DOMINION OF DUST

MATTHEW HARFFY



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2025 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781035916467;
ISBN (ePub): 9781035916481; ISBN (ePDF): 9781035916436

Cover design: Simon Michele/Head of Zeus
Map design: Jeff Edwards

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



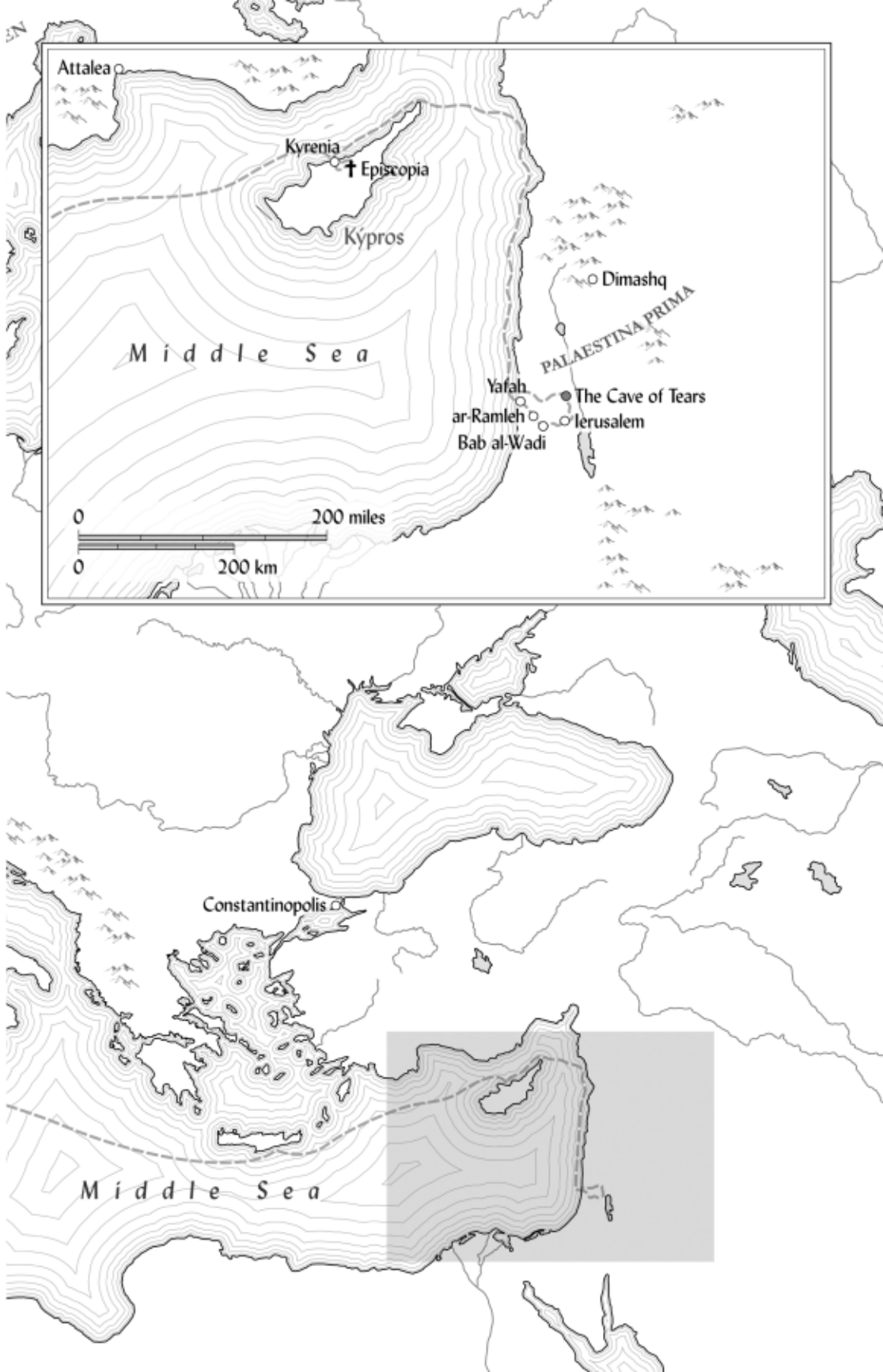
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

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Dominion of Dust
is for all the residents of Dorksville
(you know who you are)


DOMINION OF DUST
N
NORRLANDI
HQRÐALAND
Lindisfarnae
Eoforwic
MERCIA
Aachen
ATLANTIC
OCEAN
Tours
Banbalūnah
ITALIA
Roma
Toledo
Balansiya
AL-ANDALUS
BALEARES
Cagliari
Sicilia
Qadis
Xiphonia
Legend
Settlements
Holy sites
Hunlaf's voyages
0
400 miles
0
400 km


Attalea
Kyrenia
Episcopia
Kýpros
Dimashq
PALAESTINA PRIMA
Middle Sea
Yafah
The Cave of Tears
ar-Ramleh
Ierusalem
Bab al-Wadi
0
200 miles
0
200 km
Constantinopolis
Middle Sea

"And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

Hebrews 9, verse 22

"But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water."

John 19, verse 34

Place Names

Early medieval place names vary according to time, language, dialect and the scribe who was writing. I have not followed a strict convention when choosing the spelling to use for a given place. In most cases, I have chosen the name I believe to be the closest to that used in the late eighth century, but like the scribes of all those centuries ago, I have taken artistic licence at times, and, when unsure, merely selected the one I liked most.

Some of the place names also occur in my Bernicia Chronicles novels with different spellings. This is intentional to denote that this is not part of that series and also to indicate the passage of time and the changes to language that occur over the centuries.

Æbbercurnig	Abercorn, Scotland
al-Andalus	The Muslim-ruled area of the Iberian Peninsula
al-Masjid al-Aqsa	The Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem
al-Wadi 'l-kabir	"The Great River". Guadalquivir River
ar-Ramleh	Ramla, Israel
ar-Raqqah	Raqqa, Syria
Attalea	Antalya, Turkey
Bab al-Wadi	Sha'ar HaGai, Israel
Balansiya	Valencia, Spain

Baleares	Balearic Islands
Banbalūnaḥ	Pamplona, Spain
Bebbanburg	Bamburgh
Byzantion	Constantinople (Istanbul)
Cagliari	Cagliari, Sardinia
Constantinopolis	Constantinople (Istanbul)
Dimashq	Damascus, Syria
Danapr	The Dnieper
Eoforwic	York
Episcopia	Minster at the site of Bellapais Abbey, Cyprus
Ǧarundaḥ	Girona, Spain
Hálogaland	Hålogaland, Norway
Hǫrðaland	Hordaland, Norway
Ierusalem	Jerusalem
Ifriqiya	Area comprising what is today Tunisia, western Libya and eastern Algeria
Išbīliya	Seville, Spain
Italia	Italy
Kýpros	Cyprus
Kyrenia	Kyrenia, Cyprus
Lindisfarnae	Lindisfarne
Madīnat as-Salām	The City of Peace, Baghdad, Iraq
Malaqah	Malaga, Spain
Mercia	Kingdom in Britain centred on the River Trent and its tributaries. Loosely covering the region known now as the Midlands of England
Middle Sea	The Mediterranean
Norrlanden	The northernmost, largest and least populated of the three traditional lands of Sweden
Oguz il	"Oguz Land". Turkic state located in an area between the coasts of the Caspian and Aral Seas

Orkneyjar	Orkney Islands
Palaestina Prima	Byzantine province in the region of Palestine from the late fourth century until the Muslim conquest in the 630s
Papia	Pavia, Italy
Qadis	Cadiz, Spain
Qubbat as-Sakra	Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem
Quentovic	Frankish trading settlement. The town no longer exists, but is thought to have been situated near the mouth of the Canche River
Qurtuba	Córdoba, Spain
Roma	Rome
Roman Sea	Old Arabic term for the Mediterranean Sea
Rygjafylki	Rogaland, Norway
Sardinia	Sardinia
Septimania	Visigothic kingdom in modern-day southern France that roughly corresponds to the former administrative region of Languedoc-Roussillon (now part of Occitanie)
Sicilia	Sicily
Tours	Tours, France
Ubbanford	Norham
Uuir, River	River Wear
Uuiremutha	Monkwearmouth
Werceworthe	Warkworth
Xiphonia	Augusta, Sicily
Yafah	Jaffa, Israel

One

I have not written for weeks. And yet it is not the gnawing at my guts, the affliction that has ailed me these past years, that has held me back. Nor have I been prevented from my work by an overbearing abbot. In truth, it was the newly appointed minster-father, Godstan, who came to my cell this morning and encouraged me to pick up my quill once more.

"It smells like a stable in here," Godstan said, stepping over the detritus on the stone floor and swinging open the wooden shutter that covered the window. The sudden draught of cool air made the sour stench of the room more evident. There was the faint scent of smoke and ash on the breeze, and the cries of the gulls reminded me of screams of pain. "You must stop this languishing," Godstan said, turning to face me. The wispy hair around his tonsured head looked like cobwebs in the sun. "Rise up from your bed and continue what you started. It is what he would have wanted."

I felt a surge of my old ire, a spark of the passion that had been all but extinguished with the passage of the years.

"Do not tell me what he would have wanted," I growled.

I cared nought what the abbot thought of me or the smell of my quarters. I had barely roused myself from my mattress for days, content to lie swaddled in the sweat of my self-loathing. But now I pushed myself into a sitting position, groaning at

the aches the motion awakened in my back. I held a bony hand above my eyes, squinting at the blaze of early summer sunlight that pierced the gloom.

My throat was dry and my words rasped. I reached for the flask that rested beside my pallet. There should still be some of the cunning woman's draught from the previous night. I always made sure to have enough to dull my pain when I awoke. Not that the ache in my stomach had grown any more intense of late. If anything, it had abated somewhat, almost as if the Lord in His infinite wisdom wished me to have a clear head so that I might think of my actions and what they had caused.

Godstan moved quickly across the room and snatched up the flask. I lunged for the bottle with an effort, but the speed of my youth had long since vanished and the abbot was faster. Biting my lip, I leaned back against the wall.

He sniffed the flask's contents and grimaced.

"Tell me," he said. "And tell me true. How bad is your pain?"

I thought about lying, but Godstan's open gaze halted me. I had once been capable of subterfuge, but now I tried to maintain my vows, despite my weakness. I was feeble, but in this at least, I did not falter. The truth was not lost to me.

"My stomach aches," I said, "but the pain is not as sharp as it has been."

He nodded slowly and offered me a thin smile. I thought he was going to hand me the flask. Sweat beaded my forehead and my breathing quickened at the thought. But he did not relinquish his hold on the draught, instead he filled a cup with weak ale from a jug that he had brought with him.

"From now, you will drink of this potion only at night," he said.

I did not reply. It would be easy enough to drink some of the stuff once he had left my cell. I could already taste the bitter brew, and I sighed in anticipation of its warming effect, the

dulling of my senses, the softening of the jagged edges of my memories.

"I will have the woman from the village bring more," Godstan said. "I will administer the correct dose to you after Compline each evening. You will sleep well and in the morning your head will be clear so that you may continue with your work."

"What if the pain grows?" I asked, my voice trembling in a way that disgusted me. That pleading tone spoke eloquently of the hold the concoction had on me and I imagined what Godstan must think.

"Then you will pray with me. And with the Lord's guidance, we will do what is best."

Admitting defeat, I held out a hand. Godstan gave me the cup of ale. I drank, suppressing a shudder as the cool liquid washed down my parched throat.

Still holding the flask, Godstan returned to the open window and stared outside. I could picture what he saw as clearly as if I was standing at his side, so familiar was that view to me. The herb garden with the constant drone of bees flitting over the rosemary and lavender. The scriptorium, with its high windows and steep, sloping roof. The chapel and chapter house, almost fully repaired now. The building bore little evidence of the fire that had threatened to engulf it just weeks earlier. Beyond that, the sloping fields of barley, peas and oats that ran down to the river, where the tall alders lined the bank.

Those trees had been tall enough to hide the masts of the ships that had slid onto the shore. The raiders, Danes, so Lord Osulf believed, had come up through the green barley in ordered silence. I clenched my jaw at the recent memory.

"Those Danes would have slaughtered us all without any remorse," Godstan said, sensing where my thoughts had wandered. There was a bleak shock in his voice.

"It was only luck that saved us," I replied, remembering how Osulf and his warriors had galloped across the minster's

vallum before dawn. They had ushered the brethren into the chapel in the darkness, closing the doors and leaving us huddled there, the stink of fear oozing from our pores.

Godstan turned back to me, his brow furrowed.

"Luck, you say?" He rarely displayed signs of anger, but he was furious now. "This was not the capricious whim of wyrd. This was God's will and we should rejoice in it."

The bright sunshine picked out the lines of age and worry on his face. These past weeks had brought suffering to us all and I felt a pang of guilt at having allowed Godstan to bear the weight of it without offering my aid.

"You are right, Father," I said. "Forgive me."

I had not been surprised by the raiders' lack of compassion. But I had lived a very different life to that of Godstan. In my youth I had leapt over *Brymsteda*'s wale and rushed up a beach in search of adversaries. I had plunged my sword into the guts of any who had stood before me. I had done all this and worse in the service of the holiest of kings: the Emperor Carolus Augustus himself. I had killed countless foes in Carolus' service. In the name of God.

Godstan's anger vanished as quickly as it had come.

"There is nothing to forgive, Hunlaf," he said. "You have done nothing wrong." He looked away, unable to meet my cold stare. "You were not to blame for any of it."

"I should never have filled the boy's head with tales of adventure. If I had not done so, he might yet live."

"Perhaps," Godstan said, his tone soft with sorrow, "but only the Almighty can decide when a man's life should be ended. You did not wield the axe that slew Coenric."

I closed my eyes and, unbidden, I saw Coenric as I had found him, twisted and bloody in the doorway of this very cell. The boy's expression in death had been one of shock. Surprise perhaps that he had not managed to slay his adversary with the sword he had snatched up from the chest I kept under my bed.

My sword.

It was lying there now, in the darkness, sheathed and wrapped in cloth. I had cleaned and oiled the blade before putting it away, just as Gwawrddur had taught me. The thought of it made my stomach lurch. It was vanity to keep the weapon and I should never have shown it to Coenric.

I have lived a violent life, filled with blood and battle. I am a sinner and weak of flesh. I have revelled in the bloodlust of the shield-din and rejoiced at the death of my enemies. And yet, I know life is sacred. Death is never something to be taken lightly, and the demise of a loved one always cuts deeper than any sword thrust.

"I have seen so much death," I said. "Buried so many friends. But I never thought I would lose Coenric. He was so young and I barely cling on to this life."

"And yet God spared you once more, my friend."

"Why would He take Coenric and not me?"

"None save the Almighty Himself can answer that. But you are no fool, Hunlaf. Whatever else you may be. The reason you yet live is clear. God's hand was at work here."

"If only He had seen fit to save Coenric," I snapped. "He was only a boy!"

"Sadly he will not be the last innocent to die while sinners yet live. The Lord's ways are mysterious, but we must trust in Him. We must have faith."

"Faith?" I said. "What use was faith to Coenric?"

"Do not speak thus," Godstan said reprovingly. "Coenric is now seated with our Lord. His faith has been rewarded with everlasting life."

I shook my head. "If only he had run," I said. "He did not need to die. He could have saved himself. I should have been slain. Not him."

"And yet, in His wisdom, God saw to it that you would survive."

"What wisdom to keep me alive!" I scoffed.

"Do not question the will of God, Hunlaf." A hard edge had entered Godstan's tone. "You may wallow in self-pity and despair in this stinking cell, but do not blaspheme in my presence. I will not have it."

I fell silent, my cheeks hot. Godstan was right to rebuke me. I was behaving like a child.

"I have faith," Godstan went on, his tone mellowing. "It was His providence that brought sight of the Danish ships to the eyes of the sentinels. And it was God who gave Lord Osulf and his warriors the strength to defeat the raiders."

"I praise the Lord for Ealdorman Osulf," I said. "For his foresight and courage."

Godstan narrowed his eyes, perhaps imagining that I was less than honest in my approbation. But I spoke the truth. Things would have been very different for us if Osulf had not been warned of the approach of the ships. That he had led his guards to the minster at a gallop had surely saved most of the brethren from death or slavery. If I was dishonest at all, it was in my thanks to God for Osulf's intervention. It seemed to me that rather than the work of the Lord, the minster's salvation was due to the actions of a thoughtful ealdorman, who had inherited his father's canniness. Like his late brother, my shield-kin, Gersine, Osulf was steadfast, decisive and brave. There had been no Norse raids for decades and the men of Northumbria had grown complacent. But when he had heard of the recent attacks on the distant isle of Iona and the coast of Cantware, and even across the Narrow Sea in Frankia, Osulf had set sentinels and beacons all along the coast, ever vigilant for the sleek dragon-prowed vessels of the northern pirates.

"And I praise the Lord that you will be able to continue your work," said Godstan.

"I may have been spared from the axe and sword of the Danes," I said, "but I will be dead soon. What does it matter

if I write or just sup of the cunning woman's draught and welcome death with open arms?"

Godstan sighed. He stared, as if fully seeing me for the first time.

"Death comes to us all, Hunlaf," he said. "If we're blessed, or as some would put it, lucky, we have great friendships and loves before the end." He walked across the room, careful not to step on any of the items strewn across the flagstones, and sat beside me. The ropes beneath the straw mattress creaked. Godstan placed a hand on my shoulder. "I have read your writings. You had many such blessings, Hunlaf. Old age is not something to hate. It is a treasure, bought for you by the sacrifice of others."

"I did not ask for it," I said, stifling a sob. My throat was thick and tears prickled my eyes.

"The gift is yours whether you sought it or not. Do not squander what you have been given."

I cuffed the tears away from my cheeks. Coenric's face swam in my mind and alongside him Lord Osulf's warriors who had fallen protecting the minster. I saw too the faces of the friends who had sacrificed themselves for me over the years.

"Perhaps you are right," I whispered. "Maybe I owe it to them."

"Coenric would have wanted you to carry on," said Godstan, rising from the bed. "I too would read the end of your tale."

"I know not if I have the strength to write more of it," I said, my voice thin and cracking. I recalled the screams and clash of weapons as Osulf's warriors had fought the Danes. The sting of smoke in my eyes, the odour of burning, reminding me of so many previous battles. I had trembled in the gloom of the chapel, listening to the fighting outside. The sounds and smells conjured up images from my past, a time when I was hale, strong and brave. I'd longed to snatch up the sword from its hiding place under my bed. But instead I had cowered with

the rest of the monks, while Osulf and his guards faced our attackers, and Coenric – brave, foolish Coenric – had taken up my blade and been cut down. "There is too much death and sadness in my tale."

"Honour and bravery too," Godstan said. "Friendship and love."

"And sacrifice," I whispered.

"Sacrifice too. You alone can record the exploits of those who travelled with you. Would you deny them that?"

The ale had cleared my head somewhat and I pushed myself up from the pallet. My knees and ankles cracked like fresh logs on a blazing fire.

"I was fast and deadly once," I said. "Then I would have stood shoulder to shoulder with Osulf's hearth-warriors. I would have drenched the earth with the blood of those Danish nithings."

Godstan's face paled at my words, shocked by my sudden bitter rage.

"Age takes our strength," he said, "but brings wisdom."

I sneered at that.

"You think me wise? I am a fool. And now only my words are sharp."

"All men possess both wisdom and foolishness, Hunlaf," Godstan said. "Perhaps age allows us the time needed to distinguish between them."

I yearned for the astringent taste of the cunning woman's brew, but Godstan still clutched the flask, so I reached for the ale jug.

"Coenric will never have that time," I said.

Godstan's features were sombre. "No, he will not. But you do."

"Not much," I said, my tone gruff. "God must soon tire of keeping me alive while other, better men die."

"You live now, Hunlaf," Godstan replied. "And while you do, I say you continue the work you started. I can think of no

better way to honour the memory of those who have fallen before you. You can give their deaths some meaning."

"Their deaths had meaning," I growled, my anger flaring.

"Then tell their story. You are the only one left who can. Finish it, for Coenric."

Godstan left me in my squalid cell and for a time I sat, wallowing in abject pity and sorrow. His words echoed in my thoughts.

For Coenric.

Slowly, the fog of grief lifted from me enough that I could think. The abbot was right. I am still alive and, while I am yet able to lift a quill and to make out the shapes of the letters on the vellum, I will continue to recount the tale of my life outside the walls of this minster. A time when I was headstrong, young and often foolish, just as Coenric had been.

Coenric will never again read the pages of parchment, leaning over my shoulder and irritating me with his incessant questions. I would never have believed I would miss his constant interruptions, but of course, even though I am old and should be wise, I am still a fool.

I will write for Coenric's memory and the memory of all the other men and women who died in the making of these stories. Too many have lost their lives and surely it will change nothing to write about their deaths. And yet I pray that, in some small way, the recording of it might assuage some of the guilt I bear for my part in each loss.

After Sext, Godstan sent a couple of the young novices to tidy and clean my cell. I sullenly watched them sweep and mop, feeling shame at the squalor of the room and envy at their youth. They brought me fresh sheets of vellum, newly cut feathers and a pot of encaustum, and not once did I do more than grunt in response. My head throbbed as it did whenever I went for a time without the brew Godstan now rationed for me.

The pain in my head went some way to explaining my taciturn anger at the novices, but then I imagined Coenric watching me disapprovingly, and grudgingly I thanked the young monks before they left.

And so it is that I take up my quill once more. I am alone in my cell, without Coenric's constant fussing, and I feel a pang of sorrow at his absence, at the silent space he had filled. The only sounds now are those of the daily life of the minster, and the wind rustling through the leaves of the trees by the river.

Time continues to pass as it always does and life goes on as it will until the Day of Judgement. One day, when the Lord Almighty has made me suffer enough on this earth, I will die, perhaps dropping dead over a sheet of ink-scratched parchment, or maybe cut down by heathen raiders from the sea.

I cannot tell the future, but until God calls me to His side, I can turn my mind once more to the past, to a time long ago when Carolus, king of the Franks, yet lived. To a time before he was known as Augustus, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. I cast the net of memory into the dark pools of my mind and pull forth recollections of that distant past.

I remember a scorching mountainside, where I climbed, drenched in sweat, hemp rope cutting into my palms as I swung precariously over a vertiginous drop.

Runolf, Gwawrddur, Hereward, Drosten and Revna were on that mountain with me. All of us were close to exhaustion from the heat and travel, but our spirits were high at nearing our goal.

Looking back now through the dark glass of time, I know our mood would have been less buoyant if we had known of the betrayal that awaited us, and that some of our number would not live to see the end of that long hot summer.