

# The Wordsmith

Once there was a man who made words out of blood. He lived in the hollow of the hill and his teeth were flecked with feathers. There were no dictionaries in the world. Language was an art young and strange. If you wished to speak in more than grunts, you went to the Wordsmith each dusk. You paid him with sparrows and stones that shone, and in return he forged the next day's words.

Beasts could not sleep for his anvil's beat, carved from the skull of an aurochs. His hammer was hewn from the bones of trolls, his metals torn from the earth's lungs. He shaped his words from the blackness of night. From the water that gathers in the caverns of the mind. Their sounds he plucked from the crying of birds; from the whispering of wolves and the worrying of ghosts. Growing hungry, he hung his words on a string. Their scent brought sparrows to taste the sounds. He reached for one and chewed on it while he worked.

Nouns he made from a fish's dreams, adjectives fashioned from a hare's feet, suffixes sewn from a swan's heartstrings. They filled his clay jars, crowded his cavernous shelves, piled by his door, discarded and spent. The fox came in the long dead night. He sniffed and searched, claiming words of copper and silk: *swarthy, cunning, sly*. He carried them to his den and took them as his names. The hare hopped by. In her soft mouth, she scooped up *velveteen, surefooted, swift*, and she fed them to her leverets in the shallows of the field. The Wordsmith's work went day in and day out. Each blow like a voice, now a lover's, then a

brother's, a whisper and a broken cry. The boar blundered by. Snuffling in the hill's shadow, he rooted up pungent words: *decadent, fierce, proud*. He gobbled them with relish.

The forge was wreathed in billows of steam from syllables quenched in saltwater and oil. In the clear dawn light, the Wordsmith stood on the crest of the hill and scrutinised the new-made name. Yearning, as he always did, never quite daring to hope. Sparrows circled above. A magpie watched with a wily eye. But each and every day, the smith shook his dark head and tossed the word away, for the magpies to fight over, for the squirrels to bury. Then back to the forge. Back to the anvil and the crucible, to the pine smoke and bird's blood and the old ache in his shoulder.

When folk first came, he ignored them, busy with the bellows. They offered briny stones and scented bark, and he gave them a jar of words to send them on their way. The next evening, they returned like rabbits at dusk. He would have given his failures for free, but they insisted on trade. They held the words to the light, tasted them on the tips of their tongues, savouring the sounds.

They paid him with white pebbles and owl pellets, then with black amethysts and bronze plates, and in time they brought silver rings and golden effigies, and thought themselves grand. The Wordsmith melted down the jewelled gods, poured them into a wax mould. He watched the syllables settle into shape. Searching. For a glint, for a sign, that after all this time, he might have done it at last.

In the stillness of the dawn, he appraised the night's work, holding it, cradling it. A tear slipped from his eye and vanished into the storm of his beard. He shook his head and abandoned the word to the earth.

Some say he tinkers still, in the hollow of the hill. You can hear his anvil's beat when the wind is wild and mad. The Wordsmith works through the long night, reshaping old sounds. He'll work till his hammer breaks and his anvil buckles and his heart beats its last, until time fades to an ember — trying, endlessly, to forge the one thing he can never craft.

His own name.