

—A NAVRITTO STORY—



The Crooked *Nail.*

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The Crooked Nail

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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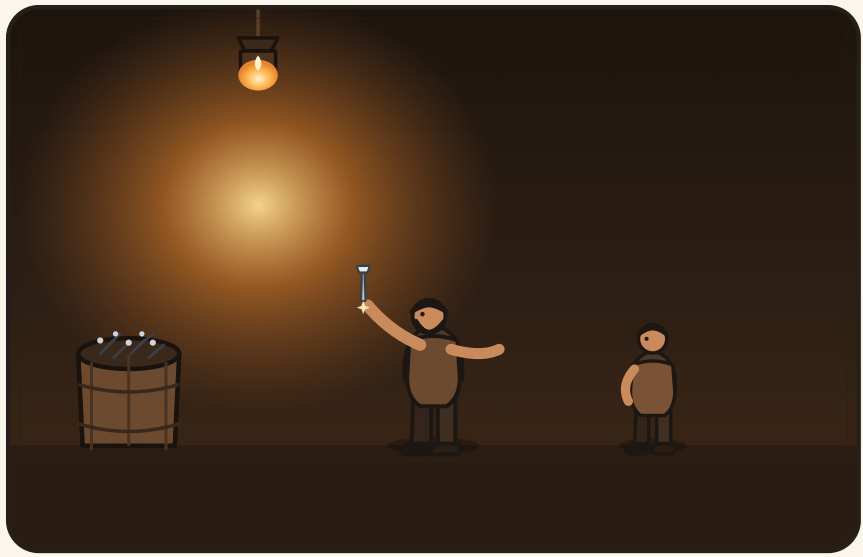
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In a town at the foot of the hills there lived a blacksmith named Bram. People came from three days' ride to buy his work, because a thing that Bram made never failed. His hinges never squeaked. His horseshoes never cracked. And his nails — even his plain iron nails — were straight and strong, every single one.

Bram had a young apprentice named Tomas, who pumped the bellows and swept the ash and watched the old man work. One evening Tomas asked why he took such care over things as small as nails. Bram lifted a finished nail from the pile and turned it in the firelight. "Because I forge every nail," he said, "as if my name is on it."



Bram checked everything. Not just the gleaming gate-latch that the whole town would see, but the rough spike that would be hammered out of sight into a beam and never looked at again. He would hold each one up to the light, and if it was not true, back into the fire it went.

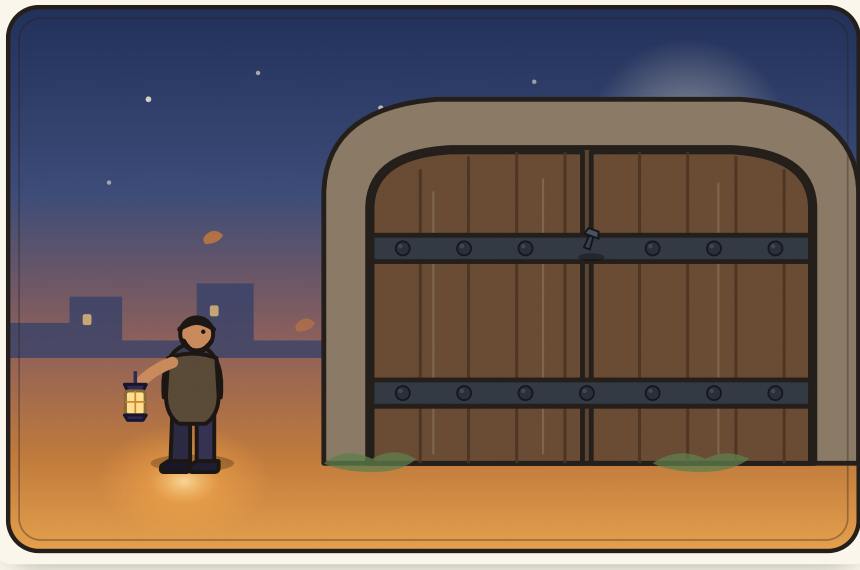
“Nobody will ever see this one, master,” Tomas said once, watching a plain nail go back to be made again. Bram only smiled. “The parts no one sees are the parts that hold up the parts everyone does,” he said. “A wall stands on the nails inside it. Put your name on those too.” Tomas nodded. But in his heart, he did not quite believe him.



The years turned Tomas into a fine smith of his own. And one summer the town gave him his largest task yet: to hang the great new gate — two tall doors of oak, banded with iron, to guard the town against flood and storm. It would take four hundred nails, and Tomas made every one himself.

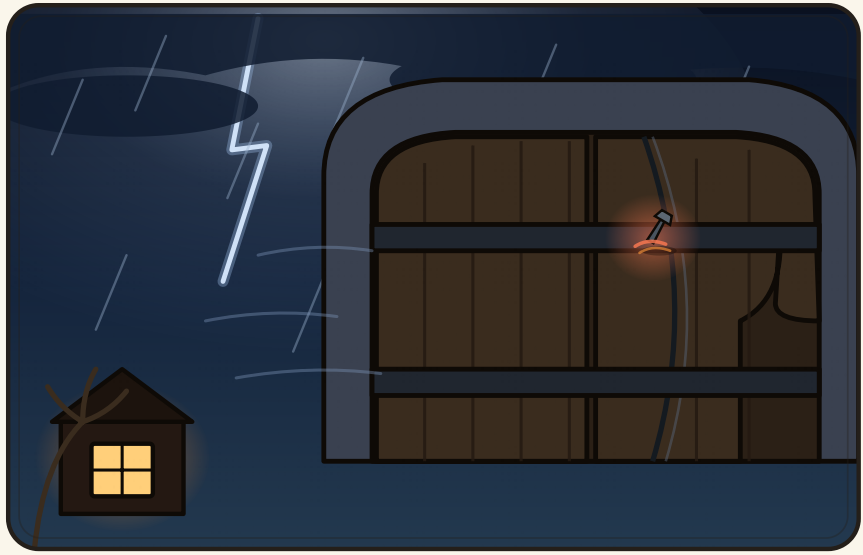
The day he fixed them was the hottest of the year. The sun beat down, the iron burned his hands, and by afternoon he was tired to the bone. Near the top, high up where the wood was thick, he reached for the last nail — and it went in wrong, bent and crooked, sunk deep and ugly. To pull it and start again would cost an hour in the terrible heat.

Tomas looked around. The street was empty. No one had seen. High up there, in the shadow of the iron band, no one ever would. “It is only one nail,” he told himself. “One crooked nail, out of four hundred true ones. What harm can it do?” He drove it the rest of the way in, hidden and forgotten, and went home.



The gate was good. Everyone said so. It swung shut against the winter rains and held, year after year, and the town felt safe behind it. Old Bram grew older, and one quiet spring he laid down his hammer for the last time, and Tomas became the town's master smith in his place.

Now it was Tomas whom people trusted. Now it was Tomas who forged as if his name were on his work — for he had learned, at last, that the old man was right. But every time he passed under the great gate, his eyes went up to one spot, high in the shadow of the iron band, where he alone knew a single crooked nail was hiding. He never forgot it. He only hoped that no one ever would.



Then came the great storm. It rolled down out of the hills at night, black and howling, and threw itself at the town like a fist. Rain came sideways. The wind screamed. And down at the wall, the great gate began to groan.

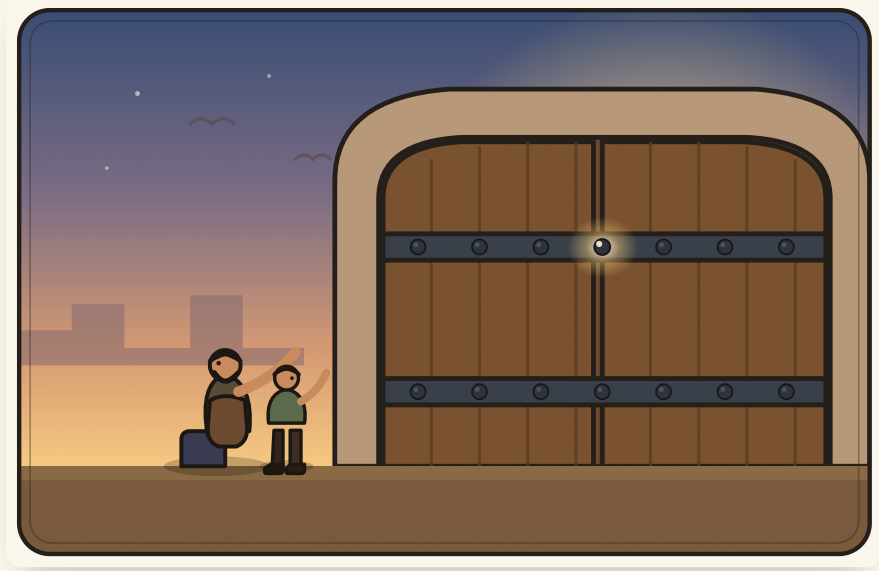
Tomas woke in his forge and heard it — a deep, straining creak, over and over, coming from the one place he most feared. He pulled on his boots and ran out into the rain. The gate was bending in the wind. And it was giving way at a single point, high up in the shadow of the iron band, where the wood was working loose around one bad nail. His nail. The crooked one held nothing, and now the whole gate was pulling apart from that empty spot outward.



There was no time to fetch help. There was no time for anything but to climb. Tomas hung his lantern on an iron stud, took a fresh nail and his hammer, and began to climb the great gate itself — up the iron bands like the rungs of a ladder, the rain lashing him, the wind trying to peel him off the wood.

Higher and higher, into the dark and the storm, until he reached the spot. There it was: the crooked nail of that long-ago hot afternoon, loose in its ruined hole, the whole gate shuddering around it. He braced his feet, drew out the bad nail, set the new one straight and true — and drove it home, blow after blow, as the storm tore at his back.

And as the good nail bit deep and the groaning stopped, Tomas understood, all at once, exactly what his master had meant. The work you do when no one is watching is the work that holds you up later. He had not skimped one nail. He had left himself one weak place — and the storm had found it, as storms always do.



By morning the storm had blown itself out. The sun came up clean and gold, and the great gate stood — whole, and strong, and safe. High in the shadow of the iron band, one nail that had spent long years crooked now sat flush and true beside all its brothers, and caught the first light like the rest.

Tomas took an apprentice of his own that spring, a serious young girl with quick hands. On her first day she asked why he took such care over things as small as nails. He led her to the great gate, and pointed up at a spot she could barely see, and told her the whole story — the hot day, the empty street, the storm, and the climb.

“Forge every nail as if your name is on it,” he told her, “especially the ones no one will ever see. Those are the ones that hold you up.” And this time the words were not borrowed from anyone. They were his own, paid for in a single stormy night, and true all the way through.

✦ THE END

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