

—A NAVRITTO STORY—



The Long *Shot.*

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The Long Shot

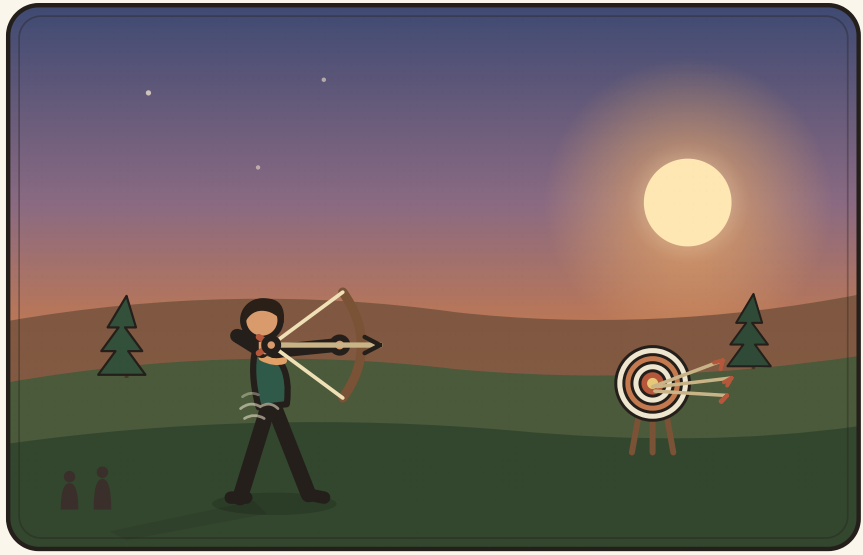
Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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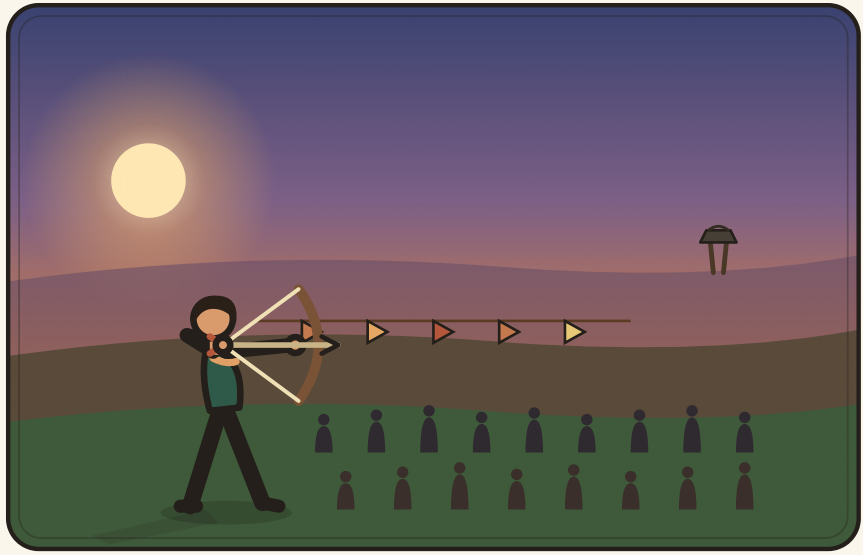
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In a valley ringed by pale mountains, there was a boy named Arun who could not miss.

He had shot a bow since he was small enough to need both arms to hold one. By the time he was seventeen, the old men who had watched archers all their lives would go quiet when he stepped up to the line. His arrows did not wobble. They did not drift. They found the heart of the mark as if they had always lived there and were only going home.

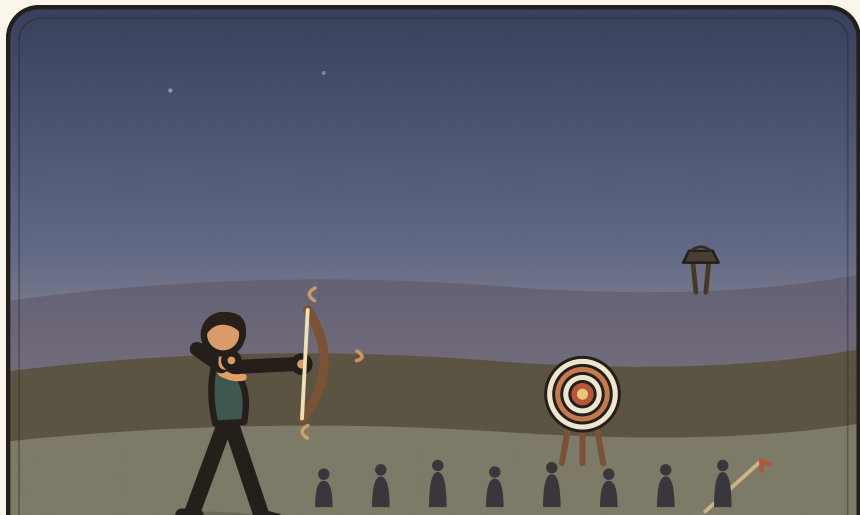
The valley loved him for it. Little children followed him to the practice field at dawn and copied the way he stood. “One day,” people said, “Arun will light the beacon.” And Arun believed them, because so far the world had given him no reason not to.



Every midwinter, the valley held a festival, and the festival began the same way it had begun for a hundred years. Across the gorge, on the far ridge, stood the old iron beacon. When the sun touched the mountains, one archer would send a single flaming arrow across the dark to kindle it — and only then could the feasting begin.

It was the hardest shot in the valley. A long shot, over cold air that pushed the arrow sideways, at a target no wider than a door. For years an old woman had made it. This year, for the first time, they asked Arun.

He walked to the line with the whole valley on the slope behind him. Every face he had ever known was turned his way. He had made this shot a thousand times in practice, alone. He had never once made it with a thousand people holding their breath.

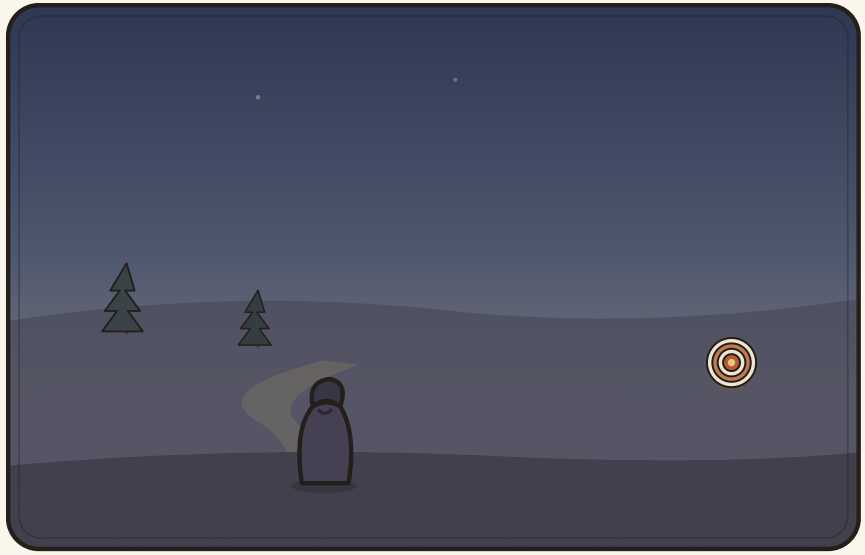


He drew the bow. And his hands — his steady, famous hands — began to shake.

He had never felt it before, and it frightened him more than anything ever had. He waited for it to pass, the way you wait for a shiver to pass. He told himself: not yet, not yet, wait until you are calm. But the calm did not come. The longer he waited, the harder he shook, and the colder the crowd's silence grew behind him.

At last, because he could not hold the draw forever, he let the arrow go while his whole arm was trembling. It flew out over the gorge, wide of everything, and buried itself in a snowbank far from the beacon. The beacon stayed dark.

For one long breath, nobody spoke. Then, somewhere near the front, a small child laughed. And then a few more. It was not cruel. It was just the sound the silence made when it finally broke. But Arun heard it as the worst sound in the world.

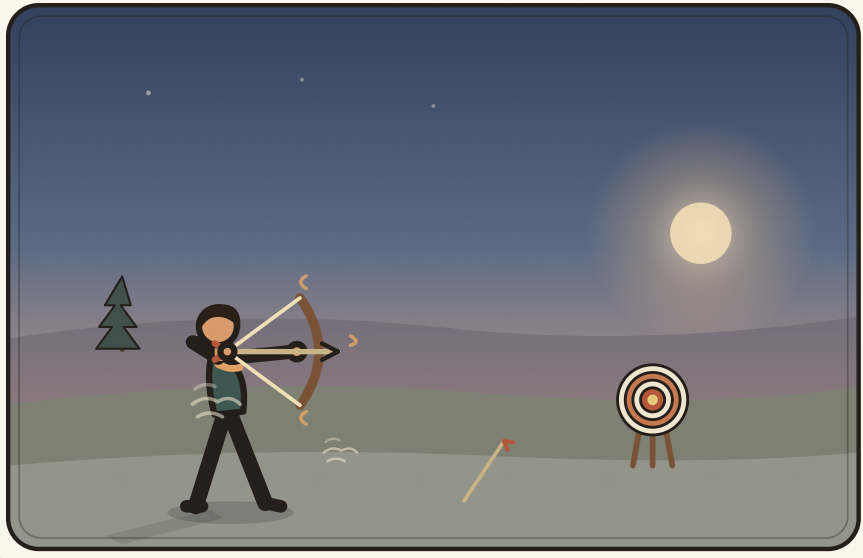


He hung the bow on a peg by the door and did not take it down.

For a while people were kind. They told him it happened to everyone, that the old woman had missed her first year too, that next winter would be his. Arun nodded and said nothing and hoped they would stop. Their kindness was worse than the laughing. The laughing had ended in a minute. The kindness reminded him every day.

So he stopped going to the field. When he had to cross the valley he took the long way round, the path behind the mill, so he would not have to pass the shooting line or the children practising there. He kept his eyes down. He grew quiet.

Here is a thing that is true, and unfair, and worth knowing: everyone remembers the miss. Of all the arrows Arun had ever shot, the whole valley remembered the one that failed. And slowly, without meaning to, Arun began to remember only that one too.

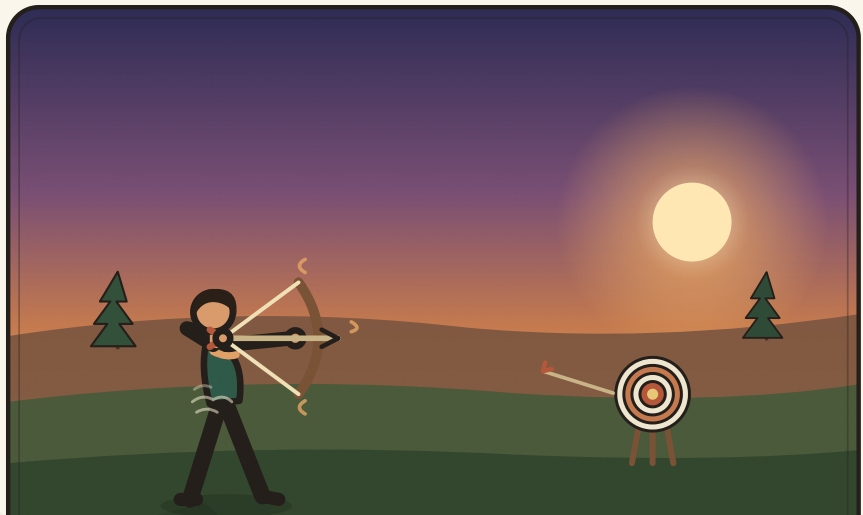


Winter passed. Spring came, and then another winter, and Arun did not touch the bow.

Then, on a grey morning when he could not sleep, he took it down. He did not decide to, exactly. His hands simply lifted it off the peg while the rest of him was still deciding. He walked to the field in the dark, before anyone in the valley was awake, his breath smoking in the cold.

He nocked an arrow. He drew. And his hands shook so badly that the arrow dropped from the string and fell into the frost at his feet, nowhere near the target.

He stood there a long time, alone, in the empty grey. He should have felt like a fool. Instead — and he could not have said why — he felt, for the first time in two years, almost like himself. Nobody had seen. He picked the arrow up, and went home. And the next morning, before it was light, he came back.

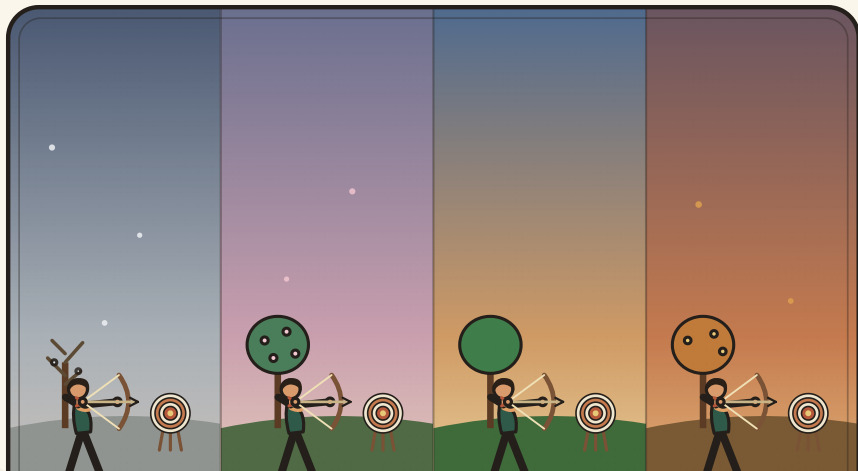


He came back the next morning, and the one after that, and the one after that.

And somewhere in those cold, private dawns, Arun understood the thing he had got wrong. All his life he had waited to feel calm before he shot. When he was a boy the calm had always come, so he had thought it was his — a part of him, like his steady hands. But calm was never his. It had only been easy. And the shots that matter are never easy.

So he stopped waiting. He drew the bow with his hands shaking, and he breathed, and he did not wait for the shake to stop. He let the arrow go while he was still afraid.

It was the first arrow he had ever shot on purpose while frightened, and it landed in the outer ring — not the gold, not close, but on the target. He stared at it as if it were the most beautiful thing he had ever made. He was not learning to be unafraid. He was learning to be afraid, and shoot anyway. That, it turned out, was a thing you could practise.



He practised it the way you practise anything: badly, and then a little less badly, over a very long time.

The frost melted and the field turned green. The trees blossomed and dropped their blossom and grew heavy and gold and bare again. And every dawn, before the valley woke, Arun stood at the line and drew through the shake. Some mornings his hands were quiet. Many mornings they were not. He stopped minding which kind of morning it was. He had learned not to trust the quiet, and not to fear the shake.

He was not chasing the boy he had been. That boy had never been afraid, and so that boy had never been brave. Arun was building something slower and stronger and entirely his own: not a gift he had been handed, but a trust he was earning back one honest, trembling shot at a time.

The valley did not know. He shot alone, and told no one, and by the time the mountains were white again he had become something the boy prodigy never was — not perfect, but reliable. Steady not because the fear was gone, but because he no longer needed it to be.

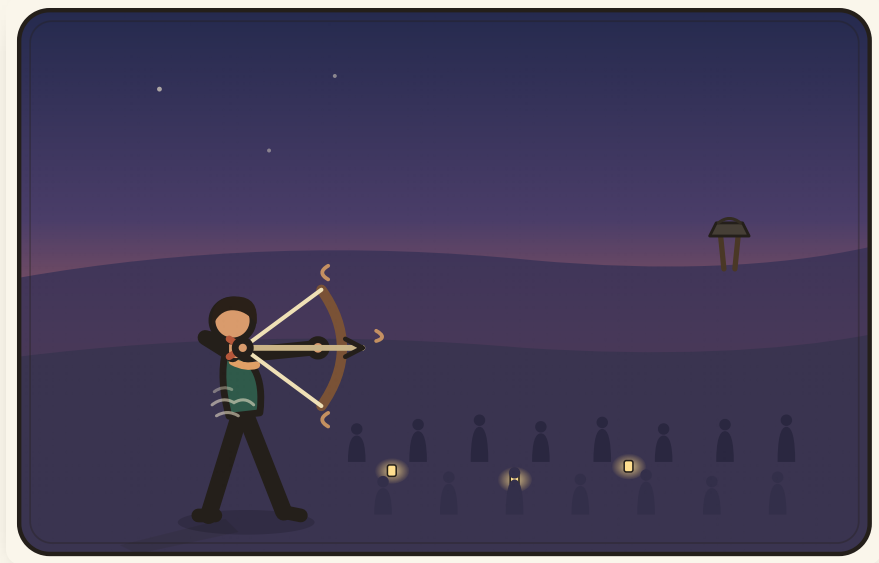


Midwinter came round again, and with it the festival.

But there was a hollow in it now. The old woman's hands had grown too weak for the long shot, and since the year Arun fell, no one had been willing to try it. Two winters the beacon had gone unlit. The valley had learned to begin the festival without that old bright arc across the dark, and pretended not to miss it, and missed it terribly.

That evening the crowd gathered on the slope with their lanterns, looking across the gorge at the black iron beacon. And a few of them, then more, turned instead to look at the lit doorway of a house at the valley's edge, where a young man stood watching the dark hill.

They did not ask him. They had asked him once, and seen what it cost him, and they were gentler now. They only left a space at the shooting line, and waited, and hoped — the way you hope for something you have no right to expect.

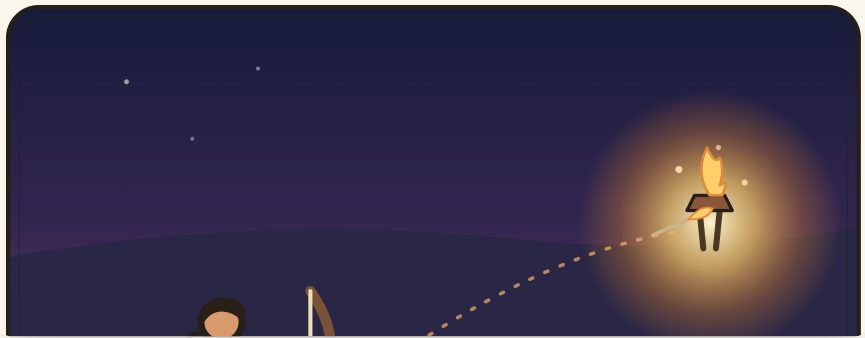


Arun walked to the line.

It was the same slope, the same cold, the same thousand faces he had known all his life. Behind him the silence was exactly as it had been two winters ago, and it reached into his chest and found the old fear still living there, right where he had left it. He raised the bow toward the far dark hill, and his hands began to shake.

The crowd saw it. A few of them looked away, unable to watch it happen twice. The boy Arun would have waited for the shake to stop. The boy Arun would have stood there, waiting and trembling and hoping, until he had to loose in a panic.

But the boy was gone, and the man who stood in his place had spent a thousand mornings with exactly this fear in exactly these hands. He knew it now the way you know an old road in the dark. He did not wait for it to leave. He breathed.

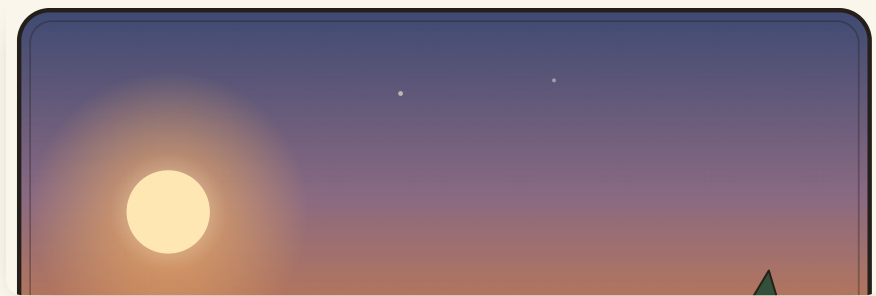


He touched the arrow to the flame at his feet, and drew, and let it go while his hands were still shaking.

And here is the truth that no one on that slope could see, the truth that was the whole of his victory: in the instant the string left his fingers — before the arrow had crossed the gorge, before he could possibly know whether it would strike or fly wide into the snow like the last one — Arun already knew he had won. Not because he was sure of the shot. He was not sure of anything. He had won because this time, afraid, he had not turned away. Whatever the arrow did now, he had done the hard and hidden thing. The rest was only where it landed.

The flaming arrow rose in a long, burning curve over the dark. It seemed to hang there for a year. Then it came down on the far ridge, and the old iron beacon caught, and bloomed — a great gold flower of fire on the black hill, lighting the underside of the clouds.

The valley erupted. They shouted his name until the mountains threw it back. But Arun, at the line, was somewhere quieter and gladder than any of them could reach. The cheering was for the arrow. He knew what it had really cost, and where the real shot had been made, and it had been made a long time ago, alone, in the cold, with no one watching at all.



The valley wanted to make him a hero. They offered him the old woman's place, and a name, and every midwinter for the rest of his life. Arun thanked them, and quietly let most of it go. The prize had never been the point. He had learned that the hard way, twice.

What he kept was the dawns. Now, when he walked to the field before the sun, he was not alone. The children came — including, in time, the very ones who had laughed, grown taller and shyer now, not quite able to look at him. He taught them all the same.

He did not teach them to be fearless; no one is, and he would not lie to them. He taught them to stand, and breathe, and draw, and let the arrow go while their small hands were still trembling. “The shake isn't the enemy,” he told a nervous girl whose bow was jumping in her grip. “Waiting for it to stop — that's the enemy. Shoot through it. You'll be scared and you'll do it anyway, and one day you'll notice that's the same thing as brave.”

He had missed, once, in front of everyone, and for two winters he had believed that was the end of his story. He knew better now. The miss was real, and it would always be remembered. But it had never been the end. It had only ever been a comma — a place where the story caught its breath before going on. And in the cold and the quiet, with no one watching, he had picked up his pen and decided the rest himself.

✦ THE END

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