

THE GREEN BEAST



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CHAPTER I: THE MIRE

PART I: THE ROT BENEATH THE STONE

The rain had stopped sometime before dawn, but the stone still wept.

Above the rotting archways of the keep, black moss clung to the walls like scabs. Ivy crawled up between cracked blocks of limestone, choking the tower's old insignia—two crescents beneath a sword point-down. Once, it had gleamed bright in sunlight. Now, only crows nested in its empty sockets.

Sir Tariq ibn Rafi of Mirewood stirred in the rubble-choked chapel. His breath rasped through slack, wide lips. Skin like oil-slick leather twitched against the morning chill. He shifted beneath his ragged cloak—once a tabard bearing his master's crest, now little more than damp cloth clinging to a monstrous back.

His fingers—long, knotted, webbed—dragged sluggishly through the wet earth beside him. Something twitched. A rat, too slow. His meters-long tongue lashed out and snagged it.

Crunch.

He chewed mechanically, staring at nothing. Bones cracked between molars made for insects and meat alike. He did not grimace. He did not savor. He swallowed.

Then silence again, except for the wind, and the faint creak of wood deeper in the keep—perhaps a loose beam, or a ghost pacing the old training hall. He listened anyway.

He always listened.

From above, through the shattered roof, a sliver of light touched the far wall, catching the dull reflection of his sword—bent, rusted, leaning against a broken altar stone. Useless. He had tried to sharpen it. He had tried to swing it. It slipped through his webbed hands like betrayal.

He started at his reflection. A bulbous frog head stared back at him, topped a squat, muscled body that stood on webbed feet. Sharp claws tipped both hands.

He turned away. Across the room, the fragments of a shield lay beneath a mural of their final campaign. Zayd ibn Khalid, the White Flame, mounted and roaring, the banner high. And beside him—Tariq. Young, lean, eyes burning like a man convinced the world could still be tamed.

Tariq watched that painted boy from the dirt, his throat clicking softly. He croaked once—reflex more than voice—and dragged himself up to sitting.

“Zayd,” he rasped. The name was the first word of his day, always. He said it like a wound. “I should have stayed.”

He blinked.

The image shimmered. Not the mural—but behind his eyes. A flash:

Zayd falling, blood black in torchlight. A woman’s soft voice chanting through a firelit storm. A scream. His own—still human then. Still helpless.

He shook the vision loose, or tried to.

Rising fully, he reached for his blade. It felt heavier than it should—mocking him. He growled, spat to the side, and turned toward the keep’s outer passage.

There were travelers in the woods again. He’d smelled their fire in the wind two nights ago. He hadn’t gone then. He had prayed instead, in broken fragments of surah and memory, beneath the crescent light.

But prayer had not answered. Rage had.

And this morning, he was hungry for something more than rats.

PART 2: THE BANDIT FIRE

The woods beyond the keep were soaked and swollen, the marsh licking higher with every season. Trees leaned as though whispering secrets to each other, bare limbs hung with fog, and the air clung to skin like old regret.

Tariq moved low through the reeds, careful not to splash. His body, hunched and hungrily built for ambush, moved with a stillness no man his size should have. Even the birds didn't stir as he passed beneath them.

Ahead, fire.

It crackled in the clearing like laughter with teeth. A crooked tent had been slung between two broken carts, and half a dozen figures lazed around the flames—boots off, blades near, ale spilling. Their speech was slurred with drink, thick with cruelty.

“...told you, didn’t I?” one said, jerking his thumb toward a leather sack near his foot. “Gold and junk, but I saw it—hilt, fine work. Silver. Still had part of the blade, all cracked like glass. Could slice a man just on pride alone.”

A cackle followed. Another voice—a woman’s—spoke through a mouthful of meat, “Or it’s just garbage from some dead knight. Lotta them these days.”

Tariq crouched lower in the brush, the name hanging in his chest: Noorfang. Couldn’t be. Could it? He hadn’t seen the blade since—

He bit down on the memory. Hard.

One of the men stood, stretching. He was tall, skin pale under the firelight, one eye glassy. “We sell the blade to the collector in Jasker. Or melt it, who cares. Metal’s metal.”

The man lifted a sword from beside him. Not the hilt—just his own weapon. Careless, but familiar. A bastard blade, dulled with rust.

Tariq’s pupils narrowed.

He wasn’t sure what broke first—his restraint or the branch beneath his foot.

It snapped.

Heads turned.

“What was—?”

He burst from the brush with a guttural croak that ripped the night in half. His claws sank into the nearest man’s chest before the scream could leave his mouth. Blood sprayed the tents, sizzling where it touched the fire.

“GOD—!”

Two more bandits reached for their weapons. Too slow.

Tariq threw the corpse into the woman by the fire, knocking her backward into the flames. She howled, rolled, shrieked again. Another bandit slashed wildly—blade catching Tariq’s arm—but the creature didn’t flinch.

His hand closed around the attacker’s face and squeezed.

Crunch. Wet. Silence.

Then steel, sudden and bright.

The tall one—the man with the pale eye—had circled behind, sword raised.

Tariq turned just in time. The blade caught his shoulder. He roared, spinning, and drove a clawed foot into the man’s gut. He flew backward, skidding through mud and reeds, sword falling from his grip.

“Mercy—!” the man gasped, hands up, eyes wild.

Tariq stood over him. Steam rose from his breath. The sword in the man’s hand trembled. His lips moved. Perhaps he was begging.

Tariq raised a clawed fist.

The man shut his eyes.

And Tariq hesitated—just a moment. Long enough to hear the echo of Zayd’s voice in memory, calm and low: “Justice is not rage. It is restraint.”

Tariq growled. Then drove his fist down.

The clearing went still.

Smoke curled upward from the ruined tent. The fire hissed low.

In the blood and soot and trampled mud, something gleamed.

A leather satchel. Torn, half-burned. A piece of metal glinted from its mouth.

Tariq's eyes fixed on it.

And the old ache returned like iron in his gut.

PART 3: THE CROAKING FURY

The croak that tore from Tariq's throat was not speech. It was thunder.

He stood amid the wreckage of the camp, chest heaving, claws slick with blood. His muscles pulsed, spasmed—the scent of fear and fire stoking something ancient in his gut. Every inch of his frame trembled, not from exhaustion, but from the echo of violence well-fed.

One of the bandits—a boy really, barely bearded—had dragged himself behind the half-collapsed cart. His arm bent the wrong way, eyes wide and glassy, bleeding from a gash across his scalp. He whimpered as Tariq turned toward him.

“No—no please, please—” the boy croaked.

Tariq advanced.

He wasn't limping. He didn't flinch. The wound on his shoulder bled dark, but he moved like a storm rolling downhill. Heavy. Certain.

The boy raised his one good hand. “I didn't touch the sword—I don't even know what it was—we just took the bag from some mule outside Jasker—please—”

Tariq loomed over him.

The boy's words dissolved into stutters. His terror filled the air like smoke.

Something in Tariq's spine tightened. Not guilt. Not pity. Something colder. Familiar.

Zayd, standing tall even in blood, saying,

“Your blade must know when to stop.”

But he had no blade now. Just hands.

Hands that crushed.

Hands that clawed.

“Please,” the boy whispered again.

Tariq knelt.

The boy flinched.

For one breath, neither moved.

Then Tariq's hand snapped out, fast and final.

The boy's neck broke with a sharp, wet click.

No scream. Just silence. A life vanished.

Tariq stood again, slowly, and let the stillness stretch. His lungs burned, his mouth tasted iron and mud. The rage was gone, but what replaced it was worse—hollowness. The kind that settles in the marrow and never quite leaves.

A nearby tent post crackled, then collapsed into the embers. Flame licked at damp cloth, turning it black and curling.

Something metal caught the light again.

Tariq turned.

There, half-pulled from a ripped satchel, was the hilt.

He stepped over a body—maybe two—knelt beside it, and gently lifted the fragment from the pack. His claws were too large to hold it properly, but he cradled it like something sacred.

Steel, split down the middle. The pommel bore the engraved crescent with a line of worn script etched along the fuller. Half of a verse. Faint, but there.

"Wa man yatawakkal 'ala Allah..."

Whoever places his trust in God...

He swallowed hard. His tongue felt foreign.

The moment stretched.

Then—quietly, impossibly—he heard it:

"...fa huwa hasbuhu."

...He is sufficient for him.

The words didn't come from the blade. Not truly. They came from the weight of memory, pressed into steel by Zayd's hand and Zayd's example. But they felt alive.

Tariq stood, blade shard in hand, and turned to the dying fire.

Smoke curled around him. Ash clung to his limbs. Blood dripped from his claws onto the hilt, staining it again. He didn't wipe it off.

He just stood.

Breathing.

Feeling something return he didn't know he'd lost.

Not hope.

Not redemption.

Just...direction.

PART 4: THE WHISPERING SHARD

He turned the shard in his hands.

The light of the fire caught in the cracked steel like it was remembering itself. The break had split the inscription—but he didn’t need to see the rest. He knew what it said. He’d traced it with his finger a hundred times under his master’s eye.

“Trust,” Zayd had said, polishing the blade, “is the root of action. Without it, faith is just theater.”

Tariq exhaled through his nostrils. A sharp, hissing breath.

The hilt was still warm—either from the fire or from something else, something quieter, deeper. It didn’t glow. It didn’t pulse. But it sat heavy in his palm, as if it remembered him.

He tried to grip it fully, but his fingers—thick, misshapen—wouldn’t close right. The old grip, the proper form, was gone. He tried again. The pommel twisted awkwardly against his knuckles. He growled and pressed it against his chest, just to feel its weight.

From somewhere between the ribs of silence, a voice stirred.

Not speech. Not magic. Memory.

“Don’t let it end here.”

Tariq froze.

He looked around the clearing. Only corpses answered. Flames hissed low. Fog crept in.

He didn’t know if he’d heard it aloud or inside his skull. It didn’t matter. It was Zayd’s voice. Not as it had been in battle—stern and thundering—but quiet. Like the voice he used in prayer. The one only the dawn and God could hear.

“Don’t let it end here.”

Tariq shut his eyes. The grip of the hilt pressed hard into his chest, and his knees bent slowly, dropping him into the mud.

He stayed like that for a long time. Not praying. Not thinking. Just listening to the terrible quiet of the aftermath.

A crow landed nearby. Pecked at something.

Tariq opened his eyes.

The fire had burned down to embers, but the hilt still gleamed in the dimness. And in that gleam, something shifted—not in the metal, but in him.

There was another piece.

Somewhere.

He knew it. Felt it like a tether, pulling toward a memory he hadn't yet touched.

He stood slowly, rising from the blood and mire like something newly carved from stone.

He knew where the other half was.

Brindle had it.

The one-eyed scavenger.

She'd tried to sell him lies once, in a village far east of the Hollow.

Now she'd sell him truth.

Or he'd take it.

PART 5: THE RUINS

He crossed the marsh before the sun had fully risen, the weight of the shard pressing against his back, bound in torn cloth and leather and a strip of fraying twine.

The way back to the keep was slow—every branch felt brittle, every root angled to trip him. The mud clung thicker than usual, and his legs ached from the slaughter. But he kept moving. A man—creature—carrying something fragile.

When he reached the ruined hall, the first light of dawn was catching on the wet stone floor. The mosque, once sanctified, was now home to moss and hornets. And him.

He ducked beneath the collapsed arch, tail dragging, breath shallow, the shard still hidden beneath his cloak.

He placed it gently on the altar stone.

Then sat.

Then stared.

The silence wrapped around him again—but this time it didn't soothe. It pressed. It accused.

Why hadn't he stopped? Why hadn't he shown restraint?

He flexed his hands. Claws smeared with dried blood. A nick in his forearm still wept slowly. The shard hadn't healed him. It hadn't calmed him. It had only watched.

And yet.

When he looked at it now, he didn't feel rage.

He felt something worse.

Shame.

Tariq bared his teeth and rose, suddenly furious again—not at the bandits, not at Zayd, not even at Morvane.

At himself.

He roared and lashed out, his claws raking deep into the stone floor. Chunks of old tile flew. Dust curled into the air. He slammed his fist down again, again, gouging symbols that meant nothing—lines, scratches, raw sound.

The keep echoed with violence.

Then stillness again.

Steam rose off his back in the cold.

He dropped to one knee, panting. Mud on his tongue. Bitter.

Outside, the swamp croaked awake.

He closed his eyes and whispered one word, not for show, not for tradition:

“Astaghfirullah.” Seeking forgiveness from the King of Kings.

He fell into a light, restless sleep. Some time later, he awoke to a breeze.

Nightfall.

The breeze shifted. Carried the scent of fire. Not far. A campfire. Woodsmoke.

Brindle.

She always camped on the higher ridges during early thaw, away from fen wolves and thieves. She had traded near the Hollow three months back, selling shattered iron and false relics. He remembered her—an eye like glass, a grin like a scar.

He remembered the glint on her cart. A piece of metal. Familiar.

He stood.

Wrapped the shard again.

And stepped out into the fog toward the ridge.

The preceding was an excerpt of the Green Beast. You can purchase the full book, from various vendors, here: <https://ashiqalibhai.com/books/the-green-beast.html>