked Aalim.

“There’s not a great deal,” replied Fergal. “Wine for the houses of the Kings and the Bishops is an item high on the list, slabs of iron and fish.”

“You bring fish from other places, you do not fish the sea,” asked Nathan, “yet you’re surrounded by it.”

“There’s not a great deal of attention paid to the sea in Ireland,” said Fergal. “We are no great fishers. The wealth of clans and Kings is in cattle and the grass. The power is in control of the land, of the grazing, what’s the ocean to them. You can’t graze the sea.”

Fergal waved at the side of the road. “We are riding along the divide of Ireland. To the north is Leth cuinn’s side to the south mug nuas side. This is the royal road to the Tara. It runs along a line across from sea to sea, from Dublin to Galway, except that it bends a bit and goes to Tara. It’s a road of contention. At the moment the southern O’Neills and the Clan Colman are in contest for the sway in these parts.”

“And if there is war,” asked Aalim.

“There’s often war about land, and occasionally about cattle. But sometimes it is settled without actual battle.”

“In Ireland battles can be fought with words.”

“Battle by gossip and argument if you like. The Fili and the bards from the arguing clans meet and put their case. It’s a battle of minds, cut and thrust of who is right and who is wrong.”

“The word spreads to the neighbouring clans.”

“Who they think has the rightness of the argument can affect which clans might join in the row and even who might be successful if words fail and there is a war.”

“Most of these fights start with the buckos, wild exuberant young men who have nothing else to do go but raid the neighbours. It is difficult for a clan to raise more cattle if they have poor land.”

“So it is awful tempting to send young warriors of no notable achievement into the land of a neighbouring clan to steal cattle.”

“Half of our legends and a quarter of our tales of heroism are about a crowd of young hallions stealing cattle.”

“If they’re successful then there’s cattle in the yard and a big feast and boasting afterward. What is left where the cattle were is a burning festering resentment with angry and aggrieved people biding their time for the opportunity to get their own back and a bit extra for the sake of justice.”

“If the raid is a failure it’s likely that some of the young men are killed by the neighbours and there’s a row about compensation and revenge when the occasion is ripe.”

“But as I said words can save the day sometimes. Battle can be brought to a king in argument. We love a battle of wits.”

“We love a contention of words and we try and ring from it any kernels of wisdom that sound men and intelligence can glean from dialogue and debate.”

“We are inordinately fond of quick witted thinkers. The ones that under pressure can conjure out of the blue a line of conjecture that at best leads to new understanding or at least to a firmer hold on what little truths we know.”

“So what happens if words fail,” asked Nathan, “What do you do then. This custom of yours sounds like a way scared men might avoid their responsibilities. Where there should be battle you have banter.”

“Well no,” said Fergal, “If its not settled in the words then the talkers consider a second option. You see if there are large clans involved in the row then the number of potential dead can be considerable. All good men from whatever side.”

“The second option might be single combat between the two Chieftains, the two Kings.”

“The result is one dead King and a resolution of the argument.”

“But there was one famous case where the dispute was settled in a contest and nobody died.”

“There was a great battle for land that was settled with one stroke of the sword, but it was a telling one.”

“It was like this”

“The Clan O’Neill of Airgailla had a claim against Clan O’Donnell for the land on the left hand side of Lough Erne.”

“It was basically a clash long in coming between descendents of Domhnall and the other sons of Niall of the nine hostages.”

“The land itself was high mountain bog but no matter its value lay in that it was land and it had to be fought over.”

“The wise men of both sides had the battle of words first but it led to no settlement. The dispute having started somebody had to have the winning of it. It was not a matter of honour. With that kind of dispute somebody can apologise or pay some cows.”

“It was about land. Somebody’s foot had to possess the right to walk it. By that definition another crowd of people were to be forbidden any right to go near it.”

“Anyway the Druids and Fili, talked, talked, and then talked some more. It was pointed out if there was war a crowd of fine young men on both sides would die and there would be weakness among the losing clan.”

“The argument further ran that the subsequent weakness of the losers would tempt the victorious to try and take more land and it would be war without end. In addition, the losses of young men would bring sorrow to raths and glens all over the north.”

“So they settled on the second option, that the leaders of each clan, the two kings would fight it out in single combat, man to man. Which sounded fair play until one wiser man pointed out that it inevitably meant that one chief would be dead at the end of it. And the wars of succession and fights and feuds that might follow would likewise weaken the losing tribe and again as before tempt the other tribe to invasion and slaughter.”

“Fair enough they decided, and then it came to them.”

The land in question was about ten miles across Lough Erne just above the bridge of Caitlin.”

“What if they said the two chiefs were to row across the lake and the man who landed first could claim the land for his clan forever.”

“No wars of succession and two live chiefs and a fair contest. Moreover, it was a fair test of stamina and determination and worth. Neither of these Kings were small physically weak men.”

“The assembled Kings and clans agreed to this course of action. And so that was what was done.”

“The O’Neill and the O’Donnell both rowed hard and fast each in a small coracle.”

“Now I must tell you that Irish law and custom is that these matters are decided in tight clauses. There has to be a clear succinct set of words that emphatically deliver a verdict, decides the matter, and leaves no scope for argument afterwards.”

“In this case the words prescribed to decide the issue were that ‘the man who put his hand on the far bank first would own the land for his clan forever’.”

“A straightforward notion you would say.”

“Now as two Kings were rowing away the coracles neared the farther shore O’Donnell was about 10 yards ahead and it was plain to see that he would win.”

“At that point O’Neill stood up in the coracle took his sword in his right hand and cut off his left hand and threw it on the farther bank.”

“And he won. He met the requirement of the words. He was the first man to put his hand on the farther bank, unquestionably.”

“No matter that he was not attached to it at the time. The Land belonged to the O’Neills forever.”

“It is the symbol of Ulster and the O’Neill’s to this very day, the red hand, the red hand of Ulster.”

The horses sauntered onward at a light pace and the talk of kings and wars and customs of the land passed the time away.

“Well” said Aalim, “I doubt that there was any discussion as the commitment of this King O’Neill after that.”

“None,” said Fergal, “indeed to this day you can tell an O’Neill by their commitment. They are not a crowd of half hearted mumblers.”

They moved on through wooded dells with the grass at the side of the road dotted with daisies and buttercups, here and there an apple tree or a green blaze of damson plums, promising a harvest of plenty when autumn came. The topics of conversation ranged from the trivial, to the funny to the serious questions of the day.”

“So why” asked Nathan, “do you monks leave Ireland and move among the Franks and the Saxons. You could stay at home and be just as industrious and as pious”

“Neither Jews or Moslems send unprotected men off to the lands of pagans to preach. If they wish to become Moslems they seem to be welcomed. And we Jews do not beseech foreigners to become Jewish.”

“Yes why is the lands beyond your shores full of Irish monasteries and peopled with monks from such a small place as this,” asked Aalim.

“I think myself,” said Fergal, “that it comes from a thing that was common in the beginning of the Christian belief.”

“Martyrs,” said Fergal.

“When we read the history of the Christian church, in the time before the Roman Empire took over it is full of martyrs. It’s a long list of people killed and tortured for their belief in Christ. The measure of the strength of their faith was being eaten by lions or such.”

“So the notion we took was that being a Christian involved a lot of suffering. Death brought you salvation. Martyrs stood at the highest apex of belief.”

“In the end the Emperors gave up the struggle since they found killing Christians led to more of them. Persecution of a people willing to die for their religion led pagans to admire such courage and commitment and the church grew larger. The bravery of the martyrs impressed new converts.”

“When the persecution ceased the Roman church had a fine trove of martyrs bones to lure pilgrims to their churches.”

“We in Ireland had no such experience and we are woefully short of the bones of martyrs as a consequence. You see when the blessed Patrick converted Ireland nobody died. There was not a single martyr, not one.”

“He went into battle with the Kings in a contest of words, in a battle of ideas with the Kings and their advisors the Druids. As I was saying before Irish tradition made this possible. And Patrick won those debates without a drop of blood being spilled.”

“So we wound up with no martyrs. But it to the apostles of Ireland it was evident that martyrdom was an intrinsic part of Christianity.”

“Well that didn’t fluster anyone because we made up a whole new idea of what being a martyr was. In fact we have gone further and invented three kinds of martyrs and two of them do not involve bloodshed, not a drop of blood spilt in either of them.”

Aalim was intrigued. He has little experience of religious discussion. Here in this last outpost of the world safe from the armies of the mighty and away from the gaze of the Pope these Irish had taken up some daring styles of thinking.

It was not a type of analysis he had heard before. The teasing of the ideas with testing and musing until a view of what was happening was delivered.

“What we came up with,” said Fergal “was the idea of the green, red and white martyrdoms.”

“The green martyrdom was to follow the tradition of the ascetics in the deserts of Egypt.. You see men in the society of others mould their thinking into the common style of things.”

“They fashion their ways into what is approved and safe. They fall in behind the leaders as cattle do on a mountain track or like sheep crossing a meadow.”

“The Green martyrdom was to go to the wilder places of Ireland’s sweet and loving land and out there alone with God, with the creatures of the woods for company and the stars above for light to dedicate your life to the praise of God and his creation.”

“It is the sacrifice of the companionship of kith and kin that is the martyrdom.”

“Away from their beloved brothers and sisters, the joys of married life, the laughter of children.”

“That was the sacrifice. The reward was abiding in the dreams of God. In those lonely cells comes the closest link of the individual with God. In those circumstances men have to think for themselves.”

“The red martyrdom was to suffer death. There have been a few Irish monks slaughtered for the Irish faith in the Frankish lands and among the Saxons. Dymphna is named for one of our preachers who was killed in Belgium looking after people who were mad.”

“But it never happened in Ireland. There are no martyr’s bones on Irish soil.”

“The white martyrdom is to leave Ireland never to return. To preach the faith to the Godless Saxon, Picts, Franks and Germans and save their heathen souls and bring them to the true God.”

“The monks who go abroad are accepting a martyrdom of exile.”

“We call this White Martyrdom the Perignato,” said Fergal. “Perignato is a journey to find the place where at the judgement you will be resurrected. To be in the place where God will on the last day raise you to your heavenly reward or send you to everlasting damnation.”

“We believe that to be resurrected you have to die in the place where your resurrection will take place and that place was known only to God.”

“That is an interesting concept,” said Aalim.

“We have a tale,” he continued nodding to Nathan, “told by Jews and Muslims alike which has a twist on that theme, about being in the time and place appointed for one’s death.”

“Anyway our story about a man being in the right place for his death is about a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions.”

“After a while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, ‘Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me’.

‘She looked at me and made a threatening gesture’.

‘Master lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samara and there Death will not find me’. The merchant was a good man and lent the servant his horse’.”

“”The servant mounted it, and rode the horse as fast as it could gallop. Later in the day the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw Death standing in the crowd.”

“He went up to her and said, why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?”

‘That was not a threatening gesture,’ said Death; ‘it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him here in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samara.’”

“Ah,” said Fergal, “that’s a good story. “It’s about what to believe.”

“People can be very stubborn about what they believe,” said Nathan. “And they can’t be argued out of it no matter what.”

“Let me tell you a Jewish story about it.”

“Some hundreds of years ago the good Rabbi Eliiezer Ben Hyrcranus was having one of those labyrinthine disputes on doctrine that only Jews can have.”

“He had run out of his armoury of arguments and still the congregation was not convinced.”

“So he performed a miracle, a miracle that proved his point that he was right and they were wrong.”

“The congregation told him even though the miracle proved his point; they said that he was still wrong because miracles were not allowed in debate.”

“He was exasperated.”

“To prove my teaching is correct’ said the good Rabbi Eliiezer Ben Hyrcranus, ‘I call upon heaven to tell you that I am right.’

“So there was a clap of thunder in broad daylight and a voice from heaven said ‘Rabbi Eliiezer is right, his teachings are correct’.”

“It still was not good enough for the disputants. They said that in a debate the rules said that the voice of the majority was right. They said the Torah plainly said that decisions were to be reached by majority vote.”

“God was a minority of one.”

“So it often is. Miracles abound but even God can’t get a word in edgeways into some arguments.”

Aalim and Fergal smiled at the wisdom of the tale.

By late afternoon they had told more tales and made a good progress along the road. As they rode out of a small meadow into a larger field the loud drumming noise of horses hooves muffled against the soft grass and the spongy soil grew louder and louder and round the edge of the woods came ten mounted men followed by a tall man in a chariot, long hair streaming behind him.

They came at speed up to the travellers and wheeled their horses straight in front of their path with the chariot rider pulling along side Aalim, Nathan and Fergal

They were dressed in blue and red tunics and the ornaments on the reins of their horses shone in the sunshine.

“And you be,” asked the Charioteer.

“Myself and my companions are from Clonmacnois and we are going to the Games,” said Fergal

“Indeed,” said the leader with a slight tinge of haughtiness.

“And what if we were to say you were invaders of my chief’s lands.”

“That would not be neither true or sensible,” replied Fergal.

“This man is a Jewish merchant. This man is a librarian from Andalusia and these are his escorts.”

“They are not from any parts hereabouts and aren’t here to invade the lands of O’Neill. Your are not suggesting that the O’Neills are afraid of monks, merchants and librarians”

The charioteer relaxed somewhat.

“I sometimes wonder about the strange people you monks are bringing into the country.”

“What about those characters there,” he said pointing at Khubayb Naim Aymaan and Tawfiq, “what clan are they from.”

The troop of men was becoming restless. They had plainly hoped for a fight, a surge of adrenalin and now they were in the company of booksellers.

“They are from the same Kingdom as the Librarian, Andalusia,” replied Fergal.

“I suppose,” said the man in the chariot to Aalim, “that you have no King in Ireland.”

“Indeed not,” replied Aalim

“Imagine now if there was a fight to whom would we pay the dead man’s price, if you have no king in Ireland, to who would we pay cows for your deaths”

“Well you would be facing a long sea journey for that,” said Fergal, “and I am not sure you would be wanting to cross those seas with a herd of cows.”

“Are these people even Christians,” asked the charioteer.

“Well no they are not,” replied Fergal.

“Well there’s another problem,” said the charioteer.

“If there was a fight and we killed you, we would have to bury you. God knows what a priest would do at your funerals.”

“Why are these people so dark. Are they well,” he asked Fergal?

“You never know with strangers that they don’t harbour some plague.”

“No they are well enough. The sun is stronger where they come from.”

“And your name is,” asked Fergal

“I am Owen of the O’Neill. You’re on our land but your welcome to proceed to the games.”

Khubayb could not follow the conversation in Irish but had some inkling that the lack of a fight was proving a disappointment for intruders. To Owens’s surprise Aalim had followed the conversation in Irish.

“If had been a fight,” said Aalim in Irish to Owen, “what makes you think you would have won?”

A wide smile crossed Owens’s face.

“Well I am supposing that the warriors of O’Neill can best a bunch of bookmen and merchants.”

“But these fine soldiers,” he said to Aalim in Latin looking at Khubayb Naim Tawfiq and Aymaan, “they are surely the finest your King could muster.”

“Certainly,” said Aalim.

“I tell you what,” said Owen, “let’s have a mock battle, no wounds, between myself and that fine looking man there,” he said gesturing at Khubayb.

Aalim looked to Khubayb.

“An interesting idea master,” said Khubayb.

“Let me see if the training of the Emir’s army is able to cope with these raggle taggle warriors.”

“Oh” said Fergal, “I can assure you these are lordly O’Neills of the southern clan, neither raggle nor taggle.”

Khubayb dismounted from his horse and stepped into the circle of mounted men.

Some of them dismounted and a ring was formed. Owen removed the cloth he had draped over his shoulders. Khubayb took off his girdle and checked his sword in his scabbard.

“Now,” said Fergal, “just the two of you and no going beyond the ring”

Khubayb drew his curved sword from its scabbard and buckled his small round shield to his left arm. To his surprise Owen drew two short swords from scabbards at his side but held no shield. This will be interesting thought Aalim.

The fight was an exceptional display of swordsmanship. Time and again Khubayb thrust and slashed his scimitar and on every occasion one of Owens swords parried the blow,

On occasions Owen would take the fight to him and either the scimitar parried the blow or the small round shield was there in a split second. Eventually the peak of both men’s fitness was reached and they agreed to call it a draw.

“A good fight,” said Fergal.

“You did well,” said Owen to Khubayb.

“It’s the style here in Ireland for a charioteer to fight with two

swords and a shield bearer, but no excuses. I can see that a lot of training went into you at some stage.”

“I have a lot of experience fighting the Franks,” said Khubayb.

“Can I have a look at that sword; it has a fine ring about it,” asked Owen.

“My pleasure,” said Khubayb handing over the sword.

Owen carefully looked over the blade, hefted it in his hand and tested its balance.

“It is the finest art of Toledo,” said Khubayb.

“I wonder if you put aside the shield and fought with two of these swords Irish style would you do better,” said Owen.

“I will try it out one time” said Khubayb.

“You know merchant,” said Owen to Nathan, “you would do great trade in Ireland if you brought swords instead of books.”

Nathan smiled and said in Latin, “I will give the matter some thought.”

He was not sure the Emir would be happy with his finest swords going to a small island of Christians. Toledo swords were never sold from the Emirate but given to dignitaries as gifts of honour. Soldiers such as Khubayb earned theirs and took care never to lose them to the enemy.

“Anyway,” said Owen striding to his chariot and nodding to his men, “good luck on your journey and we will see you at

the games.”

“Good fortune,” said Fergal, “and may God go with you.”

The Chariot and the horsemen swept from the meadow in a thunder of hooves.

Nathan asked Fergal. “Do you think they would have killed us?”

“If we were cattle raiders we would have a fight on our hands alright,” said Fergal.

They rode on down the side of a valley sloping away to a slow running river, the black rocks pointing out of the water’s swirls eddying around the goose grass on the banks. The rest of the day passed peacefully enough. Naim moved his horse forward to ride alongside Aalim Nathan and Fergal.

“I heard from Kieran that there is a town in Ireland, Tailteann town. I thought you said there were no towns in Ireland.”

“That is true,” said Fergal, “there aren’t and yes there is a Tailteann town. You see the town we are going to only appears once a year and then only for the games.”

“A long time ago, about 1800 years, King Lewey-the-Long-Hand upon the death of his foster mother, Tailtiu called funeral games in her honour.”

“The queen herself had ordered the games. She had chosen her burial site and had even helped in the clearing of a great forest to prepare the ground for a right royal burial.”

“Well the good King Lewey kept his promise and the games were so large and astounding and well enjoyed that they have been held most years from that day to this.”

As the evening dusk started its long haul to night they entered the Rath of the O’Connor’s.

They had been sighted some way down the road by workers in the fields who waved their working hoes to a watchman in a tower closer to the settlement.

The Rath stood on an elevated piece of ground surrounded by a high pailed fence with houses made of wood plastered with mortar painted white and blue. A horseman came from the gate and without greeting or words led them to a large house in the compound.

A man came out and nodded to Fergal and the group.

“I am the hospitality man of this place,” he said and beckoned them to dismount and enter the house.

As they entered Fergal explained to Aalim that the man was paid in cattle for lodging visitors and travellers.

“It’s the bedrock of Irish law,” said Fergal. “You have to protect and feed even your worst enemy if he is under your roof.”

“Come over to the feast later this evening,” said the lodge man.

He looked at the garb of Khubayb and his fellow escort and shrugged.

“You’ll lend a bit of colour to the place.”

As the sun fell the smell of a side of beef roasting on a spit wafted through the guest house.

“Come with me,” said Fergal. “There’s no great ritual of manners but don’t annoy any of the men sitting close to the King.”

“There’s a bit of competition for those seats. You will be welcome and you might enjoy the music.”

They were led to the large table in the main house groaning with steamed vegetables and slices of beef. The mead was flowing freely and a babble of talk was echoing through the room. Fergal took them around a set of introductions concluding in a warm welcome from the King.

There was great interest in their exotic manners and dress.

As the evening drew on it moved to a set of entertainments where people for whatever reason were invited to tell stories, sing long woeful songs accompanied by the harp or join a set of wild dancing at the end of the room.

It was unlike any entertainment Aalim had ever encountered. The O’Connors were amused that Aalim and his escort did not drink. Strange kind of soldiers they thought and put it down to a religious vow of some kind. The idea of people walking upright and breathing but not drinking at a ceili was entirely alien to them.

Aalim was entranced by the music. It had some of the same pentatonic influences of the music of Andalusia but with a free and soaring style that could move from joy to pathos in a

flick of the tongue.

They made their farewell in the morning with much regret. They may not have a high level of material comfort thought Aalim but these people knew how to enjoy themselves.

The morning ride was through level land braided with small streams and large meadows interspersed in the forest that seemed so part of Ireland. Oaks, ashes birches, chestnuts and elms were strewn over the low hills and valleys.

Finally there it was. They came up a slope to a long wide meadow covered with coloured tents and banners. Before them was the only town in Ireland. A town that was not there the week before and would not be there a week from now.

“Welcome to Aenach Tailteann,” said Fergal. “This is the most peaceful place in Ireland. All feuds, wars, disputes and claims are set aside for the duration of the games”

The fair was the same again as every year with hordes of clans, kings and common people, athletes and fakirs and fools of all sorts of degrees.

“The fact of the matter,” said Fergal, “is that the games are called by the High King in Tara and if the King is secure on the throne and times are prosperous the games are a large and lovely affair.”

There was in the centre of the chaos a cluster of men and women sat keening for a Queen dead over a thousand years ago.

Nathan sat on his horse and listened to it. The sound was strange and haunting a mixture of chants, mystical dirges and

long solemn sounding poetry.

At first Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq were puzzled by the whole noisy boisterous affair.

“What are these games master. Why are men playing games. Is that not what children do,” asked Tawfiq.

“A good question,” said Aalim looking at Fergal.

“Think of it as a kind of respite from responsibility and a bit of light hearted training for the serious matters men must attend to, like killing each other,” said Fergal.

As they entered the broad swath of grassed meadow at first it seemed all about horses. There were chariots practicing manoeuvres in short runs along the river bank

Warriors cantering here and there with sword swinging and lances about to be hurled.

As they passed the first knot of people gathered along the bank of the river Aalim asked Fergal, “what are they doing.”

It looked as though a bunch of boys were washing horses in the river.

“They are practicing,” said Fergal. “They have horse swimming contests along the banks.”

“Why” asked Tawfiq, “would you race horses in a river.”

“It is thought wise to have a horse that can swim and swim well,” said Fergal

“You might have noticed that it rains on a constant basis in Ireland. There is a lot of water that has to gather in rivers or lakes and we have a lot of lakes. Men fleeing in battle or looking for a way to cross the country in a hurry think highly of a horse that can swim well.”

“If you want to cross a lake or leave a battle a bit sooner than you might want to, a horse that can swim might save your life.”

“A most curious thing,” said Naim

Here and there some were practicing the long jump. Others stood beneath high arches trying to pitch a bundle of wheat over a bar across the top.

It was a hum of busy people chattering and bent on enjoying themselves. Mobs of small boys played hurling chasing balls with hurling sticks through the legs of adults. More sedate were groups of adults throwing quoits onto knobs protruding from the ground.

“It will be well under way tomorrow,” said Fergal, “and it will all make more sense then or maybe it won’t.”

“There’s a bit of an accent on any game that will make you better at killing people.”

“Sword play is prized and spear throwing is keenly contested.”

“The games are an attempt to find the strongest man in Ireland the sweetest singer and the best player of the pipes or the harp.”

“There’s everything, wrestling, archery the high jump. It’s a much accorded talent in Ireland to be able to jump high.”

“Now lads,” said Fergal addressing Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq, “if you every wanted to marry a good looking Irish girl, now is your chance. Down over there in the hollow of the fair there’s a big marriage market, full of grand looking women and stern fathers.”

“You never know, there’s many as would want to leave Ireland for better weather, for some of that Spanish sunshine and a chance to live in one of them towns of yours.”

Before long the troop’s junior members started to drift away. They slept the night in a large tent with hammocks swung from the side poles. Their horses tied at the back of the tent.

Khubayb asked Fergal if there was any risk of their horses and equipment being stolen. Not here he was told, they are as safe as the rock of Cashel and last I heard that was still there. Apart from Tara is the only place in Ireland under the protection of the High King. Theft here would be an affront to his dignity and that is unthinkable.

What most astonished Khubayb was the troupe of fakirs and dancers he met on the second morning? At first he thought he was hearing things, as the swirling skirl of an Arabian flute caught his ear.

He strode towards the sound. He had got used to people looking at his swarthy features and dark complexion and his turban and exotic clothes. There in the midst of all things Irish was a small group, dressed in the robes of Moorish North Africans.

They were dancing with long poles shaking them with small cymbals attached.

Dancing and playing the melodies he had so often heard on the streets of Seville. They had a basket for donations and it was well attended. He waited until they had finished their piece before talking to the leader of the troop.

It was a pleasure to swirl Arabic around his tongue. It appeared they were a band of itinerant musicians who in the summers cut a track from Ireland to Northumbria down to Cornwall before returning back to Andalusia for the summer.

Aalim, Khubayb and Nathan wandered through the throng

The High King of Ireland sat in large tent dyed in a soft shade of green. He was well attended with a steady queue of applicants looking for his decisions. Fergal and Kieran took the travellers to the front of the open tent and they bowed in curtsy to the King.

The King waved his hand in acknowledgment. Another bunch of colourful strangers he assumed. People from abroad were of little interest. There was nothing they could contribute to his peace of mind, no disputes of theirs he could settle and less he wanted from them.

Locals on the other hand needed close attention and their fractious quarrels attended to.

There were stalls with roasted fish, seared pork and breads and sweets of innumerable kinds. There was trade and commerce in every conceivable good from knives to yarns of wool and butter churns.

There were hucksters and bargainers of all kinds and degrees.

The travellers were exhausted when the fair ended after four days of feasting and merriment. Khubayb rounded up his exhausted ancillaries and got them mustered on their horses in somewhat presentable condition

Aalim raised an eyebrow at their haggard condition but decided to pass no remarks. Praying he thought. They might do an extra bit of praying. In no time at all the heady throngs and enjoyment of Telltown faded away and the troupe took the Dublin road to the sea and their journey to Germany

Aalim was feeling that his world had made a permanent change. Whereas once he took the occasional horse ride around Cordova now he seemed to spend a great deal of his time astride a horse.

Aymaan was asking when the great journey would end. Aalim knew there was a place it would cease and the return journey begin and that he hoped was Atil.

“It will end when it ends,” he said thinking the nebulous answer reflected the influence of the Irish beguillery they were immersed in.

“Our objective is to get to Atil by the moon after the Equinox. If we get delayed or stranded then we will be caught by the snows of winter when they come from the north.”

It was all very well to know where they were going and when they had to get there. The distance in between was the unknown factor. What was certain was that it was a long way from the valley of the Slaney.

In a few days they would be at sea and who knew what storms and tumult could happen there.

Fergal was enjoying himself meeting people on the road and chatting to them and sharing jokes and tales known only to the Irish.

On the second day they arrived in Dublin bay. The sun hid behind clouds and there was a darkness on the sea covering the sweep of land from Howth to Dun Leagain. The port of Dublin was an assembly of wharves with a few wooden sheds and houses adjacent to the mouth of the river.

It was not a town and barely justified the idea of a depot. However, it was a port and the jumble of carts and ropes and barrels was familiar. They camped a small distance from the mouth of the river and waited for a berth to Dorestad.

Fergal went out each morning and checked what new ships had arrived in the bay and established where they were bound to next.

Aalim was relieved when after three days of enquiries he arrived back at the camp with the news that a ship would leave in two days time bound for Dorestad.

Already the question of relinquishing the horses has arisen.

For the moment Naim Aymaan and Tawfiq ranged far and wide on a series of jaunts about the port. True a few incidents had happened but there seemed to be a willingness to allow foreigners to break a few local rules on the grounds of ignorance.

The camp was folded up as though they had never been there and they moved down to the port and boarded a large squat ship of huge timbers and a stout frame that looked as though you could drive it straight onto rocks and the rocks would break.

They were quite a number now thought Aalim. The five had now become seven even though Kieran was only going as far as Dorestad.

The crew seemed a cheery lot and they and their baggage were escorted to a square cabin, which was cramped and dark but had the beds and a small shelf at one end.

They listened as the rattles of a ship leaving port commenced and looked at each other realising that another part of the journey had begun.

They were bound for Francia. If their voyage successful they would walk the soil of Charlemagne's Kingdom.

He had been an abstract subject of discussion up to now Charlemagne thought Aalim, soon his power would be real.

At Hegeby

Chapter 8

Fergal stood on the pitching deck as the hill of Howth faded into the falling evening light.

“The heart is heavy Kieran,” he said in softy in Irish. “I have never left the island, and for some reason the leaving is bringing tears to my eyes. Why is that?”

“We Irish are far too sentimental,” said Kieran; “too rooted in the land, the trees, the rivers floods and tides, the birds, we are mixed into the earth of Ireland.”

“We sing songs about every hedge, every mountain and its clan. We have cast a net of thought over our land. Departing it is to leave the taste of its reality behind and keep only its vision in our heads. That is why it pains us so much to leave.”

“That’s true,” said Fergal, “If we had these towns Aalim talks about maybe we would miss them too. Then again maybe not. Towns are I hear surrounded by stonewalls holding the people in and the land out.”

“I am sure that our Andalusians comrades miss their country but I doubt in their land they can sing like us or tell stories as well or have such fun in argument,” said Kieran.

“Maybe we are going to a better and sunnier place,” said Fergal.

“Perhaps,” said Kieran, “but what if our love of Ireland stops us seeing that.”

“What if looking back from a land of sunshine we see another truth. That Ireland is a place of perpetual rain, of constant fogs and the dreariness of grey clouds.”

“Oh Kieran that’s only on a wet day. When the sun shines and the clouds flitter their shadows over the green fields and the golden wheat and barley fields of summer stand golden between the hedges it’s the finest country in the world.”

“Ah how would we know Fergal? How would we know if it’s better than any other country sure we have never been anywhere else.”

It was Fergal thought a feat of Irish argument to have the last word. To ask the question that could not be answered. When that happened it was unsaid but agreed by all present that conversation was ended and a new one could start. It ended all Irish cajolery and debate. And Kieran had just reached that.

“Sure how would we know if it was the best place in the world, we have never been anywhere else.”

They were joined on the deck by Aalim and Naim.

“You are sad to see your country go down the sky,” said Naim.

The ship was held into a strong westerly wind and Ireland was a shadow on the horizon.

“I am Aalim and I don’t rightly know why,” said Fergal.

“I miss Cordova,” said Naim.

“What especially do you miss Naim,” asked Kieran?

“I miss the shops; we have hundreds of shops, thousands of shops. I miss going into a shop and talking with the people at the counter, of buying warm baklava covered with almond flakes and dripping with honey, I miss the street vendors, the orange drink seller in the city centre, the warm smell of bread in the bakeries. I miss the orange trees planted in the city alcoves and plazas.”

Aalim laughed. “Yes such a simple thing as a shop, I never thought there could be places without them.”

“And streets,” said Naim, “to keep the shops apart,” he explained to Fergal and Kieran.”

“Where horses, carts old men with bundles on their back hoist their burdens up and down the street and there’s always something coming or going even if it’s only a few stray dogs or a cat out to find a warm place in the sun.”

“Oh don’t forget the stones,” said Aalim, “dark wet stones on walls, cobbled rounded stones on the roads and warm sunny sun coloured stones of the buildings in the late afternoon.”

“I miss the Judereia,” said Naim, “and I miss the courtyards calm and cool behind the doors of the houses.”

Waving his arm back at Ireland he said.

“There were no streets in that whole country,” he exclaimed, as though the unthinkable had become commonplace.

“Ah I am not sure you need these towns,” said Fergal still wondering what precisely a shop was.

“We do well enough without them. They must be full of people who are strangers to you. Imagine living with people you don’t know, people who might wish you harm. It must be awful stressful.”

“At least in an Irish Rath you’re among family and friends. You will seldom see a face you do not know.”

“But that’s one of the good things about cities,” said Naim, “you can get away from your relatives, they are always quarrelling, there’s feuds between uncles about who left money to who and who has not got a share of this or that. In a city you can sit among friends or strangers, when you want to, at your choice and not be cheek and jowl with the same people day after day.”

“I can’t imagine,” said Kieran, “how that works, all those strangers living with each other. How can people from different tribes or clans live together? What stops them fighting? You will always need a lord or king in charge with an army to keep the peace.”

“It may be difficult for you to imagine,” said Aalim, “but there are no clans in Andalusia.”

“The divisions among us are those of religion. The Emir’s father decreed that all religions would live in peace and tolerate each other. He was not in favour of forced conversions.”

“The words of the Quran spell out exactly how we must treat strangers and people of the book.”

“ We live in peace because each allows the other to think different ideas without taking offence.”

“Now there’s a thing we do not have in Ireland, people with different religious ideas,” said Fergal.

“I wonder what these Frankish towns will be like,” said Kieran?

“How do these Franks treat each other in their own country, I wonder” said Aalim?

“Naim and Khubayb have only met them as enemies.”

“Well met is not quite what I would call it,” said Naim. “It was a siege and we shouted at each other a lot. Had we met the conversation would have been conducted with swords.”

The talk faded away and the hush of the water against the hull became more pronounced in the silence of voices. They stayed on deck to watch the stars come out and eventually retired for the night.

By noon the following day the seas had risen and the stubby ship was rolling over a sea of long swells.

Aymaan and Tawfiq were on deck telling who would listen that they had not been affected by the sea djinns.

“Maybe they don’t live in this part of the seas,” said Nathan,

“Maybe the sea djinns only live in the waters between Ireland and Spain.”

The discussion on sea Djinns and their preferred waters of residence continues without any conclusion for a while. When it faltered Nathan pointed out that this after all was their second voyage, maybe they were getting stronger. This explanation was immediately popular.

It was their personal strength at resisting the Djinns that conferred their newfound immunity from hovering over the rails of the ship being ignominiously sick.

The captain came to the bow to check up on the condition of his passengers accompanied by Fergal and Khubayb.

“You are all well, gentlemen.”

Aymaan and Tawfiq were effusive in their protestations on how perfectly well they were. They said emphatically how much better they were than when they had been on land and how much the life at sea appealed to them.

The captain raised his eyebrows looking at Aalim for an explanation of these protested sentiments. Aalim conveyed to the captain that these two lads had been severely affected by Djinns, evil spirits on their previous voyage. On that occasion the djinns seemed to prefer them to others on board he said, winking.

The captain tried to conceal his puzzlement. Whatever a djinn was it was a matter best left to these strange passengers to sort out.

It troubled Khubayb that they were once again far from land.

“How do you know where the land is,” he asked the captain.

“Oh I don’t” said the captain. “All I know is this. When we left Dublin the wind was from the west. It hasn’t changed, so I am sailing on a line south and slightly east.”

“There are two things we don’t want to see in this trip and we want to see them from a distance. We don’t want to see the Isles of Scillies, and we don’t want to see Ushant.”

Aalim recalled Aiden’s similar remark on the voyage from Spain. It must be a common refrain of sailors in these seas he thought. Whatever Ushant and the Scillies were they had some terrors for sailors he didn’t want to have realised while he and his companions were present.

His attention returned to the captain.

The Captain continued, “I can tell the speed we are going. I might see Saint David’s head, that’s a landmark on the Welsh coast. To be kept well away from.”

“You understand we have nothing to fear from the sea. It’s the land we have to worry about, bumping into any part of it. I want to see Lands End from well off and then I can run to starboard and keep my distance from the Frankish coast. Then I want to see the white cliffs of Dover. Again at a distance. At that time I will veer a bit to Port and look towards the Frankish coast.”

“I have been doing this for 20 years and apart from sitting around in fogs for a few days it’s been good enough to get us there and back.”

Nathan tried to engage a few of the sailors in conversation but they seemed altogether busy and standoffish.

The day wore on with the strong winds rolling the stubby ship over the rollers, in a motion that finally got to Nathan. The sea djinns got to him much to the delight of Aymaan and Tawfiq. By evening the Captain passed by again with the good news that he was sure that St David's head was well past them but with the disturbing information that they would be passing Lands End in the late dusk about 10 O' clock in the evening.

"But God be thanked," he said. "The clouds are lifting. We will have the late sun well out in the west and a clear sight of the foam on the lands edge."

It was as he said a perfect passage.

The Saxon shore shone green and certain in the late evening light and the winds bore them round the edge of England on a sweeping curve as the rollers glided in from the Atlantic. They turned up the channel, now making good speed as the west wind fully filled the large sail.

The captain watched the whole manoeuvre with a small smile of satisfaction on his face.

"We have fair sailing," he said to Aalim, "now if we can keep to the centre of this wide channel we have a chance of making land the day after tomorrow."

By morning the white cliffs reflected the noon sun and the cold of the seawater. It was noticeable that the Captain prowled the rail on the port side of the ship with keen attention. Two men were perched keen eyed on the bowsprit.

"Look sharp," called the Captain, "keen eyes lads keen eyes or we will be hauling this yoke off a mud bank."

They sailed into the rest of the day, the white edges of England faded on their left to be replaced in prominence by the hills of France. The ship edged to the right. The sailors leaned over the rail looking into the haze for the foam of the shore.

“What exactly are they looking for,” asked Nathan?

“There are looking out for two large white wooden poles,” said the Captain. “They are quite tall. When you come from this direction you see them as distinct, about three hand spans apart.”

“The trick is to get the ship to the point where the two poles are in line. When that happens you turn the ship along the line drawn out to you by the alignment of the poles. Do that well and you can run along the line drawn by the poles safe and direct into the mouth of the river.”

“From then on we can sail in the middle of the river.”

As if by a conjuring trick the two poles appeared small at first in the flat landscape then larger and larger as they grew nearer.

“It is an interesting craft sailing,” said Khubayb.

“A bit too much dependent on the vagaries of wind and tide,” said Nathan. “You’re not master of your fate very often.”

The two poles fused into one and the bow of the ship turned sharply towards them.

After a deal of shouting and adjustment of the rudder they started the voyage between the riverbanks.

In the morning the ship wove its way between the banks of a low green country. Houses all wooden with deep thatched roof were occasionally seen along the banks. A few small boats hove to the shore as they passed.

Fields of green unripe wheat and oats reached down to the water's edge intermingled with stands of large trees their leaves mantled with the bright greenness of the spring. Other trees already had the sombre green of early summer.

Aalim, Aymaan, Khubayb Naim and Tawfiq took the opportunity to change into their monkish finery. The grey raw woollen cloaks had been expertly fitted at Clonmacnois.

It had not seemed to matter in Ireland that they wore the uniforms of the Emir but here the insignia of Andalusia might mean something to a retired veteran or anyone who knew the enemies of the Kingdom on the far side of the Pyrenees.

“You look grand,” said Fergal, “truly holy men indeed.”

“We could have passed you off as slaves but two monks with a troop of slaves as big and fit as you lot would have raised questions.”

“Slaves,” said Khubayb, “slaves, we could not pass as slaves surely. Is there not something about our manner and bearing that would whatever our situation say we are soldiers.”

Fergal pondered at this.

“You're right you would have been seen as haughty insolent slaves indeed but for now you are Irish monks, and the vocation of your life is piety and the saving of soul's.”

“There have been a few saints that were haughty and overbearing so I am sure that will cause no remarks among the Saxons.”

“I think it will be a big help if we put your swords away. We will wrap them up in bundles for a few days. The Franks only permit nobility to carry swords in public and soldiers are kept to their military camps.”

“I think we will be safe in the port.”

“And what,” said Khubayb, “if some insolent fool offers to fight us, we will be helpless.”

“Well you will have to be true monks and turn the other cheek,” said Fergal.

“I think,” said Khubayb “a few small daggers will give us more comfort than the piety of monks.”

“Fair enough,” said Fergal, “but see if you can avoid killing anybody. You will wind up giving Irish monks a reputation I doubt any will be able to live up to.”

Dorestad hove into view in the late afternoon. The town that confronted the travellers was a brawling catastrophe that somehow from the confusion had brought trade and prosperity to the northern part of the Frankish Kingdom.

It was dominated by one-story buildings that stretched along the shore for about the best part of a mile. They landed from the ship without incident and after paying the Captain Aalim looking thoroughly monkish led his pious troop into the streets of Dorestad.

The houses turned out not to be the residences of ordinary Franks but hostels for traders. Behind the hostels were large warehouses with stacks of barrels, bundles and piles of sundry goods of all descriptions from all parts of the world. The walls were made of rough sawn timber and coloured with the soot of years of smoky candles and oily lamps.

The travellers went to the nearest hostel adjacent to the ships berth.

A florid faced man sweating profusely and with an air of constant business explained to them in Latin that they would have to stay in the hostel for three days until the taxman called to assess their goods.

A boy showed them to their room. It was not entirely unlike the guest house at Clonmacnois if you avoided the writings on the wall recommending women of dubious virtue and the smell of beer that hung in the air like sour vinegar.

They clambered into bed. The discussion in the evening again returned to towns. Kieran lamenting that if this was what a town was it was little different from a monastery without the refinements of religious dedication and the hum of industry.

Nathan patiently explaining that this was not a town or anything like it. It was obviously a large holding pen for merchants, an emporia for those who didn't live there, but were on their way to some other place.

The hostel was overrun with boys. Dragging tureens of water, serving meals at tables, there were boys everywhere, running errant's for the merchants, cleaning dishes, feeding horses.

The first night was a nightmare of fleas, drunk men and merchants huddled at tables bartering and haggling.

They were from anywhere that anyone could think of, Frankish sellers of wool, Frisian purveyors of fish in barrels, sellers of linen, hawkers of metals, lead and tin and dye merchants, men guarding cloth and small rugs from Constantinople, furs from Regensburg and coats of mail from Mainz.

Every night there was an uproar as the horde of boys employed for the purpose went around snuffing candles and trimming wicks and keeping a constant guard against sleeping men, lit candles and a disastrous fire.

The tax they were going to wait three days to pay was collected by a bumptious official who came bellowing in on the first day shouting to the assembled company, who is new in Frisian, German, Frankish, Latin, and Saxon.

“Who is new who is new?”

He was accompanied by a motley collection of four men drably dressed in what might be a uniform of officialdom.

Aalim raised his hand and the florid man beckoned. “Come with me,” he gestured to Aalim.

They went out to the warehouse where Aalim and Nathan’s goods were piled in a square of the warehouse surrounded with a red chalk circle marked on the rough timber floor.

“Sirs,” said the florid man, “what goods do you have?”

“Books,” said Nathan.

“Books, more Irish books. You don’t have an Irish accent,” said the man looking at Nathan.

“Well he does but he’s from the far western part of Ireland,” said Fergal. “Out west where they haven’t started to travel yet.”

“Or talk properly for that matter,” said Kieran.

The florid man digested this intelligence slowly.

“Well,” he said, “be that as it may, the Irish book trade and Monks have proved a bit of a problem around here.”

“I would be astonished if my countrymen caused trouble,” said Fergal, “we are religious men, not ones to cause problems.”

Nathan looking as monkish as he could trying to catch Fergal’s eye. The florid man might be fishing for a bribe.

“No it’s not any disrespect” said the florid man, “it’s the matter of value. Half the time they tell me the books have no value and half the time they say they are giving them away and the other half of the time they say they are priceless.”

A tale of three halves, thought Aalim.

“They must have some value otherwise,” went on the florid faced man, “they would not be bringing them with them. If they were worthless they would leave them at home.”

“Maybe they just want to read their holy books for their daily prayers while they are travelling,” suggested Aalim in yet another Latin accent.

“Be that as it may I am a busy man and I cannot spare the time to joust words with Monks. I decided some time back that I would treat them as any other product.”

“Let us weigh them. The tax is ten per cent. The value is the same as woad. It’s such a small amount I am sure you can afford to pay. If you gentlemen would like to get you goods out I will put them on my scales.”

They had a number of Fergal’s Psalters, a collection of Aalim’s books and some of his scrolls.

Nathan thought he might broach some argument on the outrageous idea that books could be weighed like wheat but thought the better of it. They paid the tax.

They sat that evening in the front hall of the hostel and watched the merriment of the merchants as they drank beer and wine and told tales of trades they had made in dangerous places

An old man and one of his retainers came by and sat at their table.

“You’re are not from round here,” he said to Fergal. “Not with those funny clothes.”

“No and we are not really merchants either,” said Fergal in Latin. “We are monks selling books and preaching the word of the lord to the heathen Germans in Saxony.”

“Well good luck to you on that,” said the Englishman. “Selling books to the illiterate now there’s a challenge.”

“I sell woad myself, to men of London such as wants to dye their clothes blue. It’s a good trade when it is not disrupted.”

“How is trade disrupted,” asked Aalim, “pirates or war?”

“No not that, there’s little reason for Charlemagne to fight wars with the likes of us and it’s a short distance to England and pirates can be dealt to by them that has the power on either shore.”

“No it’s royalty and their bloody marriage problems.”

“Offa, that’s our King offered the hand of one of his daughters to a son of Charlemagne’s in marriage, all very well and good, cement relations between the kingdoms and all that.”

“But did it do that. Make us happy little trade partners, no, Charlemagne begged off. Offa got huffy and there was a trade boycott for a while. Bloody Royalty you never know what they are going to do to honest trade.”

“Still that said things are better now. I hear tell there’s even a possibility that English merchants will not have to pay tax going through here soon.”

“How is that,” asked Fergal, “is Charlemagne sorry for the row.”

“No not at all. Charlemagne is seldom sorry for anything.”

“It seems someone in the upper ranks has hit on the notion of a three year lump sum being paid by Offa and us hard working merchants will not be involved in the matter of one kingdom extracting money from the other. For three years anyway.”

“That sounds unusually sensible,” said Fergal.

Fergal went out in the afternoon of the third day to see what way they would get to Hegeby.

“It was an education,” he told them on his return.

“I went around all the hostels and it appears we can get passage to Bremerhaven and then to Hegeby, in something they call the wooden pig. The other alternative is to buy horses and set out on these strange roads ourselves. There is quite a troop of us and that might bring us to the attention of people who might not like us.”

“What on earth is a wooden pig,” asked Nathan.

“I asked and was told that it is a large timbered covered wagon pulled by six large oxen, a bit like a fort on wheels. It will take us from here to Hegeby in nine days.”

“Well what’s it to be lads,” asked Fergal, “a fresh air journey as cavalry or a few days as tourists in a fine wagon?”

“I think travelling as a mounted squadron of monks might attract unwelcome attention. We could get killed just for the horses, and speaking for myself I have felt a lot more vulnerable of late since taking up the robes of a harmless monk,” said Nathan.

“If we go by the wagon the driver is knows the roads and we are anonymous and unseen.”

“Master,” said Khubayb, “are we violating our Muslim faith by riding in this wagon of the pigs”

“I think not,” said Fergal; “it’s called the wooden pig because of its unsurpassed ugliness.”

“The decision is made by circumstances,” said Aalim,. “It’s the pig or nothing.”

“I will go and make the arrangements,” said Fergal.

Nathan, Aalim and Fergal spent a pleasant afternoon at the house of the Jewish merchant guild.

They sat in a cheery garden, bees humming along the flowers, a clean tablecloth on the table as small cakes and cool glasses of pear juice were placed in front of them.

“A breath of civilisation gentlemen,” said Aalim.

The introductions were made and the merchants Jacob and Aaron proceeded to tell them a little of life in Dorestad. Trade was good they said. This was an ideal spot to be part of the trade coming down the Rhine and the Danube and from the western areas of Northern France.

Aalim explained their quest.

Aaron had met a few traders who had made the journey to Ratisbon and down the Danube to Chaeronea on the Crimea and met traders from Byzantine and Khazar. They had not heard of the proposed change of religion of the King of Khazar.

“The Khazars are good traders and keep their bargains,” said Aaron.

“We are on our way to Hegeby. We have been advised to take the waggon, the wooden pig. Is there any other way. Are there armed caravans to Hegeby,” asked Nathan.

“Well,” said Jacob, “you would be advised to take the waggon. You could go by sea to a port on the west of Jutland. Then cross the territory of the King of Denmark to reach Hegeby. I don’t think that’s advisable. The King threatened to take over Francia some time ago. It hasn’t helped trade. There are no convoys with armed escorts. You will be safe in the waggon. The war that Charlemagne has waged against the Saxons over the last twenty years has been of unsurpassed ferocity. No one will dare to attack the King’s waggon. It carries his instructions to the Bishop of Hamburg so it is said.”

“If you are unsuccessful at Hegeby you can go back to the safety of Hamburg.”

“We have already come to that conclusion,” said Nathan. “The wagon is the best bet.”

“The road the Hegeby is quiet,” continued Jacob, “but the Saxons are still in a sullen mood. It’s not just that they have been defeated by Charlemagne but it is also his heavy enforcement of the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity.”

“Why is he insisting on conversion,” asked Aalim? “Is it really necessary?”

“I believe Charlemagne thinks the truculence of the Saxons and their constant rebellion stems from their pagan religion. He insists that the Saxons bow the knee and head. There have been some fearful reprisals for not keeping the fast of lent,” said Aaron.

“Every Saxon must become a Christian or be sold into slavery or die. He has put the churches in military stockades and made the Saxons come in for worship through ranks of armed soldiers. I think his attitude to the Saxons changed to a policy of utter subjection when he was forced to abandon his siege of Saragossa and return to quell an invasion of the Rhine lands by the Saxons. The humiliation was great. The war against Andalusia is the only one he has ever lost and he blames them for the loss of Spain. You might be grateful to them.”

“There is peace in the northern regions at the moment. I suspect the Saxons will find civilisation hard to resist when it’s overlaid in a few generations with the power of the church and the fates of their souls.”

“As for us Jews well we are tolerated for our trade, tolerated for our abilities but not welcomed as equals.”

They parted after some pleasant talk and more of the cold pear juice.

Aaron and Jacob wished them pleasant journeys and good trade.

The next morning they gathered in front of the hostel with their bundles of goods and belongings in the bright sunlight. The Pig was coming and they were on the road again.

They said a tearful farewell to Kieran who was going to an Irish monastery at Lieges. Aalim was sad to see him leave.

He had been an interesting man, young, pious, and hoping to wean the souls of the Frankish heathens to the Irish faith.

Fergal was especially sorry he was going.

“You’re leaving me among these lads who speak the most rudimentary Irish. I will be starved for wit and wonder,” he said.

“Oh you’ll cope I’m sure you’ll cope,” said Kieran. “The worry will be if you come back to Ireland and can’t face a good feed of roast pork with lashings of crackling.”

“Get away with you. Make sure you stay holy,” said Fergal.

“Most of the monks are taking up with these Frankish floosies and I am sure it is distracting their prayers.”

“Oh I will be good,” said Kieran shaking each man’s hand and taking his leave.

The anticipation of the beginning of their long journey hung in the air and the thought that they were leaving a place of little charm and thankfully would not see it again added a joy to the day.

A large ugly wagon pulled in front of them and their spirits sank immediately. Six stout oxen pulled it with two drivers perched up on the front of a big box with slits in the sides and a door at the back.

“Gentlemen gentlemen,” said the driver, “welcome to your world for the next days.”

The driver’s voice contained the glee of a man who knew their future and knew it from the fate of those who had made the journey before.

He sat with his companion high up in the front of the wooden box.

Khubayb walked around the contraption shaking his head. “What sort of monstrosity is this?”

The cart lacked grace of any kind, each piece of its construction an exercise in brutality. The driver stepped down a series of footholds cut into the front of the cart.

“Well,” he said, “we might as well be underway. We are bound together for the next few days and I hope we will find agreement and harmony. You look a strange lot but no matter, we are bound for Hegeby come hell or high water. You will fit in there. It’s a place that has as strange a folk as are anywhere to be found.”

He opened a rudimentary door and invited them to climb in.

“We carry the King’s matters,” he said, “so we will not be disturbed by robbers, bandits or pagans.”

They took their seats among the six Irish “Monks.” It occurred to Fergal that it was up to him the only real monk present to make sure his companions behaved somewhat like Monks might be expected to. The fact that none of them were even Christian might make that a challenge.

In some ways it might be advantageous if they went beyond Hegeby. Pagans were probably more used people in strange habits with odd practices.

Aalim and the companions the last of them entered the gloomy cart and took their seats.

Two other travellers joined them. Perfunctory introductions were made. They were not forthcoming with any talk or explanation. Saxons were it seemed taciturn to a fault.

They set out through a flat land. Through the slits of the wagon could see a forest of endless trees with low scrub at its base. It was green and lush and every now and then a small hamlet would appear in the rolling forest with gardens flowers and small fields surrounding it.

The road was dry and sound but had a strange rumbling noise as the wheels rolled across it.

The two strangers revealed themselves over the course of the first day. They were Saxons returning to the banks of the river Elbe where they had lands.

They had come to Dorestad to sell wool and were returning with the proceeds to begin again the season of the summer. Their Latin was little and rudimentary and their Saxon chatter made no sense to any of the company.

“Have you come this way before,” asked Aalim in simple Latin?

It seemed they had. For their conversation Aalim got some idea of what Saxony actually was. A large sprawling land between rivers, the Ems the Eider and the Elbe. Hegeby was on the far northern corner on the edge of a Saxon province called Albingia.

They had left Andalusia with a map showing lines and coloured portions showing a few names. Now the reality slowly unfolded as the days went by.

He had to admit that if he was asked to draw a map of where they had been he would be unable to give much of a scale of distances.

The rumbling noise of the road was because it had been made with fallen trees and that the small rocks and stones laid over this base. They were not roman roads deep, solid built to last until the end of time. The Irish roads made solely of wood had been better.

The noise was the least of their troubles. Every jolt or shock as the wheels took another grip caused the cart to jump and rock. It was like being tossed around like stones in a barrel. They hung on to their perches on the benches by means of rope strops hanging from the ceiling. It was painful and excruciating.

In the beginning it seemed that they would not be able to bear it. After about four hours the jostling, thumping and rattling stopped.

The back door opened and they stepped put into the courtyard of a substantial house set among smaller houses in a small hamlet.

The yard was paved with rough cobbling. Tables were set out at the front of the house and the driver waved at them to take a seat and enjoy a meal.

Two women came from the house and commenced talking at them in Saxon or some language like it.

There was a great deal of shrugging of the shoulders.

The driver said in Latin, “There’s only one choice so I will ask them to feed you as best they can. It’s cheap.”

Large chunks of black hard bread was followed by two tureens of soup and plates of dried fish and pots of butter.

They ate with gusto. “Be careful,” said Aalim, “don’t eat too much. That cart will shake the innards out of you and your chances of getting the driver to stop while you throw up don’t strike me as good. It will be worse than the Djinn’s.”

Before long they were back in the cart hanging on to the rope with the small shafts of sunlight filtering through the slits in the side of the wagon showing motes of dust in the air.

The jolting was constant and continual. There was no escape from it, no posture, no manner of sitting or lying that eased the throb and eternity of it. They stopped again near evening and were again hustled out into a courtyard for a meal that differed little from the last one. Then in no time they were off again.

The cart rolled on through the flat land in the dwindling twilight until late in the evening it stopped again in a small hamlet in front of a large house.

“Out, out” said the driver. “You will get a bed here for the night but I warn you we will be leaving at first light.”

They stumbled into a barn with benches and pallises filled with straw and grains and pulled rough linen and woollen blankets over them thankful and grateful that the world had stopped swaying, rolling, gyrating up and down.

Sleep came fast and quick. Before any time seemed to have passed the tyrant driver was shouting through the door. "Rise gentlemen rise and let's get on our way."

Fergal was the first to stumble out into the light,

The tables in front of the house had figures in the half-light laying out large wooden bowls with an oaten porridge steaming in the growing light. A creamy milk arrived foaming in wooden jugs. All of them wandered as men still sleeping to the table and ate the porridge.

Then like prisoners or slaves they walked over to the wagon and boarded their torture chamber for another day on the rack of shaking and thumping.

After three days the journey speeded up when large horses replaced the oxen.

The stops for meals were all of sameness and the countryside continued to be a rolling sea of forest speckled with small holdings of land. At the end of the fourth day just before they pushed the wagon onto a large ferry to cross a large river they looked out to a clearing with corpses hanging from low trees.

They were in an advanced state of decay. It took an age of questions to their fellow Saxon passengers in poor Latin to establish that they had been killed for not adhering to the Lenten fast. Fergal found the words of Aaron at Dorestad grimly confirmed. The conversion of Charlemagne was not a conversion of persuasion but the hard doctrine of the sword.

There was a sober silence for some time.

It brought home to the Andalusians the reality that they were in Charlemagne's domains and the King of the Franks had the power of life and death over them.

On the sixth day after the second change of horses they crossed a wide river, the Elbe said their Saxon fellow travellers.

The Saxons left that day and they had the wagon to themselves.

During the indeterminable swaying they had evolved a pattern of travel. After about an hour into the day's travail they took to reciting poetry and stories and in Fergal's case reciting the psalms. Aalim and Nathan would say the words in Latin and Fergal would sing the line in a low cantor.

Finally after days that stretched interminably the cart rolled to a stop. The driver rapped on the door and opened it to let the sunlight stream into the smelly and gloomy interior.

"I am leaving you at the trading hostel of the Franks," said the driver.

"It is the only place in this town where you are will have the benefit of Frankish civilisation.

The rest of these people," he said spitting hard and stoically, "are savages."

Aalim looked over the crude settlement, which clung to the bank of a small river and understood they had at last come to the end of the civilised world.

From here, if a voyage was possible to the land of the Khazars, they and their fortunes would be in the hands of barbarians.

The Viking King

Chapter 9

The travellers entered the hostel of the Frankish traders.

“Welcome, welcome good travellers and traders,” said a large man striding forward to meet them with an ample girth and a pale face.

“My name is Horst, under this roof we look after the merchants of Francia.”

“Out there,” he said waving his arm at the rain drenched collection of warehouses and hostels along the small river, “are the houses of the uncivilised.”

Aalim raised an eyebrow. No matter where you went people needed to have someone who they considered lesser in refinement than themselves. It was relative he reflected. Everywhere there were different ideas on who was civilised and who was not. Everyone clung to a grasping sense of betterment that made them consider themselves better than others.

“Enter travellers,” said Horst again, “you may enjoy our hospitality until your trading is finished and you have secured all the success you desire and the gold your goods deserve.”

It seemed a lustrous welcome to a shabby establishment. They were in a large roomed building sheathed by rough adzed timber and covered in a thatched roof.

It differed little from the hostel at Dorestad. Aalim yearned for the tawny sunlit stone of Andalusia.

“So what may I ask are your tradings gentlemen.”

“Well Horst,” said Nathan, rolling the strange name around on his tongue to get the measure of it and making an attempt to establish a camaraderie with their host, “we are traders in books.”

Horst looked at them questioning. “I have seen a book but never met anyone who traded in them,” he said

“Books,” he said eyeing Naim, Aymaan, Khubayb, and Tawfiq.

In his eyes you could see the question why were young fit men in this strange garb were needed to sell such harmless things as books.

“They must be valuable things book,” he observed, “I have never “read” one and never met any one who did. You need a magic wisdom to use them.”

“Well yes,” said Aalim, “you read them, page by page, line by line, word by word and letter by letter.”

“We will show you a book” said Fergal, “in good time, you will perhaps find the minds of other men set out on a page of interest.”

Horst, thought Nathan, seemed to be a man content to do forever what he did now. Manage this hostel and keep his head on his shoulders for the rest of his days. For that no book was necessary.

“Where are you going after you leave Hegeby,” asked Horst?

“We are seeking passage to Saryia Ladoga and from there to Atil” said Aalim.

“Atil,” said Horst, “Atil,” he repeated.

“Have you any idea how far away Atil is,” he asked in a sort of falsetto that seemed to indicate that the conversation had entered the realms of fantasy.

“Well not entirely” said Nathan, “but we understand that it is quite a distance.”

“Quite a distance,” said Horst, “Quite a distance, that’s one way of putting it, I can tell you this. It is beyond all thought of distance. It is many many days of travel.”

“Let me see, given a fair wind it is eight days from here to Saryia Ladoga. From Saryia Ladoga down the great river, I have heard stories that it is over a month. Only the Varangians trade the great river to Atil, I doubt others would have the courage for it.”

The innkeeper looked wistful as if dreaming of the riches on the great river and resentful that since he was not Varangian he could have no part in it.

Nathan understood why Horst was a question box.

It behoved people like Horst to know things. What was being traded? Where was a place where prices were better and who would pay them. The need to know such matters made him at first meeting a man with questions, which tumbled out of him.

“Only Varangian cross the Baltic to Starya Ladoga. The Baltic is their sea. The rivers of Russia their rivers. All of what we know about the strange people in the forests beyond the eastern shore comes from the Varangians.”

“If you want to go down the great river you will have to talk to them.”

“Do you think they would be willing to take us,” asked Aalim?

“I don’t know,” said Horst. “They are barbarians. Talking to them is different to talking to men such as yourselves from the civilised world.”

Aalim raised his eyebrow again but said nothing.

“They are a very individual kind of people,” said Horst. “When they leave the lands of the north they are a law unto themselves. Each one of them holds little obligation to their fellows except what is agreed amongst them. They respect no nation or King other than their own.”

“That said they keep a bargain and they trade well. They do love gold. If they agree to take you they will keep their bargain.”

Aalim hoped their voyage across the sea from Ireland and across the rivers of Saxony had not been fruitless. The risk they had shouldered leaving Clonmacnois had been unspoken among them since they left Ireland. The enterprise still hinged on the chance that the Varangians would help them down the great river. If they failed to get passage at Hegeby there would be no other choice but to return. It was too late in the year to travel to Ratisbon and seek passage down the Danube.

By the time they got to the mouth of the Volga the King of Khazar would have made his decision and the world would be different from that day on.

Failure meant they would have to take a miserable shaking trip back across Saxony in the wooden pig. They would stay in Dorestad again but this time with the taste of failure in their mouths. They would brave the Irish Sea with the regret of a deed not accomplished.

Retrace their steps across the middle of Ireland to the Shannon and take the ship back to Porto and travel back to Cordoba across the plains of Iberia. The news Aalim would bring to the Emir would be interesting and valued but not the answer to the question that the Emir had sent Aalim and his escort to this far distant place to get.

Was it possible to trade across the northern lands and were the Varangians a people who would do this in conjunction with the Emirate of Andalusia.

Their failure would mean that the Emir would have to remain content with the trade in books and hounds he had with the Irish at Galway and the Shannon.

If they succeeded the riches of the East might in the years to come pour across the northern lands to Andalusia.

They stood in the hostel of Horst with the question of success or failure unanswered.

Addressing Horst carefully Aalim asked, “how do we go about talking to the Varangians, do they speak Latin.”

“No,” said Horst, “they have no language but their own.”

“It is hard to do business with people when all you can do gesticulate at them,” said Fergal.

“It can and has been done often enough but I agree it is difficult,” said Horst.

“But you are in luck,” he said. “For the past few years the Varangians have been buying or raiding slaves who speak Latin and Greek. Where they are getting such people I do not know. One thing is for sure these learned slaves are not coming from the Slavs or the Wends or the Saxons.”

“Anyway the Varangians are not slow to spot an opportunity and have made these new captives into translators and business managers of a sort. It’s been interesting to see how much trade has improved since.”

“You see,” said Horst in a confidential tone of voice, “Varangians sometimes don’t bother to trade. “

“They land their ships in rivers and villages and take what they want, slaves gold, whatever they can grab.”

“They raid and pillage with a savagery that frightens even the Saxons. That kind of trade doesn’t involve a lot of talk on their part.”

“Well if they are just pirate raiders,” asked Fergal, “Why do they bother running this port. Why haven’t they raided the place and taken all they want for nothing.”

“Well that’s the other side of the story,” said Horst.

“More often than not they trade. It’s a better option for the long term. You see if you turn up here and raid the place all that happens is the that the people of Hegeby will build walls and get more and better allies to fight your thievery next time. You get one free parcels of goods but no more.”

“The Varangians could conquer the town and occupy it permanently with a garrison. But that’s expensive and time consuming. You have to leave valuable men behind to keep the inhabitants down and make them work at their crafts and lands. And they are sailors not soldiers.”

“But if you trade well you will be welcome back next time. It might not look it but this is a valuable town.”

Aalim again raising his eyebrow but strove to get his scepticism under control.

“And why is that,” he asked.

“It’s close to the border of the Franks so it is a trading post for their goods. “

“Traders from Staryia Ladoga, from Ventspils from Danzig, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Malmo or Visby come to here. Goods can cross a portage up the river to the North Sea. From there it is an easy voyage to Dorestad, London, the eastern coast of Jutland and who knows beyond that.”

Horst had a habit of repeating himself in different words as though rolling the thought around in his mind would prolong the sensation of astonishment at having the idea in the first place.

“So how do we find a ship that is going to Starya Ladoga,” asked Nathan?

“Well there is nobody in charge of Hegeby that would know who comes and goes, that’s a thing kept to themselves. Your best chance is to go from ship to ship. At some stage you might meet a translator or a slave who knows Latin. I remember a few months ago a young man was from the Orn Svard”

“What’s that in Latin,” asked Fergal, “just out of curiosity.”

“Eagles sword,” said Horst. “Orn Svard,” he said slowly, “I understand they have a young man who speaks Latin and can talk for the captain.”

“We will search for this boat in the morning,” said Aalim, “the day is spent and so are we.”

After their ordeal in the pig they spent a luxurious night where the hay mattresses were like the pillows of paradise and the prospect of a day ahead without the swinging and torment of the wooden pig blessed the morning.

They woke to the usual meal of porridge and milk and dark bread.

Aymaan and Khubayb fell to a discussion of the glories of sweet pastries drenched in honey and almond flakes and the pleasures of warm milk and the prospect of a visit to the baths in the mid morning.

“Gentlemen” said Fergal. “Enough of nostalgia. The glories of civilisation are far from here. A bit of rough living will be good for your souls. Remember you’re monks ”

After prayers Nathan, Fergal and Aalim set out on the quest for a passage to the great river.

“The year is passing quickly,” said Nathan; “we had better get passage before the cold sets in.”

“We have still have five weeks to get to the Eastern Gate before the first moon of autumn when this decision is to be made.”

The day was overcast and cold to all but Fergal. They made their way down a mud-rimmed street with wooden houses and axe-hewn fences with small gardens in the front of them. There were some signs of industry in dug gardens flowers and straggly hedges.

The waterfront was large and chaotic. It seemed to stretch around a river bend out of sight. The hillsides were strewn with small wooden houses.

Large ships the like of which they had never seen before were pulled up to rough planked jetties. They were the same at each end with a high sweeping dragonhead far over the prow with a menacing face and sharp teeth. There were wide and lay shallow in the water.

They went to the first ship and called to a man on board in Latin “where is the Orn Svard.”

He plainly did not understand Latin but after Nathan reported the request slowly he waved his arm down the river and said something they did not understand.

“Well at least,” said Fergal, “we have a direction.”

They set out down the river past another four or five ships and walking a little way down one of the small jetties to a ship moored along side again asked the question of a man on the deck of the ship. They were getting used to the slim ships with the dragons head at the prow.

The sailor nodded that he understood the name of the ship they were looking for and walked down the deck towards them, He beckoned them to follow him and walked past two more small jetty's and pointed at a larger vessel than the rest moored by yet another small jetty.

They tendered their thanks and walked to the side of the ship. Three men were leaning over the ships rail.

“Hello” said Nathan in Latin “is there someone aboard who speaks Latin”

One of the trio raised his arm, nodded, and walked to the square structure in the middle of the ship. Presently he came back with a tall man with longish red hair.

“Hello” he said in polished Latin, “who am I talking to.”

“We are travellers,” said Nathan, “and wish to pay for passage for ourselves and our escort to Starya Ladoga and from there to Atil.”

“Indeed,” said the man, “that’s a fair distance. I can’t speak for the captain and it’s a matter you will need to discuss with him. We sail for Visby and Starya Ladoga and points east in the next few days.”

He stepped down from the ship onto the jetty.

Fergal spoke when he came closer. “You have a bit of a westerly touch to your Latin,” he said in Irish.

The stranger startled visibly.

“It is a while since I heard my native tongue,” he said in Irish, tears glistening at the edge of his eyes.”

He stepped forward and took Fergal in his arms and clasped him to his chest. Stepping back he said “my name is Rory.”

“You’re a long way from home yourselves,” said Rory

“We are indeed and weary for that I must say. Let me introduce ourselves,” said Fergal; “this is Aalim a scholar and librarian from the city of Cordoba in Andalusia.”

Aalim stepped forward and grasped Rory’s hand.

“Greetings,” he said in Irish. Rory smiled, tears at the edges of his eyes.

“And this is Nathan a trader from the city of Salamanca in the realm of the Emir of Andalusia.” Nathan also greeted him in Irish.

Rory was visibly marvelling at the fact he was speaking in Irish and being addressed in the same language by people who were plainly not Irish but who were taking the trouble to speak in Irish for his benefit.

“And yourself,” asked Rory of Fergal.

“I am Fergal from Clonmacnois in the province of Connaught and the Kingdom of Hymane.”

“I am an O’Malley” said Rory, “from Tir Connell and the monastery of Inishmurray. I was out walking one evening and raiders took me prisoner.”

“I was taken to Jutland and served there as a translator and scribe for the Danish King. He sold me to the king of Visby, who sends me on these trading voyages. I have been in the employ of the captain of this ship for nearly four years.”

“I have Latin and Greek a bit of Hebrew as would any Irish monk and of course I speak Varangian and I have learnt some Khazarian and Saxon”

“They treat me well but there is little said of allowing me to return to my people. I have been in the Baltic Sea, raiding the coast of the Slav lands for slaves for sale in Atil.”

“Tell me I have only heard rumours of what has happened since I was taken. Has Ireland been devastated by the Northman.

“Holy Ireland is as it has always been,” said Fergal, “the monks are still praying and the chieftains are still fighting.”

“We were at the Teltain games and had a grand time. The women were as fair as ever the musicians as quick with their fingers and the charioteers as bold as ever was. The weather has been good and the crops reliable.”

“We have heard of three large raids, the one at Inishmurray where you were taken, at Rathlin Island above Dal Riada and in the Saxon lands where Aiden went at Lindisfarne.”

“There have been none since. Please God it was a passing thing.”

“That’s a great relief,” said Rory. “I imagined that what had happened to me was happening in far more places. I have seen what the Varangians can do to a quiet village, the slaughter and the horror and the weeping and anguish.”

“I had visions of holy Ireland, the land of constant prayers, devastated. The books, the prayers, the songs all silent and the ruins monuments to who we once were.”

“Lord what I would not give to walk on Inishmurray once again and raise my voice in matins among the men of my monastery. But listen I am holding things up let me bring the Captain to you. Stay here”

He stepped on board the ship and went into the cabin like affair in the centre.

“The mystery of the savage men who raided Rathlin Island and Inishmurray is solved,” said Fergal to Aalim.

“It was these people and we are standing far from home beside their ship seeking passage with them.”

Aalim felt a small chill of fear. They had left civilisation behind and about to put their fate into the hands of not just strangers but fearsome sea raiders.

Rory returned with a fair-haired giant of a man wearing a red tunic and with a sword hanging at his side. He spoke in a ringing language that Rory translated

“Greetings men,” he said, “I am Hakan of the traders of Gotland and the Kingdom of Visby. Who do I have the pleasure of addressing.”

Nathan was not certain that the language of the man before them was as polished as the words coming from the mouth of Rory. But it was of little matter. The strength and open face of the man who addressed them gave him no grounds for unease.

“We are merchants of books,” said Aalim. “Myself and this man,” pointing at Nathan, “are from Andalusia”

“This man is from Ireland,” he said pointing at Fergal. “Let me tell you of our mission. We have two objectives. The first is to establish trade with your Kingdom and the emirate of Andalusia. The second is to go to Atil to meet with the Kagan of the Khazars to speak of trade.”

Aalim was full of trepidation. What he would say next could determine the success of their quest. If this man did not offer them passage all was lost.

He continued on while Hakan stood smiling with a look of curiosity.

“We understand in the first moon of the autumn the Kagan of Khazaria is to choose a new religion for the Empire of Khazaria.”

“We wish to try and persuade the King to keep his Kingdom open to all traders.”

Rory translated.

Hakan beckoned them to sit on some barrels and paused for a moment.

“That is very interesting. I have heard a little of Andalusia. I understand it is a prosperous country with much trade. The trade you would bring to the Kingdom would be welcome.”

“My King will make the decision. I am prepared to take the chance and bring you to Visby. I can say he will likely allow you to go Atil. You are not a large army and where is the risk. If you prosper we prosper and if you do not well that’s the chance of trade is it not”

“As to the matter of the King of Khazar and his religion, that is a matter I can see the portents of but having felt that wind I would not be able to forecast where it is blowing. The King of Visby will be interested in that matter, of that you can be sure.”

Aalim felt a tremendous wave of relief sweep over him. They were going to take another step on the journey. Perhaps the one that would take them to Atil.

“Now,” said Hakan, “to the business”

“The business being how much would you pay me for the journey. Are there just you three and how much baggage have you. For each of you I carry I could be bringing a slave to the markets in Atil.”

“Well,” said Aalim, “we can pay in gold coin, half on our beginning and half at our journey’s end.”

Hakan nodded at this. Aalim continued.

“I have an escort of four men in addition to those of us you see here. I agree that each of us will take the deny you the opportunity to profit from a slave and I accept the value you put on our passage.”

“So the bargain is the price of a slaves at value in Atil. Might I ask for a small discount for services we might be able to render you.”

“Services you could render to me,” said Hakan in an ironic voice.

“Well” said Aalim, “we could help defend you from bandits, something slaves cannot do.”

“Oh indeed a bunch of soft handed priests and booksellers are going to fend off the Bulgars when they are feeling a bit ill tempered after a burnt breakfast,” said Hakan.

Aalim had forgotten that they stood before the Viking captain dressed as monks.

He was beginning to think that trying to bargain down the price was not such a good idea. It was what merchants did, did they not. Maybe he should have left this business to Nathan who was a real trader.

“Well,” he said, sensing that the defence argument for a reduced ticket price was failing, “we won’t need guarding like slaves. My men are trained soldiers and could help you against pirates.”

Now he was telling pirates they needed defence from pirates, he had a feeling of foolishness.

“Oh I don’t know about that,” said Hakan. “Slaves I can treat like cattle, passengers have a slightly higher level of treatment, slightly,” he added bemusedly.

It was obvious that Hakan was enjoying bargaining with an amateur and wasn’t taking his bid for cheaper passage too seriously. Aalim felt relieved and touched by Hakan’s kindness.

“The price of slaves varies from season to season. I suggest we take last year’s price as a benchmark,” said Hakan

Astonishment was continuing to flow through Aalim. It looked as though their mission could actually happen and here he was wasting Hakan’s time and patience with his clumsy attempt to get a cheaper rate.

“I will offer this,” said Hakan. “When the slaves I take to Atil are sold that will be the price.”

“And yes,” he said laughing, “less five per cent for your ‘defence’ services. Last voyage the price of a fit young slave in Atil was 50 gold coins. I will take half of that when we get to Visby The final payment will be established when we sell the slaves at the Eastern Gate.”

In the back of Aalim’s mind it occurred to him that if treachery was the measure of this man Hakan could collect their gold at Visby and double again by selling them in the slave markets of Atil.

He banished the notion and said “that is an acceptable bargain.” They shook hands and Hakan said to Rory.

“Settle the details, we sail on the tide the day after tomorrow . Tell them we will stop for a few days at Visby on the island of Goteland and I will ask the King to talk with them. The king takes a great interest in people from far off places with unusual trade. He will decide if they can go down the great river to Atil.”

They spent the next day in Hegeby seeing if they could buy a selection of food and some small trappings for the voyage. It was not a problem. Everything was for sale in Hegeby from slaves to souls.

On the following day the seven walked up the gangplank of the ship ‘Eagles Sword’ and after a lot of instructions from Rory were able to stow their wrapped bundles in the small roofed area near the mast and take their seats in the stern.

The lines were cast off with efficiency and the Orn Svard pulled out into the centre of the river with the chant of the rower’s times man shouting the oars into unison.

The pattern of rowing quickly established itself and the voices from the ship lowered and faded away.

They discovered they were a flotilla. Hakan’s small fleet had four other ships filled with fighting men and slaves. They shadowed the leader of the fleet like swans on a lake sailing down the river in the haze of the afternoon.

As evening fell bread and beer was handed around and some of the oarsmen took a short break. Further on into the night a westerly wind strengthened and the sail was unravelled and attached to a cross rod and hauled up giving the rowers a rest and pitching the ship energetically into the small waves.

The travelling band were seasoned sailors now and the voyage to Visby was but an idyllic jaunt. Naim and Aymaan spent the time trying to knot ropes and learn the sailing craft but with little success.

The sailors had not used the oars since they had cleared the harbour and a steady wind carried the boat and its companion vessels westerly at a steady pace.

It rained on the second day, a blustery windy rain that drove water into the sail where it cascaded down to the deck below. Hides were strung over as a shelter and the men huddled in the centre of the ship with the steersman standing solitary aft in the gusting squall.

“Your men are hardy,” said Aalim to Hakan.

“Oh this is a bath in joy compared to a winter voyage,” said Hakan. “Freezing rain and snow and every lash of seawater carries razors of ice. I don’t suppose the men of your country love their furs as much as we.”

“No,” said Aalim, “It can be cold in the mountains of Spain but it is an easy land.”

They arrived at Visby on the mid afternoon. The green slopes of the island curved into the small bay and the familiar jetty stuck out in to the harbour. News of their arrival had somehow spread and a crowd of people dressed in unfamiliar garb surged to the wharf. No sooner was the boat tied up than there was a flurry of men jumping over the side and hugging children and clasping wives and sweethearts to their arms, beaming and laughing with joy.

Hakan shouted for a few men to deal to the practicalities of the boat.

It was the only time Aalim seen a lowering of the discipline of the crew. It was not a discipline of orders and shouted commands. There seemed to be an agreement of practice. An understanding that there were sensible ways of doing tasks and that all were by and large agreed and that the discipline came not from the head of one man but the discipline imposed by the job at hand.

The slaves were taken off the trailing boats and led up to a large house not different from those the cattle were kept in. Aalim and his companions walked up with Rory to the guest house and made themselves comfortable.

“Have a rest,” said Rory, “and take some time for yourselves. For the next two days nothing will happen round here. The crews will be attending to their households, talking to their children and making love to their wives or chasing new girlfriends.”

“They put up with the hardship of the seas and the dangers of trading and raiding for this time of happiness. Tomorrow evening they will come together in the large building over there and the king will greet them.”

“And there will be a great feast and entertainment. You may wander around the settlement and do what you will.”

The guest house was warm and comfortable with wood carvings on the wall of children and swans. The bedding was deep and warm and they slept long and sound.

In the morning a slave came pointing his fingers to his mouth and then at the sun and the table. Food was going to be served. They relaxed in the house and cast off the swaying feeling that followed days at sea.

Towards evening Rory came and said they could go to the big house. They walked up to pathway and entered a large thatched house with a large span over an open area easing into a gawking assembly.

The Cordovans in their green rimmed turbans and white robes, Nathan in the garb of a Mediterranean merchant and Fergal in his monkish attire were singularly unusual in the throng of men, women and children.

The small children made humorous remarks and laughed. They sat around a large fire in the large house and listened to the sayers of sagas. Not being able to understand the stories the travellers were polite and quiet.

Aalim looked around the throng of shining faces of children and their parents and marvelled at the companionship of the assembly. The stories like all good stories enwrapped them in the mind of the teller taking them from the hard and factual on long ships of imagination to realms of emotions and joy, of the glory of their ancestors and the valour of their men.

The food was roasted beef and pork, bread in abundance and butter in dollops. The evening ended with the singing of sad and wild songs that had the rhyme of oarsmen sweeping a ship through furling seas. They wandered back to the guest house their ears ringing with the songs of the evening and the smiles and good wishes of the departing audience.

Hakan came early in the morning and asked Aalim if he could have his troupe muster in front of the house in an hour.

“Training,” he said “is important for those who wish to travel the great river. “It is not enough to be brave,” he added cryptically, “you also have to be able.”

Aalim hurried the fellowship out of bed and drafted them through a quick breakfast of hard bread, porridge and honey in hot water with milk and mead. Before an hour had passed they were all mustered in front of the wooden veranda of the house.

Hakan came down the twisting street with three companions, naked to the waist, a sheen of oil glistening on their arms. The three men were armed with wooden swords, wooden knives and large shields gleaming with polished silver embossments and held a bundle of similar weapons. Hakan held a small bucket with a reddish paint brimming over it.

He addressed the small group. Looking more often at Khubayb he asked the question.

“Who can traverse the great river? Who,” he asked?

“It is not just the brave, not just the bold. Not the keen or those hungry for gold and pleasure. The only ones who can sail the great river are those who can.”

“Those who can,” he repeated.

“We will not know who can until we have done it. At that time we will know those who can, for a certainty. Some may be lucky. I do not trust entirely in luck.

“I am a sure man. I must know before we leave if you have the abilities to try. The great river is full of bandits, opportunists and savage bands in search of gold and slaves.”

“You must know and I must know that we are men of ability, determination, skilled in defending ourselves.”

“If you do not meet the mark now we will spend a few days seeing that you can.”

“I will not risk my men being distracted by defending you. And I will not lose my fee by having you wounded or killed on the river.”

“These three men will test your abilities to defend your selves and your skills at making those whom attack you defend themselves. We use wooden weapons and these men will dip them in this red paste.”

“Take your weapons from these,” he said taking the wooden bundles of weapons from his three companions.

“Strip yourselves down and commence.”

“The amount of red paint you get on your bodies particularly on the vital parts will give you and me some idea of your chances when the time comes. I will return in a few hours.”

The three men stepped forward and pointed at Naim, Aymaan and Tawfiq. They dipped their swords in the red barrel and then waited until the surplus dripped from the weapons. They held them aloft and then commenced in a flurry of blows and dancing steps around the Andalusians.

It was apparent to all that the Northmen were superior. The parries of the Andalusians were blocked and swift steps to the side resulted in more parries and sharp slashes leaving red paint over arms and backs.

But it was not entirely an uneven contest. The Emirs soldiers had been taught the rudiments of fighting but had simply not had the same experience. When they eventually stopped Aalim was not critical of his men

“More practice is needed,” said Aalim, “but you were not disgraced. These people are used to fighting on foot. You are used to horses.”

The three men stepped back bowed and waited until Fergal Aalim and Khubayb got ready. It was a different fight this time. Fergal and Khubayb were the measure of their opponents.

In fact Khubayb was more than the measure of his opponent beating him back across the yard and against the fence.

They walked back across the short distance. Khubayb did not have a mark on his body.

Rory arrived. Khubayb’s opponent bowed and spoke in Swedish. “You are well trained, a worthy opponent.”

“He says you’re well trained, a worthy opponent,” said Rory.

“Tell him he is a good soldier,” said Khubayb

“To be truthful,” said Rory, “there’s no real word for soldier in their language. They fight as freemen for their kin. I will tell him he is a good warrior.”

“No soldiers,” said Khubayb, puzzled, “are you are saying that they are all freemen with their own notions and take orders from no one.”

“They are more like the Irish,” said Rory, “They answer to nobody but as a clan they can fight a disciplined way when it’s called for.”

“Your not too bad at the fighting yourself,” said Rory to Fergal.

“The O’Kelly’s train their nobles well young man,” replied Fergal.

Aalim who was nursing a few bruises and a good deal of red paint said, “well it’s the custom for the Emirs officers of court to get military training but I am getting a bit rusty.”

“Tomorrow we need to learn a few pointers from these gentlemen,” he said nodding at the Northman.

It was left for Nathan to step forward with the largest of the Northmen. They circled each other and then with a flash of red the Northman wove a swift savage cut to Nathan’s midriff.

It was just a quickly parried and Nathan pushed the rim of his shield into his opponents shoulder and whirling round thrust a foot into the side of his knee knocking him off balance.

The Northman stepped away and taking a new view of his adversary came back with a whirling and slashing of his sword. To no avail as Nathan weaved this way and that and with a set of swift thrusts proved that he would be no easy pickings.

The bout ended when it was obvious that Nathan lacked nothing in his ability to defend himself.

“He thinks you are a good fighter,” said Rory.

“Pay him my compliments,” said Nathan, “he fights well himself.”

Hakan returned an hour or so later.

“What the damage,” he said. Looking at the Aymaan, Tawfiq and Naim he grinned. “Not too bad but there’s work to be done.”

“You three,” he said pointing at Aymaan, Naim and Tawfiq, “Be at this place at eight in the morning and these men will teach you a few of the rudiments of hand-to-hand fighting. You will also need to learn how to hold a shield as some protection against arrows.”

And so it was next morning they stood blinking awake kitted up for training in the art of fighting Northman style.

It took a few hours, nearly all the day in fact but by late afternoon they had learn the techniques of fighting as practised in the seas of the north. At the end the leader of their teachers said through Rory, “well you have improved much, a bit more tomorrow and we will turn you into foot soldiers yet.”

At the end of their session the following day Hakan came to the house and asked them to dress up and get themselves presentable. They were to see the King he said.

They walked up the small hill to a large wooden building and entered a wide hallway leading to a room. The King sat on a bench on the far end of the room, a bowl of small bread pieces and a pitcher of beer on a small table beside him.

Two large warriors stood close at hand.

It was an unpretentious setting with carvings both in the standing pillars and on the walls. They were sharp and fierce in visage giving an air of no nonsense power about the room and its occupant.

The King pointed to three seats set in front of him. Hakan addressed the King

“King,” said Hakan, “these are the travellers from the west. They wish to go to the Eastern Gate on this voyage.”

Rory stepped forward and translated Hakan’s words into Latin

Then each of them stepped forward and was introduced to the King. The King acknowledged them with a nod. After that was completed Rory listened to a few words from the King and after a pause said to the travellers.

“The King’s name is Harald. He would like to discuss with you the dimensions of your mission with the King of Khazar.”

“I hope you have found your welcome to Visby pleasant,” said the King. They nodded.

“Hakan has told me you wish to discuss two matters. Trading between us Varangians and you Andalusians and trading with the Khazars. I have given the matter of trading with you some thought and consider it should happen. It is always good to encourage honest trading.”

The matters you wish to discuss with the King of the Khazars,” continued the King.

“I ask myself if this will be of benefit to us in Visby.”

Aalim gestured at the King indicating he wished to place his map on the small table.

Once again slowed by the need for Rory to translate Aalim went through the strategic consequences facing the King of Khazar, whether he should throw his lot in with the Muslims and thereby set himself at odds with the Byzantine empire across the Black Sea or become a Christian and draw closer to the Byzantines.

He emphasised the effects this would have on the trade that flowed through the Northern Silk Road. Finally Aalim pointed out that this decision would be made on the moon following the equinox.

The King thought for a while and then replied.

“I am puzzled why he feels the need to change his religion.” He is the King and if he becomes a Moslem or a Christian then his people will also have to change their beliefs. Why is he making them make that choice I wonder? It’s not the needs of trade.”

“We trade with the Christians in the Black Sea and with the Moslems at Abkhazia. They would I suppose like us to take up their religion. But they have not said as much to my representatives.”

“We are seeking to set up a trading agreement with the Byzantines. We are not disturbed by the beliefs of the Byzantines.”

“The King of Khazaria changing his religion is a serious affair. I don’t think it’s to help his trade.”

After Rory translated there was silence for a while.

Aalim replied. “Your majesty is right. Religion is not hampering the trade of the King of Khazaria at the moment.”

“On the contrary his Kingdom is a safe place where the riches of the Silk Road, the produce of the Caliphate and the wealth of Byzantium can all be traded safely much to the profit of the King. But that could change if he aligns himself with one of the Empires around him.

Rory translated Aalim’s remarks to the King who nodded.

“Tell me,” he said, “what is your interest in this matter so very far away from your borders.”

Aalim replied.

“We have a wish to trade with the you across the northern seas, to bring our produce into this region and through your traders to have access to the traders of Khazaria.”

“We wish to go to Khazaria before the King makes up his mind and present the various options to the King and one of those would be to keep his present religion.”

“We wish to earnestly beseech the Khazarian King to continue trading with you the Varangians. In that way the possibility of our access to the goods of the silk road will remain open to us at Hegeby.”

The King again reflected for a period.

“We are very keen to see trade prosper in the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, all seas,” said the King.

“Every year trade is increasing on the great river but it cannot prosper if the Black Sea becomes either a Christian preserve or a Muslim enclave.”

“The King of Khazar may change the religion of his people and hope that trade will continue and that he can preserve his independence from the Caliphate and from the Byzantines. But that would be difficult.”

“We Varangians are freemen we kneel to no God and we kneel to no kings but our own. Each trader is a free man able to carry the glory of his king but not his orders.”

“I think your mission is of benefit to me and I will let you continue down the great River. I am unable to send representatives of your calibre to this Khazarian King so it will be of some comfort to me that you are undertaking this task.”

Inwardly Aalim heaved a great sigh of relief. The main obstacle in an impossible journey had been overcome.

“Now” said the King warming to the discussion with strangers from a world he could only imagine.

“Hakan tells me you are traders in books. I am interested in new tradings. I have met with booksellers before. Tell me about this trade in books. Is there any value in it.”

“The value of a bag of coins, a bale of furs, a line of slaves those I understand. I can measure the value of the jewels on the front of a book.”

“But I am at a loss why people should pay for a set of squiggles and scrawling on the hides of an animal. I have difficulty seeing why anyone would pay for such an item”

Aalim was nonplussed.

In the world he came from that it was taken for granted that the written word had an authority and a value.

“The worth of a book,” said Aalim “is that it carries the words of a man from one time to another and from one place to another.”

“Books can tell you of the present, give you instructions on how the world is made, how to make things, what other men are thinking.”

“They can bring the past into the present. Books can bring the words and thinking of men from centuries ago, the learning of empires and people who have passed away into history, the Romans and the Greeks.”

“Books can send knowledge into the future. They make available to our children and their descendents the knowledge we have worked so hard to win.”

“Books can convey knowledge from men in one place to men in another place without those men having to make the journey in person to convey that knowledge.”

“They contain the prayers and guidance of God himself. You do not need the druids the shamans to spend twenty years memorizing all your lore and recipes and learning’s the directions of your Gods.”

“That may be true,” said King, “you strike me as honest men and there is eloquence and truth in your words.”

“Tell me this. For people to read your books they have to learn reading and writing. It must take a lot of time.”

The King opened a book in front of him.

“I would have to learn each of these symbols. The combinations are I take it words. I would need to learn a lot of words as well. What if there was a word I did not know. I would have to have a man at hand who knew that word.”

“And as for my people taking up the use of books. It is a big thing to take men from the fields, from trading from minding herds to sit and do the writing of symbols in a book.”

“And the cost of these books, it is not small. Only Kings could afford them. I am told that to make them you have to slaughter forty sheep even for a small one, and dry the hides and train the men to make the books.”

“In your country how many of your people can read these books, in your own language.”

Aalim was intrigued by the analysis of a practical man.

“I wonder though if books can tell you all things,” continued the King.

“Take a commonplace thing in the world of experience, the building of a wheel.”

“A wheel is made of a number of separate pieces. The spokes are shaved and shaped to bear the load from the rim. They must be straight and true.”

“The rim pieces are cut to fit the spokes tightly. The hub is made with inserts for the spokes, which must be in exactly the right place and precisely the right size and length. Then the iron rim is forged, all in one piece, a little smaller than the circumference of the wheel.”

“The last thing is done is this. The rim is heated and placed around the wheel. There is a sizzling as the rim cools. It bites and burns into the wooden edge of the rim. The wheel tightens and the spokes are driven snug into the spine.”

“If the pieces of the wheel are well made then it will become taunt, tight, perfect, and give reliable service for years. If it is not made right it will explode into a collection of useless pieces of wood, a waste of time and materials.”

“It is a task done slowly and carefully. Until you put the hot rim on you do not know if it will work.”

“I put it to you that it is only from real experience that you can learn such things. This knowledge from experience is passed from masters of the craft to apprentices who learn painstakingly from advice, and their mistakes to make a wheel.”

“What writing could convey the skill and knowledge in the minds and hands of men who make a wheel.”

Aalim was nonplussed.

“You are right,” he said. “There is a limit on what may be written and learned from a book.”

He decided to make one last pitch for the value of writing.

“Writing is of great use to Kings,” said Aalim. “Your rulings can be sent in writing to another part of the kingdom. Without writing you have to rely on the memories of messengers. The written word carries your decrees your rulings exactly as you said them.”

“I follow your argument,” said the King.

“What you suggest would rely on an official writing a document. Where do I get that man? When my written words get to my subjects I need a person there who can read them. How is that to be done? In fact I find my time with my subjects allows dialogue, we can each talk to each other.”

“You see my worry is the permanency of these books,” said the King. “That and the reverence that might be given to permanent words from the past.”

“In future will people regard a book as more learned than a wise man talking from experience? Could a book written by a foolish man lead people astray?”

“Will the books allow men to contradict their King?”

“Those who write the book will be dead. There will be no opportunity to question their thinking. Much might have changed since the book was written.”

“There is a danger where men let old thinking take precedence over the things they can actually see in the world they live in. It is our custom for all men to gather each year and discuss what we will do for the year ahead.”

“The ‘wisdom of the ancients’ written in books could be like a dunghill outside a cattle barn fertilising the minds of men with outdated notions distracting them from the things that need to be done.”

Aalim, Fergal and Nathan were askance.

The Varangian King had taken the concept of books and explored their worth and their pitfalls in a matter of minutes. To be a King among people with a fast and fluid capacity for action took intelligence and foresight.

The King went on.

“It is my conclusion from what I have said that we here in our lands do not as yet need books. However, I am prepared to change my views if circumstances warrant.”

“We have learned to take by arms valuable things from other men and use them or trade them.”

The King rose.

“Convey my compliments to the King of the Khazars. On your return to your own country give my respects and my good wishes to your Emir and tell him his traders will be welcomed at Hegeby and that I look forward to meeting your traders in the future. I wish you safe travels and prosperity in trade.”

They were dismissed and left the house.

“Well,” said Fergal, “we have his good wishes. That will count with Hakan and his men.”

“We do,” said Aalim, “He quickly understood that whichever religion the Khazars choose will be important to trade. And he has delivered ideas on books which need consideration.”

“We have succeeded on one step of our mission. Andalusia will be welcome in Hegeby. We only need two things to happen to make that permission of the King real. We have to get home safely to Andalusia to tell the emir. Praise be to Allah blessed be his name that happens. Then the ships of Andalusia have to get safely to Hegeby. “

They returned to the guest house.

Hakan left them there.

“Tomorrow we sail. Be at the jetty early and ready to go to sea once more.”

On the Great River

Chapter 10

Aalim was sad leaving Visby. He stood with Khubayb Nathan and Fergal at the ship's prow.

His dealings with Hakan and the Varangian King had made him realise that although the Varangians were sea raiders there were among them men who were astute and intelligent.

The talk fell again to the question of who was civilised and who was not.

Fergal conceded that it was not a matter of intelligence. Peoples were not barbarian because they were stupid. Anyone could see that the Varangians were no less able to think than the Irish or the Andalusians.

He felt the Irish were civilised because they had libraries and knowledge.

“We are not nomads on horseback thieving from the crops of peasants and earning a living stealing the hard work of other people. Our work in the monasteries means we can grow crops and keep them for our own sustenance.”

His words hung lightly amid a silence in the air. A case made easily but one without weight. It wasn't that his words lacked the force of argument or that what he said did not hold some truth.

It was the silence of respect accorded to a man whose argument is not wrong but not convincing.

The pause in reply that comes out of a regard for who the speaker is and the closeness of a friendship, not the strength of his argument.

Aalim was not so sure that the Irish were that civilised. They had no stone roads or towns or baths or the amenities that the Andalusians considered the prerequisites of the civilised life.

Nathan broke the quiet.

“By both the measures of Ireland and Andalusia the Varangians are barbarians. They had no writing, no roads no buildings none of the semblances of settled and civilised lands,” said Nathan.

“If you met them in the night as they came ashore brandishing burning fire staves, killing the innocent, plundering all you had and taking your kin into slavery I think the argument would settle itself,” said Fergal. “It would be a horror beyond imagination.”

“Varangian barbarity has a naturalness about it,” said Nathan. “Unlike the cold premeditated savagery of the Roman amphitheatres.”

“Murder feels the same I suspect whether it’s the consequence of a pirate raid or the disdainful process of an organised heartless state,” said Fergal, “Does the mental disposition of the perpetrator make a difference.”

“Yes they are barbarians,” agreed Aalim.

He paused to consider that they were passengers on a ship of these people they were deciding were barbarian. Their lives were, every minute of the day, in the care of these ‘uncivilised’ people.

“But let us remember the last few days. In their own place, at their own hearths they were free and generous men. Each man we have met was personally kind. I don’t doubt their savagery when they raid peaceful settlements.”

“I wonder,” he said as the ship pulled further away from Visby, “if all men are good in their own lands.”

“It is possible” said Khubayb, “who are you going to fight, your grandmother”?

“Oh there has been many a fight in a clan,” said Fergal, “and family feuds have that bitter intensity of a fight between people who know each other too well.”

“That said there seemed no disunity among the people of Visby and the King was a smart and clever man.”

“It must be hard in winter. There was no sign that outsiders had ever attacked them,” said Khubayb. “They do not have much wealth but it is sufficient to their needs and they seem to have happiness. What makes them leave these places?”

“I think they do have wealth” said Aalim, “from all that raiding and trading. They seemed to have a great deal of gold and all the hard work on their lands and houses was performed by slaves. They had many many slaves.”

“But gold won’t keep you warm at night,” said Nathan.

“They have all the fur they need,” said Fergal.

“There wasn’t a lot of cropland,” said Aalim. “I think they raid to give an inheritance to their descendents. Their wealth is children, they had large families.”

“I saw families of seven and ten children in Visby, children grow to be adults in a surprisingly short time. They have a lot of young men who want to make their mark. What are those children to do?”

“It takes fifteen years for a boy to become a man who can farm and fight. So you need maybe as little as fifteen good harvests to raise a horde of men. They may be like the peoples beyond the Eastern Gate.”

“As Fergal said barbarians live of the sweat of others. The best prospect they have not the tilling of land but the destruction of their neighbours and the theft of their goods and cattle.”

“Let us remember Roman history. There has been an incessant parade of Cimbri, Huns, Alans, Tuetons, Franks, Germans crossing borders for plunder. Civilisation is the difference between a settled people who live by the plough rather than the tenders of animals who move constantly looking for better pastures.”

“When herders conquer a place they bring their population with them and supplant those who ruled the land before. We Andalusians conquered Spain but we did not moved in a large hungry population.”

“The Irish,” said Fergal, “have conquered nobody and nobody has conquered us. Praise God that never changes.”

“Could we breed hordes to conquer the world, you think? I suppose so. We send a lot of monks to the Frankish lands.”

“Mind you I hear the Pope is considering celibacy for the clergy and for monks. That will change a few things. Most monks in Ireland are married.”

“The Torah tells us the Jews were good at conquering once. It seems to have been a lost art for a very long time,” said Nathan

They sailed on into the evening with the lowering sun glancing off the sea and the light ebbing in the drawing in of the night.

The next four days left no memories on the minds of those who were part of them. Each started exactly like the day before, the seas were the same and apart from occasional showers of rain the skies were the same. The crewmen rowed the ship with a stoic fervour when the wind was slack.

Eventually after four days they arrived on the coast in the mouth of a wide river. They did not see any sign of habitation until they had proceed some way up its banks.

“Where are we now” asked Nathan of Hakan?

“About twenty miles up this river is Starya Ladoga. The great river is much further to the east. Some of the boats you will see at Starya Ladoga go down a river system to the Dnieper directly into the Black Sea.”

“The Black Sea is great for trade but it is full of Jews, Moslems Bulgars and Byzantines all competing with each other.

It is a harder journey on the Volga but for the moment a few of us have the market to ourselves.”

“Trade is good on the Volga. The trade across the deserts from the Eastern Gate gives us access to silks and the works of the industrious peoples beyond in China. Everyone wants slaves. Everyone wants silks and swords. It is a trader’s paradise.”

Hakan was in a contemplative mood.

“The trade in slaves depends on successful wars. Every city that is sacked has losers. The pay of the soldiers of the conquerors comes from selling the losers into slavery. Who really wants to pillage goods and chattels? You can only load so much furniture or fancy drapes on your back.”

“Slaves are easy and far more valuable. Tie them by the neck and whip them along and you can get them to walk on board by themselves.

“Ah but you don’t have to feed furniture,” said Aalim

“Yes but we feed the slaves well enough, no one is going to buy a thin starved bit of goods. It’s hard to sell a hungry horse with the ribs sticking out of it.”

“Sometimes we don’t have to raid any villages and risk our lives getting them.”

“As often as not you will find that one tribe will happily invade their long standing enemies and deliver them all wrapped up and neatly tied neck to neck, no trouble at all. We can just land on shore and make an offer.”

“Slaves are a wonderful product. Imagine having a slave to boil water for your bath, cook your dinner, mind your children and harvest the rye from your fields. They are worth much much more than it costs to keep them.”

“Indeed,” said Aalim. “We have slaves. I sometimes wonder what’s their opinion on the outcome of a losing battle.”

“Well” said Hakan, “when the walls of a city fall or an army loses a battle the one thing they might be thankful for is that they are still alive. Years later they might be full of woe for their homeland, their loved ones, their children but they have the one solace, they are still alive and those that died on the day of the defeat are not.”

“Enough,” said Hakan, “there’s work to do we will be at our destination soon.”

Sarya Ladoga was a surprising mixture of wood, bare soil , tall fir trees and cleared land that looked desolate. But among the trees was a large collection of barns and houses made from logs laid sideways on top of each other with the chinks plastered with mud.

There were not as many ships as at Hegeby but the same bustle of men and products on the move was evident everywhere in the sheds full of slaves and bundles of trade goods.

They did not stay long in Sarya Ladoga.

“Every day we spend travelling” said Hakan, “is a day we feed the slaves, eat ourselves and run up costs.”

At Sarya Ladoga Fergal had his first chance to see the slaves.

They had been led out into a shelter leaning against a warehouse. They sat against the wall, a line of sad human beings tied to a large tree with thin chain.

Fergal had noticed that as time went on they talked more among themselves and even smiled a little. There were no Irish speakers among them and addressing them in Latin brought no response.

It must be a savage and wrenching shock he thought to be one day tilling your fields or minding your children and then after a night of unspeakable horror to be tethered like a dog facing a life of servitude among strangers. They were on the move soon.

As Hakan had repeated to all who would listen , “The sooner we are under sail on the current of the Volga and the sooner we sell the first batch of slaves the better.”

True to his word the visit to Starya Ladoga was a short one. They sailed further down the river the next day.

A few days after leaving they came to a wide bay in the river and on the right hand side was a landing.

Beyond the landing a wide corridor of trees had been felled. It ran off to the distance a brown man made slash among the tall green forest. Hakan was all action walking back up and down the boat calling instructions to the men.

Rory relayed as much as he could to Aalim Nathan and Fergal.

“Get your gear together,” said Rory.

“We will be portaging the boats over a long stretch of land. “It’s a tricky business,” he said.

“Until you see where you might be helpful, or are given some orders by Hakan the best idea is to stand to one side by the tree line and let the men take care of the boat.”

The boats bumped into the landing almost simultaneously. Hakan and with about seven men immediately walked briskly to the trees and did a quick reconnaissance around the perimeter while the ships companies stood armed and ready in the event of trouble.

“It pays,” said Rory, “to check if we are landing into the face of an ambush.” “The land nearby is secure but this part by the portage is easily approached from the northern reaches of the river by all kinds of brigands.”

“Hakan is going to send men for horses from a village close by. We will also use the slaves. It’s a hard business and needs a lot of timing and coordination.”

When they had landed Aalim noticed the rail. From the landing stretching out through the forest was a twin rail of timbers built on a cross hatching of logs. The logs were laid crosswise across the path lashed together and held steady with rammed earth. Along the centre of this log road were the two lines of hewed timber lashed and pegged to the crossbeams.

There were about nine inches apart and about twelve inches high. It was a strong structure.

As soon as Hakan had decided the area was safe and secure he started shouting orders.

The ships were held stern landward lined up along the shore. The slaves were unloaded and mustered at the start of the rail.

Ropes were tied to the eagle prow of the first ship and its bow slotted into the rail. Its keel fitted into the centre of the two rails.

A man with a bucket of tallow smeared the rails as it was dragged up into the slot and with enough shouting and encouragement the ship was hauled clear of the water.

The slaves moved in order out the front and taking up the line of ropes tied to the ship and started to haul the boat along the railed road. The cargo was piled in orderly rows along the landing. The second and third ships were pulled from the water with swift and efficient throwing of ropes and lining up of crew and slaves.

Finally when the fleet was lined up on the rail there was a rest while the cooks got the stoves going on the ships and handed the food over the rails to the teams of pullers.

Aalim, Nathan and Fergal were directed by Rory to take a place in the rope lines in front of the first boat.

The horses arrived and joined the pulling. The cargo was reloaded onto the boat and the hauling, guiding and oiling continued through the rest of the day,

In places the railroad had been constructed on small bridges over streams and small declines in the land. It was hard work.

Hakan had obviously come to consider Khubayb, Naim, Tawfiq and Aymaan as crew.

They found themselves hauling ropes with the Varangian rowers. At first there was a few whimpers from Aymaan protesting that he was a passenger not a slave but he thought the better of it after a few strong remarks from the other haulers.

Aalim was impressed by the discipline and the attention to the task. There seemed to be no emphasis on rank or formality. Each man hauled his portion of the rope and there was no difference in the rate of effort between the slaves and the crew.

The night came later than he imagined possible. The day seemed to go on forever. By what he thought must have been nearly midnight the light was just fading behind the birch trees. Everyone lay on the ground wrapped in furs and their leggings with fur covers. They weren't as needed as one thought.

Bear grease was in demand to protect them from ravenous insects thinking this rare feast would not last. The sooner they attacked the exposed flesh of the sleeping humans the better. Sentries were posted on the outskirts of the camp. Fergal and Rory were together on the first watch. Aalim and Khubayb were on the second.

They all said they could do more than two hours but Hakan insisted that he needed wide-awake sharp-eyed men and that more than two hours made men sleepy and careless. The night passed with little incident and in the morning the weary Northmen, slaves and travellers had a breakfast ladled over the sides of the ships strangely stranded in the forest.

The traces were taken up and the hauling began. Aalim found it was not hard to pull the boat.

Just a steady pull was all that was needed. It was the job of four men two forward and two aft to hold the boat steady and stop it keeling over. The twin rails seem to do most of the work of keeping the boats upright but the four men each with a rope tied to the dragons acted as a final stay in case the hauliers accidentally pulled the ship to one side or the other.

At about noon on the fifth day they reached a lake whose waters stretched out to the horizon. It was the end of the rail. After days of hot sweating and hauling and the cuts of branches sticking unexpectedly out of the ferns with brush cutting legs and feet the hauling suddenly ended.

The running of the ships down the slip was spectacular. All the ropes were removed and each ship poised above the lake before a final push ran it swiftly down the greased rails into the water.

“They look so natural now. What’s more odd he said then a ship out of water,” Fergal said,

The ships were rowed to a small jetty further down the lake and the cargo and slaves loaded aboard. The sails were hoisted and the rowers settled into their seats and they moved out into the lake.

After a couple of hours the days of hauling and pulling were forgotten as the small fleet was as it was before, sailing under the power of the wind westward over the waters of the lake. Hakan came to explain to the Aalim what was in store for the voyagers.

“We will be leaving this lake through a small river on the far eastern side and that will lead us to the great river.”

“In a short time you will see the sight of a real river that flows across the world.”

A day later they sailed into the great river. It was of considerable size. Fergal remarked that he thought the Shannon at the mouth was as wide.

“Wait a bit” said Rory, “wait a bit more and you will change your mind on that.”

They sailed on for days, sleeping and eating in their seats the steady rocking of the rivers current and the flap of the woollen sail a constant background to their progress.

The river gradually became wider. The eastern shore was slowly receding into the haze.

Hakan finally saw what he wanted and with horns and waving the ships bore easterly into the mouth of a small river. There were signs of previous encampment. On one side of the river there was a wall of pointed stakes that marked the beginning of a defensive wall. The ships were secured to the ramshackle jetty and the camp was set up.

“Why have we stopped,” asked Aalim of Rory?

“This is the first trading posts,” said Rory. “The trade is with people on the far side of the river. Over there is a wide beach with meadows. It’s a handy place for trading with strangers. You can see who is around you and you can’t be ambushed so easily. The way the business is done is quite interesting. If you are dealing with complete strangers you leave a sample of the goods on the river bank, walrus tooth ivory and amber and see what the other side will offer by way of trade.

“You initially risk the loss of a small sample. If they steal it you know trading is not an option. But if they leave an offer for the sample, in gold or goods they think might interest you then you can accept it or leave the sample there and hope they increase their offer. After a few trips back and forth across the river the price they were prepared to pay and what they want gets established without anyone risking their necks.

“Like as not the other side want something you have and they have not. At some trading spots trust has built up over a few trades. It’s possible that by the next couple of voyages we might meet and exchange presents and pleasantries.”

The next few hours were spent in voyages over the river and back, with goods slowly changing hands and gold returning back over to the Varangian camp.

On the first night before dark came Hakan assembled all the Northmen and the travellers.

“Men,” he said. “Some of you have been here before and some haven’t.”

“We have protected ourselves from harm from the people on the further shore. But each time we use this camp news is getting out that we have here a nice collection of goods and valuable slaves ready for the taking. Tonight as always we are going to post sentries.”

“Now let me explain how this is to be done. We are not guarding the walls of our villages or a fortress on Visby. So we will not have sentries that walk back and forth and in doing so tell the enemy that we have sentries posted and where they are.”

“If we do that we are inviting any raiders to creep up on them silently and cut their throats. Now if your throat is cut we will have no warning of any attack. Your body will lie in this ground far from home and your journey will have been wasted. Not to mention the happy times you will have missed when we reach the Eastern Gate.”

“So listen and listen well, your lives, all our lives depend on this. Keep low to the ground. Do not let yourself be seen against the sky or against the moon. When the light comes in the morning do not stand up in a place where you can be seen against the brightening light.”

“Spend your time listening. When no one is coming there will be the sounds of insects, birds of the night, animals like foxes that hunt at night. If you stay still, make no noise these animals will continue about their business undisturbed by you. Some will smell you but it’s been my experience that they make no fuss and avoid you. The bears and wolves are all asleep. It is all about noise and silence.”

“It’s a black night and you will see little. Let your ears see for you. It is when the sound changes that you should take notice. Normally we would make a noise like an owl, or a night bird to signal the camp and a sentry in the camp would rouse the men.”

“We do not know the noises birds make in this part of the world so if you sound the alarm by making the sound of an owl all you will do is tell the attackers, where you are and that you have tumbled to them.”

They will then come out of their hiding and commence a full-scale attack.”

“So it is all about listening. If you hear the insects, the forest around you go silent or if you hear noises of a group coming towards us then do not hesitate to quietly come back to the camp and wake the captain you have been assigned to.”

“Each sentry will wake a different captain and immediately the captain are awoken they will quickly take their men to the positions I will spell out.”

“The first squad under Sven will move to the trees by the slave line. The attackers may have been watching us already.”

“If that is so they will know where the slaves are. They will cut the slaves traces and let them run among us causing disruption. We must prevent that happening. The second captain, will move to the front of the boats. These are our lifelines back to the world we know.”

“If the boats are damaged we will be forced to stay here and defend ourselves with these rudimentary walls. We can build more boats if we survive the attack but it might be under continual siege and we might not live to launch them.”

“The third team will come to this point here and defend this area.”

Hakan continued until he had spelt out exactly where each man would move.

“You will sleep with your shield and weapon at hand and if your shoulder is shaken move immediately to where I have indicated. The captains will decide where the enemy attack is focussed and when they do immediately move their squad, against them.”

“In the morning we build a bit more of this camp. Each time we visit we will have more of a defensive structure. Eventually we will have a stockade to defend us.”

Aalim was impressed.

“Well what do you think of their military skills,” he asked Khubayb.

“Each of them is individualistic and on the face of it undisciplined,” replied Khubayb.

“But in the things that matter, the movement of boats, and the arrangement of their crews, the defence of the camp they are very competent. When it comes to a crunch they get organised and get on with it. I think they would be formidable in short battles.”

“I don’t know if they have the ability to conduct a siege of a walled city. I doubt that any of their raiding parties would disturb a city in Andalusia or be able to raid a port that the Emir controls. I don’t think they could organise supplies for a long siege or last through a long war. The organisation the Emir brings to his forces, the training we have is better than we are seeing here. Civilised places like the Caliphate or the Byzantines could withstand them. But Ireland and Saxony are not as strong. I am certain they would go such places like a knife through butter.”

Aalim made a note to mention this to the Emir on his return. The Varangians might be good trade partners. Nevertheless a day might come when they thought they could sail up the Guadalquivir and raid Cordoba. It would pay to advise the Emir to take precautions against such an event.

After dinner had been served from the ships tied alongside the campsite they turned in early. Some part of the night would be spent on sentry duty and although the voyage along the river was not taxing or tiresome sleep was needed nevertheless.

Rory, Nathan, Aalim and Fergal sat talking by the fire. They had come such a long way. In a few days they would be in the city of Atil. The Khazar would no longer be a mirage but real and personal.

“Will we even get to see this King,” asked Aalim. “All the other people who have come to put their case on the religious choice will have been talking to the Khazarians maybe for years. We are coming as strangers.”

“We have heard words about them but what do we know of their customs, their attitudes. What if we offend them by accident.”

“You are worrying too much,” said Fergal. “Like as not the fact that we are exotic and far away will get us noticed.”

“Hakan tells me you will get a hearing,” said Rory. “He doesn’t say how he knows but he has been here a few times. We will see.”

They had stopped at another trading camp and after a night of watchfulness picked up goods from the strangers on the other bank and on one occasion even met and talked with their trading partners. Khubayb has accompanied the trading team across the river. They were very strange people he remarked. Their eyes were not like ours but half closed. Like almonds, and it was as though they had spent all their lives in the desert squinting at the sun.

“And they seemed to have a lot of silk.”

“Were they civilised,” asked Aalim.

“Hard to tell in such a short time and without knowing their language,” said Khubayb.

“They were polite, there was a lot of bowing, and they were respectful of the Northmen, not haughty or disdainful. They looked like a wandering band of horsemen.”

“We don’t look as if we represent a civilised people ourselves, more like wanderers on the moor,” said Fergal,

At the third camp the routine was much as before. The goods were taken from the ships, the slaves were tied in rows along the river and fed and watered like a line of horses at a military camp.

Aalim continued to appreciate more and more how the Varangians operated. They were a unit when tasks had to be done. When the job was done they quickly reverted to a stalwart independent minded individualism.

They ate dinner served over the side of the boats as usual and lit fires in the centre of the camp for light and companionship.

The sentries were posted and the firelight dimmed. The moths came in the twilight and the bird song ebbed as the light dimmed. Aalim settled in for sleep. He was to take the watch on the fourth hour and sleep was paramount. The solid land was to be appreciated. The world had moved constantly all day before his eyes as the riverbank had passed his peripheral vision.

He awoke from sleep as the returning sentry touched his arm. He quietly stepped out in the half moonlight to take up his duty.

Here he was a learned man and a person of rank in the world's most civilised country acting under orders from a barbarian. But what Hakan said made sense. As the Varangian had said no book could encompass the experience Hakan had accumulated.

Maybe for Khubayb it was different. Maybe the trade of soldiery was the same whether barbarian or civilised.

He was on duty half an hour and had got accustomed to the noises of the insects and the frogs and what he presumed were night birds. He knew that there were four other sentries standing behind tress, concealed as he was. Making no noise and listening for any sound that would indicate they would be thrown into a maelstrom of screaming pain and blood.

There seemed to be a hedgehog or fox or some animal making a great deal of noise off to his left. He was becoming relaxed now and fighting against becoming dull or stuporous.

Then the noise stopped. It just went quiet. No sound at all. It was a dramatic demonstration of nothing. He made a decision.

He had no experience of being attacked by raiders in his life. Making the wrong call would result in lost sleep for his companions. He would get perhaps a lot of ribbing from the crew. A mistake could cost them their lives.

Keeping low to the ground he made his way back to the camp.

He reached the sleeping Hakan and squeezed his shoulder. Hakan opened his eyes quickly and without a word rose from his sleep and nodding to Aalim moved off into action.

Aalim saw that two more of the sentries had come back from their positions. It was not a false alarm.

Hakan led a small party into the forest and they waited. The ship's captains were moving quietly to their stations.

The slaves were warned in hushed tones that if they cried out or aided any ambush they would die fast. Aalim assumed it was enough to compel their silence.

The first raider moved silently into the camp. Four others quickly followed him. Hakan gave a great shout and the Varangians and the travellers moved forward and quickly dispatched the surprised intruders.

A skirmishing line was formed advancing into the trees clashing their shields and driving forward to meet the rest of the attackers who were unaware of the fate of their four scouts.

In the midst of their quiet approach to a silent camp the attackers were suddenly confronted by the war cries of the crew and the clash of swords resounding against the shields. It was not a long battle. The attackers had the advantage of knowing where they were running to. But they did not all run fast enough. Their bodies were pulled back and thrown under the trees. The fight ended in a short time.

The first light was filtering through the camp as they started counting the slaves and defenders.

The bodies of the raiders were hauled out from under trees and scrub and laid out in front of the camp. The wounded were put to the sword.

There was one body among them that was not one of the attackers. It was Tawfiq. He had a wound to his side where the spear had gone through to the heart.

They buried him in the morning sun in peace and calm, there, on the side of the Volga, under a myrtle tree.

Aalim thought that in the winter, when the great river froze and the winds came over the white ice, he would lie here, cold and alone, far from the sunny breezes and warm sunshine of Andalusia.

He could see the day when he, Aalim, came home to Cordova and he would tell Tawfiq's mother and father of the death of their son.

Tell them where and how he died and see the sorrow cross their faces and the tears fall for their Tawfiq and the children he would never have and they would never see.

He would tell them how in the dark of night in this place far away he was caught unawares by raiders they knew not.

Describe for them the setting of the tree and the grave beside the river where traders would come and go past Tawfiq's resting place until eternity.

They said the funeral prayers and buried him swiftly.

The crew were kind in their condolences.

He was a good boy, worked hard they said.

“And that he was,” said Fergal, “there but for the grace of God go all of us.”

Khubayb, Naim and Aymaan told the tales of their memories of Tawfiq.

His fruitless shooting at the pheasants was recounted again in the absence of the shooter of the arrows. In the reverence and humour of the tales they said what they could not say overtly. That he was their friend and companion and that they loved him.

Aalim took the time to talk to Hakan and tell him he was glad they had all been trained to respond to the raiders in the way they had. It had saved their lives.

He thanked him for the crew’s sympathy for Tawfiq.

They loaded the slaves and in a sombre mood rowed the boats out to the midstream and raised the sails and the flotilla took the run of the current and moved swiftly down the river.

At The Eastern Gate

Chapter 11

It was a morning of blue sky and sun wide horizons as the flotilla rounded a bend of the river and the travellers first saw the city of Atil.

The city was on two banks of the river with an island in the centre. The houses were a mixture of sand coloured bricks and wood.

The wharves were crowded with ships, the low sun casting shadows of their silhouettes and masts across the docks.

Fergal stood in the prow of the ship looking at the first city he had ever seen. It was, he thought, a grand sight, the sunlight glowing on yellow walls, red tiled roofs and cobbled streets. The sort of place he thought where might and glory were commonplace.

As the ships touched the wharf the crew threw the ropes ashore. Rope handlers strode forward and tied the ships to the shore. Aalim was glad to feel the ship bump against the land.

It gave finality to the voyage, a definite point in time, an exact minute that it had ended and was complete. Their journey had reached its destination and in this splendid city his mission would be completed. Whether in success or failure he did not know.

Beside the wharf a vast plaza spread out to the edge of a high curved wall.

At the centre of the curved wall stood the Eastern Gate.

It was framed sharply against the sky with the endless vistas of the steppes visible through its arch, proclaiming to all who came through it that this was the end of the Silk Road.

The Gate itself was topped with a tall curved Arch decorated in red and gold with flags adorning its centre point. The arch was of varnished wood, tall as a ship's mast and wide as a house. At its base stood armed soldiers with elaborate silver breastplates and gleaming gold helmets rimmed with dark fur.

This gate was the destination anticipated every step of the way by the caravans coming from the deserts, the grassed hills of Mongolia, past the snow-capped Himalayas, the jungles of India from fabled China itself. Under this arch came the trade from the eastern world of mystery.

A tall man with a shining silver metal helmet rimmed with fur and an escort of two similarly dressed acolytes stepped to the side of the ship. Hakan went to meet him and after a short exchange of words passed over a payment in gold coins.

Rory was standing by. Aalim asked what the transaction was.

"We pay one payment for the number of ships and another for the number of the crew," said Hakan.

"For that payment we are allowed to go throughout the city and in particular to go to the bazaar and the slave market to sell our goods. We must live in the stranger's quarter and we cannot go to religious places or go about as an armed group."

"It seems reasonable," said Aalim.

“Armed groups attending church would be upsetting, especially if they were from a different religion,” said Fergal, with a touch of irony.

“So we are not going to be locked up for three days while bureaucrats get around to assessing the cargo,” said Nathan.

“No,” said Hakan, “there will be a ten percent levy on the total value of the goods we sell. We pay when we sell so we don’t need the money up front. So payment is easy to settle and does not involve a bunch of busybody civil servants nosing among our goods.”

“Very civilised” said Nathan. Hakan was about to give them their leave.

“You will be taken,” he said, “by a man whose job it is to accommodate you. Rory will go and fetch him shortly. It has been an honour and a pleasure to bring you here. I hope that the King of Khazar makes it possible for us to trade profitably in the future.”

“You are a credit to your people and I thank you. The payment we will settle when my slaves are sold. We will be living in a different quarter but please do not feel a stranger.”

“We have to start our journey home as soon as we have sold our goods. The river will ice up in a few weeks and it will be getting cold in our part of the world.”

“It would be a wise move to be at home in Visby with our wives and children in front of a warm fire before that happens. We will be having a celebration before we leave. It will be in about five days. I shall send you an invitation.

Do come. Our parties are legendary in Atil.”

“It will be a pleasure,” said Aalim.

The sights they could see from the dock side visibly pleased Khubayb, Naim and Aymaan.

“Master,” said Aymaan, “it is so good to see men in turbans again, and a city a real city. What a joy, food stalls in the streets, warm bread and people. People just like us.”

“Just behave yourselves,” said Aalim. “This is not a Muslim city even though there are a lot of Muslims in it. Khazarians may look like a crowd of Baghdadis on holiday but they are not. So wait until you understand the local rules before taking liberties with the natives.”

“It is a wondrous place,” said Khubayb taking in the dry spicy scented air and the frisson of heat rising before the noon had come. They all felt a satisfaction of a arrival at a destination promised, a feat accomplished, and the prospect of a mission concluded. In a short time Rory came back to the ship with a bejewelled functionary of the kingdom.

“This is Mohammed, an officer of the King. It is his job to help those who come to the Eastern Gate and see they get advantage from their visit and develop a wish to come back and trade again.”

“Indeed,” said Nathan, “how sensible, they are most hospitable to traders in Atil.”

Mohammed greeted the band of book traders with a cheery smile and commenced talking loquaciously in singsong Latin.

“Welcome traders,” he said. “You are most welcome, most welcome to the Kingdom of Khazaria the city of Atil and the Eastern Gate. I hope your trade will be most fruitful and bring you great prosperity and happiness. You had a good summer, it has been good here.”

“The summer was good,” repeated Mohammed. “It’s nearly over now. Our people are returning to the city from the steppes and tending of their crops.”

Mohammed chattered on. Aalim caught scraps of words among the verbiage. It sounded as though over the years he had honed a speech that worked well with foreigners, so he stuck to it. He wasn’t sure Mohammed actually understood the meaning of what he was saying.

Mohammed proceeded undaunted. Aalim caught snatches of references to the wealth of Khazaria.

“In the summer Khazarians leave the city and enjoy the life we once had long ago, living in tents and summerhouses tending our land and cattle. The crops will come in for storage now.”

He kept talking as they mustered their bundles out on to the wharf.

“We have wealth in our fields. Wealth comes across the deserts of the eastern lands. It comes down the great river. We have wealth in the tribute of our subject peoples from Kiev to Samara from Chernosea to the Gate of gates.”

“From the Pechnegers, the Bulgars at the Iron Gates and trading areas of the Jews at Kiev, Kherson and Feodosia.

Mohammed's effusive welcome and news bulletin continued. It was obvious that no one else could get a word in edgewise until he got to the end of it.

“The Caliphate, the Avars, Varangians and the Byzantines find it advantageous to trade here. It is the place where all roads meet and where all rivers reach the sea.”

There was a long pause.

“Thanks heavens for that,” muttered Fergal. He was not against learning about this strange place but not at this pace.

Mohammed started speaking again this time more slowly.

“A question gentleman, which quarter would you like to live in. You can choose the Christian, Jewish, Muslim or the foreign quarter with the Varangians and the rest.

“Well that is easy,” said Aalim to his companions, “majority rules. We would be most pleased to reside in the Muslim quarter.”

“We Andalusians have spent months among infidels,” he said. “People with different ideas of food and right behaviour. They have been most hospitable but it would be nice to be back among people like ourselves.”

“Now it's out,” said Fergal, playfully, “It is an Infidel I am, an infidel.”

“It's a good choice,” said Nathan thinking that living among Muslims would be closer to life in Salamanca.

“Fair enough, won’t bother me,” said Fergal “I look forward to some of the spiced southern food I keep hearing about.”

Following Mohammed’s waving gesticulations they made their way to the Muslim quarter and were soon surrounded by men wearing turbans, white robes and speaking Arabic.

Khubayb was starting to bristle with anticipation. Naim and Aymaan were wide eyed.

The burden of foreignness, of being exotic among strangers, fell from their shoulders. They could walk, talk and gesture like Andalusians and be themselves among people almost like themselves. They arrived a house with a brick base and a wooden top. It was warm, well equipped and comfortable.

“You may use this house for the period of your stay,” said Mohammed.

“You will have a servant come in the morning noon and night with food from the kitchens of the Bek, the Kagan of the king’s material affairs. I understand the King’s secretary wishes to see you tomorrow morning to arrange a meeting with the king.”

“If you need my services ask one of the soldiers who stand beside the Eastern Gate. They will fetch me to this house or to any place you require. I will take my leave.”

Fergal was impressed, room and board and a meeting with the King. They are an organised people he thought.

The night passed pleasantly. The sheets were crisp and clean and a samovar bubbled in the hearth.

The food arrived on trays with shining metal covers and wine for the Dhimmi was mysteriously set beside the table in small leather skins. Nathan and Fergal were impressed with the thoughtful courtesy implied.

The house smelled of spices, sweet fragrances. The aroma of cooking food from the street vendors wafted in the windows.

At early sun the secretary arrived, a genial man with sparkling eyes, a beaming smile and a warm sense of welcome.

“The King likes to converse widely. He has been advised of your arrival. He is intrigued by people who have come from where the earth ends. And yes it is no secret the king is to make his mind up on the matter of the religion of the Kingdom in one week’s time. The King is a man who deliberates before making important decisions.”

“He has instructed me to take you to the court this afternoon an hour after the muezzins call in your quarter.”

“He will see you individually. He asks you to do two things. Tell him of your country. And make a submission on the religion you would advise the King to adopt for the Kingdom.”

Aalim was taken aback. He had pessimistically anticipated that getting to see the King would involve long negotiations with underlings and sniffy officials. At best he had hoped bumptious minions might intercede with the King and he would have to broach the vital matter of trade with the Emirate of Andalusia with bureaucrats. But for all his negativity the possibility of knitting the Varangians into the equation of the trade with the Eastern Gate had gone well.

The Varangian King at Visby was well disposed to trade with the Emirate. If ships the ships of Andalusia could get to the portage on the other side of Hegeby it could be accomplished.

It might even be possible for the Varangians to come to Porto.

So far fortune and persistence had paid off. Now it was possible he might get a chance to influence the King's decision. His reverie on future trade left a pause in the conversation.

He returned to the matter of the King's invitation and addressed the Secretary.

"I am," he said, "a scholar but not an expert on the faith of the Prophet."

"My main purpose with the King is to discuss trade with Andalusia. I am sure more knowledgeable people than I have already appeared before the king and put the case for the true faith of Allah, blessings be upon him."

"That has happened," said the secretary. "They have put their case well, but the King is intrigued. He wishes to hear the recommendation of those who have come the longest distance to the Kingdom and he relishes making your acquaintance."

The secretary left. Aalim waited until lunchtime before having the conversation he had meant to have in the morning with Khubayb.

"What are your plans for the day?"

"I thought shopping and praying might be in order," said Khubayb. "Those boys need reminding that they are Muslims."

Aalim raised an eyebrow. “Well best of luck with that. Do have a yarn with one of the locals to see how things are done around here. And remind those two that whatever they buy in the Bazaars they have to carry home with them and it’s a long way.”

The time arrived and the hour appointed quickly came to hand. The cheery secretary escorted Aalim, Nathan and Fergal across the city to the gate of the palace into what was a city within a city.

The plaza before the palace was vast and filled with the important and the lesser important. From the varied dress and regalia of those present it was evident that they had come from many exotic places. A number must have already made submissions to the King and others had yet to do so.

The trio found themselves nodding and paying respects to darkly dressed Greek Christians, bejewelled Byzantine Bishops, Muslim clergy and strangely robed Indians and Orientals of the most varietal description on their way to the palace gate.

They entered a large burnt brick building with carpets on the floor and sheets of silk brocades falling from the walls. The sumptuousness overwhelmed Fergal. To Aalim it brought back memories of home.

The King’s Secretary left them in the hands of servants who showed them to upholstered seats. After a while he returned beaming.

“Good,” he said, “the King will meet you individually. Who is to be first.”

Nathan as decided stepped forward. "I will have the honour."

The party remained seated as Nathan went through a large portal.

Nathan entered the room.

The first thing to overwhelm his attention was the King sitting on a throne garbed in reddish silk embroidered with gold. He was a heavy thickset man with an air of action about him.

On a lower level sat two men who Nathan took to be advisors. He bowed and took stood directly in front of the dais.

The King nodded to his advisors. The one on the left, an older man nodded and said in Latin, "My name is Kerch."

A younger man with a hooked nose and a furrowed brow sitting on his right said, "My name is Prost."

Prost commenced with the first question.

"What the King would like you to do is tell him about yourself. Where you come from. Where is it? What do you do there? What are the customs of your people? And finally the King would like you to tell him what are the benefits of your religion for the him and his people."

The King will interrupt you when he wishes.
We will have questions."

He nodded which Nathan took as an invitation to commence.

Nathan rose and bowed to the King and to the two advisors.

“I am Nathan, a Jew, son of the Rabbi Joseph of Salamanca in the Emirate of Andalusia. “I am a merchant. My trade is to trade.”

My King is his eminence Al-Hakam the Emir of Al Andalusia of the family of the Ummayyads. He rules our beloved Andalusia from the most beautiful city in the world, Cordoba.”

“Of the faiths coming before you we Jews are the oldest. In the thousands of years since Abraham we have kept the covenant made by our God, Yahweh, with us his chosen people.”

“God gave to Moses the laws to guide us, to guide us and keep us in his favour. We have weakened many times. But we are confident that we have a future of joy and purpose if we keep his laws, in this world he has made and on the return of the Messiah when he returns to take us to paradise.”

Nathan became conscious that accentuating the love of God for the Jews as a chosen people might be taken as an oblique criticism of the worth of the King’s current Deity.

“Al Andalusia is a place of tolerance. Jews are treated with respect and we are free to follow our faith, as are the Christians.”

“My recommendation is that whatever religion your majesty decides for your kingdom that Khazaria continue to be a place of tolerance where all religions can live in peace. The prosperity of trade depends upon it.”

“My submission to you is that the practices you have in Khazar and we have in Andalusia are the best way of ordering religion and trade.”

Toleration of differences and freedom to trade is the way of prosperity.”

Prost waved his hand.

“There are many religions among the people of Khazaria and those who trade here. We have Turks, Jews Muslims, Greek Christians, Roman Christians Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrians as well as Varangian, Finnic, and Slavic religions.”

“The Kingdom you live in is ruled by Moslems. But you are Jewish. If we were to become a Jewish Kingdom would that also be tolerant. Would those people who are not Jewish be able to practise their religion as they do now.”

Nathan nodded his head and answered.

“That would not change because the King would still be the supreme ruler. Since the fall of the Temple there has been no central authority in the Jewish religion. Power will not pass from the King’s hands to a higher authority than the King.

It is in the nature of the Jewish religion that we do not seek control over those who are not members of our religion. The words of the Torah command us to be kind to the stranger.”

“Our religion says we are a chosen people. It does not make us superintendents of the virtues or faults of other religions.”

“Rabbis can exclude a member of our congregation from our presence. But we have no authority over others. We are not a religion that hungers for converts.”

There was a pause as Nathan ended the answer to the question.

Kerch asked.

“You paint a picture of tolerance by Jews for other religions. Some religions seem to persecute not others but those among their own who do not comply with the exactitude of doctrine required by their authorities.”

“If we become Jewish will we spend our time persecuting ‘heretics’ who are have different views on what being a Jew means?”

He left the question hanging in the air with a graceful wave of his hand.

Nathan answered.

“There have been disagreements, many disagreements among Jews. The disputation and bitterness in the Temple when Titus besieged it is well known. We are a people consumed by the small print of laws in the Torah. The search for the will of God among his written laws is a joy that deepens our love for God.”

“Since the fall of the Temple our pursuit of truth does not compel us to ask the civil law to destroy Jews who are in disagreement with the general views of the majority of Jews.

In the last 700 years guided by the wisdom of our rabbis we have become I hope a more tolerant and wiser people.”

Prost raised his hand.

“Christians who have come before us say your people are descendents of murderers.”

“They say your ancestors killed their God. Would becoming Jews join us in this guilt in their eyes?”

“It is true my lord that we have been vilified over the years for the fact that Jews put the Christ to death. The Romans killed him but it was done at the request of the Jewish authorities.”

“Christ was a Jew himself. His disciples were Jews and kept the laws of Moses. His views were disturbing to a number of factions in the Jewish community of the time and most certainly disconcerting to the Roman authorities.”

“What happened was the death of a Jew at the hands of Jews, sadly not an unusual event. It was not an act of malevolence against Christians since there were as yet no Christians.”

“I say to you King that Christ was crucified by human beings. That they were Jewish was of little account. His teachings were viewed at the time as a challenge to the civil and ecclesiastical power and the challenge was met in an all too human way, with his death.”

Nathan stopped talking. The King again waved his hand.

“How is it that there is no place or Kingdom that is Jewish. Surely if you are God’s chosen people he would have provided a kingdom for his favoured people.”
That’s an astute question thought Nathan.

“It may have happened because we have not kept the covenant,” he said. “For that reason God has seen fit to cast us out into the Diaspora and leave us dependent upon the grace and favour of kingdoms from the edges of Persia to Andalusia.”

“But in all our scattering we implored God to keep the covenant, to remember us, not let us slip from his mind, ‘zokhreinu’. In our prayers we ask each year, each day, that the temple be restored and that we return to Jerusalem.”

The King nodded.

“So if my Kingdom becomes Jewish I am to have a people whose ambition is to move somewhere else,” said the King with a smile.

Nathan grinned at the quiet jest beneath the King’s remark.

“It is a hope my lord, a fond and fervent hope.”

The King smiled, again. Kerch lifted his hand.

“Many of the Jews who have come from Byzantium after the recent persecution brought a stricter form of their religion than we have in Khazaria. If our Kingdom becomes Jewish will we have to adhere to these strict practices.”

“Would we have to circumcise our people and follow your convoluted rules on food and diet.“

Nathan was starting to understand that he would have to raise the quality of his arguments an intellectual notch or two.

“Let me repeat that in the Jewish religion there is, no central authority that you need satisfy as to the purity of your religious practice. You might choose all the laws of the Torah or some of them.”

Nathan felt he was treading on soft ground.

Misleading a King on theological matters had consequences. What if Khazaria became a loose living society calling itself Jewish and the blame for this was sheeted home to him. Still he thought these people were not ethnic Jews. This was a new endeavour and new rules would have to accompany it. He might as well make them as anyone else. Besides there was no lack of written instructions of what it entailed to be a Jew.

“It’s my contention,” he went on, “that each Khazarian would in their own heart, decide how Jewish they would want to be. Let those who wish to be strict do so and those who feel they can meet their obligations to God in a less hidebound way follow their desires. The enforcement of a level of strictness is not a matter that need concern the King.”

Nathan could not tell how this answer had been received. There was an air of inscrutability in the people before him that he was not used to.

Impassivity was a practiced art among traders. There were occasions when you did not want the other side know when bidding had reached an acceptable price. They might bid higher.

This inscrutability was different. Maybe it was a cultural habit born out of something in this place, these people. He did not know if the nuances of his argument were appreciated. It held him back from pressing home a point. He received no cue to what had been accepted as having merit or soft peddling some point of argument that he could see had hit a nerve or wounded a sensitivity.

Kerch raised a question.

“Can the Khazars make a covenant with the Jewish God? Are not Jews born from Jews, whose mothers are Jews.”

Nathan was coming to terms with the knowledge his questioners had about Judaism. They had learnt much from the Jewish presenters who had preceded him.

He was straying into an area that for all its religious dressing was political. He might have a future as a diplomat but if he made a theological mistake or caused a clash of countries he might not.

Could the Khazars join the Jewish covenant with Abraham?

A good question and one he hadn't thought of. This discussion was like piloting a high prowed boat through rapids. The risks were high for a wrong answer but the right one did not stand out among the shoals and rocks of dialogue.

He thought quickly. A covenant had two parties. The Khazars were one. What about the other party God. There was the answer.

“Whether a covenant with you is acceptable to God is a matter you can leave to God to decide,” he said. “It is finding favour with God that matters.”

God had better, thought Nathan, back this opinion or he Nathan would have issues with him at one stage, likely on his death.

Prost nodded and asked, “Will other Jews welcome us into their religion, consider us Jews, as parties to the covenant.”

They have thought this through thought Nathan. First they establish they will be part of a covenant then they make sure other Jews will sign on to this idea. It would be strange Jews who would not welcome a Kingdom into the faith he thought.

“I think Jews will rightly wait on the decision of God. To say before the day of judgement that a good and honourable people could not be Jewish would be to second guess God.”

“On that basis I think your becoming Jews would be acceptable to the large majority of Jews in the world.”

“The thing to remember is that the covenant God made with Abraham was not a covenant with a kingdom or a people. It was a promise made to every individual Jew as a person, as a human being that he would enjoy the love of his God who made him. God who is all powerful and all knowing agreed to stay his hand in judgement and allow us to learn ourselves the errors of sin and injustice.”

Kerch raised his hand.

“If we become Jews will we be among those who will welcome the Messiah and receive the blessings and bounties mentioned in the book of Daniel.”

These Khazarians were methodical sharp-witted traders thought Nathan. Now that they had agreement that they could join the Jewish bargain with God, they wanted to know that they were going get the rewards thereto.

“I believe that to be so. The rewards of heaven are for those who keep the covenant.”

“On the day of judgement you will be weighed in the balance and hopefully will not have been found wanting.”

“If you keep the covenant you will be among those who will greet the messiah and enter paradise, whose names will be in the book.”

There was a long pause. Prost spoke.

“Is there any other matter the King should know about your religion.”?

“If you change your religion you will as a consequence become a people who can read and write books. To be a people of literacy is a great boon my lords. A book is like a boat from the past that can carry knowledge across the present and take on more freight to sail off into the future.”

“You are also King choosing an alphabet and a script. The choice lies between the Jewish alphabet and script, the Greek alphabet and script, the Roman alphabet and script and the Arabic alphabet and script.”

“With your selection of an alphabet and a script comes the inheritance of all the books that are written in that script.”

“Those books will be available to your rabbis and scholars when they learn Hebrew, the language of the Torah.”

“My lords the Torah contains God’s covenant, his commandments, the history of our people and their voyage down through the ages. It is our guide and source of constant admonition to keep our covenant with God.”

“The choice of a religion and book is not exclusive. You can

follow the example of the Caliphate and Emirate, and arrange for the translation of other scripts, Latin Greek, Hindi, and learn from other books of wisdom.”

There was a pause. Nathan found it hard to guess what impact his words were having. Was his argument advancing his case or was it falling in a well-mannered way by the wayside. He did not know.

And then it ended. The king looked at both his advisors. There was an almost imperceptible signal from both of them that Nathan’s presentation was over.

The King took his cue.

“Thank you for your advice and answers. We will consider them. I will be mindful of your request to continue to trade freely with the Varangians. I will welcome the traders of Andalusia to the Kingdom. Please come to Atil when it is convenient to trade with us.

May your trade be prosperous and your stay among us be fruitful.”

Nathan left the room. He had the King’s assurance that he would trade with Andalusia. What they had come to achieve had been achieved.

He came back into the antechamber and sat beside Aalim and Fergal.

“What was it like,” asked Fergal?

“Thorough, very thorough,” said Nathan, “They are astute, knowledgeable and pragmatic.”

“They have already heard a number of presentations and they have listened well and built on their knowledge from each to the next.”

The interlude lasted about ten minutes until the Secretary came again through the curtain.

“Gentlemen, next please.”

Fergal rose and walked through the curtain. Nothing he had ever seen prepared him for the sumptuousness of what he now regarded. The splendour of the room took his breath away.

The brocades of red and gold so absorbed his attention that it was some time before his gaze rested on the seated figures of the King and his advisors.

The introductions were conducted with formality. Prost set the manner in which his presentation would be conducted.

Fergal bowed to the assembly and took his place standing directly in front of the dais.

He was conscious of the contrast of his plain woollen habit with the ostentation and ornamentation around him.

The King nodded to his advisors and then to Fergal.

“My name is Fergal, I am from the island of Ireland at the further end of the world.”

“Beyond my land there is no other place, not of land only the ice and fire of Ultima Thule. We are a small island of five provinces with a High King and five Kings of provinces and lesser Kings within those provinces. A land of kings my lord.”

“I am come of the Kingdom of Hymanie in the Kingdom of Connaught. My family name and that of my King is O’Kelly. I am a monk. My monastery is the monastery of Ciaran, Clonmacnois on the banks of the Shannon.”

“Some centuries ago the people of Ireland laid aside our old Gods and became Christians. Today all of the island is Christian. The man who converted us to Christianity was called Patrick.”

“It was a peaceful, persuasive and gentle conversion. No one died in the making of it. We kept our customs and way of life and we did not dispense with our ancient laws. They remain part of the legacy of our people.”

“Only those practices and laws which were in direct contradiction of our new religion were put to one side.”

“Alone among all the Christians we have kept in our minds the old stories of our people and our land.”

“I am telling you there is a manner of Christianity that does not take away all the previous ways and culture of a people.”

“As you contemplate a change of your religion from a religion that is much like our old one I draw your attention to the way our change was achieved and the peaceful way it came about.”

Kerch raised his hand.

“The old Gods are they still worshipped in Ireland,” he asked

“Lugh the mighty and all the heathen Gods are heard in our history and stories but they are no longer heeded.”

It is understood by the people of Ireland that they are of a day long gone, of a time before we became followers of Christ Jesus.”

“The old Gods lived in the lakes, the trees, and landscape of Ireland. We are as enchanted by our land, our trees and forests, the rivers and loughs and wells of our green and fertile country as ever we were.”

“But instead of seeing Gods in these material things, believing they are in themselves Gods we now understand that God created them and that the one God is in them and in their design and fashioning and it is in their beauty and grandeur we see his face.”

Fergal paused.

“Are you sure that a change of religion in the King’s domains would be as peaceful as that in Ireland,” asked Prost?

“It might help your answer if I explain a little of our religion.”

“Tengri is our God, our chief God among Gods, he is the creator of the visible and invisible world.”

“His form is a pure, white goose that flies constantly over an endless expanse of water, which represents time. Time passes as Tengri flies. The sun and the moon are Tengri’s eyes.”

“Beneath this water, Ak Ana the White Mother calls to him ‘create, create’. To overcome his loneliness, Tengri has created Er Kishi, who is not as pure or as white as Tengri and together they made the world. Er Kishi has turned into a devilish character and seeks to mislead people and draw them into darkness.”

“Tengri tries to provide people with guidance through sacred animals that he sends among them. If we change our religion all this will go and be no more. Can we mere humans take the risk and anger Tengri, our people will say.”

“Tengri gives us death and gave us life, they will say and they will tremble at the consequences if we should abandon him.”

Prost folded his arms and nodded to Fergal.

“You are right my lord to consider this. With all respect I have heard nothing in your description that would lead me to think that your change of religion would be different from ours.”

“I think you have understood from what I have said that the renunciation of their old Gods was an issue for each of the Kings of Ireland who embraced the words of Patrick.

Like your people they were very aware of the risk they took upsetting the spiritual lords of the world who had ruled their lives for so long”

“When people get a new God, one who is the creator of the cosmos, of them and all that is in their world, they have the capacity to forget the power of the Gods who went before.”

“When they have genuinely decided that a change will be a good thing then they begin to value the new more than the old.”

“Time passes and the people who were alive at the conversion pass on. To later generations the new is the established and soon regarded as having always having been there, as was the old.”

“I think my lord that our experience in Ireland is that there will be an embrace of the new and the quiet discard of the old.”

Kerch waved his hand.

“It seems to us from what we have heard that it is the custom of the Christians to see that no other religion is tolerated. Only their religion is allowed. Is that true in your country?”

Fergal was guarded in his response.

“There is no other religion in Ireland. Few strangers come among us so the question of tolerating others does not arise.” Fergal felt as he said it that the answer was lame and unconvincing.

“I would like to think if there were other religions we would show forbearance,” he added.

Kerch indicated he wished to intervene in the discussion.

“It has been said to us that in future we will find difficulty ruling an empire while we continue to be believers in shamans.”

“They are prone to sudden notions. Matters of state can become a gamble. It has been emphasised that the answer to this uncertainty is the adoption of a religion with a book.”

“What was the effect in your country when you adopted a book and an alphabet and changed to a religion based on a book with rules and prescriptions for behaviour, which came from outside your people’s experience.”

Like Nathan, Fergal was starting to understand that he had best rise to the standard of the discussion, a standard that was higher than he had contemplated.

Fergal cleared his voice.

“That, my lord, was the real transformation of our country. The coming of reading and writing changed us forever. It meant that our monks and learned people have the value of reading the writings of men long ago from the empires of Rome, Greece and Hispania.”

“This has brought wisdom and learning which we did not have before. We remained who we had always been, lovers of words. Now we can preserve our thoughts through time. We are no longer dependent on the fallible memories of our bards and poets.”

“More than that it is we to a large extent who have brought learning back to the lands of the Franks.”

“Monks such as I have devoted their lives to the making of books and the spread of knowledge and religion among the Franks.”

The King smiled and indicated he would like to ask a question.

“If we were to become Christians could the Pope or the Patriarch in Constantinople tell our king what to do?”

Fergal replied.

“That is not the case in Ireland but we are a small place far from the concerns of Rome.”

“We were asked and reluctantly complied with requests from the Roman church. We have changed how we wear our hair and the celebration days of some feasts. We are not to know what requests for changes to our ways might come in the future.”

“We are a religion of monasteries not territories ruled by Bishops and priests. We follow the rules of the founders of our monasteries and the strictures of our abbots.”

“So,” asked Kerch, “tell me what is the benefit of your religion above that of the Muslims and Jews.”

“My lord we are like them followers of the God of Abraham. But our lord Jesus Christ gave to us as our religious inheritance the belief that all individuals are equal in the sight of God. He did not say that we are equal to each other. “

“However, he did say that our God holds us in equal regard and values each individual as the same worth.”

“God loves the slave as much as the king. As followers of the one God we must take his example and love one another as God loves us. So much so that we must love our enemies and when our enemy smites us we must turn the other cheek.”

“It means we have a quite different view of the world and those in it. We are asked by Christ to hold that each and every person is a person of worth. A person of worth to our God and therefore a person of worth to us.”

“In our regard for each person no matter who they are we are different from the other religions.”

Kerch asked.

“I am puzzled by the Christian God being divided in three and disturbed by how much dispute and death that has caused among Christians.”

“We believe,” said Fergal after nearly 500 years the matter of the threesome nature of God has been agreed in the belief in the Trinity. We think doctrinal disagreement is behind us.”

“We believe God has three powers. God the Father created and creates the world and brings into existence all that is.”

“God the Son, Jesus Christ through redeeming us from sin by his death on the cross keeps the world in place by his divine will and his offer of forgiveness of our sins on the last day when he will come in judgement. He has made a new covenant with those that follow him.”

“God the Holy Ghost, the spirit is with and within us at all times understanding that his creatures have free will and reason and allowing us to use those facilities.”

“There are not three separate Gods but one God and the three personalities of God are in the one God indivisible.”

“It is a mystery of the faith like many others of our beliefs and we trust in God and have faith in his wisdom and know that on the last day these mysteries will be understood.”

The King intervened

“Tell me of the trading in your land,” asked the King.

“The trade of my land is cattle. It is all about the feeding and raising of cattle. There are no roads or towns or settled places. Traders come to the houses of the kings and the families. Our wants are simple and our trade is cattle.”

“Wealth is reckoned in the numbers of them and recompense for all wrongs is measured out in payment of them.”

There was a long pause. The King looked at Prost and Kerch and nodded, he turned to Fergal.

“Thank you for your honesty and the soundness of your explanation. We are wiser for your coming.”

Fergal left the room with the feeling that he had been in the presence of intelligent men who had a pretty good idea what they were about.

He sensed they had a systematic strategy to sift the options open to the Khazar kingdom and make sure it's chosen future was as well thought out as it could be.

Fergal returned to the outer room and nodded to Aalim.

Aalim went through the curtain.

He stood in front of the King and his advisors with some trepidation. He waited through the introductions and the outline of what was expected of him.

Then he spoke.

“My lord I bring you greetings from the Emir of Andalusia. He wishes you long life and that you and your Kingdom be safe and prosperous.”

“I am the Emir's librarian, the keeper of the books in the library of Cordova.”

“This library exists because like the Caliphate we place a great value on wisdom, on the exploration of knowledge and the understanding of the learning of those who have been in the world before we came. We hope to leave to those who come after us a repository of established wisdom.”

“My Emir sent me here my Lord to ask you to retain your wise policy of allowing trade with all who come to your Kingdom. It is the desire of the Emir to add to our prosperity and yours by trading with your Kingdom through the Varangians.”

“In that way my lord Andalusia and Khazar will be able to exchange goods and bring prosperity to our peoples.”

“Your Majesty we have some concern that your change of religion will hinder the development of that prospect of trade.”

“It is our apprehension that further conquests by Charlemagne down the Danube will create a Christian world from the coast of Francia to the banks of the Dnieper.”

“It is the considered view of my Emir that if your majesty chooses to become a Christian you will be drawn into the orbit of Charlemagne.”

Prost raised his hand and asked,

“Why do you assume if we were Christian we would be drawn into the web of Charlemagne? His forces are still a long way from our borders. If the King chooses to become a Christian a closer association with the empire of the Byzantines would surely be a more likely outcome? The Byzantines have emphasised the benefits of Christianity to us and the benefits we would receive from a closer association with that kingdom.”

Aalim replied, “you are quite right, you are closer to the rulers in Constantinople.”

“We see our circumstances as no better if your majesty falls under the undue influence of the Byzantines. You would become part of a Christian alliance sealed off from our trade.”

Aalim felt he had made his case but it was a nebulous one. All he had said so far was that if the King became a Christian it would be bad for business, Andalusian business. It was a stretch to think that the King would give consideration to the interests of Andalusia which he had just heard off ahead of any other concerns he might have.

Prost raised his hand.

“You are familiar with the number of traders who come to our city. Should his Majesty’s choose Islam as the state religion would we be free to trade with the Christians?”

Aalim replied.

“My lord you will be aware the prophet Mohammed blessed be his name was himself a trader. We hold traders in high regard. In Andalusia everyone is free to trade. We find difficulty trading with the Franks but still do so through intermediaries like the Jews. If your Kingdom became followers of the one true God blessed be his name you could continue to trade with the Christians?”

“But that said your majesty it would be a disadvantage to the Emir’s kingdom if you become a Kingdom whose source of advice was the Caliphate in Baghdad.”

“Ideally it would be the best outcome if your majesty were to become a Muslim and maintain your independence from the Caliphate. We are not sure this is possible in the real world.”

“Permit me my lords to exercise some candour and come to the crux of the matter.”

“It is about access to the Northern Silk Road. It is our hope that we will have access to the Northern Silk Eastern Gate via the Varangians.”

“If you become a Christian or a Moslem that might not happen.”

“We of the Emirate in Spain and the Caliphate in Bagdad are of the same religion but there is a dynastic dispute involved. The Emir’s grandfather escaped from the Caliphate when the Abassids took control of the Caliphate some fifty years ago.”

“The Caliphate controls the southern Silk Road,” Aalim continued.

“It is stinting in the access it allows to our country and other Kingdoms in the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Your Kingdom controls the northern Silk Road.”

He could sense a rising curiosity in his audience.

Aalim was conscious of the delicacy of the argument he was advancing. If word leaked out that he had spoken against the Khazars becoming Muslims he would not be popular in the Caliphate.

“We have polite reasonable relations with the Caliphate. The current Caliph Harun el Rashid is a wise and learned ruler.”

“But we cannot rule out that one day a successor would close access to the Silk Road to us.”

“I have come a great distance to meet your highness with the hope of setting up a new trading route for Andalusia, with the Varangians, to trade down the great river.”

“So my earnest submission to you is to earnestly protect your independence and your policy of trading with all who are your neighbours.”

Kerch nodded in Aalim’s direction.

“We are a prosperous and peaceful country with many who pay tribute to us. Were our King to choose the Muslim religion would this level of tolerance be possible under the beliefs of your faith.”

“I think I can say,” said Aalim, “with some certainty that the Muslim religion is the most tolerant religions in dealing with those of our subjects with beliefs other than our own.”

“We are tolerant of the people of the book. We tax the Dhimmi and they are not equal with Moslems. They are free to practice their religions so long as they do not try to convert Moslems or make loud protestations of their faith in public.”

Prost cleared his throat and asked

“It is our observations of the Muslims that their religion is strict and disciplined.”

“Will we not have trouble imposing that strictness on our citizens?”

Aalim replied, “You are correct my lord. The prescriptions of our religion are explicitly stated in the Quran. They are a submission to God. These are duties embraced with joy by Muslims. It is their submission to the mercy of Allah.”

“The followers of Islam are free in one way that Christians are not. Our religion does not hinder the investigation of the world as God made it.”

“The exploration of the wonders of mathematics, of the natural world, of the science of the Greeks is encouraged in our Kingdoms. We investigate truth in the real world.”
Prost raised his hand slightly.

“Is the book of your religion easy to learn?”

“It is in Arabic my lord and to avoid arguments of translation it will always remain in Arabic.”

“Children learn the Quran with delight and peoples of all languages and creeds find its straightforward clarity and instructions on how to practice a holy life in accordance with the wishes of Allah most beneficial”

Kerch nodded and asked

“The benefit we would find in books has been impressed on us. Are there any drawbacks to books and their use in religion?”

Aalim thought this rather an unfair question to put to a Librarian.

But he could only tell the truth as he saw it whether it spelled advantage for his trade or not.

“I must observe that the coming of more and more learning in books has led to a temptation among the religious leaders to codify and make rigid some of the more petty rules of religion.”

“In the Muslim religion the strictures of the Holy Koran were followed strictly but the Koran does not take concern with the petty matters of criminal actions.”

“Until recently it was really the laws and practices of the local citizens that were followed.”

“Recently there is a move to make the way of the life of Mohammed the guide to our criminal law.”

“Writing down theories of law is leading to a much more defined rigid and enduring strictness of the laws thereby setting aside the wisdom of the local people learned over centuries.”

“A drawback of books is a tendency to freeze in time the thinking of men and leave them in the thrall of the written word.”

“In the time before books, the lore and customs of peoples were passed down the ages by words and dialogue and men could come to understandings without the need to challenge or differ from a written text in a book.”

“Books may lead to sterile scholarship and the pontifications and squabbles of lawyers.”

Kerch nodded and posed a question.

“Books or the directives of any leader of the religion do not bind our King under our present religion. If the king embraces Islam will the religious leader of Islam give orders or direction to my lord the King?”

“My lord in Islam this problem does not arise. There is no difference in what is required of the King and his subjects. All is a unity. The law of Islam is the law of the land.”

There was a short period of silence.

Prost spoke.

“Please understand that we have questioned a number of authorities and scholars from the Muslim religion.”

“They have given impressive and valued advice.”

If we have not canvassed a large amount of topics with you it is not because of lack of interest but simply the weight of the advice that has gone before.”

“I am sure his Majesty will pay attention and heed to your remarks on the trading position of your Kingdom.”

Aalim understood his presentation was over.

The King interrupted.

“Please convey my greetings and friendship to the Emir and tell him I am most interested in trading with his emissaries and traders. I will tell the Varangians that it is my wish that they trade as intermediaries on your behalf until such days may come when the ships of your kingdom can come through the Bosphorus to our ports.”

“May you have a safe journey home and your trade be prosperous.”

Aalim bowed and left the room. He entered the room where Nathan and Fergal awaited him.

“How did you feel it went?”

“Good,” said Aalim. “I feel confident that our wishes for trade will come to pass no matter which religion the King chooses.

We can return to Cordova and tell the Emir that there are good prospects for trade with the Varangians. and the Khazars.

“Our mission has been successful.”

“The only remaining concern we have is the choice the King makes in the matter of religion.”

“We must hope that his choice will be a wise one and that it will lead to peace and prosperity and not war and havoc.”

A Decision is Made

Chapter 12

Aymaan and Naim were verging on abuse of their host's generosity with their prodigious appetites.

The carefree luxury of meals delivered by servants and having nothing to do all day but wander through the markets and mysteries of a city full of the exotica from every corner of the world was beginning to be taken for granted.

The life of luxurious ease would end soon and the adjustment back to reality might come hard thought Aalim. So long as there was no legacy of indolence all might be well.

Aalim tried to draw the line when Aymaan came back from the market with an exotic creature he called a monkey. It was an appealing beast but he wondered if it could be fed and managed on the journey home.

“Master it will be as my child,” said Aymaan, “as my own born.”

“There is a family resemblance,” remarked Khubayb. It would be easier to manage a child thought Aalim.

“Can we be sure sea captains, who we depend on for travel, will want such a creature on their ships,” replied Aalim, “And horses, might a horse startle at such a fidgety beast as this and throw you to the ground.”

“Please, please,” pleaded Aymaan, “Let me keep it. If it causes trouble I will get rid of it.”

Aalim could see the falseness of that promise. As time went by the attachment between boy and monkey would grow. What near to death-defying calamity would it take to force Aymaan to part with the monkey?

He could see no way through the matter that did not involve risk or tears at some point. If he put his foot down with a downright refusal Aymaan’s resentment at his decision would smoulder and become a hindrance to the journey.

He was at a loss what to do until he remembered who was in charge of this expedition, him.

“I will let you keep that beast until it causes trouble. If there is trouble be prepared for a dire result. If the beast is not a problem life will continue for it and you.”

That at least put Aymaan on notice that the matter had not passed by and that if there were a problem consequences would follow.

He spoke to Khubayb as he left the house.

“I am putting this matter of Aymaan’s monkey on your shoulders. If it causes problems ring it’s neck or if we have time liberate it or sell it.”

The thing Aalim was beginning to like about soldiers was that they could make decisions of life and death quickly. Khubayb nodded resignedly.

The one thing soldiers knew was that life was never the popularity contest it was for scholars and politicians. You met people and you either killed them or you did not.

An aspect of management Aalim was getting to like was delegation.

After the debate about the monkey subsided a messenger arrived at the door.

“Masters, masters,” he called from the door, “A message from the Varangians.”

“You are,” he called in Arabic, “You are bidden this evening one hour before sunset to the house of Hakan.”

“He bids you to a celebration of his fortune in trading and a farewell before he and his men commence their journey back up the great river.”

“Convey to him that we accept his invitation with pleasure and will join him at that hour,” said Aalim.

The messenger hurried away.

“What is a celebration,” asked Naim?

“We will let the event describe itself,” said Aalim. “Oh rest assured it will be just to your taste,” said Aalim. “I think you will enjoy this celebration Naim, yes rest assured it will bring you enjoyment.

“ I have always thought young men were barbarians in the making,” he said

“Now after years of discipline and the oversight of the army and your parents here you are in a foreign land invited to a celebration with barbarians with I suspect the opportunity to confirm my thesis.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent in anticipation of the event. Beards were shaved or trimmed and clothes selected. It appeared that Naim and Aymaan had spent a deal of money on some interesting apparel.

“Swords,” said Khubayb, asking his perennial question, “Will we bring swords.”

“No I don’t think that would be wise or necessary,” said Aalim. “Perhaps a small dagger not brazenly displayed.”

Was there anywhere Khubayb went that he did not bring a sword? My life is spent with a pen and security he thought. What must it feel like to feel the constant need for a means of defending yourself against a threat to your life.

They arrived at the appointed hour to a large sprawling house with an inner courtyard filled with people, braziers and meat searing on spits in all parts of the compound.

It was one of the most riotous affairs that any of them had ever seen. It reminded Khubayb of the aftermath of a siege of a small city, certainly in the noise level.

Hakan had invited all and sundry and sundry obviously covered a wide range. There were Persians, Armenians, traders from Samarkand, Bulgarians, Muslims Christians and Jews. There was beer in buckets and slave girls in profusion. The fumes of hashish wafted through the garden mingling with

the smells of meats and savouries searing on the embers of the fires. The Varangians insisted on sporadically breaking out in wild singing.

The melee ebbed and flowed in madness and intensity only brought to silence by displays of belly dancing and harp playing. Hakan invited Fergal, Nathan, Rory and Aalim into the kitchen.

“Come and see this wonderful machine that I have bought.”

On a bench in the centre of the room was an apparatus made of spiralling glass and copper. A mechanic was tinkering with it. They leaned against a bench while Hakan and the minder of the machine tinkered with it.

The tinkering man was informative. “It is,” he said, “The invention of the most wondrous and esteemed scientist Jabir ibn Hayyan a man of profound ability to understand the world.”

“Indeed,” said Fergal, “And what pray tell is his claim to fame.”

“Jabir ibn Hayyan is a man of illustrious learning and discovery. His mind,” said the tinkerer, “has ranged over the classification of all things. He has divined a chemistry of the whole world.”

“Quite,” said Aalim intrigued by the man’s mellifluous language.

He wondered if anyone in this city of traders could tell you anything without giving you the full brochure speech about

the origin and benefits of whatever they were on about.

“Yes,” said the tinkerer, “the wise Jabir has divined the world into three categories, spirits, metals and non-malleable substances.”

“Indeed,” said Nathan. “And it’s a big world to be examining for categories, it must have taken him a while.”

He looked across at Rory. That question sounded like something the Irishman would ask. Was he falling into the Irish habit of asking jocular unsensibly sensible questions?

“Well however long it took him,” said the tinkerer, “He got the job done.”

“This machine” said the tinkerer, ”produces, from the designs of the good Jabir, spirits.

“Spirits,” said Aalim, “what are spirits, can you get djinns out of liquid?”

“The wise Jabir” said the tinkerer with the machine, “says that spirits are substances that are created with heat but evaporate without heat. He has written many wondrous books, Kitab al-Kimya, Kitab el-Sab’een, the book of kingdoms, the book of balances.

“I shall seek those out, Jabir ibn Hayyan, I trust I shall remember in the morning,” said Aalim.

The tinkering went on amid the tumult coming from the rest of the house. Aalim could only consider it an out of control orgy. Finally having lit a small fire under the machine the

tinkerer pronounced himself satisfied. In a few moments the machines started dripping a clear liquid into a small cup.

“It is spirituous and strongly alcoholic so only infidels can drink it,” the tinkerer said.

Nathan, Hakan, Rory and Fergal were offered a sip. It had a strong burning taste.

“I understand,” said the tinkerer, “it is a strong alcohol. Here try it with a small touch of black currant cordial.”

The foursome were of the opinion it was very interesting. And after a few more experimental tastes they decided it was more than interesting.

“It lights and gives warmth,” said Fergal.

“It is a wondrous thing to mix in oils and perfumes,” said the tinkerer.

“I think,” said Hakan, “that it will be very popular with Varangians and it might not be for the making of perfumes. I am pleased with my purchase.”

“I think the Irish would like a drop of this. It would take them half the time to get merry,” said Rory.

The celebration raged on into the night. Hakan and Fergal never strayed far from the spirit conjuring machine of the much blessed Jabir ibn Hayyan.

Aalim decided he would arrange to pay Hakan before the latter became too inebriated to remember he had been paid.

The evening was not complete without a series of happy doleful speeches from all parties. Farewells were made and glorious memories revived of their days on the river.

It was a night to remember even if few present could remember in any detail exactly what happened.

Aalim, Fergal and Nathan stumbled home through the streets of the city of the Eastern Gate.

They were happy. Their mission had succeeded.

Aalim did a head count next morning and was content that all had made it home safely. Their condition was piteous. Bleary eyes, raging headaches and weariness were the fate of all. They spent the whole day recovering.

Aalim was not sure that the piteous moans of Aymaan and Naim were real or histrionic. He was not himself in a position to sit in judgement. Fergal said that whatever Arabic spirit he had been imbibing it had a kick like a mule and left your head in no better state than a mules.

Nathan said nothing and simply nodded agreement. The following night was a night of long sleeps and the avoidance of loud noises and heated conversations.

The next day Aalim Fergal and Nathan spent talking to the clergy and philosophers who had come to the most unusual event of their lives. Nathan was busy making the acquaintance of the city's traders.

There was a great deal of anticipation of what the King might decide. His decision was not a mere trading arrangement.

In trading arrangements decisions on price and quality might occasion a loss of trade for some. There might be gains for all. However, with the turn of fate and circumstances that could change in a short time.

The decision of the King on the religion of the people Khazaria would have long lasting consequences. It would change the mental inheritance of their descendents. It would shape the history they would inherit and the history they would forget.

A new religion would bring ideas they had never heard before. It was a change that would seep deep into the sinews and marrow of the society.

The suspense built up over two more days until the morning they assembled before the king.

The hall was full of a polyglot of the peoples from the Persian border to the shores of the Atlantic. The King had canvassed widely for opinion, knowledge and wisdom.

When all were seated and the hall was quiet the King's secretary came from the curtains on the far end of the dais and coming to the front of the raised stage began speaking.

“My good people, the King thanks you for your attendance. He is grateful to you for coming to the Kingdom and offering him advice on which religion our King and we the Khazars should adopt.”

“The King is mindful of the time and wisdom you have put at his disposal and the long distances you have travelled and inconveniences you have undergone in coming to his court.”

“He wishes you a swift return to the duties and concerns you have among your own people.”

“He is now going to announce his decision.”

The king came through the curtain with a swish of silk and ceremony. A small boy accompanied him and stood at his side. A servant came with a glass of water and placed it on a table low and to his left.

The King bowed. The assembled company bowed.

“Ambassadors, Mufti’s, Rabbi’s, Bishops, Gentlemen, traders and learned scholars,” he began.

“Sometime ago I decided that I and the people of Khazar would set to one side the beliefs of our ancestors and choose from one of the religions that we were familiar with a new religion for our people.”

“It was you understand not a decision taken lightly.”

“We have a deep veneration for our Gods and our holy sages down through the history of our people from our beginnings.”

“Our understanding of the world and our place in it comes from these beliefs.”

“You are doubtless wondering why we don’t carry on with our old religion. Why would we want to leave our comforting beliefs and embark on the conversion to a new way of thinking?”

“Changing our religion will mean we will have to fit our lives into a religion of others.”

“One that has been in place for a long time. We will be taking up a religion that has been expounded and expanded by peoples different from us. A religion which unlike ours will not explain who we Khazars are and our place in the world we see about us.”

“Let me explain why we are making the change. We were before coming to this land some two hundred years ago a nomadic people from the steppes.”

“We still in the summer leave our beautiful city and go to the country to be again the tent dwelling people we once were.”

“We have the tales of our shamans, our myths and the stories of our origins. Our Shamans’ have good memories and they learn over many years the lore of our ancestors.”

“Alas there is no certainty in visions and insights.”

“Our language is sophisticated and our thoughts are not of a lesser quality than you who are assembled before me but we cannot take from a shelf a book of authority and certainty that would guide us through the worlds we have come from or the future we are going to.”

“As other peoples have come to our city we have discovered that the world in which they live is set down in books. We find ourselves in a world where religion is set down in the writings in a book, but we have no book.”

“We can see that a religion comes with a script, with an alphabet carrying the thinking of those who write in that alphabet. We have no way of writing things down save to use the writing of the Arabs or the Romans or the Greeks.”

“I cannot be certain that what I decide this day will be successful forever. I have set a precedent in making this decision. Each of my successors is now entitled to unmake it and make another.”

“I have heard from some of you that it will be possible to safely and calmly set aside our old religion. I am comforted from the experience of those who have in times known to man made that transition.”

“I trust if I decide wisely that the faith and religion which I choose will endure with our people until the end of time.”

“I will concede to you that my decision is made in part for the reason that my empire feels pressure from the two large places around us.”

“The Caliphate comes to my boundaries with wisdom and learning. So do the Byzantines. The basis for my Kingdom’s prosperity is that all people can come to this place and trade.”

“A further reason for my desire to change our religion, if you will forgive me, is the simple desire of my people for more hope of a world beyond this life.”

“Our religion places men in the centre of the world, in the bosom of the earth. On their passing from this life they are no more. The religions amongst which we are choosing offer men the possibility of living forever, of finding God’s favour and entering paradise.”

“ So I have chosen a religion that will help our people toward that eternal paradise after they die.”

“I have chosen a religion that has the age and certainty of the thinkers who have been its seers down through countless ages. I have chosen it because of the certainty of its prophets.”

“Before I tell you my decision and my words are washed away as you digest it let me state this. There will be a long transition period.”

“It will not be compulsory for my subjects to convert to the new religion. Those of my people who wish to continue the practices of our people as they are now may continue but my court and all those who serve it have accepted the need to change to the new religion. I expect my subjects will follow the wisdom of my decision.”

“The tribes and kingdoms who pay tribute to my Kingdom will be free to continue in the religions they have now.”

“We will continue to have seven courts in the city, one for each religion and one for those that come from diverse places.”

“Those who are of other religions who trade in my kingdom will find no change from the policies that prevail at the moment.”

“Their citizens and merchants are free to come and trade and live in their quarters in this city as before. I do not expect the relations my country has with the Caliphate, the Franks, the Romans, the Byzantines to change.”

“We will continue to respect our treaties and the obligations we have made to them. This is my decision.”

“From the next moon the religion of the Khazar people will be Jewish.”

There was a stunned intake of breath in the room. The Muslim clerics and the Christians exchanged meaningful glances.

The Jewish Rabbis and teachers had the good sense to smile but not too broadly and if gloating to do that inwardly.

“I will leave it to you to meet my officials if this matter is of concern to you.”

“My thanks for putting your sincere and enlightened views to myself and my advisors.”

“I wish you all an enjoyable and prosperous stay in my city and Kingdom. I wish you a safe journey home and good trading.”

The King bowed and left the room. The room erupted in a babble of chatter and discussion.

Fergal Nathan Aalim and Khubayb gathered together.

“Well that surprised me. But I don’t know why” said Fergal.

“To be Jewish eh, I don’t think many seen that coming. It’s a clever solution and not one I thought of.”

“It is political,” said Aalim. “This way he can say to the Byzantines and Charlemagne, I am not forming a Muslim Kingdom there is no threat to your interests.”

“And he can say to the Caliphate, my kingdom is not Christian and is not part of any alliance against your interests.”

“If these people are lucky they can be Jews unhindered by either of the large forces around them. There is no threat from the east as far as can be seen and the Varangians are too far away and too barbarian to pose a threat.”

“The Emirate can set up a trade arrangement with the Varangians and we will have access to the Eastern Gate and this great city.”

“We find no difficulty with Jews though having a Jewish Kingdom will take some getting used to. All is settled for the future.”

They met next day with Hakan and the crew of the small Varangian fleet as they prepared to cast off for the journey back up the great river.

“I hope your business in the religion went well,” said Hakan.

“Very well very well,” said Aalim.

The Varangians had taken little interest in the merits of the religious arguments and consistently repeated that trade was their paramount concern.

“Trade will be unimpeded,” said Nathan. “We can look forward to a profitable future in the trade of the great river.”

“He is a wise King and a blessing to his people. His majesty says it is his wish that we trade with you. He can see no barrier to us trading with you and your trading from the great river to us in Andalusia.

“It will be fruitful for all of us,” said Hakan.

Rory was sad to take his leave.

It had been a pleasure to be among learned men. To feel the lilt of Irish pass his tongue and enjoy the jousting and verbal sparring with Fergal.

“I have good news. I have made a bargain with Hakan,” he said. “If I go back to Ireland and send to him a replacement that I will teach the language of the Varangians then he will let me go. I hope to do that next Northern winter if I can make passage from Dorestad.”

“You will find a replacement,” asked Aalim.

“It is my dearest prayer to God that it comes to pass,” said Fergal.

“There are many in Ireland wanting to endure the white martyrdom and bring Christ to the peoples of the great river and to Varangians themselves,” said Rory. “Praise God that comes to pass and I can step ashore from the Shannon landing to the warm welcome of Clonmacnois.”

“God speed.”

“Safe travels to your homes,” Hakan called as the boats were pushed off from the wharf.

Aalim, Fergal, Nathan, Khubayb, Naim and Aymaan stood on the wharf for sometime watching the Varangian fleet disappear up the river. They were lost in their thoughts.

Ahead lay the journey across the Caspian to the Caliphate, through the deserts to Antioch and the seas to Andalusia.

The End

Afterword.

Some of the events in this book happened and some did not.

The characters - Aalim Khubayb Naim Aymaan, Tawfiq Nathan, Joseph, Fergal, Hakan and Rory are of course fictitious. That said I don't think I have done much injustice depicting the kind of lives such people led.

The geopolitics of the world as I have described them are I hope accurate. For the purposes of the story I have taken the liberty of shifting some events in time. Not many and not by a great deal, no more than 30 or forty years or so.

The King of Khazaria really did convert to Judaism some say in 740 AD and some say as late as 820 AD.

The Khazarians prospered and remained Jewish until they were destroyed by the rulers of Kievian Russia, who were partly the descendants of the Viking traders, partly the resident Slavs sometime in the late 960's. Ironic since the Khazars were the founders of Kiev. It is thought that they held onto the Crimea and north Caucasus until around 1016 AD.

Dicult's book on geography may have come out some ten or so years after the year 800 AD., The year this book takes place.

We may not have many maps from the 9th century that meet the modern standard of scale and accuracy. So we may think that people lived in ignorance of the world beyond their homes. This overlooks three elements of the equation.

We overlook the mundane fact the books and the maps they would contain were very expensive. A single book then cost the wages of a skilled literate person's for a year and 20 or so sheep and hides. Let's say \$50,000.

A sum of money well beyond what a merchant would be prepared to pay for a travel guide. Dicult's book would be invaluable for the small number of wealthy literate people of the time. But at such a cost it was not feasible as the travel guide of the age.

People in those times committed a great deal of knowledge to memory. So a merchant's travel directions say from Marseilles to Cologne would be conveyed in a detailed verbal outline of river crossings, roads to be taken and the length of time to travel between towns and cities. The best guide wasn't a book costing \$50,000 but someone who had been there before.

People in general may not have travelled far from their home localities but those that did, merchants soldiers and mariners had considerable knowledge of the world beyond. What might have been rare was not knowledgeable travellers but rather those who could and did write it down and whose books survive.

In this book I have made much of the role of merchants in the world of the ninth century. Muslim and Jewish societies were more favourable to trade and traders than the Christian Kingdoms. All of them needed goods from abroad but the Christian world was less wealthy and more of an autarky.

The Romans did not accord traders much respect. They were needed but not of any social account. It was not until modern times that merchants were given any respectability and importance. It is also possible given the value of books that they were not traded at all but swapped and bartered. Not every Bishop or petty King or Monastery could afford a \$50,000 book in cash. But they could afford the cost of a scribe to copy one. True scribes had to be housed and fed but then so did everyone. It might be therefore that books were exchanged not so often sold as such.

Was the Emirate of Andalusia as tolerant as I have asserted. Yes I believe it was. Some twenty years afterwards Christian “suicide martyrs” tried the patience of the rulers of Andalusia. They weren’t successful. By all accounts the rule of the Ummayyads in Andalusia was one of the wonders of the world.

A hundred or so years later invading Muslim armies from North Africa instituted a much less tolerant version of Islam. And a few hundred years after that the Moslem concordat accorded to reason and rationalism was set aside throughout the Muslim world.

But by all accounts in the year 800 AD Andalusia was a place where other religions were tolerated, reason was brought to bear on the world and it was quite the most civilised place in the world of its time.

The distinction between religions and individuals has to be borne in mind. The medieval world is one where the concept of an individual lifestyle of personal ideas and tastes and preferences is unknown. Tribal and religious prescriptions dictated all actions.

Was the Irish Church as easy going as depicted here.

The Church perhaps not but the Monasteries more so in fact. Monks were married and the customs of the ancient Irish prevailed to a great extent. It was a culture permissive in what could be done and not savage in its idea of penalties to be paid. The Irish had ceded little of their customs and culture in the embrace of Christianity.

They had been very careful to accommodate as much as they could of the old traditions and only dispensed with those practices directly in contravention to the Christianity of Patrick.

The cultural carriage was the clan. Since the monastery was the creation of the clan there was a great deal of harmony.

A monastery was in effect a very large extended family with all the arguments and rows possible in such an arrangement carefully controlled by the authority of the Abbot and the rules of the founder. It was a co-operative founded on a religious tenet with the messy business of defence and temporal authority left to the King and the nobles.

Wars with other clans were commonplace and even inter-monastery conflict was not unknown.

The relationship with the church in Rome or the ecclesiastical authorities in Ireland was completely outside the box as far as the rest of Europe was concerned.

The fact that Ireland was never part of the Empire had one emphatic and crucial outcome. Wherever the troops of the empire came they abolished tribes and clans. One was part of the Roman Army not a Dacian or a Cantabrian. By the fourth century an inhabitant of Roman Gaul or Britain was not a tribal person.

The physical landscape had become disassociated from tribes and became a province of the Empire. Thus it came about when the empire fell the administrative districts of the Church, were dioceses. These followed the definitions set down in the reforms of Diocletian.

What had happened is that the Church had taken over the Empire in many ways and naturally formed its administrative structure around that of the Empire.

As the church accommodated itself to the new order in Europe, that of tribal kingdoms it still ruled itself through bishoprics

and thus dioceses. These became the “realms” of bishops who were both in cooperation and conflict with the civil kings of the temporal world.

In Ireland and Scotland however areas not conquered by Rome the tribes continued, disturbed for a while by the Normans. But they persisted until their destruction in the colonial conquest by England some 800 years later.

In this tribal Ireland untainted by the Romans the relationship of monasteries founded by their founders on precepts taken from Martin of Tours or St Anthony were hugely personal to the views of the founder and owed little to Church authority. In a land without towns they were the manufacturing centres, gardens, herbarium, schools, colleges and universities of the clan.

There were ecclesiastical units of administration in Ireland namely dioceses but they had almost no control over the monasteries. Monasteries were the possession of the clan in whose lands they were founded.

Members of the monastery were lay people not priests bound to a Bishop who ordained them and whose behaviour he could expect to control. They looked to their King for temporal authority and their abbot for religious direction.

In this lack of control by church authority came a tremendous amount of administrative freedom. Monasteries did things in a manner much decided by the rules of the founder.

However they were not free to believe anything they felt like. The decisions made early on in the early time of monastic Ireland and laid down mainly by Columbanus was that there would be no doctrinal deviation from Rome.

Customs and behaviours might be radically different from Byzantine and Rome but no written deviation or starkly new written doctrine would follow from Irish independence.

This had consequences. As in the rest of Christianity there was no take up of empirical Aristotelian examination of the world. The general prescription throughout the Christian world against the use of “logos” and reason to examine the world persisted in Ireland as elsewhere until the Reformation and the enlightenment. The “logos” was revealed in and through Christ. There was no need to examine the world outside of that revealed in the Bible.

Books in the 9th century had the transforming effect that the Internet is having today. Given their high cost they were the possessions of cathedrals, monasteries and Kings. Paper saved the messy business of dressing hides but they still had to be copied by hand.

It was however another five hundred years until the printing press made them widely available and maybe a thousand years until it was possible for ordinary people to consider owning books.

It is 800 years after the time of this book that anything like a newspaper is possible. But the change in thought and custom that books effected was profound. The internet is causing the same revolution today but since it is in its nature to be omnipresent and affordable and multidimensional it is going to have a greater impact in our world than books did a thousand years ago. The flat rigid words upon a page is to be challenged by the visual aural multimedia vectors of the future. Given the pace of development from the “Brick” hand phones of the ‘90s to the Ipad holographic image projection can’t be far away.

The pace of the impact is exponentially greater so its possible that in as little 50 years we will have some idea of the general effect. Such an overview of the effect of books took over a thousand years to be apparent.

Indeed so entwined into our society is the role of books that we may not really discern its centrality until they are challenged by what the internet brings.

The immediacy, orality, connectivity, aggregation and pervasiveness of the Internet may one day show us how integral the written word was to the last 1200 years.

I have appended a small bibliography. It is but a few of my reading over the time it took for the gestation of this book.

If you are interested in the history of the time covered in this book some of these books are fascinating and give a reasoned and deep rendition of the history of the times and areas covered by this book.

Much of the research is bits and pieces from Wikipedia. We should all be thankful for that resource.

Thank you for buying the book and feel free to contact me.

Your comments, corrections and reflections would be most welcome.

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Daniel McCaffrey 2014

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