

Hakon led the horse into the dark stables, leaving Magnus alone with his thoughts. He wondered if he had done anything to anger his father since he had last seen him.

Perhaps his father wasn't happy with how he had handled himself on the war trail. Earl Harold had fought a major campaign in North Wales two years ago, defeating and killing Gruffudd, Prince of Gwynedd, but last autumn he had only been chasing raiders. There hadn't been much real fighting – just a few skirmishes, an ambush or two – and Magnus hadn't made a single kill. He sighed, and headed for his favourite place to do some brooding, the orchard on the slope above the hall. He stuck his spear into the ground beside an apple tree and sat down, his back against the trunk.

Stretched out below him was the whole farm, although Magnus knew that was far too small a word to describe the family's rich holding. At its heart was the great hall with its long, whale-backed roof and crossed beams at both ends. Other buildings surrounded it – the stables, several large barns, animal sheds of one kind or another. A wooden palisade circled them all, a watchtower at the gate. Beyond were the wide paddocks with their herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, and further still were fields full of crops. It was late spring here on the coast of Sussex, the land of the South Saxons, and the wheat and barley was young and green in the furrows.