

1. FRITHA'S GRAIN



1069

Fritha sat on the doorsill of her father's hut, keeping a watchful eye on her young brother Wulf, while she ground handfuls of wheat and rye from the half-full sack beside her. Her arms ached as she pushed the heavy quern stone round, but she kept her mind on the fresh baked bread that her mother would make tomorrow. It was Autumn and at this time of year the villagers' sacks were full of grain, the trees heavy with fruit and food shelves stacked with baskets of drying peas and beans.

"When are mother and father coming back?" Wulf asked.

"Not till dark," Fritha told him. "Not till they've filled up all the carts with grain."

Wulf snatched up the wooden toy sword that his father had made for him. "I'm going to fight with Orm," he said.

Fritha smiled and nodded. "Don't scare him," she teased.

Orm was one of Earl Waltheof's oldest housecarles. The cluster of huts stood in the shade of the great hall that they called Waltheof's Oula.

That afternoon, Orm and two other old housecarles sprawled by the drawbridge, enjoying the late summer sun. They chatted and joked, lazily whetting their sword blades, while the hunting dogs yapped and snuffled for scraps. There was something of an air of holiday, for their master had taken his best horses and the younger, strongest housecarles and gone off to York, leaving this small band of older men to guard the Oula. The Earl was determined to do battle with the invader from Normandy, who'd taken all the land and now called himself King William.



Wulf sighed and swung his toy sword close to Fritha's cheek. "When will the men and horses be back?" he asked.

"As soon as our master has beaten the Normans," Fritha told him.

Neither the children, nor the housecarles were worried about the fighting. Earl Waltheof was one of the most powerful lords in the north. He was descended from fierce Danish raiders, on his father's side, and from the Kings of Northumbria on his mother's. He ruled his lands like a king himself. Everyone believed that along with the other northern lords and the warriors sent from Denmark by King Swain, he would send Duke William's soldiers, running back to the south. Then Waltheof and the other Earls would make Childe Edgar the true king.

...Wulf set off towards the Oula, trailing his wooden sword behind him. The walls of the great hall rose above the barns and stables, dwarfing the village of huts. The splendid beams that supported the roof were made of the thickest seasoned timber. The stables were huge and usually filled with fine horses and dogs, for the Earl spent much of his time galloping over the moors, with his friends, hunting grouse and deer, wild boar and wolves.

"Here's mother and father coming back," Fritha shouted after him, pointing down the sloping hillside towards the River Rivelin.

Wooden carts and people could now be seen in the distance moving fast towards the Oula and the village.

Wulf stopped in his tracks and turned back to Fritha. "They're running ... and shouting!" he said.

Fritha carefully set the quern aside and stood up, shading her eyes from the sun, to see better; a little knot of worry pulled her stomach tight. Wulf was right; there was a great deal of shouting going on and people were streaming along the riverbank.

“The carts are empty?” said Fritha. “Where is the grain?”

Orm and the two old housecarles scrambled to their feet and ran over the wooden bridge that straddled the ditch to meet the noisy crowd. Fritha grabbed her brother by the shoulders, sure that something was very wrong.

Wulf’s lip trembled. “Where’s mother?” he cried. “Where’s father?”

Orm and the housecarles ran back over the bridge to the Oula, snatching up their weapons. They suddenly began hacking down the thick ropes that held the drawbridge in place. A few people with torn clothes and bloody wounds ran through the village of huts, heading towards the deep wooded ravine upriver. Where were all the workers who’d gone out to fetch the harvest in?

Orm saw the brother and sister crouching by their hut. “Run children! Run!” he bellowed.

“Come with us?” Fritha called, snatching up her small sack of grain.

But Orm shook his head. “Run!” he begged.



Suddenly Fritha’s mother was there, panting and breathless, her hair streaming loose, her face wet with sweat.

“What’s happened?” they asked her.

She grabbed them by the hands. “Come!” she choked, dragging them off towards the woods. “King William’s men! Norman soldiers!”

“But where’s our master?”

“Taken prisoner!” Mother gasped. “The men ... all dead!”

Fritha’s heart thumped and she tried to run fast, but her legs felt heavy as lead; still she clung to her sack of grain as though it were gold dust.

“Father!” Wulf cried.

Mother shook her head, her mouth grim.

“Men on horses!” Wulf cried. “Screaming ... all screaming! Killing the dogs!
Killing the cows!”

“Don’t look!” Mother gasped. “Don’t look back, or we’ll be dead too!”

They struggled on splashing through the shallows, up the river and out into the sheltering woods.

“Caves,” Mother called. “Into the caves!”

There were many small caves in the woods beside the river. They found one hidden by massive tree roots, on the steep riverbank. Edda, the old village blacksmith came stumbling in after them, dragging his two terrified granddaughters, one in each hand. Without a word they crammed together in the tight space, while darkness gathered. Wulf peered out fearfully from time to time through the thick tree roots. Nobody spoke much, though there were



whimpers from the children and the harsh sounds of shouting and sobbing could be heard from somewhere in the woods.

As the light began to go Wulf called out, “Red sky!”

He pointed through the trees down river, to where a strange glow lit the sky.

“Bad magic?” he whispered. “Thunor is angry!”

Edda shook his head. “That’s not magic. I’ve seen such things before!”

“What is it?” Fritha asked.

“It’s the Oula ... burning.”

Fritha pushed her sack of grain carefully to the back of the cave. “I must see,” she said.

“No!” Her mother tried to pull her back, but she fought free and went outside to climb the steep bank that lay behind them. At last she could look down onto the clearing where the Oula had stood; two fiery dots reflected in her eyes.

Fritha had seen bonfires and funeral fires before, but never one like this. It roared and raged, shooting sprays of bright sparks high up into the sky. Every bit of Waltheof’s magnificent hall blazed and beyond it the wheat fields by the river glowed, red.

As Fritha watched, the huge roof beams crashed down, one by one, sending streaks of flame into the darkness above. A few horsemen cantered around the edge, but most had gone. The fire was so hot, and the destruction so thorough, that no man, however well armoured, might stand by to gloat.

Despite the heat, Fritha shivered. Tears coursed down her cheeks. Nobody could live through that: not Father, nor Orm. Everything was gone: the barns, the stables, the baying dogs and the tiny hut that had been her home. Even the barn stacked with fresh grain had vanished. What could they eat now?

She heard panting and rustling below her and saw her mother struggling up the hill towards her. “I’m coming back,” she called. “Stay there, I’m coming back down.”

“Well?” asked Wulf as Fritha crawled in beside him. “What did you see?”

“All gone,” she whispered. “Nothing left!”

The old man, Edda put out a gnarled hand and gently touched her wet cheek. “We shall look after each other,” he said. “Us few that are left.”

They spent a long night huddled together in the cold and damp of the cave, but when the darkness lifted, Edda squeezed through the protecting roots; he stretched himself in the dusky light and rubbed his back.

“I shall go down there,” he told Mother. “You stay here for a while and keep my little lasses safe.”

Though Edda had often been gruff with children who came to him with broken cooking pots to mend, Fritha could not bear the thought of losing him now.

“No,” she begged him. “Stay safe with us.”

His granddaughters cried and shivered. “Bad men down there Grandfather!”

Edda sighed. "Aye maybe, but ... we must save a little of the fire before it dies away, or we shall perish of cold. We must see what we can salvage from the flames."

"Let him go!" Mother told the two little girls. "I will stay here for a while and look after you."

Edda crept down through the woods while the others waited impatiently.

Wulf struggled to his feet and marched around the mouth of the cave, swinging his arms back and forth. "I'm cold and my belly's empty," he groaned.

Fritha could not think of food. "Will Edda shout if it's safe?" she asked.

"No," Mother told her. "He'll not want to make noise. We'll wait a bit, then follow him."

The sun was high in the sky when they crept out of the ravine, onto the bleak smoking hillside. Fritha still dragged her bag of grain with her.

Edda fed a small fire with scraps of charred timber, beside it lay Orm, badly wounded. Fritha looked away from the blood and the great gaping wound in his side. Mother set about covering him with her cloak, but the man pushed her away looking for Wulf.

"Here lad," he whispered.

Wulf looked puzzled but he squatted down close to listen.

"I ... I saved it for you."

They all bent over the dying warrior, trying to catch his words.

"Beneath me," he told them, trying to raise his shoulders.

"Lie back man," Edda told him. "Don't try to move. We'll send the lad for water."

They made Orm as comfortable as they could, but Edda insisted that they set to work at once, sifting through the ashes for scraps of iron, clothes, wood, stones, bones - anything that they might use.

It was terrible work. They hauled out stinking, blackened bodies ... animals, cattle, family and friends. A young boy stumbled out into the clearing, dazed and alone. Mother gave him water, then set him to work with the others. Two old women followed and another tiny boy, begging for milk. The little band of

survivors worked though the wreckage, dazed and weeping. When dusk came they were exhausted and starving, covered with thick soot and ashes.

“Where is Edda?” Fritha asked, her voice rising with panic.

“Gone to look at Sigurd’s snares,” Mother told her. “They’re no use to Sigurd anymore.”

“I’ve got to eat,” Wulf murmured. “Fritha’s got some grain.”

“Aye,” said Mother “You’re a good lass, saving that grain. But we mustn’t eat it. Not yet! Fetch me water and nettles, I’ve found a whole cooking pot. I’ll brew up nettle stew.”

“I’d rather eat Fritha’s grain,” Wulf pulled a face, but he took the iron cooking pot and set off once again for the river.

They were warming themselves by the fire, staring blankly at the cooking pot, with its bubbling green-grey stew of nettles, when Edda came out of the wood, swinging a rabbit and leading a complaining nanny goat, her hair singed brown on her back.

“Look what I found up in the woods,” he cried. “Meat and a little drop of milk for you all!”

Mother soon had the rabbit skinned and in the pot and they were cheered by the sip of warm goat’s milk that Edda shared, saving most of it for Orm. Rabbit and nettle stew had never tasted so good. As night came they huddled together close to Edda’s fire, wrapped in burnt rags, trying to sleep.



When they woke to a cold dawn, Orm had died.

Wulf hid his head in his mother’s lap and cried. Sadly Edda took the fallen warrior by the shoulders and began to drag him off to join the others awaiting burial. As he shifted the bloodstained body, something gleamed in the dust where Orm had lain.

“What’s that?” Edda asked.

Wulf looked up. He was on his feet in a flash, scrabbling in the dust. He pulled out Orm's heavy sword. "For me!" he cried, grabbing it with both hands. "He said there was something beneath him for me!"

Wulf dragged the sword from the ground, but though he struggled to raise it with both hands, it was too heavy for him. The others watched in silence.

"When I am big! When I am a man!" Wulf cried. "I shall take this sword and kill them! I will kill them all!"

Quiet tears rolled down Fritha's cheeks.

Still they sat there, saying nothing, but then at last Edda spoke. "I can think of something better to do with that sword," he said. They all looked up at him. "I'm only a poor pot mender, but I'm a good enough blacksmith to melt that sword down and with the other scraps of iron that we've got, I could make a rough plough and a harrow, and even a sharp bladed scythe."

"What would you do with them?" Fritha asked.

"I would plough those blackened stalks of corn back into the earth, and then ... and then we could plant Fritha's grain."

"Aye," Mother suddenly smiled for the first time since the terrible thing that had happened. "We could plough and sow now, before the frosts come. If we can struggle through to the spring, why then we'd have sprouting grain."

"How can we manage till then?" Fritha asked, her voice flat.

"We must gather nuts, acorns and mushrooms and fix up nets in the river to catch fish. You know that I can make nets," Mother reminded her, "if you can find me enough scraps of thread."

Fritha nodded, her spirits rising a little. "Edda will snare more rabbits for us and in the spring we'll have sprouting grain!"

They looked at Wulf, who still struggled with the sword. "I WANT my sword," he growled.



No one spoke, but Wulf strode off towards the woods dragging the heavy sword behind him. Fritha got up to follow him, but Edda shook his head. “Leave the lad be,” he told her. “Now, ... let’s see if this poor nanny goat has another drop of milk for us.”

They sat quietly by the fire, passing around the precious bowl of goat’s milk, then just as they were getting up to set about the dreadful tasks that must be done, Wulf came back, still hauling the sword behind him.

“I’m hungry,” he muttered.

Without a word Edda held out the small sip of milk that they’d saved for him.

But before he took it, Wulf turned his tearstained face to the old man. He put the heavy pommel of the sword into Edda’s hands. “Make us a strong plough,” he said. “We WILL plant Fritha’s grain.”



Author’s Note.

There are differing opinions as to where Earl Waltheof’s Great Hall stood. I have chosen to set it above the Rivelin Valley. This seems to make sense to me, as the Owlerton area of Sheffield close by, is thought to have got its name from the Great Ouler of Waltheof. Sheffield Wednesday Football Team also got their nickname ‘the owls’ from the same source.

Stories and illustration copyright Theresa Tomlinson.